

To assess the ethnic identity and Archaeological values, Patterns and portraits of Tattoos of Tai Lue Kalom

Pat Kotchapakdee¹

¹Lecturer from the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture Fine Arts and Design, Khon Kaen University

How to cite this article: Pat Kotchapakdee(2025) To assess the ethnic identity and Archaeological values, Patterns and portraits of Tattoos of Tai Lue Kalom. *Library Progress International*, 45(1), 150-156

1.1 Abstract

This research was funded by the National Geographic Foundation for Science and Exploration (Grant number Asia-19-15). The objective was to examine the tattooing customs and patterns of the Tai Lue Kalom community, as well as to capture images of persons adorned with tattoos from Nayang hamlet, located in the Luang Prabang region of Laos. This was accomplished via the use of qualitative research techniques. Information was gathered from three specific categories of individuals: Key Informants, Casual Informants, and General Informants. The study revealed that the designs and body art of the Tai Lue Kalom community may be categorized into three primary sections: top, middle, and bottom. Tai Lue boys often begin receiving tattoos between the ages of 14 and 20, coinciding with the initiation period known as "Khan Lai" in the native language. Tai Lue guys believe tattoos, primarily depicting animals such as "Mom" and "Phoenix", to be a crucial aspect of their identity. The tattooing apparatus comprises a tattoo needle and ink. The needle is constructed with a wooden handle and has tips crafted from either iron or copper. The ink is composed of animal fat derived from species such as bears or snakes, blended with soot obtained from kerosene. Currently, there are only 15 guys who possess traditional Tai Lue Kalom tattoos and may be photographed. The subjects were meticulously captured through the use of Portrait Photography methods in their authentic living environments, accompanied by narratives highlighting the significance of their tattoos. These narratives included references to specific locations, such as riverside areas where young men would historically disrobe to bathe together, and where individuals without tattoos were not permitted to join. The investigation reached a definitive conclusion. Examining the ritual via an ethnic theory lens reveals that tattooing functioned as a distinctive symbol of the Lue ethnic identity and maybe shared cultural ties with other Tai ethnic groups in the area. Moreover, the photographic record of persons adorned with customary tattoos is a visually captivating account, emphasizing the significance of safeguarding culture and the diminishing but enduring practice of tattooing in Nayaang Village.

Keywords : Laos, Lue, Lue Ethnicity, Ethnicity, ASEAN, Tattoo

1. Introduction

Tattooing is a longstanding artistic practice that has persisted throughout human history and is prevalent in contemporary society. The exact origins of tattooing are unknown, however it is known to have included the use of sharp instruments or needles to scrape or puncture the skin, and color was added to create designs dependent on the tattoo artist's creativity. This practice has varied throughout various cultures. Those who had tattoos in ancient times were often seen as social misfits, rather than being seen as individuals belonging to the divine. This notion was widespread around the globe.

Tattooing on the skin persisted as a cultural practice in several locations and civilizations over later centuries, extending its influence to Europe, America, Africa, and Asia. Iranians in Southeast Asia engage in tattooing for aesthetic purposes, medical treatment, or protection against supernatural entities. Burmese males engage in

extensive tattooing, covering the area from their waist to their knees, as a preventive measure against injurious animal bites. These images demonstrate that almost all ethnic groups in Southeast Asia have a longstanding tradition of tattooing, particularly in Laos, where remnants of the tattoo culture are still apparent today.

Tattooing was prevalent in many regions of Laos, spanning from the north to the south, in the past. During that era, a significant portion of northeastern Thailand, known as Isaan, was once a constituent of Laos. Consequently, it was customary for the majority of males in this area to adorn themselves with these tattoos, which were often seen. Nevertheless, these customs have gradually diminished over the years, leaving behind only vestiges of these tattoos, which are now mostly visible on the bodies of elderly individuals, many of whom are deceased. However, in contemporary Laos, there exists a particular group where a significant population of persons with tattoos can still be found. The community is called "Ban Nayan".

Ban Nayan is situated in the Nam Bak district of Luang Prabang, which is in the northern region of Laos. Ban Nayan is situated around 120 kilometers in the northwest direction from Luang Prabang. The area is partitioned into two primary settlements, Ban Nayan North and Ban Nayan South. The region is a compact, level basin surrounded by hills, spanning around 8 square kilometers, with a narrow watercourse running between the two settlements. Located in a valley, Ban Nayan has many natural resources such as woods and animals.

During an interview, Father Migon, also known as Thao Kon Liu, Kantaboon, aged 54, the previous headman of Ban Nayan South, said that the majority of the residents in the community belong to the Thai Lue ethnic group and identify themselves as "Lue Ka Lom". The Lue Ka Lom community has a well-established and enduring presence in the city of Luang Prabang. The Tai ethnic group, hailing from southern China, comprises a sub-group residing in the Mekong area. They relocated to the northern region of Laos, often changing their location as a result of conflicts, environmental catastrophes, and the quest for arable and expansive territories suited for farming. In the end, a group of Lue Ka Lom people chose to permanently live in the plains close to the center of the La River, which is a tributary of the Ou River. This area comprises Ban Nayan and Nam Bak.

Presently, the inhabitants of Ban Nayan make dedicated efforts to save several facets of the Thai Lue culture, including architectural practices, weaving techniques, culinary traditions, linguistic heritage, and the Lam drive. To save the Lue Ka Lom culture, particularly the practice of tattooing and the unique tattoo designs that are not being passed down to future generations.

1.2 2.Objectives

1.3 The objective is to examine the tattooing customs of the Tai Leu community residing in Ban Nayan, Nam Bak, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. Furthermore, To capture images of persons adorned with tattoos among the Tai Leu community residing in Ban Nayan, Nam Bak, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR.

1.4 3.Research Methodology

This qualitative study titled "Tai Leu Tattoo: Patterns and Photographing of the Remaining Individuals in Ban Nayan, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR" has been conducted. Methods such as questionnaires, in-person interviews, and focus groups are used to gather information. Purposive sampling is used to gather data about tattoo designs and procedures from a specified group of 25 experts, practitioners, and individuals engaged. Along with the documentary photography of persons, the collected field data is analyzed utilizing theories and ideas. The findings are presented using a descriptive analytic technique.

The development of long-term cultural tourism can only be achieved via the active participation of members of the target culture or ethnic group.. The data utilized in this study came from two different locations: one in Ban Nayang Tai, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR, and another in Tai Lue village. The cultural inheritance process, including the degree to which the two groups are connected or distinct, is the focus of the research.

1.5 4.Results and Discussion

4.1. Tattoo Equipment

The tattooing apparatus comprises a tattoo needle and tattoo pigment. The tattoo needle handle is constructed from a wooden piece of around 60-75 cm in length. The needle tip, used for the process of tattooing, may be crafted from either iron or bronze. The object has a flat spatula-like shape, consisting of two sections that resemble a bird's beak. Various sorts of ends, including blunt, sharp, and cut ends, have distinct functions according on the line work they are used for. The needle is affixed to the wooden handle by means of copper or lead coiled around the point of connection, while resin is used to bond the needle to the handle. This exerts significant pressure on

the sharp tip of the needle, hence reducing the amount of force required by the tattoo artist throughout the tattooing process. The tattoo ink is composed of animal fats, such as bear or snake, which are combined with soot derived from kerosene oil (Fig 6).

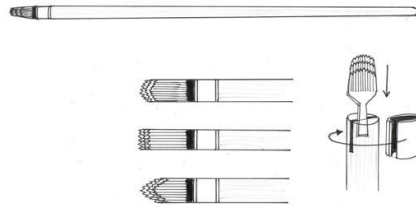


Fig 6: Image of the tattoo needle, various types of needle tips, and the technique of connecting the needle to the wooden handle using a copper sheet.

Illustrator : Kittisan Sriraksa (2019)

Reasons for Tattooing There are several reasons why men of the Tai Lue ethnic group in Nayang village engage in leg tattooing:

1. Tattoos are a test of personal endurance. If a person can withstand the pain of getting both legs tattooed, they are considered highly resilient, able to endure significant pain and likely to be a future family leader. On the contrary, a man who has only one or no tattoos is seen as mentally weak and less likely to be considered as a potential partner by women.
2. Tattoos are a form of beauty enhancement. In the past, it was considered a high form of taste as most men prefer to wear short clothes (ancient Khmer sarongs), which gives them a good opportunity to show off their leg tattoos. Also, men who have leg tattoos are more accepted and integrated into the Tai Lue male society.
3. Tattoos are linked to beliefs about improving health and protecting against harm. It is believed that the body becomes stronger and can resist diseases and dangerous animals. Tattoos also act as a talisman to protect against various dangers or during wars.
4. Tattoos are a tradition inherited from ancestors. It is believed that Tai Lue men are descendants of brave warriors like the Mangkorn dragons, hence they should have tattoos resembling the scales and patterns of dragons to keep up with the lineage and not be ashamed.

4.2 The Photography of Tai Lue Tattooed Individuals in Nayang Village, Nam Bak District, Luang Prabang Province, Laos

In the process of creating the photographic work "Portraits and Tattoos of Tai Lue People," the researcher aimed to present portraits of individuals showing traditional tattoos of Tai Lue people from the northern and southern Nayang village. The photography process used real-life backgrounds to reflect the context in which these tattoos existed and are now fading away. The documentary-style photography highlights both the models and the patterns of tattoos on the models. The creative process is divided into three steps: pre-production, production, and post-production, following standard practices in photography and motion picture production. From the field survey in the northern and southern Nayang villages, Nam Bak District, Luang Prabang Province, Laos, it was found that there are still elderly people who have traditional tattoos and are willing to provide information and allow photographs, totaling 15 people. The researcher then carried out the photography according to the prepared plan from the pre-production process, resulting in the following photographic works.

Photographic Works "Portraits and Tattoos of Tai Lue People" Remaining in the Northern and Southern Nayang Villages

Through the implementation of an ethnographic research, the photographer is able to explore the subject matter in more depth and aims to portray the subject's actions, motivations, beliefs, interests, and traditions (Kuntjara, 2004). Therefore, using a qualitative technique in documentary photography is the most efficient strategy as it enables a realistic examination. Active personal engagement is crucial for grasping the core ideas put out by Kratochvil & Persson (2001), who stress the need of understanding the underlying motives and strategies behind the subject's behavior. Gaining genuine knowledge and comprehension of a topic can only be achieved via complete immersion, actively participating in their activities, and concurrently critically analyzing both the subject and our own actions. A photo narrative should be presented as a coherent entity, including a compilation of pictures that together convey a narrative. By immersing themselves in the whole compilation, observers might get more extensive and profound understandings of the subject matter or narrative being portrayed, as opposed to only seeing isolated images. By using this "package," viewers may cultivate a more holistic and profound comprehension of the subject matter. Moreover, there is a fundamental concept that the complete collection should have a greater effect or influence than the individual photographs on their own. The photos possess meaning alone when shown as a cohesive entity to a viewership. Hence, it is essential for a photographic project to have a well devised strategy for disseminating the pictures, usually via exhibits that serve as platforms for their display. Contrary to photo essays, which often convey a certain perspective or argument, documentary photography aims to maintain an impartial stance. The photos shown to viewers enable them to exercise their own discernment, drawing upon their intellect, personal encounters, and even skepticism (Kratochvil & Persson, 2001).

Nevertheless, it is essential for the documentary's purpose and storyline to be unambiguous and coherent throughout. Hence, the analysis is crucial for assessing the results of every picture session. The photographer should evaluate if the shot satisfies both technical and non-technical standards. The technical parts of photography include composition, exposure, lens selection, lighting, and creative and aesthetic traits, which can be easily evaluated. Conversely, non-technical elements pertain to inquiries such as: Does the image effectively depict a significant component of the overall context? Does the documentary effort adhere to its intended aim, storyline, or title? One must assess the qualities of each photograph and decide which ones to retain and, if feasible, redo. In a documentary photography project, an image must possess both aesthetic appeal and effectively communicate a crucial aspect of the narrative, and vice versa. In the end, the shot must blend seamlessly with other photographs to create a unified storyline.

The EDFAT hypothesis, developed by Frank P. Hoy, may serve as a research tool for researching photography. It encompasses the analysis of Entire, Details, Framing, Angle, and Time in photographs. This technique offers a complete framework for doing research in the field of photography, taking into account several facets of the photographic process. The EDFAT theory may be used in the field of photographic research in the following manner: Whole: The investigation starts by analyzing the totality of the image, taking into account the general arrangement, subject matter, and visual influence. Researchers examine the interplay of components inside the frame to produce a unified and captivating picture. They evaluate the overall impact and storytelling communicated by the shot.

Analysis: Researchers proceed to examine the image meticulously, directing their attention into the finer components, textures, and complexities present within the composition. They meticulously scrutinize the intricate particulars to reveal concealed subtleties and strata of significance. Through meticulous examination, scholars might get a more profound comprehension of the photographer's meticulousness and the possible symbolic or narrative importance of certain components.

Framing: The framing component of the EDFAT theory urges scholars to analyze the photographer's deliberate selection of how to position and enclose the topic inside the picture. The photographer's use of composition methods, such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, and symmetry, is analyzed. Researchers also investigate the deliberate use of negative space or other framing decisions to examine how framing affects the overall visual effect and narrative of the image.

Angle: Subsequently, researchers analyze the specific angle or viewpoint from which the shot was captured. The analysts examine the selected perspective, whether it is elevated, lowered, aerial, or at eye level, and evaluate how this angle enhances the visual impact and storytelling of the picture. Researchers analyze how the angle of view increases or modifies the viewer's impression of the subject matter and impacts the overall composition.

Time: The temporal dimension of the EDFAT theory focuses on analyzing the time-related elements shown in the

image. Researchers examine whether the snapshot preserves a particular instant, portrays movement, or encapsulates a more comprehensive notion of time. The analysis focuses on how the depiction of time in the image enhances the storytelling, evokes emotions, or explores themes.

By integrating the EDFAT theory, which encompasses the elements of Entire, Details, Framing, Angle, and Time, as a study approach in photography, researchers are able to thoroughly examine and evaluate photos. This technique facilitates a more profound comprehension of the comprehensive structure, intricate particulars, framing selections, perspectives, and temporal elements included within the photos. It offers a systematic framework for revealing the photographer's goals, visual storytelling strategies, and the possible narrative or thematic importance contained in their work.

Photographs of individuals with traditional tattoos of the Tai Lue people:

Photographic works of individuals with traditional tattoos, still remaining, were documented by the researcher in the environment and locations where the target group lives their daily lives in the villages of Nayaang North and South, in the city of Nambak District, Luang Prabang Province, Laos. The photographic works are as follows (Fig 7)



Fig 7: Photographs of Various tattooing people

In ancient times, it was mandatory for all Lue males from Nayaang Village in northern Thailand to obtain tattoos as a means of demonstrating social assimilation. There was a prevailing belief that those without tattoos were not held in high regard, and that those who did not participate in communal river bathing were expected to wash in a different, less desirable area of the river. Traditionally, Lue males would begin the practice of tattooing around the period of their late teens, often between the ages of 14 and 20. The tattoos were mostly located on the upper thigh region, spanning from just below the waist to the middle of the shin. The arms and cheeks of Lue males were adorned with tiny tattoos known as "karnsak khay" in the native language, which were regarded as important cultural characteristics.

The tattoos of Lue males from Nayaang Village are characterized by horse-shaped motifs surrounded by fences, accompanied by two stacks of grass in the front, and a rectangular design like a saddle atop the horse, referred to as "an-ma." The tattoos spanned many regions, ranging from the waist to the knees. In addition, a variety of additional motifs were included, including cage patterns, peacock patterns, net patterns, and flag patterns. The tattoo designs were basically categorized into three primary sections: top, middle, and bottom. The tattoo patterns in these three primary portions largely mirrored those of the Tai ethnic tribes inhabiting the Mekong River basin, with minor changes in the particular motifs included.

The tattooing apparatus comprised of tattoo needles and ink. The tattoo needle's handle was crafted from a long teakwood of about 60-75 cm, while the tattooing component might be fashioned from either iron or red brass. Tattoo ink was produced by charring animal bone with high-quality animal oil, such as from bears or snakes, and then combining it with lamp soot.

Prior to receiving a tattoo, a customary practice called "ka jao" or the teacher's fee existed in the Lue language. This price was given to the tattoo artist and represented the labor expenses associated with the tattooing procedure. The charge was computed at 2.5 mone each tattoo, with an additional 1 mone for the waist region, resulting in a total of 6 mone or around 6,000 Baht in current times. Individuals seeking tattoo designs have to use opium as a means of mitigating discomfort. Each tattooing session required many sessions, generally totaling five.

The tattooing custom among Lue males from Nayaang Village is motivated by many factors: 1) Tattooing as a means to assess one's own resilience, 2) Tattooing for the aim of enhancing aesthetics, 3) Tattooing driven by personal values, and 4) Tattooing as a way to uphold traditional rituals.

Concerning the photos of persons adorned with traditional tattoos, a mere 15 individuals are now residing in Nayaang Village and Nayaang South. A solitary individual has relocated to a nearby hamlet, where the researcher has successfully obtained photographic evidence. The photographic approach employs authentic environments where the models reside in their everyday routines to depict the surroundings where these tattoos formerly were and are progressively diminishing. The photography utilizes a documentary technique, focusing on the models and the tattoo designs on their bodies. This includes the river in the town, which used to serve as a location for bathing and showcasing tattoos as a symbol of maturity and manhood among Lue men of Lue ancestry.

Conclusion:

Tattooing is a culturally and socially important activity among Lue males from Nayaang Village in northern Laos. In antiquity, tattoos were obligatory for all Lue males as a manifestation of societal assimilation and individuality. The absence of tattoos marked individuals as social outcasts, underscoring the significance of tattooing within their group. The tattoo designs, adorned with equine motifs and accompanied by diverse supplementary components, were dispersed throughout numerous anatomical regions, resulting in a multifaceted and distinctive artistic expression.

From an ethnic theory standpoint, the tattoo designs of Lue males in Nayaang Village have notable similarities to the tattoo patterns of the Tai ethnic groups in the Mekong River area. This resemblance suggests cultural exchanges and perhaps common historical roots between the Lue people and other ethnic groups in the region. Tattooing undoubtedly functioned as a conspicuous symbol of the Lue ethnic identity, signifying their particular cultural legacy within a varied ethnic milieu. Furthermore, the practice of tattooing may be examined as a means of cultural defiance and safeguarding. Amidst the growing marginalization of indigenous cultures in a globalized society, the persistence of tattooing traditions in Nayaang Village serves as a testament to the community's unwavering commitment to preserving its cultural identity and values.

Utilizing documentary-style photography to depict people adorned with traditional tattoos provides a captivating

visual account of the cultural legacy of Nayaang Village. The photographer captures the models in their authentic environments and everyday routines, offering a contextualized portrayal of the diminishing tattoo heritage. The incorporation of the village's river, once a prominent location for communal gatherings and exhibition of tattoos, enhances the images by providing a fuller understanding of the tattoos within the community's overall way of life. The images not only center on the tattoo designs but also highlight the models themselves. This method imbues the subjects with human qualities and establishes a connection between the audience and the Lue men, resulting in photos that are more sympathetic and powerful. The images serve as a visual record of a distinctive cultural custom, safeguarding the recollection of the tattooing legacy for future cohorts and maybe enhancing consciousness about the significance of conserving cultural heritage. The tattooing practice among Lue males in Nayaang Village has profound cultural importance, serving as a representation of social cohesion, artistic manifestation, and devotion to age-old traditions. Through an examination of the custom from an ethnic theory standpoint, it becomes apparent that tattooing functioned as a distinctive symbol of the Lue ethnic identity and perhaps shared cultural ties with other Tai ethnic groups in the area. Moreover, the photographic record of persons adorned with customary tattoos is a visually captivating account, emphasizing the significance of safeguarding culture and the diminishing but enduring practice of tattooing in Nayaang Village.

References

1. Kosawat Phanit (2534), Esan of Yesteryears. P. Wattana Publication Limited. 2nd edition: Bangkok.
2. Veela Arnolak and Kriangkrai Gertsiri (2017). Tai Lue House: Nayang Subdistrict, Nam Bak District, Lao PDR. NAJUA: Architecture, Design and Built Environment, 30, A–55. Retrieved from <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/NAJUA-Arch/article/view/64939>
3. Frank P. Hoy (1993), Photojournalism : The Visual Approach. Prentice Hall : USA
4. Kuntjara, E. (2004). Research in culture: Apractical guide. Yogyakarta: Graha Ilmu. Kratochvil, A., & Persson, M. (2001). Photo-journalism and documentary photography : They are identical mediums, sending different messages. Nieman Reports.
5. Smith, W. E. (2012). The Photography of Life: 50 Years of Photojournalism. National Geographic
6. Smith, J. (2018). Mastering the Art of Photography : A Comprehensive Guide to the Creative Process. New York, NY: Random House.
7. Gilbert, S. (2000). The Tattoo History Source Book : A Source Book of Tattoos and Tattooing from Ancient Times to the Present. Juno Books
8. Friedman, A. F. (2015). The World Atlas of Tattoo. Yale University Press.
9. Atkinson, M. M. (2003). Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of a Body Art. University of Toronto Press.
10. Johnson, M. A., & Smith, K. L. (2019). The Cultural Significance of Tattoos: A Review of Literature. Journal of Cultural Studies, 15(2), 45-62.
11. Thompson, R. J., & Williams, A. B. (2017). Exploring the Motivations and Meanings Behind Tattooing: A Qualitative Study. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43(3), 325-340.
12. Ngo, T., & Lim, G. (2019). Cultural Significance and Symbolism of Tattoos in East Asia: A Qualitative Study. Asian Journal of Cultural Studies, 27(3), 345-362.
13. Suzuki, Y., & Tanaka, K. (2018). Traditional Tattooing Practices in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study of Rituals and Meanings. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 45(2), 189-206.
14. Qin, X. (2017). The Changing Landscape of Lue Ethnic Minority Villages in Xishuangbanna, China: A Socioeconomic Perspective. Asian Ethnicity, 18(2), 186-203.
15. Li, W. (2015). Identity Construction and Ethnic Minority Tourism: The Case of Lue People in Xishuangbanna, China. Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 23(2), 268-285.
16. Oranoot kosol and Chokchai Suttawet, Sustainable Tourism Management for Supporting ASEAN Economics Community, Journal of Politics and Governance, vol. 4, no1, September 2013 – February 2014
17. Thida LhamLuksakul “Creative Tourist for Conservation and Sustainable Development,” Journal of Rattana Bundit University., 7, no 2 November 2012 – April 2013
18. Songsak Prangwattanakul, Coutural Heritage of Tai Lue Textile, Faculty of Humanities Chiang Mai University, 2009