

Patterns of Change: Transitions in Hmong Textile Language

by

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Abstract:

In traditional Hmong life, women produced complex textiles as markers of clan identity and cultural values. Paj ntaub (flower cloth), created by embroidery, appliqué, reverse appliqué, and indigo batik (among the Blue or Green Hmong), were primary transmitters of Hmong culture from one generation to the next over centuries. Clothing, funeral and courtship cloths, baby carriers and hats were designed with traditionally geometric, abstract patterns Hmong could understand as a shared visual language within an oral culture.

This photo essay introduces the author's twenty-five year fascination with paj ntaub and documents a trip to Laos and northern Thailand in November/December 2009 to discover whether story cloths were being produced in Hmong villages in Laos or if story cloths remain a product of refugees only. The researcher also hoped to learn whether traditional Hmong clothing is still produced and worn in the Laos, to observe how Hmong textiles are made and consumed for a tourist market, and to discover possible sources for the dramatic shift in paj ntaub visual language from symbolic abstraction to pictorial representation.

Keywords: Hmong, paj ntaub, embroidery, Laos, Thailand



Fig. 1 - unknown girls, Hmong New Years festival at Roger Williams Park Museum, Providence, RI, mid-1980's.

Introduction

As a textile artist I am deeply inspired by the textiles and story of the Hmong. When a new mother and young artist living in Providence (1982-86), I met Hmong women through a needlework cooperative where I volunteered, the Southeast Asia Co-op. I was fascinated with the culture, previously unknown to me. The important rituals and protections connected to traditional paj ntaub is complex and layered. A belief shared by one Hmong friend is that paj ntaub, especially baby carriers and hats, disguise the children as flowers so evil spirits will not pluck them from the earth. Who wouldn't want to know more? The story was devastating and all too familiar. When the Secret War ended in Laos in 1975, many Hmong fled from political retaliation into refugee camps along the borders of Thailand. As political refugees who later arrived in the United States, traditional and acculturated forms of paj ntaub were and are essential in preserving Hmong cultural identity and their shared story.

My research examines cross-cultural influences of war and immigration on Hmong textile language, gender roles in production, and transitions into new art forms including art quilts or wall hangings. Hmong refugees in the camps developed a new pictorial embroidered textile language that is a more universal language than the tra-

ditional abstract patterns. Representational images of people, animals, or bombed villages continue to tell their history in story cloths and continue to be stitched by Hmong in the United States, although increasingly less so in the past fifteen years. While Hmong needlework on traditional clothing remains abstract, these forms are in transition also. What is the genesis of this “dumbing down” of visual language (strictly this artist’s perspective), from symbolic abstraction to pictorial representation? This essay documents a trip to Laos and northern Thailand to find whether story cloths are being produced in Hmong villages in Laos or if story cloths remain a product of refugees only, and to discover other possible sources for the shift in visual language.



Fig. 2 – Hmong New Years festival 2009, Ban Nasala, Laos.

Methodology/ Limitations

This investigation was conducted over a very short period of time (three weeks), based primarily on observation and paj ntaub available in public marketplaces and Hmong villages that are experienced with tourism due to proximity to a road. There was insufficient time to conduct fieldwork such as interviews with Hmong textile producers, or trek to remote villages. My conversations with Hmong/English-speaking guides I hired in Xieng Khuang, or waiters and shop vendors in Luang Prabang and Chiang Mai, were with full disclosure of my research interests in the textiles. However, I have not used their names here to protect their anonymity. Anyone who was photographed gave permission. Prior to beginning this project, training for human subjects research

and approval was obtained from the University Research Compliance Office at Kansas State University, who also provided partial support with a University Small Research Grant from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs.

The project is part of a larger research goal to study whether textiles in non-traditional Hmong-American communities in the United States retain the same cultural significance as they did in Laos, especially for ritualistic uses such as funeral clothing and New Years courting, and how widely paj ntaub is still taught and practiced in the Hmong diaspora.



Fig. 3-4 – Blue Hmong skirt, 1970's, hand woven hemp, indigo batik, appliqué and embroidery by Nhu Fang Yang, overall & detail.

Photo credit: Gloria Joseph, John Prusak, Kathryn Vander

Patterns of Change

Hmong textiles were and are a primary agent of culture, language and identity. The traditional forms have many rituals and protections connected to paj ntaub, while newer forms such as story cloths demonstrate the fluid nature of culture and visual non-verbal languages. Even before Chinese attempts at cultural subjugation several centuries ago precipitated a Hmong migration into Laos and other mountainous regions in Southeast Asia, paj ntaub signified Hmong ethnic independence. The significance of Hmong costume is revealed in a legend that claims the Hmong used to have a written language but when the Chinese made it illegal to speak or write Hmong, the Hmong women hid the alphabet in the folds of the women's skirts. With complex patterns of embroidery, appliqué and batik in skirts made of twenty-four feet of cloth compressed into tiny pleats, the legend gains currency when understood in context. (Yang, 2009: 55). While their traditional designs are not an alphabet in the strict linguistic definition, they do serve as a visual language that was understood by fellow Hmong and were important in the ritual functions of paj ntaub. However, equally fascinating is the emergence almost overnight of a pictorial or quasi-representational embroidered art from a geometric, highly stylized non-representational ornamental art. This has rarely, if ever, been documented in detail in anthropological literature (Cohen, 2000:138) and rarely documented in art historical literature either.

Traditional forms of paj ntaub in the highland mountain areas of Asia (including southwest China, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar) were almost exclusively clothing. As a semi-nomadic group practicing swidden (slash and burn) agriculture, their primary cultural wealth was in their elaborate costumes and silver jewelry. The significance of costumes and costume making in the past was for ritual purposes and cultural identity, and were made by the women in the family. According to Hmong women informants at the Kohler Art Center paj ntaub exhibition and conference (1985), the three primary reasons for wearing traditional costumes were:

1. Identify oneself as Hmong,
2. Display the wealth of one's family at celebrations, especially the Hmong New Year festival, and
3. Prepare oneself for the passage into the spiritual world after death – the costume pieces [hats, jackets, funeral pillows, etc.] afforded the wearer spiritual protection or assisted in claiming an individual's spirit by the clan ancestors after death. Funerary textiles were made by a young wife for her parents and her new in-laws, with great importance attached to the textiles and their presentation to one's parents. They would show honor to the parents when used for their burial. Their use offered protection and symbolic way-finding for the deceased on the long journey to the nether world, so the soul could prosper in the afterworld. (Mallinson, Donnelly, Hang, 1996; Lewis and Lewis, 1984; Symonds, 2004).



Fig. 5 – unknown young woman and man, Hmong New Years festival, Roger Williams Park Museum, Providence, RI, mid 1980's.

Extravagant costumes for a young woman's dowry were also of great importance. Although the young woman might have made many costume pieces, they were considered the property of her parents who had paid for the threads and cloth, and had allowed the young woman time away from childcare or agricultural work to produce the labor-intensive garments. (Mallinson, Donnelly, Hang, 1996: 33). Young Hmong girls began learning the cross-stitch embroidery when they were as young as five years old, and learned the more complex processes of hemp production and weaving, appliqué, indigo dyeing and garment construction as they grew older. It was widely reported by Hmong friends in Providence that a young woman's industriousness and textile skills were among the most highly regarded attributes of a partner when a young man was searching for his future wife. A woman's inventiveness in textile pattern design was also reported to be an indicator of her future fertility in childbirth. Widely shared patterns and design motifs did not preclude a high regard for design innovation. In Laos, creation of clothing for families by the women was most productive during the months after the harvest cycles of crops: rice, vegetables and opium as a cash crop for trading. (Yang, 2004). The Hmong New Year was when new garments were revealed and displayed on all members of the family, but most significant for young women of marriageable age.



Fig. 6-8 – unknown artist, reverse appliqué & embroidery, collected in Providence, RI, mid 1980's.

Traditional forms of paj ntaub were already influenced by external sources from the mid-1950's as it was the beginning of tourist trade in southeast Asia. Westerners visiting Laos wanted a souvenir of the fine stitching that appeared on Hmong costumes. Later there were efforts made by missionaries in the late 1960's to market paj ntaub squares and coasters to buyers in the US and France to obtain financial assistance. Making/selling paj ntaub squares became a lucrative business for the less remote villages, and inspired the development of larger decorative hangings. While small squares of paj ntaub were exchanged by Hmong in Laos as a sign of friendship- and also enabled sharing ideas for new pattern designs- this was different than the “decorator squares” that began being produced as exportware for tourists that continues today. (Cohen, 2000) These acculturated paj ntaub are removed from the ritual functions of Hmong identity and spiritual protection that marked the traditional forms and are not “activated” by the same belief systems, even as they demonstrate a new color palette and design freedom that is aesthetically interesting (but a discussion for another essay).



Fig. 9 – Untitled (Hmong refugee come to America), 1986-87, by Ia Yang.

Photo credit: Gloria Joseph, John Prusak, Kathryn Vander

While paj ntaub production had undergone these transitions prior to the conflict in Vietnam, the most dramatic visual shift occurred when the Hmong who fled into refugee camps in the 1970's began making embroidered pictures or images, a dramatic turn from the patterned geometric cloth that had served as a shared visual language previously. As the culture was in significant upheaval, so did their textile language and the producers change. Paj ntaub was women's work in the mountains of Laos, but the men in refugee camps also began to produce "story cloths" as wall hangings in the new pictorial language, a simplification from the abstract language to representational image. Also, the development of commercialized textiles produced confusion over how gender was connected with needlework, as the arena of trade had been clearly male in Laos. (Donnelly, 1994: 111). Again, an in-depth analysis of gender roles is outside the scope of this photo essay - focused on the shift in visual image as language – except to indicate that men did participate in drawing the images and embroidery while in the refugee camps.

So if refugee camps answer the "where" in the genesis of story cloths, I am fascinated with the "why" in the story of story cloths. What could be the reason or impulse for this "dumbing down" of language (strictly this artist's perspective), from symbolic abstraction to pictorial representation? My point of view does not privilege

the Western art history canon. It does suggest that many alternative forms of art such as textiles have not been documented while they, the textiles, became the unconventional document for language. There are numerous Hmong informants and anthropologists (Dewhurst, MacDowell, 1984) that report it was a relief worker in the refugee camps who suggested that the Hmong make the embroidered pictures to sell. Anthropologist Erik Cohen suggests another possible source for this shift to pictorial imagery away from the geometric and ornamental designs. "In the wake of their displacement in Laos, flight and eventual internment in refugee camps in Thailand, the Hmong came increasingly into contact with selected elements of lowland Lao and modern Western culture. Among other things they came in touch with printed materials, which included various illustrated textbooks used for instruction in the English language – which they were taught in the camps as part of their preparation for eventual resettlement in a third country. In all probability, the idea of figurative representation penetrated Hmong culture from the simple illustrations found in these textbooks and in Chinese pattern-books." (Cohen, 2000: 136).

My friend Ia Yang was introduced to story cloths in her year in refugee camps on the Thai border, but did not embroider her beautiful story cloth of refugees coming to America until she was resettled in Providence, Rhode Island (Fig. 9). She did not see picture books in the camps although many Hmong men did. She says that they were not encouraged to produce the embroideries by relief workers, but the men had nothing to do in the camps and the story cloths were a possible source of income for their families. Ia believes, first and foremost, that the primary reason Hmong made the story cloths was to document their story, including the incorporation of English text, to make the history and plight of the Hmong accessible to outsiders. (Yang, 2009) "The Hmong may well have been assisted in the composition of the English texts by foreigners working in the camps as aid personnel or by missionaries. It should be emphasized, however, that the Hmong refugees were not asked, advised, or encouraged by the relief organizations marketing their crafts to produce figurative designs. Indeed, these organizations concentrated on purely ornamental designs, and marketed the figurative ones only rarely and in negligible quantities." (Cohen, 2000: 138).

LAOS

The next stage of my research was to investigate these central questions related to the genesis of story cloths. If the Hmong began production of the pictorial embroideries in the refugee camps only - which has a reasonable amount of evidence - then has this shift in style and production of story cloths become prevalent in Hmong village life in the mountains of Laos and northern Thailand? One goal was to determine whether the pictorial story cloths remain a product of refugees only. This meant traveling to Laos.

This answer was found quickly once in Laos – the amount of embroidered picture story cloths for sale in the tourist center of Luang Prabang has perhaps gained more momentum there than in the U.S. (The number that can be seen for sale at U.S. craft fairs has dropped significantly in the past fifteen years.) Story cloths are numerous in the night market of Luang Prabang. It has also taken new forms, with embroidered figures now stitched on Western-style aprons, bags, pillows – many functional textiles that are unlike the first forms of large wall hangings or art quilts that I encountered in the U.S. However, no story cloths were seen in the more isolated mountains of Xieng Khuang, where much of the Secret War was enacted.



Fig. 10 – Mountains of Xieng Khuang province on the way to Phonsavan, the new provincial capital built in the late 1970's, 35 km from the devastated Xieng Khuang city. The former capital was heavily bombed during the Secret War and could not be inhabited until the land was cleared of unexploded ordnance.



Fig. 11 – Planters at a restaurant in Xieng Khuang, a reminder that this is one of the most heavily bombed places on earth, with much unexploded ordnance that kills people each year, thirty-five years after the war ended.

Xieng Khuang Province

I traveled by van to Xieng Khuang from Luang Prabang, as there is still a large population of Hmong and it was New Years. While in the province of Xieng Khuang, mostly around the capital Phonsavan, the one example of figurative embroidery I saw was on pillows in a Phonsavan tour office and the Hmong manager said they came from Vientiane.



Fig. 12-15 – The Plain of Jars



Fig. 16-17 – Hmong girls dressed for New Years at the Plain of Jars

At the Plain of Jars, a mysterious ancient site that is the primary draw for tourists from around the world to Xieng Khuang province, I met a number of Hmong-Americans who had returned to Laos to celebrate Hmong New Years in the homeland. Those I spoke to said they could not remember ever visiting the Plain of Jars because they left Laos when they were very young. Because the surrounding land hasn't been cleared of unexploded ordnance, villages are not in close proximity and so Hmong New Years festival activity like the ball toss game was not at that tourist site. However, roads leading to the Plain of Jars and Phonsavan had a number of groups engaged in the ball toss game at the edge of the villages.



Fig. 18-24 – New Years festival costumes and ball toss court-ing game at Ban Tha Chok and along the roads.



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

Fig. 25-35 – Ban Tha Chok.

The village is close enough to the road to have electricity and therefore satellite TV for those who can afford it. Water is carried from the river and the housing remains traditional in style, made of split wood, fireplace in kitchen for cooking, and packed dirt floors.



Fig. 26 – Distilling lao-lao whiskey at Ban Tha Chok.



Fig. 27-28 –
Ban Tha Chok.



Fig. 29-30 –
Ban Tha Chok.



Fig. 31-33 –
Ban Tha Chok.



Fig. 34-35 –
Ban Tha Chok.



While Phonsavan had the largest Hmong New Years festival, I concentrated my time going to smaller villages to photograph New Years attire and to see if there were story cloths for sale. (There were no commercial vendors in the villages and no figurative embroidery that I saw.) Although the traditional style costume is worn by most of the young women, it appeared non-existent for the young men. Our male Hmong guide said that the men don't care about wearing traditional clothing, but when looking for a Hmong bride at New Years, they still cared whether she was wearing the costume with hand-embroidered paj ntaub. He also said this was because she would need to make funeral clothes for his mother. While most of the skirts were pleated polyester and not hemp - white or machine printed to look like Blue Hmong batik with embroidery - the counted cross-stitch apron and collars appeared to be the traditional elements still stitched by hand. One young Hmong woman in Ban Nasala said that they still do the embroidery for the apron (sev) themselves, they should not buy that.



Fig. 36-40 – New Years festival and ball toss game in Ban Nasala, a Hmong village about 60 kilometers from Phonsavan and too far off the road to have electricity. The guide said the women sitting in the background were “advisors” available to consult with young women on choosing their husband. The fur and beaded hats are not traditional to Lao Hmong, but imported from China, a style derivation from the Chinese Miao.



Fig. 37



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40

Fig. 41-44 – Ban Nasala.



Fig. 42 – The guide said that bomb casings work well for grain storage buildings since the rats cannot run up the metal.





Fig. 43



Fig. 44

The Phonsavan market that sold kitchenwares, shoes, suitcases - mostly non-tourist merchandise - included one corner of Hmong vendors of jewelry and textile shops selling New Years skirts, jackets and aprons. One vendor told me that the polyester skirts are all made in China. Out of about fifteen textile vendors, only two had traditional hemp skirts with only one or two skirts available, all used except for one length of new pleated white hemp for a skirt was available at one stall. There were no story cloths or any type of figurative embroidery sold at these vendors, giving weight to the idea that story cloths are created for tourist consumption only in Laos. One Hmong-American female from Minnesota wandering through the stalls said that she believes most Hmong feel it is very important for the young women to have handmade garments for New Years, but it is no longer essential they stitch it themselves. Probably in her sixties, she said that she was back in Laos for the first time since she moved to the United States, and wanted to be there for the New Year festival although she was married and would not participate in the ball toss games.

Fig. 45-46 – Phonsavan market.

A traditional Hmong baby carrier is in the upper right corner - it was the only one visibly for sale at the Phonsavan market. There were several mothers at the market with babies in the traditional carriers.



Fig. 47-48 – Phonsavan market.



Fig. 49 – A Hmong village on Rt 7 that had a vegetable market. No handmade Hmong textiles were for sale, neither repurposed old paj ntaub or new costumes, just machine-made textile imports. There was an older woman that was seen at the back of a house doing counted cross stitch by hand.



Luang Prabang

The primary tourist destination in Laos, Luang Prabang is a Unesco World Heritage site along the Mekong River with many active Buddhist temples and formerly the home of the Royal Lao family, whose palace is now the national Palace Museum. The Palace Museum did not have any exhibitions on minority cultures, but in 2009 a small museum opened in a restored French villa in Luang Prabang, the Traditional Arts & Ethnology Center. They had good costume displays but did not allow photographs, although the staff generously shared their library's articles on the Hmong. None of the articles were focused on Hmong material culture, primarily politics, education and health issues.



Fig. 50



Fig. 51

Fig. 52-53 – Neighborhoods in Luang Prabang are a mix of restored French colonial villas and rural style housing intermingled, including Hmong and other minorities.



A center of lowland Lao culture with dozens of Buddhist temples, Luang Prabang offers visitors many images of mosaic and stencil design that have very related spatial compositions to Hmong story cloths. While the technique of the glass mosaics on the Red Chapel building in the Wat Xieng Thong temple complex is different than embroidery, the design of the mosaic is strikingly similar to the figurative style, temporal ambiguity and village life subjects of story cloths. Investigating whether these or similar design elements of lowland Lao culture could have influenced story cloth design is on my future research agenda.

Fig. 54-55 – Wat Xieng Thong, Luang Prabang. Built in 1560, it remains an active temple, maintained by the monks in immaculate condition.



Fig. 56-57 – The Red Chapel, Wat Xieng Thong, has 1950's glass mosaics that depict scenes of village life with a compositional aesthetic related to story cloths.





Fig. 58-59 – The 1959 royal funerary urn and chariot with seven-headed naga prow, inside the Chapel of the Funeral Chariot, Wat Xieng Thong. Buddhas and flower offerings inside the Chapel of the Funeral Chariot.



Fig. 60 – Exterior of the Chapel of the Funeral Chariot.

Several shops in Luang Prabang such as Kopnoi and Ock Pop Tok help local crafts continue through commissions of Western-style textiles and tourist goods from villagers - the best employ fair trade practices and have information on their work with textile artisans. They also promote Lao culture – minority groups and lowland Lao – through temporary exhibitions.

Fig. 61 – Kopnoi, Luang Prabang



Fig. 62-65 – Stay Another Day Laos exhibit on Kopnoi's second floor focused on craft.



Fig. 63



Fig. 64



Fig. 65

Camacrafts is a non-profit who began working with Hmong in the refugee camps in Thailand in the late 1970's to maintain traditional craft skills through production of textiles for sale to tourists in Asia or to be sent abroad to relatives in the U.S. Camacrafts created a catalog of designs and colors suited to Western non-Hmong tastes, that allowed the products to be ordered and purchased from buyers abroad. (Cohen, 2000) This process discouraged design innovation and the textiles were completely removed from the traditional ritual functions and the designs/patterns altered. But since Camacrafts has continued to insist on a very high level of craftsmanship from Hmong producers, many difficult techniques - especially the wax batik and indigo dyeing - have been maintained at a reasonably high level. The batik designs are perhaps the closest to older traditional patterns. There were no story cloths or figurative embroidery in this Camacrafts outlet, although their web site indicates the shop in Vientiane has them for sale.



Fig. 66-67 – Camacrafts outlet in Luang Prabang inside another shop.



Fig. 68 – This small sign for Camacrafts, not visible from the street, was the only promotion. Without a published address and no exterior signage, once the doors were closed and batik not visible, it is very difficult to find. But it was worth walking several hours along the river to find it. The quality is far better than anything seen in the night market.



Fig. 69 – Due to the affluence brought by tourism, other alternative venues outside shops, markets, and museums are available to see minority textiles. The hive bar and restaurant garden has regular contemporary Ethnik Fashion Shows of minority costumes modeled to a thumping techno beat and fog machine with strobe lights. (Since it was quite dark, photos were unsuccessful.)



Fig. 70 – The same area of Luang Prabang as Kopnoi and hive bar has many crafts such as paper cutting being produced in the shop.



Fig. 71 – Several stylish shops in Dara Market, Luang Prabang, that sell acculturated Hmong textiles designed for Western tastes. I saw no vendors in Dara Market selling story cloths.



THAILAND



Fig. 72 – Donald Duck and a zoo of African animals such as giraffes fill the garden of this Buddhist temple, one example of many different cultural influences colliding.

Chiang Mai

As the largest city in the north of Thailand and along a major trade route for thousands of years, Chiang Mai has integrated multiple cultures for a very long time. It has a booming tourist industry, and in the 1980's became the most recognized base to find a guide to take individuals or small groups trekking several days into the mountains to visit hill tribes such as the Hmong. This resulted in many villages creating tourist accommodation and developing special textile products to sell to tourists. Northern Thailand also absorbed many Hmong refugees after 1975. There is a Tribal Museum that had good exhibits on several minorities including the Hmong and a large political story cloth on display (no photographs allowed). The Hill Tribes Products Center has the highest quality Hmong textiles, both story cloths and acculturated reverse appliqué and batik.

Fig. 73 – A number of shops like this one in northern Chiang Mai use old minority textiles and combine them into hippie tourist fashions, although there are a few young designers now using the textiles in more elegant clothing. The Night Bazaar has the largest selection of these repurposed textiles.



Fig. 74-75 – This shop in the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar was owned by a woman who said she is Hmong and only carries products made from Hmong textiles. She said the floral embroidery is from Chinese Hmong, whose traditional patterns vary from Laotian Hmong textiles. She travels to Laos and China to buy the handwork, and said her mother sews most of the products in the shop.



Doi Pui

Fig. 76-81 –

Doi Pui Hmong Village is about 20 km from Chiang Mai, on the same mountain as Doi Suthep Buddhist temple, an important tourist destination for Thai nationals. As a tourist destination for several decades, they have created tourist-only accommodations and many other amenities such as museums, water features and extensive flower gardens. It is popular with Hmong-American tourists also, with women in New Years dress wandering the garden for photo opportunities. There was a very large commercial market of tourist products, including gem stones. The textiles were principally repurposed hemp indigo batik skirts taken apart and unpleated to make bedspreads and bags, and reverse appliqué non-traditional products for the home.



Fig. 77



Fig. 78



Fig. 79



Fig. 80



Fig. 81



Fig. 82-86 –

This story cloth was purchased at Doi Pui market, artist unknown. There were only two vendors in Doi Pui that sold story cloths. None of the story cloths I looked at had political subjects. Mostly they seemed to be Hmong legends with English text although occasionally Lao words in English text, and I did not see any story cloths with Hmong words. From limited language skills, I think I understood from the vendor that only one woman in another village made all of her story cloths, and the stitching and shared aesthetic would support that.



Fig. 83



Fig. 84



Fig. 85



Fig. 86

Conclusion

The short time in Laos and Thailand indicates that limited observation was possible. However, production of story cloths has been incorporated into some villages in Laos, primarily for potential economic gain as tourist commodities sold in economic centers. The embroidered story cloths were not displayed in Hmong homes I visited, nor have I seen them displayed in Hmong-American homes. Also, when there is text on story cloths in Laos and Thailand, of those I observed it was only in English. I remember seeing a few early story cloths in Providence with Hmong words (in Roman Popular Alphabet) but it has been many years since I have seen those in the U.S. While the production of story cloths has become transnational in sales and production, they still seem to be made primarily for tourist consumption. Counted cross-stitch on the women's clothing, particularly the women's apron (sev) is still valued for traditional costumes for the New Years festivals, but the more difficult reverse appliqué was seen very little on new garments. Hemp skirts are very rare, as young women usually purchase machine made polyester imports from China. Resettlement conditions and disparities between Hmong experiences in native rural, agricultural villages and urban settings that require wage labor, both in Laos and in the U.S., certainly seems to be the primary factor for the reduction in labor-intensive textile production.

Future Research

Future extended fieldwork in remote villages in Laos to discover the reach of tourism and globalization and their impact on Hmong textile production should be conducted. There is also great need to compare these findings with research into the current practice of paj ntaub makers in the Hmong diaspora, and to gather stories of Hmong-American textile makers who have lived a traditional life in Laos. Their stories of life in the refugee camps could also illuminate further the beginnings of figurative embroidery and cultural reasons for making story cloths beyond tourist commodity. These interviews also could lead to conversations about whether elements of lowland Lao culture such as the Red Chapel mosaics at Wat Xieng Thong in Luang Prabang could have influenced the design of story cloths, with the strikingly similar figurative style, temporal ambiguity and village life subjects of story cloths.

It is certain that paj ntaub will continue to change in dramatic ways, but it is this artist's hope that the exquisite textiles that so defined Hmong identity will not be lost completely with subsequent generations, and that there will be other researchers who will document further transitions. A comprehensive study of Hmong textiles is needed, as the focus of much literature to date has been on political, medical, linguistic, economic and religious aspects of Hmong life but not on textile production or the rich material culture that traditionally was intertwined with Hmong cosmology.

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