



Ethnicity of Tai Dam and creative tourism in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, Thailand

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Abstract

Tai Dam people in Ban Na Pa Nad, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, Thailand are an ethnic group that migrated from their original base in Laos and Vietnam. The community settled down on the left bank of the Mekong River a hundred years ago. This group of Tai Dam has identities that stand out and are different from other groups in neighboring communities. This paper focuses on studying the way the ethnic identities of the Tai Dam people in Ban Na Pa Nad are presented and used as tourism resources in Loei Province. The research analysis is based on the anthropology of tourism framework. Data were collected from the survey and interview with the Tai Dam people who reside in this community. The main objectives of the study were to point out a way to improve ethnic tourism and to determine the factors affecting the presentation of the ethnic identity of Tai Dam people to be used as a creative tourism activity. The results revealed that Tai Dam people in Ban Na Pa Nad present themselves with more complex and invented identities in terms of language, housing, beliefs, food, arts, traditions and rituals. These elements are used as the “gimmick” in the community tourism areas. Nonetheless, such creations are not only focused on preserving the cultural trajectory of the Tai Dam group, but also on turning the culture into attractions in the tourism areas.

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Introduction

Tourism in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province is becoming more and more popular today because there

are many tourist attractions especially the culture and communities along the Mekong River, for example, the walking street along the Mekong River in Chiang Khan District or the area of Kaeng Khut Khu in the middle of the Mekong River, which is a place to relax, sit and watch the scenery at many popular riverside restaurants. Moreover, there are Buddhist places such as temples, Chedi or a big Buddha statue on top of the mountains along the Mekong River such as at the place where

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the Huong River merges with the Mekong River. Big Buddha at Phu Kok Ngiew at Ban Tha Di Mi is one example. There is construction of a sky walk called “Sky Walk of Chiang Khan” (see [Figure 1](#)) to be the new landmark of Loei Province so that tourists can appreciate the beauty of the natural border of Thailand and Laos. In addition to the natural attractions, tourists are also interested in the Tai Dam village in Ban Na Pa Nad, Khao Kaew Subdistrict, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province. This ethnic group migrated from Laos more than a hundred years ago. Tai Dam people have preserved and created their culture to become the focus of tourists. The community has enhanced local tourism such as by building a house for Tai Dam Museum, a learning center to demonstrate the Tai Dam lifestyle and knowledge to be used as tourism resources in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province.



Figure 1 Landscape of the sky walk of Chiang Khan, the case study tourism in the Mekong riverine community
Source: Dailynews (2020)

The literature review revealed that there have been studies on the culture of Tai Dam people in Ban Na Pa Nad. There are many scholars who have studied the way of life and culture of this Tai Dam group, such as Promma (1998), who studied the Tai Dam house in Ban Na Pa Nad, Khao Kaew Subdistrict, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, which is a study of visual elements and architecture of home building. In addition, Pholgnam (2016) studied Cultural Tourism of the Tai Dam Community in Loei Province. It was found that the potential of Tai Dam cultural tourism consisted of sightseeing of the Tai Dam houses and exploring their way of life consisting of: (1) play: Tai Dam has preserved

the legendary play called “Shair Pang”; (2) language: Tai Dam uses their own language which is specific to the group; (3) weaving: in the past, every Tai Dam house would grow cotton or feed silkworms to produce silk garments for family members; (4) dress: in the past, Tai Dam, both women and men, wore different styles of clothes, which became a symbol of the ethnic groups of Tai Dam dress; (5) food consisting of vegetables and chili; and (6) traditions. These studies focused on the way of life and culture of the Tai Dam people as an ethnic group in Loei Province. However, there is still a lack of studies linked to the issue of ethnic identity used for promoting and developing creative tourism to counteract the changes of society at present. For this reason, this paper aimed to provide a base of knowledge in the study of the issue of creative tourism to have a better understanding of this topic.

Ban Na Pa Nad Village, Khao Kaew Subdistrict, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province has a prominent ethnic identity of the Tai Dam community. This group of people emigrated from Laos and settled down in Thailand more than a hundred years ago. The former residence of the Tai Dam people is in the region of Sip Song Chu Tai in Vietnam, located on the border of the Red River, the Black River until Khwaeng Chiang Khwang, the Ou River and the Mekong River in Laos. In 1880, during the reign of King Rama V in Thailand, there was a war with Ho entering into various districts, namely Muang Phuan, Muang Luang Phra Bang and Muang Vientiane (Worahan, Hongsuwan, & Aunthaya, 2012). Oftentimes, the army was sent to fight the rebellion of Ho and the people were evacuated and moved to the area of today’s Thailand. One group was “Tai Dam”, which partially settled down in Ban Na Pa Nad, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province today. Since then, the Tai Dam people have lived together with other Laos and Isan ethnic groups. But they still strongly preserve and continue their culture in terms of language, belief, clothing, home building, food, tradition and rituals.

These things are considered sources of ethnic tourism, which refers to tourism to visit or study the way of life of different ethnicities who live closely connected with nature. This has brought about the popularity of Tai Dam ethnic tourism in Ban Na Pa Nad because it is the nature of tourists to want to see “exotic” lifestyle and traditions (Na Thalang, 2019, p. 33). Therefore, Tai Dam people have arranged for local tourism. This community-based

tourism to preserve its culture interestingly communicates the creation of ethnic identities for social, political and cultural negotiation and bargaining. In addition, the use of the ethnic characteristics presented in the area of tourism is a creative way to create social interaction. For this reason, ethnic tourism is a response to the needs of the tourists in the modern world, who yearn or need to have direct experience by being exposed to authenticity. Consequently, they come to experience the lifestyle of the ethnic group, which is a totally different activity from their everyday life.

From the preliminary observations, local tourism activities to promote ethnic identities are visiting Tai Dam Ancient House Museum, Tai Dam weaving demonstration, demonstration of Tai Dam traditions and rituals, etc. Such cultural activities are all used as tourism information. Questions that arise are as follows. What are the characteristics of a traditional way of life or the creation of an adaptation of the way of life for use in the tourism area? Are there any conditions and factors that relate to such development practices? These are the main research questions. This study reflects the Tai Dam cultural formation to be used as a base for tourism resources of the province. It also points out the factors that influence such creation by examining concepts and theories about creative traditions and commoditization in the analysis. The results of the study will be used as travel information that will help in the process of inheriting the way of life and culture of ethnic groups so they can survive under the circumstances of change in the present age.

Literature Review

This section presents the literature review focusing on the main theoretical concepts and research results that are related to this study.

Na Thalang (2017, p. 361) studied the characteristics of creative traditions. According to this study, creative traditions are applied, continued and “invented” in the context of today’s society. Tourism, capitalist economy and globalization are the important factors that cause “creative traditions” to be presented to tourists. It can be said that all the traditions and rituals that tourists see do not have any roles in the actual rituals. Rather, they play the role of “acting”. Thus, it is found that the

current rituals are “creative traditions”, the application of existing traditions and rituals to a new context with the purpose of tourism and the current economic situation. The characteristics of creative traditions are as follows: (1) Borrowing traditions across the region, in the context of a boundless society both at the global and national level. Information travels boundlessly. Therefore, when studying creative traditions, we find the phenomena ‘cross country-cross border’ of traditions and rituals. This causes borrowing of traditions from one place to another; (2) Mixing rituals together to create new concepts or to achieve new objectives; (3) Restoration of old traditions, bringing up old traditions, reviving or demonstrating to tourists; and (4) Creating new traditions on the basis of the original belief. Such proposals show that the creative traditions are dynamic in nature because it is the result of a renewal, application, reproduction, modification of the “traditional traditions” or creation of “new traditions” based on a certain culture of beliefs.

For this reason, it can be demonstrated that culture has become an important component of local and regional development, and also tourism placemaking policies especially in rural areas (Lew & Cheer, 2017). The basis of creative tourism is culture which is regarded as a resource in creative economy debates (Richards, 2014). We also introduced the concept of ethnic tourism as a framework for this study. Under this concept, ethnic tourism meets the needs of tourists who live in modern society, who yearn or need to have direct experience of authenticity. Therefore, they want to travel to see tribal lifestyles and do activities such as trekking, elephant riding, birdwatching, wildlife watching, rafting or rock climbing. These activities are different from their real life (Novelli & Tisch-Rottensteiner, 2012, p. 54, cited in Na ThaLang, 2019, p. 33). Ethnic tourism is usually related to eco-tourism. Trekking tours are popular among some groups of tourists, for example, trekking tours are arranged for tourists to see different hill tribes in Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces.

Another important issue of ethnic tourism is that we should consider which ethnic groups are chosen to be the “gimmick” for tourists (Berlie, 2001). For example, in China, a village with many ethnicities in Yunnan Province and one in Guangxi Province have been chosen to be tourist destinations for tourists in China and from other countries. In *Tourism, Ethnicity and the State in Asian and Pacific*, Picard and Wood (1997) highlighted

the relationship between tourism and identity and pointed out that although tourism is a channel that contributes to understanding the way of life of the minorities, tourism has made that ethnic identity a commodity.

As for the concept and theory of commoditization, Appadurai (1986) proposed that the term ‘commoditization’ means the transformation of what is normally not a commodity into a commodity, or, put another way, to assign value to it. Appadurai gave a provisional definition of commodities as “objects of economic value.”

Cohen (1988) studied “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism.” He said that the process of commoditization is brought about by social change. There is the need to respond to the change by fabricating or modifying to be able to respond promptly to the needs. It also includes the increase in demands. Therefore, the traditions must be changed or invented constantly. Various ethnic traditions are created in response to tourists who want to watch the rituals without having to wait until the actual time. Consequently, when the traditions are created, it reduces the value and is replaced by a commodity. As a result, the value of authentic traditions is reduced.

According to Howell (1994), “Commoditization of a culture can change not only the meaning of cultural products, but also the human relations between the cultures. The producer and the purchaser, the history of these relations and their ethnic identities.”

In this study, both groups of related research are considered, namely, creative tradition for tourism and

commoditization. This is to illustrate aspects of the presentation of Tai Dam ethnic identity of Tai Dam used as a creative tourist attraction of Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, under constantly changing interactions. It depends on how Tai Dam people interact with the visitors, on which places and at which time period.

Methodology

This research was qualitative research. Data were collected from surveys, interviews, observation, and small group discussion and participation meetings. The meetings engaged with the community, both public and private sectors, in the area of Ban Na Pa Nad, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province. The research findings are presented using descriptive analysis. Two steps were taken in collecting and analyzing data: document research and field research.

1. Document research: This is a compilation of documents related to secondary data, which are existing data drawn from literature reviews of books, articles, research papers and information on the Internet. The information was from various sources.

2. Field research: This is a collection of primary data from field work. The steps taken were physical survey, observation, dialog, interview and small group participatory meeting in the community (Figure 2).



Figure 2 The field work and Tai Dam ethnic group participatory meeting in the Community

To facilitate data analysis, data were compartmentalized according to the presentation of the ethnic identity of Tai Dam in Ban Na Pa Nad used as a source of creative tourism. Accuracy and completeness of the data were taken into consideration. Data collection and data verification were conducted simultaneously while making transcription of recordings, interviews and observations. Data were then categorized to be used as a basis for the study according to the objectives of the research. The qualitative data were analyzed using descriptive methods.

Results

The Ethnic Identity of Tai Dam Ban Na Pa Nad presented in the Tourism Area

The modified or redefined ethnic identity of Tai Dam in Ban Na Pa Nad to be used as a gimmick for tourism is presented in various forms. The Tai Dam Ancient House Museum is a source of knowledge about the history of the Tai Dam ethnic groups (Figure 3). It is also a place for many activities for cultural demonstrations such as cooking, play, traditions, rituals, and costumes, as well as being a trading center for cultural products of the

Tai Dam community. Male and female tourists can dress up in Tai Dam costumes and have their photos taken with a view of the Tai Dam wooden houses in the background as a souvenir. In the museum, which is a wooden house, there are exhibitions of various objects representing the newly defined Tai Dam identity, such as traditional Tai Dam clothes in the past, a sarong with Nang Han pattern, Pha Piaw (Tai Dam turban), carry bags and various handicrafts such as flags, spider webs, Tai Dam lanterns, baskets, etc. These items decorate the house of this museum. There is also a demonstration of weaving, flag making and lantern making. There are also papers written in Tai Dam script for tourists to see. Tourists can join the conversation and learn the Tai Dam language, which has very specific vocabulary and accent that differ from Thai, Isan and Tai Loei dialects. There is also a feast of Tai Dam food arranged for a group. Dr. Pettabong Paisoon recounts the history of the Tai Dam community. There is also a demonstration of Tai Dam dancing and playing by the children and young people in the village for tourists to watch. This shows the relationship between tourism and culture can be sustainable, however, tourism will have to be developed in harmony with community interests. It will have to protect and preserve traditional culture, fostering sensitivity to and appreciation for cultural practices.



Figure 3 The Tai Dam Ancient House Museum in Baan Na Pa Nad and the tourists dressed in Tai Dam Ethnic

Tai Dam Ethnicity under Social Interaction in a Tourism Context

The Tai Dam people who act as a welcoming host for tourists, when interacting with the community visitors, present their identity differently on some levels. A representative image of the cultural symbol that the host selects to denote the ethnic identity varies depending on who they are interacting with. For example, if a visitor coming from another region speaks Central Thai, they will present themselves as Tai Dam by using Tai Dam or Tai Loei dialects to communicate with the visitors and wear traditional costumes (Figure 4). If the visitor does not understand, they will switch to Central Thai dialect and still wear traditional costumes. In this case, there is an overlapping ethnic identity between Tai Dam, Tai Loei and Thai. Thus, it has been shown that the ethnic identity of the Tai Dam is due to the interaction that changes over time under different circumstances. The ethnic identity of Tai Dam is presented differently. The Tai Dam identity is inconstant and can change over time. It can be rebuilt under interaction with different groups of people in different situations.

The ethnic identity of the Tai Dam in Ban Na Pa Nad presented through Tai Dam Museum and Cultural Center is an attempt to present the modern-day Tai Dam in the context of creative tourism that has entered the Ban Na Pa Nad community.

From the details mentioned above, we can conclude that the process of presenting the ethnic identity of Tai Dam in Ban Na Pa Nad via Tai Dam Museum and Tai Dam Cultural Center in the context of tourism shows the following characteristics: (1) Definition of Tai Dam under various contexts; (2) Selection of symbolism that represents the ethnic identity as determined to be the representative image, for example, use of old items, new inventions, use of existing items and change; (3) Presentation of the Tai Dam ethnic identity in the context of tourism; and (4) Presentation of the Tai Dam ethnic identity under the interaction in the context of today's tourism.

The above presentation of the Tai Dam ethnic identity is under the context of promotion of tourism activities in the community and cultural villages in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, which is constantly changing depending on the social gatherings and interactions with other groups involved. Tai Dam people in Ban Na Pa Nad, therefore, modify their ethnic identity to be in line with the relationship. Modifying these identities is for their benefit. Therefore, the identity of Tai Dam is defined as dynamic, non-stop, and can change over time under different contexts and situations particularly in the present-day tourism promotion framework. This view is in line with Adams (1996) who suggested that all identity is constructed across difference, and that identity politics are rooted on the politics of difference. It is hard to contest that these differences are important to understanding society.



Figure 4 Tai Dam ethnic groups in tourism promotion activities on the road along the Mekong Riverine, Chiang Khan District

Discussion and Conclusion

In terms of ethnicity related to tourism, especially those related to cultural tourism and ethnic tourism in the local community, it was found that people describe themselves or present their identities, local groups or ethnicities through such cultural information as myths, performing arts, plays, costume, basketry, traditions, rituals, food, music and tools. These are all cultural mechanisms that have been used to show the identity of the people to differentiate ‘us’ from ‘the others’. This can be seen in the creation of the ethnic identity of Tai Dam people mentioned above.

This is due to the fact that the government promotes conservation and restoration of local cultures and tourism in the country and promotes the use of local cultures in tourism activities as tourism resources. As a result, the Tai Dam village in Ban Na Pa Nad, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, which is one of the ethnic groups whose lifestyle is affected by this change, tries to adapt to the context of globalization, capitalism and consumerism by altering its identity to go back to the traditional way of life as a gimmick for tourism for their survival. The Tai Dam ethnic identities are presented through places, ways of life and work as a source of learning to promote tourism activities in the village, in particular, Ban Tai Dam Museum, an important tourist attraction, traditional Tai Dam costumes and establishment of a Tai Dam indigenous fabric group. All of these things present the ethnic identity in the context of today’s social change.

Cultural information of the Tai Dam ethnic group is part of the daily life and lifestyle that can change over time, depending on the context or social factors. This cultural information used as a resource for ethnic tourism is dynamic and is subject to change. It all depends on the owner of the culture, Tai Dam people, whether they want to express their identities and social contexts that are involved in the relationship that can demonstrate the meaning of the ethnic identity. Their presentation makes it easy to see and understand through the information that has been created and refined. But in today’s social context, whether tourism, creative economy, cross border, modernization or globalization, these stories are all related to the presentation of the ethnic identity that are constructed and invented in the new context of politics, economy and society in the present time.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interests.

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