

**DRESS AND IDENTITY
AMONG THE BLACK TAI OF LOEI PROVINCE,
THAILAND**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines dress, textiles, and identity of the Tai Dam or Black Tai living in Loei Province, Northeastern Thailand. The thesis focuses on the contemporary role of traditional and tradition-based Black Tai textiles and dress as material and symbolic representations of Black Tai ethnic and socio-cultural identity. The ethnographic research utilizing participant observation, interviews, observation of behaviour and interactions provided a wealth of information for analysis. The interpretive analysis of textiles and ethnic dress reveals that dress and textiles serve a crucial role in ethnic and cultural continuity among the Black Tai peoples; however a number of types of traditional textiles have been lost due to acculturation and commercialization. Textiles continue to figure prominently in the religious beliefs and practices of the Tai Dam as well as serving as markers of status, functioning to promote cultural and social cohesion, and more recently serving as a means of economic development.

Keywords: Dress, textiles, identity, participant observation, ethnography

Subject Terms: Black Tai or Tai Dam, Thailand, cultural continuity, acculturation

*To my family
for their endless support and encouragement.*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the textiles and dress of the villagers of Ban Napanad in Loei Province, Thailand. Thailand is located in Southeast Asia and is bordered by Laos, Burma, Cambodia and Malaysia (see Map 1.1). The people of Ban Napanad categorize themselves as belonging to the Black Tai (Tai Dam) ethnic group. The purpose of my research is to document and analyze the role dress and textiles have played in the past and continue to play at present in this community. The present study not only documents the role that textiles and dress have played in the cultural traditions of the people of Ban Napanad, but also examines the role textiles and dress have played in relation to their ethnic identity as Black Tai within Thai society.

The thesis of the present study is that Black Tai material culture plays a central role in the maintenance and perpetuation of their ethnic identity; specifically through dress and textiles and the rituals and symbols with which they are associated. Black Tai dress and textiles serve as not only markers of Black Tai ethnic identity, but also play an active role and influence the continuance of the cultural system that generates this identity. However, Black Tai dress and identity do not exist in isolation and are innately tied to a broader political, social, and cultural environment. The social, political, and material environments interact to influence the demarcation and maintenance of Black Tai ethnic boundaries

This thesis draws upon Fischer (2001), Rosaldo (1993), Appadurai (1996), and others that contend with the issue of individual diversity versus cultural continuity to which has been at the forefront of much recent debate in anthropology (Fischer 2001). The researcher adopts an anti-essentialist approach whereby simplistic and universal assumptions are avoided and lived experience and idiosyncratic variation are accounted for in the ethnographic accounts; however avoids the most radical form of anti-essentialism that undermines the concept of culture itself (see, for example, Abu-Lughod 1991). Therefore, I examine individual and collective Black Tai cultural identities in the research. Furthermore, Geertz's (1973:5) conception of culture is adopted that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, [and] I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one search of meaning". He further adds (452), "the culture of a people is

an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles of text, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulder of those to whom they properly belong”. The Geertzian cultural metaphors above guide the principal orientation of that of the researchers insofar cultural actors (individuals) actively construct their own cognitive and cultural worlds derived from available cultural resources (see Fischer 2001).

Map 1.1: Southeast Asia



Like other people in Thailand, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad have been subject to accelerated acculturative influences in recent years and consequently the younger generation

seems to have lost most notions of their cultural traditions and practices while those of the older generation strive to preserve them. The village elders recognize the perplexing dilemma posed by the desire for a better life in terms of economic development and education while seeking to preserve a cultural heritage of which they are proud. The response of the elders has been to make a conscientious effort to revitalize cultural traditions and pass ethnic knowledge on to the younger generations. One such initiative is the creation of a cultural centre, which was established in 2539 BE (or 1996 CE) to promote and preserve Black Tai (Tai Dam) cultural traditions and ethnic identity (see Figure 1.1 and 1.2).

Although Thailand is often portrayed as a relatively homogeneous country in which Thai people who share a wide range of cultural features in common constitute the vast majority, there is in fact considerable ethnic heterogeneity within the country and even within the Thai majority. While the term Thai suffices as an ethnic label when referring to speakers of Tai languages in Thailand in general, I will use the term Tai when the reference is to Tai-speaking sub-groups such as the Black Tai. Tai-speaking peoples constitute about 84 per cent of the population of Thailand, but there are about 75 distinct ethnic groups in Thailand (Howard 2001: 2202), including groups speaking Tai as well as non-Tai languages. Non-Tai speaking groups include relatively large numbers of Chinese, Malay-speaking Muslims, and Khmer, as well as smaller groups speaking Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Hmong-Mien languages (see Schliesinger 2000).

Of particular concern to the present discussion is the nature of the Tai-speaking population. The Tai-speaking people of Thailand include four major distinct regional groups: the Central Tai, who constitute about 36% of the population; the Tai-Lao from the northeast, who comprise about 32% of the population; the Northern Tai or Lanna Tai (or Yuan), who account for about 8% of the population; and the Southern Tai or Pak Tai, who are about 8% of the population. However, the situation is even more complex. In addition to the larger groups already mentioned, there are many smaller Tai-speaking groups such as the Lue, Phuan, Tai Khang (Lao Khrang), Shan (including Tai Yai), and the Black Tai. In his survey of Tai groups in Thailand, Schliesinger (2001) lists 30 different groups.

Attention to questions surrounding ethnicity and ethnic relations in Thailand has tended to focus on relations between the Tai majority and non-Tai groups such as the Chinese, Moslem Malays, and hill tribes (e.g., Karen, Lisu, and Hmong) of northern Thailand. Studies of ethnic relations concerning such groups have centred on such general issues as assimilation (sometimes referred to as Tai-ization or Thai-ization) and nation building or on more specific ones like questions surrounding citizenship. These issues are also of relevance to Tai-speaking minority

groups such as the Black Tai, but their situation is somewhat different from that of non-Tai people since they share a common cultural heritage with the national majority. As will be discussed below, the ancestors of many of the Tai in Thailand were Black Tai and yet very few recognize this aspect of their heritage today. Even among the Black Tai, who were resettled in Thailand from Laos and Vietnam in the late 18th century and at various times in the 19th century, many were subsequently assimilated into the encompassing Thai society. The Black Tai of Ban Napanad so far have resisted such assimilation to a considerable extent. Schliesinger (2001: 113) says of them: “The Tai Dam of Ban Napanad became famous for preserving traditional Tai Dam culture in their new habitat. Even today, they keep their customs alive and celebrate all their social and religious events in a traditional way.” As will be seen, textiles and dress are an important part of the traditions of the people of Ban Napanad and they have also served as markers of ethnic identity for these people in relation to those living around them.

Textiles and Identity

In their introduction to *Cloth and Human Experience*, Weiner and Schneider (1989: 1) comment “Throughout history, cloth has furthered the organization of social and political life... Cloth lends itself to an extraordinary range of decorative variation” and “These broad possibilities of construction, colour, and patterning give cloth an almost limitless potential for communication.” The present study focuses on one form of such communication, the use of textiles as a means of communicating ethnic identity. Although the literature on socio-cultural aspects of textiles is extensive and studies of textiles often assume some kind of relationship between dress and ethnic identity, as noted by Eicher (1995: 1) and Howard (2000: 1) studies that specifically address the question of the relationship between dress and ethnic identity are relatively rare.

Writing on ethnicity in general, Nash (1989: 11-12) views textiles or dress as among the “surface pointers” that “make recognition at a distance, or a fleeting instance, possible,” while recognizing that such surface pointers can also be linked to what he calls “core features of group differences.” Thus, not only can textiles be used to indicate one’s ethnic identity to others, but their use can also be associated with internal aspects of ethnicity including the linking of a person to their ancestors and as being associated with shared aesthetic and other cultural values. Beyond simply describing such patterns of communication through dress, it is also possible to examine the use of dress in relation to ethnic identity in a dynamic fashion. Tarlo’s (1996) study of dress in India is useful in this regard. Noting that people in modern India have a variety of identities, she

focuses on the choices that people make in selecting what to wear in different context and how this relates to their various identities. Although Tarlo does not concern herself specifically with ethnic identity, the notion of choice in regard to this form of identity is an especially useful one when approaching situations such as that of the Black Tai in modern Thailand who are confronted with a variety of choices in what to wear and who have been confronted influences from a variety of sources undermining the issue of traditional Black Tai dress.

A great deal of research has been conducted on the textiles of Southeast Asia (see Howard 1994). While many studies of Southeast Asian textiles have focused on describing them and the weaving technologies employed, there have also been numerous studies focusing on the socio-cultural context of weaving, textiles, and dress. As noted by Howard (2000: 1), however, most of this literature “has been decidedly inward looking, relating dress to such things as hierarchy and gender within particular societies” rather than examining the broader context, such as the relationship between dress and ethnic identity. Likewise, Eicher (1995: 1) comments that ethnicity and dress are often linked and that the relationship between the two has been largely ignored analytically.

Surveying the literature on ethnicity and dress with the context of Southeast Asia, Howard (2000: 3) remarks “despite the fact that few other regions of the world have been the subject of so much descriptive writing on dress as Southeast Asia (see Howard 1994) and that throughout Southeast Asia patterns of dress have long played an important role as markers of ethnic identity”...“one of the particularly striking features of the purportedly more theoretical writing on dress in recent years is the virtual absence of Southeast Asian material from the discussion.” He also comments, “it is striking how little attention is paid to dress in the post-World War II literature on ethnicity” in Southeast Asia and that within the literature on Southeast Asian textiles emphasis has been on “the traditional symbolic role of textiles within particular societies or related group of societies rather than questions of cross-cultural ethnic identity” (Howard 2000: 4-5).

Among the works on Southeast Asian dress that do pay attention to questions of ethnic identity is Niessen’s (1993) study of Batak dress in which she examines Batak dress within a regional and global context. Thus, Niessen looks at Karo Batak textiles and dress at the time of the 1872 Karo Batak rebellion in relation to anti-Dutch and anti-Malay sentiments: “Karo clothing co-operated with those feelings as a badge, and an expression, of their difference from their neighbours. The simple and sober indigo blue cloths of the Karo reflected the egalitarian nature of their social structure” (Niessen 1993: 64). Following the unsuccessful revolt, when the Karo

“switched their political direction, they switched both their clothing styles and colours,” which became more European and Malay in colour and style (Niessen 1993: 69).

In his study of dress and ethnic identity in the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya (now called Papua), Howard (2000) also places the use of dress in relation to ethnicity within a historical context. He discusses how initially dress played a limited role as an ethnic marker in large part because of the relative isolation of the different groups in Papua, but that it came to be of more significance in the face of efforts by the Dutch and Indonesians to assimilate the local populations, noting: “From the perspective of the individual Irianese, the situation was one of increasing complexity as more choices became available when deciding what to wear and as questions of identity became more complex” (Howard 2000: 23). Howard examines cases where groups have resisted assimilation by consciously retaining traditional modes of dress as well as instances in which there has been a revival of traditional dress in particular circumstances such as cultural festivals, noting that while wearing traditional attire in some contexts may be viewed as a form of resistance in others it “seems to serve more as a security blanket than as a form of resistance” (Howard 2000: 24).

In a more recent work, Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah (in press) examines how textiles have been used in the construction of national identity in Brunei. Hand-woven textiles are an important part of Brunei traditional culture, serving not only as markers of ethnic identity on the part of the different ethnic groups living in Brunei, but also as signifiers of social status, wealth, and political prominence. Since the country’s independence textiles and dress have also been consciously used to promote a national identity that is closely associated with Brunei Malay cultural values and a process of re-Malayization that began in the mid-1980s. In this process the use of traditional Brunei Malay styles of textiles has been expanded to include their use in new traditions such as university graduation ceremonies.

I would like now to turn to an examination of the literature on textiles and dress of Tai peoples in Southeast Asia in relation to questions of ethnic identity. A good place to begin this discussion is with Gittinger and Lefferts (1992) *Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia*, one of the first works to examine Tai textiles from a regional perspective. In her introduction to the volume, Gittinger (1992: 29) notes “Textiles are a key to many aspects of Tai culture and even address issues of the history of the Tai people... Their most traditional or ‘core; textile forms encode evidence of the early material culture of the Tai people and provide an intriguing glimpse of certain aspects of the material culture of the Tai several centuries ago as they moved into the areas we associate with them today.” In addition to core Tai textile forms, Gittinger also points to

the influence of Khmer, Indian, and Chinese textile forms and styles of dress on the Tai people. In a chapter on “Contexts and Meanings in Tai Textiles,” Lefferts (1992: 59) remarks:

Among Tai, textiles embody social meanings... Beyond clothing people, they define the fundamental division of labor, signal changes in status and liminal periods in rites of passage, and commemorate important occasions. Indeed, until recently, with the advent of oil-based house paints, photographs and lithographed calendars, textiles were the primary means of adorning Tai homes and surroundings.

In discussing textiles in relation to identity questions, Lefferts focuses on gender. In fact, although the volume includes numerous references to textiles that are identified with particular sub-groups of Tai, the authors do not elaborate on the relationship between sub-group identity and textile forms. Nor do they discuss textiles as ethnic markers to distinguish Tai peoples from non-Tai.

Textiles of the Daic Peoples of Vietnam by Michael C. Howard and Kim B. Howard (2002), while focusing on Tai textiles within Vietnam also seeks to place these textiles in a wider context, especially in relation to China. The authors note (2002: 7) that “Chinese subjugation of lowland northern Vietnam” served to divide Tai-speaking peoples with those living to the northeast of the Red River coming under strong Chinese influence, while those living to the west of the river retained more of their distinctive culture, and such differences came to be “reflected in the textiles of the various Tai speaking groups.” They include the Black Tai among those who were more isolated from Chinese influence. They view an especially important indicator of cultural conservatism versus Chinese influence as the wearing of skirts (“short or long full wrap-around as well as tubeskirts”) in traditional Tai fashion versus the adoption of Chinese style trousers by Tai women (Howard and Howard 2002: 11).

Especially important for the purposes of the present discussion is Howard and Howard’s discussion of differences in textile traditions among Thai sub-groups. The Thai ethnic group in Vietnam is comprised of Tai people living to the west of the Red River, as distinct from the Tay and Nung who live to the east of the river. The Thai are divided into White Tai and Black Tai and Howard and Howard further divide the Thai into the Northern Thai who live in the area formerly included within the core area of the Sipsong Chau Tai confederacy and the Southern Thai, who live further south and largely outside of the area that was included within the confederacy. The White Tai and Black Tai form distinct groups among the Northern Thai and this is reflected in distinctive female attire. In contrast, Black Tai and White Tai are mixed among the Southern Thai and, not only is their dress different in many respects from that of the Northern Thai, but among Southern Thai there are also several regional or sub-group differences. In regard to this situation they note (Howard and Howard 2002: 100):

Accounting for the differences in the textiles and dress traditions of the Northern Thai and Southern Thai is not an easy matter since the history of these traditions is so poorly understood. To some extent they probably represent long-established variations among different Tai speaking sub-groups. It is also possible that they are manifestations of the very basic division in Tai society between White Tai and Black Tai. However, there is enough evidence of underlying commonality... to indicate that other variables have also been at work. It can be argued that the Southern Thai tradition is a more complete survival of the ancient Daic textile tradition than we find anywhere else except among the Li of Hainan Island. Elsewhere, such as among the Northern Thai, this tradition has been undermined to a large extent by external influences, especially the influence of the Chinese and Vietnamese.

Thus, they return to the notion of core textile types as mentioned by Gittinger and to how this core has been retained to varying degrees over time by different sub-groups of Tai.

Howard and Howard's (2002: 139-48) book includes a discussion of the influence of Tai textiles and dress on neighbouring non-Tai groups. They examine this in relation to the process of what Condominas (1990) has referred to as Thai-ization, which is the process of non-Tai becoming fully or partially assimilated by Tai. This process of Thai-ization includes the adoption of Tai styles of dress. Other groups trade with the Tai for cloth, but then use the cloth to create clothing that is distinct to varying degrees from that of the Tai. In some instance this situation reflects environmental aspects in that these groups live at higher elevations where it is difficult to grow cotton.

The question of the relationship between textile differences and various sub-groups arises again in studies of the textiles of Tai groups in Laos. In addition to the distinction between the Lao-Phutai and Tai, there are also many distinct sub-groups of each of these larger ethnic categories. Thus, Tai in Laos include White Tai and Black Tai as well as Red Tai. In fact, Schliesinger (2003) includes about fifty Lao-Tai sub-groups in his survey of ethnic groups of Laos. Two studies are of particular interest in the present context. The first of these is an article on Black Tai, White Tai, and Red Tai textiles by Gittinger, Chungyamin, and Saiyalard (1997). Written prior to the publication of Howard and Howard (2002) this article suffers from a lack of understanding of the history of these groups in Vietnam prior to their migration to Laos and serves to highlight just how important knowledge of the Tai heritage in Vietnam is to be able to interpret Tai culture in Laos and Thailand in that the Black Tai in Laos were migrants from the former Sipsong Chau Tai region at a time when there are a relatively limited textile repertoire, while the Red Tai and White Tai migrated from the Southern Thai region in Vietnam where much of the core repertoire is still found.

Gittinger, Chungyamin, and Saiyalard (1997: 94) begin by noting “Technologically there are few differences among the textiles produced by the groups.” They remark “[t]here are two methods of handling the tension on the supplementary-warp yarns. One weights the decorative yarns below the foundation warp, the other above. The distribution of these two methods is imperfectly known, but it does not seem to be ethnically aligned.” In regard to the decorative patterning on textiles, they comment (1997: 103) “The Tai Daeng [Red Tai] enjoy an inventory of textiles that shares forms with the Tai Dam and Tai Kaw (White Tai). The Tai Daeng assemblage, however, reveals a more exuberant sense of patterning and in many instances a higher degree of craftsmanship.”

The second work, a survey of Tai textiles in the Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan regions of Laos by Patricia Cheesman (2004), was published after Howard and Howard (2002) and therefore was able to draw on the Howards’ book and gain a greater appreciation of the relevance of the Tai experience in Vietnam for understanding the situation in Laos. Cheesman (2004: 16) argues, “Ethnic identification [of Tai textiles in Laos] is meaningless without the qualification of the political-geographical *muang* provenance.” By this she is referring to their *muang* of origin rather than to their current location, thus pointing to how textile styles can tell us something of the history of a group’s migration. She cites the example of the Red Tai (Tai Daeng) who migrated from Muang Daeng in what is now Vietnam (see Howard and Howard 2002: 107-09) to Muang Xam Nuea, bringing with them their style of weaving (2004: 16): “When the French replaced the Tai Nuea administration [of Xam Nuea] with Tai Daeng chiefs for religious purposes, the textile styles of M. Daeng suddenly became the dominant style of Xam Nuea, but these cannot be identified as belonging to the Tai Nuea or the Tai Daeng, as both these groups displayed the same style in most of their textiles.”

The Muang Daeng style referred to by Cheesman falls within the types of textiles described by Howard and Howard (2002) as being produced by the Southern Thai, including those of Muang Daeng and neighbouring *muang* in Thanh Hoa Province of Vietnam. While Howard and Howard (2002: 104) indicate that in the case of dragon motifs on the waistbands of noble women’s tubeskirts it may have been possible to have identified the specific *muang* of the wearer, they give the impression that within the Southern Thai region variations in textiles were not necessarily specific to particular *muang*, but might be found within an area encompassing several *muang*. Clearly we are dealing with a very complex situation here and it is obvious that more research is needed to sort out the various regional and sub-group manifestations of the Tai textile repertoire in Vietnam and Laos. We will return to the issues raised here in regard to the

association of textiles to the identity of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad within the broader context of Tai identity.

In discussing studies of Tai textiles in relation to identity so far I have focused on sub-group identity and to a lesser extent on identity questions in relation to textile use by groups who have been partially assimilated by the Tai. The non-Tai works discussed at the start of this section focused on another aspect of textiles and ethnic identity in relation to the use of dress as a marker of ethnic identity within a national context. Howard and Howard (2002: 153) in their conclusion point to “increasing acculturative pressures” on Tai people in Vietnam that coincide recently with “political changes in Vietnam [that] have created new opportunities for cultural revival.” They also highlight “contradictory market forces” in the greater availability of commercial clothing along with a growing external market for hand-woven Tai textiles. They view this as a “dynamic situation” that “holds out hope for the survival of one of the world’s richest textile traditions.”

Tai people from a large number of sub-groups came to settle in Thailand in the past and many of these groups had forms of dress that distinguished them from one another. The forces of assimilation in modern Thailand have reduced such differences in dress, but not eradicated them entirely. This can be seen from several surveys of textiles in Thailand describing regional and sub-cultural differences (National Identity Board 1994, Prangwatthanakun and Cheesman 1987, Conway 1992: 135-81). Even more than the Tai groups in Vietnam, Tai-speaking minorities in Thailand today are confronted with the contradictory forces of assimilation on the one hand and market and other promotional efforts to revive the production and use of traditional hand-woven textiles on the other hand.

Prangwatthanakun and Naenna (1994: 27) and Howard (1998: 21-23) review the increased use of imported textiles and adoption of Western fashion in Thailand during the 19th and early 20th century, culminating in the famous cultural mandates that were promulgated by the Phibun Songkhram regime between 1939 and 1942. Assimilation and decline in the use of traditional hand-woven textiles was greatest in Central Thailand, while older traditions of weaving and dress remained stronger in the outlying areas, such as the northeast. As noted by Reynolds (1993: 8): “the edicts advanced the interests of the dominant ethnic group, the Thai-speaking people of the central plains, as against the interests of other Thai-speaking populations and ethnic Chinese.” Thailand’s rapid development starting in the early post-war period saw this process accelerate. At the same time, however, there were concerted efforts to revive hand weaving and adopt tradition-oriented textiles to more contemporary fashion. Queen Sirikit of

Thailand was especially active in this regard. Howard (1998: 24-38) discusses these efforts at revival.

It is important to recognize that this revival in the use of hand-woven textiles took place within the context of nation-building in which the central government sought to create what Anderson (1991) refers to as a 'imagined community' and McVey (1984: 12; cited by Reynolds 1993: 21) a kind of 'super-ethnicity'. In his study of the Karen in Thailand, Renard (1999) argues that starting during the reign of King Vajiravudh Thai nationalism, responding to external influences, manifested policies to assimilate and acculturate ethnic enclaves. While the Chinese were the primary targets of these policies initially, during the post-war period ethnic groups outside of central Thailand also came under such pressure.

Such efforts to promote a national identity and to assimilate ethnic minorities had a profound impact on the use of traditional-oriented hand-woven textiles. Howard (1998: 37) discusses this in regard to a particular type of skirt cloth traditionally woven by Phuan communities in the vicinity of Si Satchanilai:

Had Sieo teen chok has assumed a dual identity. While most Thais, and some non-Thais, recognize such cloth as coming from at least the area around Had Sieo, few today associate the pattern with the Lao Phuan. Thus, it is associated with a particular region, but not an ethnic group. In addition to this regional identity, when used in contemporary fashion, it is also intended to convey Thai-ness and, therefore, it is also associated with a national identity.

Thus, while local styles of textile may continue to be woven their meaning in relation to ethnicity may be changed. In the case of the Phuan people living near Si Satchanilai, most no longer recognize themselves as Phuan, but rather as Thai living in a particular region and even in the local context the style of dress has lost its association with a particular ethnic group. As we shall see in the case of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad, they in fact have been able to retain a style of dress that they view as distinctly Black Tai and this is in no small part related to their maintenance of a distinct ethnic identity.

Methodology and Fieldwork

Traditional anthropological participant observation continues to engage the discipline, providing insights that other methodologies may neglect. Typically, participant observation "entail[s] the researcher immersing herself or himself in a research 'setting' so that they can experience and observe at first hand a range of dimensions in and of that setting" (Mason 2002: 84). Geertz (1973: 19) describes such ethnographic research thus: "the ethnographer "inscribes"

social discourse; [ultimately] he writes it down” and therefore “turns a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be re-consulted.” Comparing anthropological fieldwork with that of sociologists, Okely (1992, cited in Amit 2000: 1) argues that the “bounded periods of sociological versions of ethnography” bear “no comparison to the long term and thorough immersion of anthropological fieldwork, a total experience, demanding all of the anthropologist’s resources, intellectual, physical, emotional, political, and intuitive.”

It has long been the view by professional anthropologists that an ethnographer should do his or her fieldwork by living as intimately as possible with the people being studied for a sufficient amount of time to allow for a holistic analysis. As noted by Bernard 1988: 149), “Most basic anthropological research is done over a period of about a year, but that “Some researchers have found that very long-term participant observation, done in a series of studies over several decades, can yield understanding of social change that is simply not possible in any other way.” Whether one year or longer, this length of time should be sufficient for the ethnographer to become familiar with the people so that the data collected has considerable depth and reliability such as can be gained by cross-checking it an witnessing first-hand a wide range of activities. It is important to recognize, however, as pointed out in *Notes and Queries in Anthropology* (Royal Anthropological Institute 1951: 31) that even with such a long period of time in the field: no single individual can investigate the whole field of human activity; even in a small community.” While at present it has become increasingly common for anthropologists to conduct shorter periods of fieldwork, this is far from ideal and runs the risk of superficiality in data collection and that undermines the viability of the anthropological enterprise.

The research for this thesis relied primarily on three types of methods: unstructured interviews to collect life histories and narratives; structured and semi-structured interviews that address specific research questions; participant observation including the observation of behaviour and interaction. The last proved instrumental in providing key insights into the cultural system. As Geertz (1973: 17) notes, “Behaviour must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behaviour—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation.” Since the research was concerned with material culture, I made an effort to observe the production process of textiles, baskets, and other items. Interviews and observations also focused on the use of such items. Photographs proved very useful as they captured a pictorial representation of cultural phenomena and the use of Black Tai material culture. After completion

of my fieldwork systematic examination of the field-notes, photographs, and material artifacts provided a wealth of information regarding dress on which the analysis is based.

Fieldwork was carried out over an eight-month period in the Black Tai (Tai Dam) village of Ban Napanad in Northeastern Thailand, Chiang Khan District. Prior to the onset of fieldwork, I spent three months in Chiang Mai undertaking intensive language instruction in order to gain conversational fluency in the Central Thai language. While many people in Ban Napanad understand Central Thai, the main language spoken in the village is Black Tai (Tai Dam). While the younger people of Ban Napanad and some older people are fluent in both Black Tai and Central Thai, many older people are more proficient in the Black Tai language. Another language often spoken in the village is a dialect of Lao. The Black Tai have their own language and written script (alphabet) (see Appendix A). I was unable to locate an individual who was capable of teaching me the Black Tai language in the village. Thus, interviews were conducted largely in Central Thai (also known as Standard Thai). In general, I used Central Thai for purposes of communication and, while I am able to communicate to a limited extent in Black Tai, I usually had to rely on the assistance of others in the village to translate when Black Tai was the exclusive language of communication.

There is no standard means of transcribing Central Thai or Black Tai into English, although the transcription of Black Tai into English is more standardized than is the transcription of Central Thai into English. There are two main sources for transcription of Black Tai. One is the Thái-Việt dictionary by Hoàng and Tòng (1990) that defines Black Tai words used in Vietnam into Vietnamese. The other is the Black Tai-English dictionary by Baccam, et al. (1989) that is published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The situation for Thai is more complex and has been subject to changing fashions over the years. In the present thesis I make no attempt to indicate tonal and vowel length variation. I have used the spelling provided by the authors that often correspond to the common transliterated spelling.

During my actual eight months of fieldwork I lived in a Black Tai household with one elder male and his wife (as was prearranged by my senior supervisor and myself on a prior occasion), only leaving the village to renew my visa on two separate occasions. The male of the household was a worker in a health clinic located in Loei Province (city centre) as the village health clinic did not have an available position. Both the male and female I was living with were well-respected individuals within the community and were always involved in cultural events. I decided to enter the village with no items that would be considered luxuries and to live essentially the same lifestyle the villagers of Ban Napanad. Therefore, I never asked for any additional

conveniences nor did I accept them when offered. For example, when offered bread for breakfast, I simply indicated that I would prefer to eat the same food as the Black Tai. This brought me closer to my host family and by the end of my research I began to love them as a family. The villagers began to call me “Mr. Tai Dam” and often remarked, “the *farang* is more Black Tai than most others,” which was often met with cynicism and a rapid series of questions regarding Black Tai history and social life. Fortunately for me I was well read before I went to the village on these particular issues. Originally, based on readings concerned with ethnographic research methodology, I was quite fearful that I would have difficulty getting people to trust me so that I can interview them. During my stay in Ban Napanad I never encountered animosity. It was quite the opposite; actually, everyone was hospitable and sociable towards me. I must admit that during the first couple of months of my research I tried to be as unobtrusive as possible simply observing behaviour and interaction among the villagers. Eventually, villagers began to stop and wanted to talk with me. I never needed to solicit interviews from most villagers.

The only real problems I encountered were related to village politics and rumours. I often found myself situated right in the middle of local politics because of my host family’s position within the villages’ political system. This was most evident at the time of voting for a new village headman. Once people in the village became aware of the position of my host family in this regard it was assumed that I was of the same opinion, guilty by association. This influenced some people’s behaviour towards me for a time, but this did not last long and the daily life of the villagers went back to normal after the election was over.

In regards to rumours, the most problematic of them was the overall attitude the villagers have to foreigners. Overall, foreigners typically have come in and out of the village exploiting them for the knowledge and then essentially proclaiming themselves as experts on the Black Tai. Or else, they came into the village with an ethnocentric viewpoint and judging the villagers as less modern. Despite these stereotypes, it was relatively easy for me to overcome this obstacle by allowing the villagers to get to know me. In fact, in the first couple of months I did not solicit any interviews but more rather allowed the villagers to ask me about myself. In turn, the relationship that was established among the villages of Ban Napanad was not one of researcher and participant but more rather one similar to with friends and family.

Ethical Considerations

In projects that deal with human subjects certain ethical considerations need to be considered. Babbie (1999) deals with a number of important and practical issues relating to social

research. First and foremost, the researcher must bring no harm to his or her participants therefore participation in the research must be voluntary. In my ethnographic research, I always considered the participants welfare before all else. Participants were given the right to withdraw from an interview at anytime or not answer a question(s) if they did not want to. Voluntary participation was with verbal consent to my specific ethnographic research. Ensuring that no harm came to the socio-cultural system being studied was another important factor that I took into consideration. A careless researcher can reveal private information that could be held or used against another villager. Therefore, all respondents were guaranteed confidentiality. In some cases, anonymity could also be guaranteed. However, due to my methods, primarily interviews and oral histories, anonymity was not always feasible.

Babbie (1999: 403) also addresses the issue of handling one's own identity as a researcher in the field. He says that researchers sometimes "fudge" the truth of why or for whom they are doing research. In my particular research this was not necessary. I made my research goals very apparent and open for criticism and/or judgment from all those individuals involved. However, I found a greater issue concerned my role as a researcher as opposed to my role as a friend or family member. I stayed with one family during the duration of my fieldwork and eventually became an honorary family member, and with this, I became involved in family politics. Consequently, those villagers who did not maintain cordial relations with the family proved difficult for me to interview or befriend. Therefore, I often waited for them to ask for an interview rather than take the initiative myself. On the whole, however, I found my time in the Black Tai village to be extremely productive and without tribulations.

Organization of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides background on the Black Tai and their history and identity. Chapter 3 examines dress and textiles of the Black Tai villagers of Ban Napanad. Chapter 4 is concerned with religious beliefs and the use of textiles. Chapter 5 examines in more detail the relationship between dress and ethnic identity. The final chapter reviews the thesis concluding the role dress, textiles, and the rituals and symbols, with which they are associated, maintains in perpetuating Black Tai identity.

Album One

Figure 1.1: The cultural centre located in Ban Napanad that was established in 1996 to promote and preserve Black Tai culture.



Figure 1.2: The textile centre that is connected to the Black Tai cultural centre to promote and preserve weaving among the villagers. There are currently five or six weavers weaving daily.



CHAPTER 2: THE BLACK TAI

The Black Tai are a sub-group of Tai-speaking peoples. They speak what linguists categorize as a Southwestern Tai language. Tai languages are divided into Northern, Central, and Southwestern sub-families, which reflect their migration across southern China and northern mainland Southeast Asia.

The origins of the Tai peoples can be traced back prior to 2000 BC along the Yangtze River from Sichuan Province to the coast in the vicinity of Shanghai.¹ It was in this area that the earliest states with Tai inhabitants emerged. The ancestors of the Black Tai were associated with the ancient kingdom of Yüeh, which emerged as a unified state in 496 BC and came to encompass parts of what are today the Chinese provinces of Zhejiang, Fujian, Anhui Guangdong, Hainan, Guangxi, and Hunan, as well as portions of northern Vietnam. Other Tai peoples also settled in Yunnan.

The Tai people who settled in northern Vietnam's coastal lowlands and interior valleys were divided into Black Tai and White Tai. The origins of this division are obscure, but they were already in existence when the first Tai arrived in northern Vietnam. These Black Tai are ancestors of the people who today are called Tay in Vietnam, while the White Tai are ancestors of those called Nung. The early Black Tai lived along the Lo and Gam rivers and to the north in the present province of Cao Bang. The White Tai lived further west in the vicinity of the town of Viet Tri. To the west of the Tai territory in what is today southeastern Son La Province a group of Tai founded Muang Tak. Tai documents date the founding of Muang Tak to 271 BC. It was in this area to the west of the Red River and further north in Yunnan that Southwestern Tai-speaking groups emerged as a distinct group from the Central Tai-speaking groups to their east, who became the Tay and Nung.

Southwestern Tai languages are sub-divided by linguists into Chiang Saen Tai, Lao-Phutai, and Northwestern Tai languages. This reflects their geographical distribution across the border area of southern China and Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and Assam. People whose

¹ The discussion concerning the early history of the Tai people is taken largely from Howard and Howard (2002) and Howard (in press).

homeland is along the upper Mekong River in Yunnan and who subsequently migrated west to Burma and Assam speak Northwestern Tai languages. People whose homeland is further east in the vicinity of the upper Red River in Yunnan speak Chiang Saen Tai and Lao-Phutai languages. Speakers of Chiang Saen Tai languages maintained the distinction between Black Tai and White Tai after they came to form distinct groups from the Central Tai-speaking Tay and Nung. Those Chiang Saen speaking Tai who are categorized as Black Tai call themselves Tai Dam (*dam* = black), while those who are categorized as White Tai call themselves Tai Don or Tai Khao (*don* = white, *khao* = white).

The Chiang Saen speaking Tai in Vietnam are given the ethnic label of Thai, which distinguishes them from other Tai-speaking groups such as the Tay, Nung, Lao, and Lue. After the Chinese defeated the Tai ruler Thuc Phan in 208 BC Thai chronicles mention Black Tai living in Muang On and Muang Ai and White Tai in Muang Bo Te. These *muang* were located in the border area of Northwestern Vietnam and Yunnan near the Red River. This area subsequently came under control of the Nan Chao (Nanzhao) Kingdom of Yunnan, which was founded in AD 732. The Tai migrated to the southwest beyond the territory of Nan Chao and into the hills west of the Red River that were also outside of Chinese control. They spread across the high valleys of Northwestern Vietnam, south as far as Nghe An Province, west across northern Laos towards the Mekong River, and into what is now northern Thailand.

The Thai in Northwestern Vietnam (i.e., in Lai Chau, Dien Bien, Son La, and Yen Bai provinces) retained the distinction between Black Tai and White Tai. Even today, despite the general official ethnic category of Thai, most of the Tai in this area continue to distinguish themselves as Black Tai or White Tai and speak distinct languages. The Black Tai in particular perceive of their homeland within this region as being Muang Thaeng, which later came to be called Muang Thanh or Muang Thaan (Howard and Howard 2002: 74) and more recently Dien Bien Phu. It is to here that their founding myths refer, where the Tai people emerged from the gourd and their founding ancestor Khun Borom is said to have come to earth and to have given birth to the founding ancestors of the early Black Tai ruling lineages. The area where the distinction between Black Tai and White Tai prevails is associated with a confederacy of Tai *muang* that was known as Sipsong Chau Tai, or 12 Tai *chau* (a *chau* can be translated as a canton and is roughly equivalent to a *muang*). Within Sipsong Chau Tai the distinction between Black Tai and White Tai continued to play an important political role and to manifest itself in linguistic and cultural differences. Elsewhere these differences tended to break down.

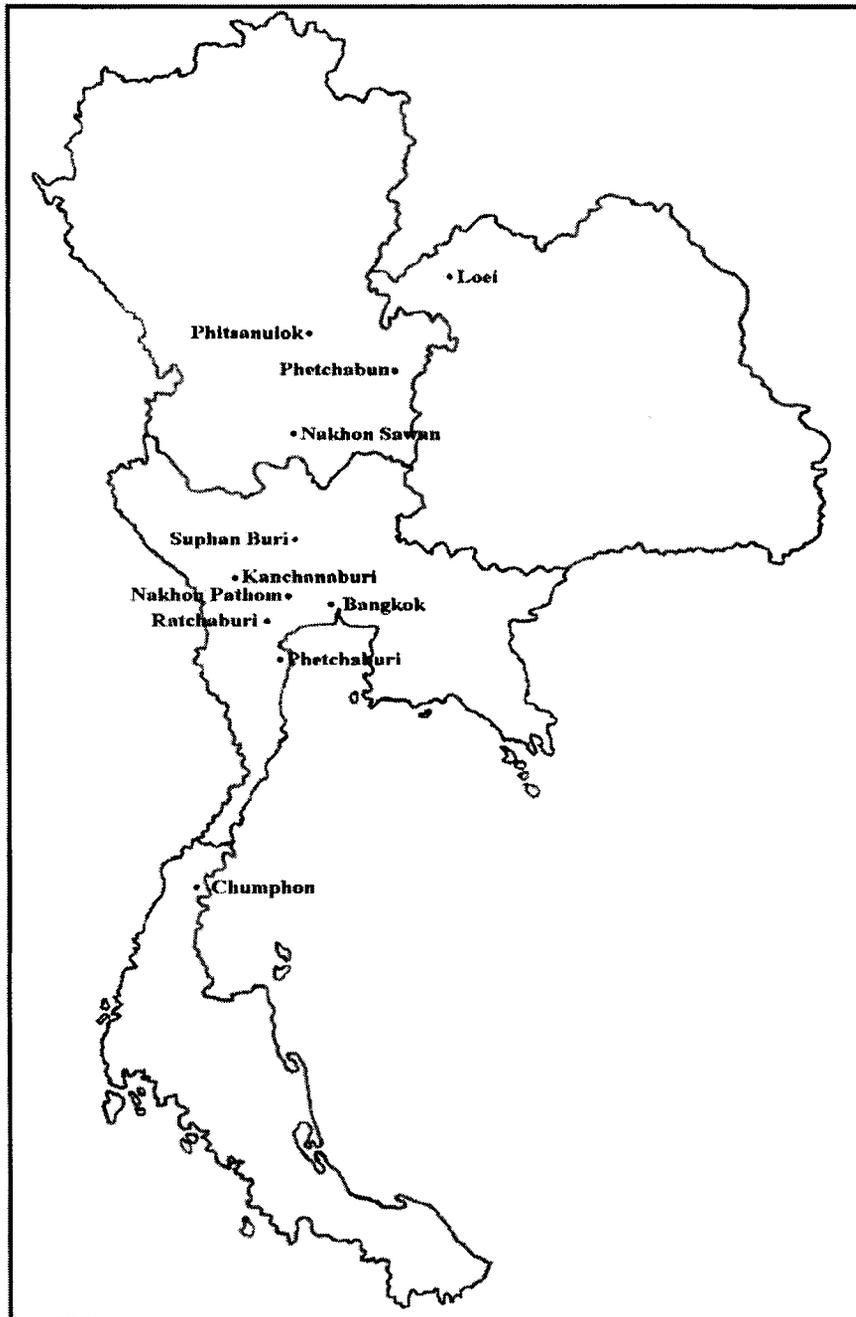
The White Tai were the first to move further south and to settle in what are now Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, and Nghe An provinces of Vietnam. Black Tai came later to settle in this area and also in what are now Houa Phan and Xieng Khoang provinces of Laos. In this region the distinction between Black Tai and White Tai became confused. This was in part a result of inter-marriage. Thus, many of the Thai in Thanh Hoa Province refer to themselves as Black Tai, but speak White Tai. Thai living further south in Nghe An Province tended to identify themselves according to their local *muang* and today are often referred to by new names, Tai Thanh and Tai Muang respectively, rather than by the Black Tai and White Tai names. A similar situation prevailed in Houa Phan and Xieng Khoang provinces, where new names like Tai Neua, Tai Daeng (Red Tai), and Phuan came to replace Black Tai and White Tai.

The Tai who settled in northern Thailand lost their identity as Black Tai completely and came to be known as Yuan or Khon Muang. These Tai converted to Buddhism and adopted elements of Mon civilization. While the language spoken by these Tai still resembles the language spoken by Black Tai in Vietnam in many respects, those Tai who settled further to the south within what was at the time part of the Angkorian empire of the Khmer developed a culture and language that was even further removed from the original Black Tai language and culture as a result of the influence of the Khmer and Indian civilizations.

Thus, while it is possible to trace many of the Tai peoples to their Black Tai origins, in the majority of cases in Laos and Thailand this aspect of their identity has been lost. At present there are over 1 million Black Tai in Vietnam (Howard and Howard 2002: 71). In contrast there are only about 65,000 people who identify themselves as Black Tai in Laos (Schliesinger 2003: 112) and 47,000 who identify themselves as Black Tai (either as Tai Dam or as Lao Song Dam) in Thailand (Schliesinger 2001: 51, 113). There are also small numbers of Black Tai in China, the United States, and France. Most of those who were originally Black Tai in Laos and Thailand gradually were assimilated into other Tai groups.

The Black Tai in Thailand at present are divided into two groups. Most Black Tai in Thailand are commonly referred to as Lao Song Dam rather than as Tai Dam. Those called Lao Song Dam are located in Suphanburi, Kanchanaburi, Phetchaburi, Phetchabun, Phitsanulok, Nakhon Sawan, Ratchaburi, Chumphon, and Nakhon Pathom provinces (see Map 2.1). A few thousand Black Tai who are identified as Tai Dam live in Loei Province. It is among these Black Tai that I conducted my fieldwork. While the people of Ban Napanad in Loei Province call themselves Ta Dam (Black Tai) others often refer to them by a variety of names. These include Lao Song Dam, Lao Song, Thai Song, Phu Tai Song Dam, Thai Song Dam, and Thai Song Dam.

Map 2.1 Black Tai and Lao Song Dam settlements in Thailand.



Those Tai in Thailand who today identify themselves as Black Tai (i.e., Tai Dam or Lao Song Dam) mostly are descendants of Black Tai who came from the territory of Sipsong Chau Tai in the 19th century. Black Tai came to Thailand at six different times. In 1780 King Taksin of

Thonburi commanded the leader of the army of Luang Prabang to go to Muang Muoi (Muay) in Houa Phan Province and Muang Thanh and to remove the Black Tai from these two *muang* and resettle them west of Thonburi in Phetchaburi. In 1792 King Taksin had more Black Tai removed from Muang Phuan in Xieng Khoang Province and Muang Thanh and resettled in Phetchaburi. In 1828 King Phra Nang Klao (Rama III) ordered an attack on Muang Thanh because its ruler was not sending tribute to Siam. This attack resulted in additional Black Tai families being resettled in Phetchaburi. As a result of conflict between the Black Tai of Muang Huem, Muang Koy, and Muang Kuan and the ruler of Luang Prabang, Luang Prabang sent an army against these *muang* and took Black Tai prisoners to Bangkok. During the latter part of the 19th century there was considerable disruption in northern Laos and Vietnam as a result of the activities of Haw bandits. In 1879 they attacked Muang Thanh and the following year King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) sent an army to Sipsong Chau Tai to attack the Haw bandits. Additional Black Tai were resettled in Phetchaburi while the Siamese were active in Sipsong Chau Tai in the 1880s. These are the ancestors of the Black Tai living in Loei Province today. Siamese activities in Sipsong Chau Tai came to an end in 1888 after the French established control over the area. A final period of migration followed the fall of Laos to the communists in 1975. Earlier the fall of northern Vietnam to the communists in 1954 had resulted in some Black Tai moving to Laos as refugees. After 1975 a number of Black Tai were among the refugees who fled across the Mekong River from Laos and were placed in a refugee camp in Nong Khai. Rather than remaining in Thailand, however, most of these Black Tai were resettled in France, the United States, and Australia.

Black Tai Society of Northwestern Vietnam

This section is intended only to provide a very brief outline of the society that the ancestors of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad lived in back in Sipsong Chau Tai. Traditional Black Tai society is commonly characterized as having been feudal in nature. The Black Tai of Sipsong Chau Tai organized their territory into districts or *muang*. Each *muang* was made up of many villages (*ban*). The ruler of each *muang* was referred to as the *chao muang*. The position of *chao muang* was hereditary and title was passed from father to eldest son (Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave 1964: 222). In the past, the Lo and Cam families were most often *chao muang*. Members of the Lo or Cam clans are believed to be direct descendants of Pho Then Luang, a great deity, and related to the great hero Khun Borom (Howard and Howard 2002: 76). As descendants of Pho Then Luang the Lo and Cam families were believed to possess the “supreme spirit of the

soil” or *ten luong* (Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave 1964: 222). Thus, the system of land tenure was closely related to the feudal structure and the religious system of the Black Tai.

Traditional Black Tai society had five main social levels beginning with the hereditary rulers or the *phia tao*², then the notables, who were responsible for administrative duties of the *muang*, including the control of “corvee labor or *kuong*” and collection of “taxes or *nguot*” (Howard and Howard 2002: 76). The priestly clans (*mot lao or mo chang*), were ranked in ten levels, and were responsible for ceremonies and reciting oral histories (Howard and Howard 2002: 76). In the past, the Luong and Ka families had exclusive right to the role of *mo* (priest) (Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave 1964: 222). The majority of people were classified as commoner. There were also domestic servants who were often Mon-Khmer in origin (Howard and Howard 2002: 76).

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad

The Black Tai migrated to Siam at four different periods. The first groups came when King Taksin ordered the leader of the Luang Prabang army in 1780 to go to Muang Muay and Muang Thanh in Sipsong Chau Tai and remove the Black Tai peoples and take them to Phetchaburi Province. King Taksin had a second group of Black Tai moved from Muang Thanh and Muang Phuan to Phetchaburi Province in 1792. Relations between the leader of Muang Thanh and Siam deteriorated in 1828 since tribute was not being sent to the king of Siam. This led to more Black Tai families being removed and relocated in Phetchaburi Province. Muang Huem, Muang Koy, and Muang Kuan in Sipsong Chau Tai were showing signs of aggression towards the kingdom of Luang Prabang in 1838. Luang Prabang was under the suzerainty of Siam and Siamese forces intervened in the conflict and took Black Tai prisoners to Bangkok.

The Black Tai who remained in and around Petchaburi came to be known as Lao Song Dam rather than as Tai Dam. The Lao Song ethnic category emerged only after the Black Tai arrived in central Siam and this was in response to efforts at national integration by the government of Siam (Sams 1987: 293). The Black Tai of Ban Napanad retained their designation as Tai Dam (Black Tai) because they did not remain in the Petchaburi area, but returned to Sipsong Chau Tai for a time. Oral histories say that some of the Black Tai who had been settled in Phetchaburi missed their homeland and a few families decided to make their way back home in the late 19th century. However, they returned to a territory that was by then under French control.

² The discussion by Howard and Howard (2002) uses Vietnamese phonetic transliterations and Standard Tai Dam as written in Vietnam rather than the Thai one provided by me.

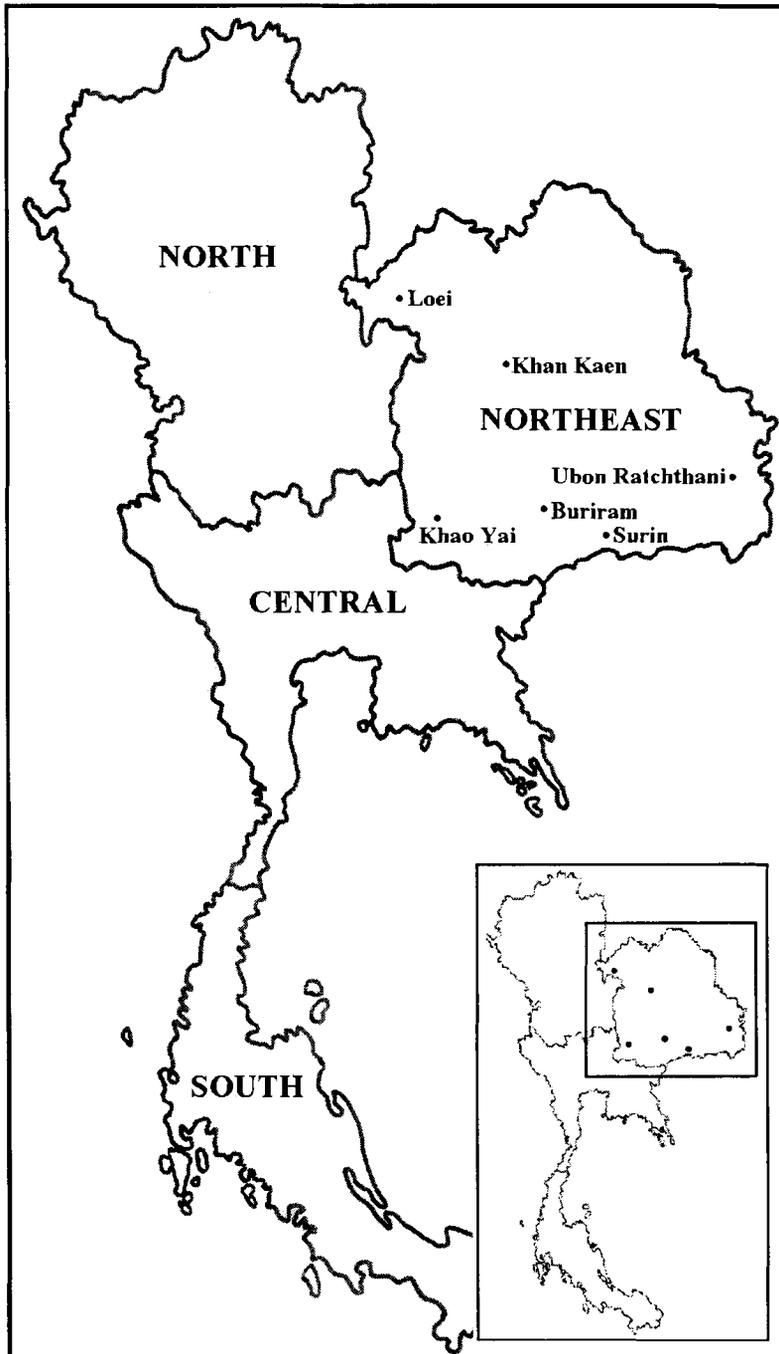
According to oral history, the French mistreated these returnees, placing them under conditions that were tantamount to slavery. There is another version of what happened. During this time the Black Tai of Sipsong Chau Tai were subject to attacks from Chinese Haw, and King Rama V of Siam ordered his army to suppress the Haw bandits in Sipsong Chau Tai. In 1880, the Siamese forces occupying a portion of Sipsong Chau Tai took some of the Black Tai living in the Dien Bien Phu region to Loei Province, which was within the territory of Siam. According to this account these are the ancestors of those Black Tai living in Loei Province today. Whichever history is closest to the truth, by the 1880s a group of Black Tai who had been living in Sip-song Chau Tai had settled in the Chiang Khan District of Loei Province.

These Black Tai initially stayed at Wat Sri Khun Muang. Here they met an abbot who informed the recently arrived Black Tai people of a potential village to settle in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, called Ban Soke. This village is approximately three kilometres away from Ban Napanad. Ban Soke was stable until fever and a smallpox epidemic spread rapidly killing many villagers. The Black Tai are animists and firmly believed that the spirits (*phi*) were responsible for this epidemic and decided to leave Ban Soke. And move to Ban Tat Saw, where they lived for approximately 10 years. While in this village they were struck by a diarrhoea epidemic and again, responding to their animistic beliefs, they moved. This time they settled in Ban Na Bane, where again they stayed for approximately ten years. Unfortunately, Ban Na Bane held no greater fortune; disease yet again plagued the village forcing them to continue their search for a desirable location. This time they turned their attention to a highland area with a vast forest filled with *ton nad* or *bai nad* (a tree that has a mint-like odour). The Black Tai believed the odour of the *nad* plant would repel evil spirits and rid them of further disease and misfortune. They settled here and named the village Ban Kok Song Dam. *Kok* means highlands or forest.

Originally, 15 families settled in Ban Kok Song Dam. The name of the village was eventually changed to Ban Napanad since the district officer did not like the name Ban Kok. The village site was ideal since it was situated in the highlands out of harms way, especially away from the threat of flooding.³

³An informant indicated that oral histories explain that prior village sites were destroyed from flooding.

Map 2.2: Regional Map of Thailand



Ban Napanad is located in Chiang Khan District, Loei Province, Thailand (see Map 2.3). Ban Napanad is separated into two hamlets, *Mu Si* (Hamlet Four) and *Mu Sipsong* (Hamlet 12). At the time of my research it had 365 inhabitants (182 male and 183 female), comprising 95 households (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Population of Ban Napanad according to Gender and Age

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
0-5	13	9	22
6-11	16	14	30
12-17	11	15	26
18-24	10	9	19
25-31	15	12	27
32-38	18	16	34
39-45	26	22	48
46-51	33	31	64
52-58	18	17	35
59+	28	25	53

Source: Fieldnotes

At present Ban Napanad is part of Kao Kaew Sub-district (*king-amphoe*), which contains 13 villages in total. Within the sub-district there are six primary schools, one high school, three libraries, three health centres (usually with one doctor, and three village staff), one police station, and one small post office, Twelve (94%) of the 13 villages have electricity. The geographic setting is mountainous with 25 streams.

Although, the villagers of Ban Napanad share many of the luxuries of neighbouring city homes, infrastructural improvements have only occurred in the past decade. Government investment in village infrastructure has included a main paved access road (Figure 2.1), electricity, and running water. Prior to these improvements, the villagers had a communal well for bathing as their main water source (Figure 2.2). The village is located approximately 20 km away from a major city centre, Muang Loei, and 15 minutes from the district town centre of Chiang Khan. Many of the development initiatives today are supported trilaterally between Khaw Kao Sub-district, Chiang Khan District, and Loei Province officials.

While outside government institutions certainly play a role in Ban Napanad, the local village government is in many respects self-sufficient and self-governing. The village headman or *pu yai ban* is responsible for much of the administrative work in the village, along with his two helpers or *chuu ay pu ya ban*. The process of selection for the position of headman is democratic and a fair and organized vote is guaranteed. On election day district officials ensure confidentiality and anonymity for the voters. Two military officials, five police officers, and two Black Tai representatives oversee the voting to ensure an efficient and just election. The election process was similar to the process that goes on in any Western country, however, at a much smaller scale (Figure 2.3).

Contemporary Black Tai society in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand is no longer feudal in nature. Evidence of nobility and commoner classes however do exist in Ban Napanad. The more affluent members of society most often are of the Lo or Cam ancestral lineage and the priestly clan is also highly regarded in the village community. The villagers that belong to the lineage of the priestly clan are recognized as having spiritual powers. They are blessed with powers that make them superior to the general population. Those who belong to this clan are often taken care of by the village. For example, in Ban Napanad a number of villagers would often donate money, food, and other items to these particular families as employment was and still is evidently prohibited for these people; it is frowned upon if a traditional healer were to go to work in the city. As his services are required in the village first and foremost.

It is traditional for the oldest male to be the head of the family and this person is only head of one household, however, his opinion is warranted great respect in all of the sibling households also. Most households within the village today are comprised of nuclear families. Extended families are rare; only six families in Ban Napanad are extended. Most men leave their natal home once they are married and live with their in-laws for a few years as a kind of probationary period. If the family sees him fit to be a good husband and provider they can start their own family and home.

Men and women share responsibilities within and outside the home. Black Tai women commonly are responsible for child rearing, taking care of the home, and for many of the duties associated with agriculture. In the past, it was noted by informants that the men were the hunters and the women were the gatherers. However, with the advent of hunting restrictions and deterioration of the surrounding environment, Black Tai men rarely hunt any longer, focusing their activities instead on agricultural production and animal rearing. Gathering still plays an

important part in village life. In addition to foods from the forest such as bamboo shoots and mushrooms, people also collect firewood and medicinal herbs.

The present day economy of Ban Napanad is based on a variety of activities, but rice production is a core element and one that plays an important cultural role in the lives of people. The Black Tai in Vietnam and Laos are farmers whose villages are most often situated within highland river valleys. This is the case with the Black Tai of Ban Napanad as well. Most families produce glutinous and non-glutinous rice, beans, and maize. Villagers cultivate glutinous rice on a commercial scale and non-glutinous rice for domestic consumption. Secondary crops include non-glutinous rice, corn, cassava, peanuts, soybeans, and maize (which is used as livestock feed). Each of these crops has its own prescribed times and patterns of cultivation and there are traditional festivals, rituals, and customs that accompany these activities—activities at which people wear Black Tai dress.

Table 2.2: Land for Growing Rice in *Mu Sii*

<i>Rai</i>	Number of families
1-5	30
6-10	6
11-20	11
21-50	21
51+	0

Source: Fieldnotes

The villagers grow crops in wet or flooded fields as well as dry fields. Rice is grown in wet fields from June until December. In *Mu Sii* 785 *rai* (2.53 *rai* = 1 acre) are reserved for growing rice and informants said that 1 *rai* of land would produce approximately 500 kg of rice. 68 households continue to harvest rice. There are 55 families that also have land devoted to growing other annual crops, including corn and soybeans. Approximately 425 *rai* are reserved for growing these crops. Soybeans are grown from January to March and harvested in April and May. Corn is grown from August to November. The corn is then harvested and fields are prepared for

the next cycle. An additional 50 *rai* of land used for growing crops such as sugar cane, cassava, cotton, and pineapple. Only ten families grow such crops. Most households have gardens for growing vegetables. Vegetables are grown primarily during the rainy season, although a few families also grow vegetables during the dry season.

Domestic animals include chickens, ducks, pigs, and buffalo. Five families also have fish farms. In many parts of Thailand buffalo are becoming scarce as a result of the shift to mechanized farming methods. However, 80 families in Ban Napanad continue to own a buffalo for farming purposes. Initially, I thought this was largely due to their inability to buy machinery for farming, but the situation proved more complicated as is highlighted by the following statement by an interviewee:

Buffaloes represent Black Tai culture. Buffaloes represent life and strength. We can all farm more quickly with the iron buffalo [a mechanized plow] but the real buffalo is a part of our culture. Our ancestors used buffaloes and today Black Tai everywhere choose to keep a buffalo for their lands. The buffalo is sacred to us. (Interviewee 70, January 11, 2005, Ban Napanad) (see Figure 2.4)

Another villager made comments along similar lines, highlighting the relationship of keeping buffalo to rice cultivation and ethnic identity and other aspects of their culture:

If we stop our traditional way of life then Black Tai culture will not exist. If we do not have buffalo then we are just Thai farmers. If we do not have our festivals to ask for the rains we can just believe in Buddhism. We need our culture to continue. Rice culture is important to our way of life despite it being such hard work. (Interviewee 71, January 11, 2005, Ban Napanad)

Not all households in Ban Napanad engage in agriculture and even some of those that do farm are not self-sufficient. While all 95 households own at least some agricultural land, not all of them work their own land nor are do they all produce enough to meet their subsistence needs. The household I lived with, for example, did not work its rice fields, but simply exchanged labour for rice. Growing and harvesting rice requires hard work and many villagers today would rather purchase rice from local markets at a cost of five to eight baht per kilogram than grow their own rice. Nevertheless, rice cultivation remains important to the people of Ban Napanad that transcends the purely economic. Rice plays a larger role in the Black Tai socio-cultural system than simply providing food. Its cultural significance is especially important in for the maintenance of their cultural heritage. An elderly male proclaimed:

I wait every year for rice harvest. It is the most joyous of occasions. All Black Tai come together to rejoice in our rewards [a successful rice harvest]. We celebrate and have festivals to thank our spirits. We all gather to sing, dance, and eat. We also wear our traditional dress at these times to show our identity to all those

watching here and there [in reference to *Muang Fa*]. Sometimes Black Tai from Laos or other places in Thailand come to celebrate with us as we still continue traditional practices that they do not. (Interviewee 32, October 14, 2004, Ban Napanad)

During the rice harvest period while I was conducting my fieldwork people from Ban Napanad returned home from Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Udon Thani, and elsewhere for this important time. After a day of hard work in the fields, families joined in the happy occasion to reminisce about old times, tell tales related to Black Tai folklore, and participate in ceremonies. One informant remarked:

At the time of rice harvest everyone will return home and give a hand. Everyone works together to help one another. It is a fun time in the village. We have many festivals and we give thanks to the spirits and ancestors. We are always fortunate with a successful rice harvest. At this time, we all dress and dance traditionally. Those who live far away in Bangkok will come back home on bus. It is a very important time. (Interviewee 48, November 14, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Some of the major festivals such as *Liang ban* and the *Sae Paeng* are geared towards the thanking of the ancestors for a successful rice harvest and to ask for the same the following year. Another important tradition related to the rice harvest is giving offerings to the village spirit each 15th and 30th of the month and asking the spirits for a plentiful harvest, rain, and good weather. It is also important to note that during the rice harvest most villagers cease to engage in other types of work, such as weaving. Even elderly women work the fields.

During the time I spent in the village, the number of people wearing traditional Black Tai dress during the rice harvest surprised me during the related festivities. When asked why a villager remarked,

During this time [rice harvest] we are giving thanks to our ancestor spirits for watching over us and they must be with us at this time...to rejoice in our plentiful harvest. We need to wear traditional dress so they know we are Black Tai and are inviting them to join us. Our mo phi will invite them in our ceremony upon the completion of the rice harvest. (Interviewee 50, November 15, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Other traditional economic activities include weaving, plaiting, and tool making. In the past, all women possessed a loom, which was made by their father, and with this wove all cloth to meet their family's requirements. Some women still weave at present, but many younger ones do not and people now purchased much of their cloth and clothing. In response to the decline of weaving, weaving collectives have been established in both villages to promote weaving as both a

cultural revitalization tactic and an economic development strategy. The *Mu Sii* collective has approximately 45 members, but only about five or six weave on a daily basis. Traditional and tradition-based textiles are produced for sale, but market demands for items such as tablecloths and scarves have undermined the weaving of more traditional types of cloth. In total about 30 families earn income from textile production.

In Black Tai society men traditionally made baskets. Only a few men in Ban Napanad continue to plait baskets. This is largely related to market conditions that have undermined an interest in making baskets and made it relatively easy to purchase baskets or other forms of containers. The Black Tai basket maker depicted in Figure 2.5 is one of the last men still producing baskets, fish traps, and other household items today. He produces both tradition-based and traditional baskets for sale. He noted in a conversation that traditional baskets are not popular because the market sells Chinese baskets for a much cheaper price and, therefore, the time needed to produce a basket is considered unnecessary. He raised issues similar to those mentioned by textile weavers about the commercialization of particular items, the lack of a need to produce traditional Black Tai material items because of the availability of cheaper Chinese items, and frustration with the younger generation's lack of desire to learn Black Tai traditional culture.

Black Tai culture had a tradition of making tools in the past, which has been largely lost again as a result of the availability of similar items that are commercially produced. The cultural centre initiated an effort to revive this tradition in 2004 and it has met with some success in selling items to nearby villagers and to visiting foreigners.

The village cultural centre was established in 1996. The cultural centre receives financial support from the Loei Province Cultural Department. Its purpose is to educate local people, visiting government officials, and tourists about Black Tai culture and identity. The village cultural centre provides home-stays and educational activities on Black Tai culture including festivals, rituals, and customs. Other projects that have been implemented through the cultural centre are aimed at cultural revival, for example, in basket making and tool making (see Figure 2.6). It appears as if all of the village's 95 households gain some sort of monetary gain from the cultural centre (or have equal opportunity to participate to earn money) either from the sale of traditional handicrafts or from taking part in activities organized for outside visitors. Other villagers make a rather modest living providing work or doing menial tasks around the village such as carpentry, cleaning, maintenance, etc. (20 families fall into this category).

In addition to such relatively traditional economic activities as those discussed above, many villagers also engage in more clearly modern ones. A large number of villagers commute back and forth to Chiang Khan or Muang Loei to work for wages or otherwise relocate for varying periods of time to work in other parts of the country. Those who work outside of the village sometimes hire local labourers to cultivate their rice fields. It was explained to me by a number of villagers that the traditional way of life offers little monetary gain and without incorporating modern practices they cannot survive in Thai society. But sustaining the traditional economy is not for economic purposes alone but also serves to maintain social cohesion and perpetuate a distinct ethnic identity among the Black Tai villagers. This is most profoundly illustrated with the revitalization of such traditional economic practices of tool making and basket weaving that yield minimal income when compared to other forms of work, but which are highly valued as means of resisting acculturative influences and to maintaining ethnic identity.

Album Two

Figure 2.1: The photo shows a road that was paved recently by the government through the village. Prior to the government initiative the village site was difficult to access.



Figure 2.2: A traditional communal well used for bathing in the past. Nowadays, every household has running water.



Figure 2.3: A photo depicting a military office at the voting station during the local elections.



Figure 2.4: Traditionally, it is said all Black Tai households would incorporate buffalo horns, as shown here, into their homes construction. Today, however, very few of the contemporary homes retain this feature.



Figure 2.5: In the Ban Napanad, basket weaving is a traditional activity only performed by men. One of the last remaining Black Tai still plaiting baskets.

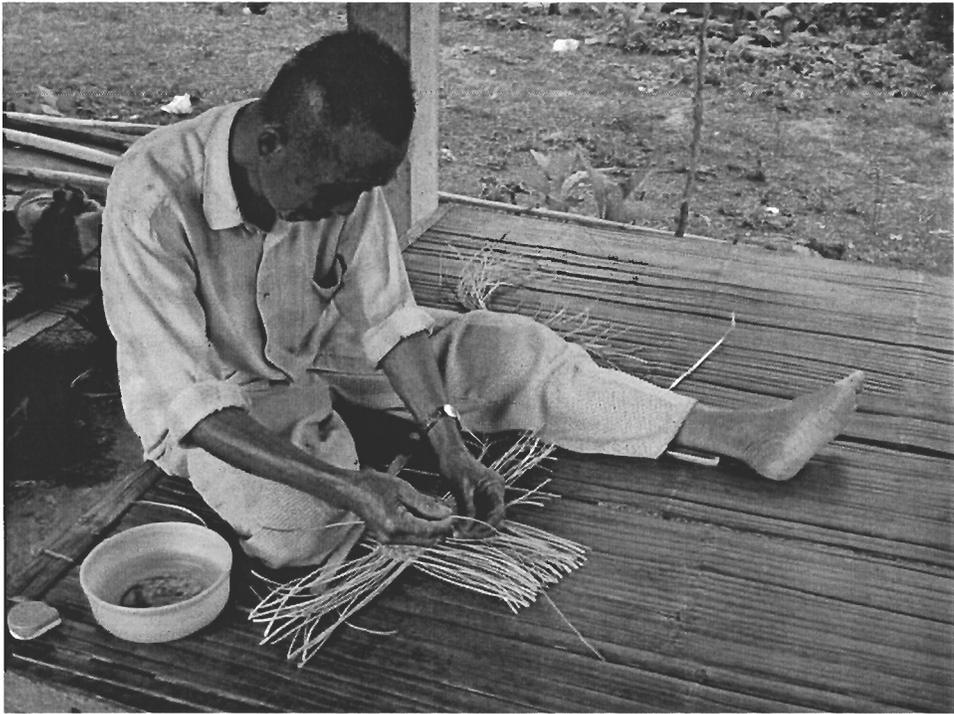
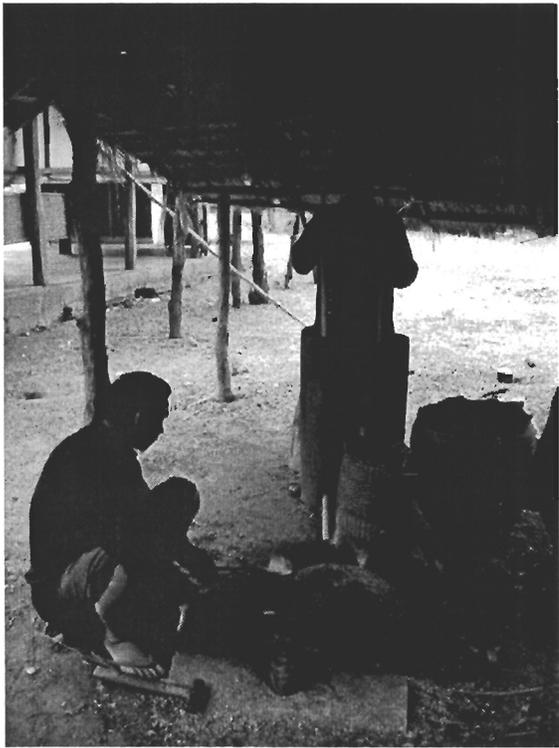


Figure 2.6: Black Tai man tool making and a novice watching along side of him.



CHAPTER 3: TEXTILES AND DRESS

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad are diligent weavers and produce a wide variety of textiles that serve practical, ritual, and cultural functions. The weavers of Ban Napanad have a tradition of producing similar textiles to those made by other Black Tai groups living in Vietnam and of making them in a similar fashion. This chapter will provide a survey of the textiles of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad and analysis emphasizing the role dress has in the continuance of Black Tai ethnic and cultural identity.

Studies of Black Tai Textiles

There are a number of works that provide classifications of techniques pertaining to textiles that are of relevance to the present study. Careful attention to techniques is important for comparative purposes, proper identification of the origins of many textiles, and an understanding of the history and diffusion of textile traditions. Seiler-Baldinger (1994) provides a general worldwide survey of techniques that is especially useful for the purposes of the present study to ensure that the terms employed are generally consistent with those used by other textile scholars. Studies dealing specifically with the techniques employed by Tai peoples include Howard and Be (1999), Howard and Howard (2002), and Cheesman (2004).

Let us now turn to the literature on Black Tai textiles and dress, focusing on the most readily available sources in the English language. The literature can be divided into that describing Black Tai textiles and dress in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The ancestors of the Black Tai in Thailand originated in Northwestern Vietnam. Some of these Black Tai migrated to northern Laos. Howard and Howard (2002) provide a detailed account of Black Tai textiles and dress in Vietnam that includes a survey of the literature in Vietnamese and French. The Black Tai in Vietnam are part of the official Thai ethnic group and Howard and Howard (2002) divide this group into the Northern Thai and Southern Thai. The Black Tai among the Northern Thai live mainly in Dien Bien and Son La provinces and form a distinct group from the White Tai. Among the Southern Thai the Black Tai and White Tai are mixed to a considerable extent and in some areas refer to themselves as Black Tai, while in other areas they employ other names (such as a

predominantly Black Tai group in Nghe An Province that is commonly called Tai Thanh). While the dress of the men of these groups is similar that of the women has distinctive characteristics.

Citing various archaeological and written sources, Howard and Howard (2002: 10) note that Tai males wore loincloths in the distant past, but that “loincloths vanished as an item of male attire long ago and were replaced by Chinese-style trousers” and shirts. Thus, what is today identified as “traditional” Tai male attire is in fact a Tai version of archaic Chinese clothing. Howard and Howard (2002: 80) describe northern Black Tai men as wearing a long-sleeved shirt, long trousers, and sometimes a head-cloth. The man’s shirt is “plain black or dark indigo blue with long, narrow sleeves, and is either collarless or has a short Chinese-style collar.” They also wear plain black long trousers. The head-cloth is also made from a plain dark coloured (dark indigo or black) cotton cloth. There are also various styles of long-coats that, again, are derived from Chinese fashion.

Howard and Howard (2002: 80) describe northern Black Tai women’s dress as being “slightly more complex” than that of men and including a blouse, tubeskirt, belt, head-cloth, and long-coat: “The blouse is tight fitting with long sleeves. It opens down the front and is usually fastened with silver (or some metal that looks like silver) buttons. There is a noticeable difference in the blouse worn by northern White Tai and Black Tai women. Northern Black Tai blouses in the past were black and usually closed at the neck, while northern White Tai blouses were white and had a V-neck cut in the front.” Citing Le (1990: 32), Howard and Howard (2002: 81) note that in the past women sometimes wore a rectangular piece of cloth as a breast-cover rather than a blouse. They describe (2002: 81) the tubeskirt of northern Black Tai women as commonly made of plain dark indigo or black cloth. The head-cloths are made of a long strip of black or dark indigo cotton cloth. The middle of the cloth is left plain while the ends have a number of decorative features. These features include a variety of patterns in the centre made using a variety of coloured threads, small doughnut-shaped attachments on the corners, and plain red edging. The patterns today are embroidered, but in the past were woven into the head-cloth.

Howard and Howard (2002: 87-89) devote a separate section to the dress of the Black Tai of Muang Vat (now called Yen Chau). Black Tai women from Muang Vat wear a different style of tubeskirt and head-cloth than the Black Tai in other areas. Their tubeskirt is dark indigo or black with narrow light blue or red weft directional stripes on the body. The head-cloth of Muang Vat in the past were more colourful than those of Black Tai in other areas, but Howard and Howard (2002: 88) note that this fashion has now been adopted by Black Tai in other areas as

well. The striped tubeskirt, however, remains distinctive. In regard to the present study it is interesting to note that such striped tubeskirts are also worn by Black Tai in Thailand.

Southern Thai women in Vietnam dress quite differently than Northern Thai women. The Northern Thai were part of the Sipsong Chau Tai confederacy and their dress was influenced by this fact, while the Southern Thai lived beyond the confederacy and were more isolated. Howard and Howard (2002: 100) comment, “It can be argued that the Southern Thai tradition is a more complete survival of the ancient Daic textile tradition... Elsewhere, such among the Northern Thai, this tradition has been undermined to a large extent by external influences, especially the influence of the Chinese and Vietnamese.” Howard and Howard (2002: 105-06) say that Southern Thai women in the past often did not wear blouses, but instead covered their breasts with the upper portion of their tubeskirts. If they wore blouses, and this was primarily the practice of noble women, they wore pullover blouses. At present Southern Thai women generally wear modern-style generic blouses. There are a variety of styles of tubeskirt worn by Southern Thai women. Howard and Howard (2002: 105) describe “seven basic types of cloth used to make the body of the tubeskirt.” In addition to 1) skirt bodies made of plain black cloth (*sin dam*), there are 2) skirt bodies with narrow warp directional stripes (sometimes with warp ikat dashes) (*sin ta lai* or *sin ta lan*), 3) similar skirt bodies with the addition of weft ikat patterning scattered over a portion of the cloth and sometimes rows of supplementary weft patterning placed near the edge that will form the hem (*sin ta lan*, *sin ta lai*, or *sin mi*), 4) cloth that is similar to that of #2 with the addition of narrow warp directional bands of white supplementary warp patterning (*sin muk*), 5) a skirt body with weft directional rectangular segments of supplementary weft patterning in between warp directional rows of supplementary warp patterning (*sin muk ko*), 6) skirt bodies similar to #5 with the addition of weft ikat patterns in between the supplementary weft rectangles (*sin muk mi ko*), and 7) skirt bodies with wide bands of weft ikat patterning that are separated by narrower plain stripes and bands with supplementary weft patterning (*sin mi*).

Waistbands are attached to the top of these skirts (thus, they are called the heads of the skirt, *hua sin*). Howard and Howard (2002: 103) say that there are usually three distinct parts that are made of separate pieces of cloth. As was indicated above, in the past these waistbands served as breast-covers. Howard (no date) describes these as follows: “The uppermost “head” is called the *hua tinh*. It is decorated with geometric supplementary warp patterns. The simplest versions of these are woven with a single ground colour and a single colour of supplementary warp thread, while more complex versions may use three or four colours of supplementary warp thread... The middle “head” is called the *hua tô*. *Tô* refers to an animal or person and this “head” usually

features warp directional rows of small animal (and sometimes plant) figures... The bottom "head" on the skirts is called the *hua sup mi*. It usually has alternative weft directional bands of supplementary weft patterning and weft ikat patterning and is similar to the cloth used to the body of a type of skirt called *sin mi*."

Cheesman (2004) provides a description of the dress of Black Tai living in Laos, including attention to social and ceremonial aspects of dress. The style of dress that she describes (Cheesman 2004: 71-72) is similar to that described by Howard and Howard (2002) for the Northern Thai Black Tai of Vietnam. She also describes styles of tubeskirts like those worn by the Southern Thai in Vietnam as being worn by neighbouring Tai-speaking groups in Laos, such as the Red Tai.

Cheesman (2004) also gives a detailed analysis of the Black Tai (and other ethnic groups) living in Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan, northern Laos. Her description gives reference to social and ceremonial aspects of dress as well. Cheesman describes the dress of those she refers to as the *Sipsong Tjau Tai* (i.e., Sipsong Chau Tai). She mentions that they migrated to Muang Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan in present-day Laos. These Black Tai are from Muang Thaeng (or Muang Thanh), the homeland of the Black Tai. Therefore, these specific groups hold particular interest, in the case of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad, as they are the ancestors of those in Loei Province, Thailand. Cheesman (2004: 71) describes the Tai Dam women's tubeskirts: "made from plain indigo cotton, plain black silk or commercial satins. These were long to the ankles and folded and tucked at the waist. The tube skirts had narrow red waistbands without hem pieces, but red binding was placed on the inside of the hem" (cited from Howard and Howard 2002: 80). Made from the same fabric, blouses were tight fitting, long sleeved, with a high collar and front opening. This opening was fastened with silver buttons. The blouse was tucked into the skirt at the waist and a green silk belt with red ends or red decorations at the ends was tied to one side. Head cloths were made of commercial silk or hand woven indigo cotton with embroidered decorations at each end." She continues to describe the long-coat as follows: "in cold weather, a long coat was worn in a pullover design, long to the knees. This was plain dark indigo cotton on the outside and decorated with appliqué on the inside. Indigo cloth leggings were worn for working".

Cheesman (2004: 72) describes of Black Tai men's dress as including: "plain black or very dark indigo cotton baggy pants that tucked at the waist and a long-sleeved shirt with a front opening, having either a standing Chinese style collar or no collar at all. The front was fastened with cloth ties. Men wore headcloth made from plain indigo dyed cotton. Long coats were worn

for special occasions made in a Chinese style with side fastenings, high collar and long sleeves. Bags were plain indigo cotton. Men received white embroidered handkerchiefs from their beloveds.”

Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard (1997: 110) present additional descriptions of Black Tai dress in Laos in their comparative study of the textiles of the Black Tai, Red Tai, and their Tai-speaking neighbours in northern Laos. Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard (1997: 110) note, “It seems there has been a great amount of sharing in basic skirt types between or among these groups.” Their analysis points to the common origins of these Tai-speaking groups. Differences tend to reflect the migratory history of these groups with those Black Tai who migrated most recently from the Dien Bien area dressing like Northern Thai Black Tai in Vietnam and those other groups who migrated from adjacent areas of Vietnam inhabited by the Southern Thai dressing similarly to the Southern Thai in Vietnam.

Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard’s examination of the female head-cloths is of particular relevance for the present study. They recognize that the head-cloths of these groups resisted acculturation and fusion with the styles of other ethnic groups in terms of their overall style and the patterns employed. In fact, the basic style of head-cloth worn by Northern Thai Black Tai women in Vietnam is essentially the same as the type worn by Black Tai women in Laos, and as is worn by the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. Differences are found mainly in the details.

Schliesinger (2001) provides brief descriptions of the dress of Black Tai groups living in Thailand. These groups include the Lao Song Dam and the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. He says (2001: 53) that their daily dress is like other rural Thais, “But on festive occasions, such as *Songkran* and when they make offerings to the spirits and during funeral ceremonies of one of their group members, the Lao Song [Dam] dress in their traditional costumes..., which are quite distinct from the costumes worn today by the Tai Dam of their former homeland.” He describes (2001: 54) Lao Song Dam female attire as including a dark blue or black tubeskirt “with a few thin vertical white, bright blue or yellow stripes,” and a silk breast-cloth. Traditional male attire is described as including a long-sleeved garment that reaches to just above the knees and is fastened at the left shoulder and trousers (although previously they wore a loincloth instead of trousers).

Prangwatthanakun and Naenna (1994: 42-43) present a more detailed description of traditional Lao Song Dam dress, and one that differs in some respects from that offered by Schliesinger. They describe (1994: 42) male attire as comprised of “Chinese style pants” and “a long sleeve shirt called *sua tai* which was indigo cotton with a front opening closed by 10-12

silver buttons. The buttons were a lotus bud shape.” They describe (1994: 42) traditional female attire as including a blouse that is “called *sua kom*. It was fitted in shape, long sleeved and short with numerous silver buttons at the front opening”; a tubeskirt that is “dark indigo woven on a red silk warp and had thin white stripes in the weft”; and a head-cloth (*pha pieo*) that is “a long narrow indigo cloth approximately 50 x 200 cm. Embroidered with silk hook designs called *kho kut*.” In addition, on special occasions “both men and women would wear *sua hi* shirts. These were knee or mid-thigh length with side slits on both sides. The men’s shirt had a side opening down the full length of the shirt... The woman’s shirt...was short sleeved with a deep ‘V’-shaped neck.”

Schliesinger is only partially correct in his assertion that the dress of the Lao Song Dam is distinct from that of the Black Tai of Vietnam and Laos. Their tubeskirts are like those worn by the Black Tai of Muang Vat and most other traditional items of attire are variations of styles of clothing also worn by Black Tai in Vietnam. Differences are mainly in the details. Thus, the *sua hi* worn by Lao Song Dam commonly features elongated or isosceles triangles made by embroidery and appliqué techniques. This is interesting since this form of decoration in Vietnam is associated with the robes or long-coats worn by White Tai who live to the north of the Black Tai in Vietnam (Howard and Howard 2002: 94). More research on this is needed, but this may represent an older tradition among some groups of Black Tai in Vietnam as well or it may be a result of their being some White Tai included among the Black Tai who were brought to Siam. Lao Song Dam women wear a dark coloured head-cloth like the Black Tai in Vietnam, but the embroidered patterns are different and the Laos Song Dam head-cloths feature less decoration than is commonly seen on the head-cloths of Black Tai in Vietnam.

The dress of the Black Tai women in Ban Napanad (which will be discussed in greater detail later) corresponds more closely to the Black Tai of Vietnam and Laos than does that of the Lao Song Dam. For example, Howard and Howard’s (2002: 80) description of a Black Tai man’s shirt closely resembles the type of shirt worn by Black Tai men in Ban Napanad. Certain customs and conventions remain similar as well. For example, Howard and Howard (2002: 83) describe the different ways women wear the head-cloth, noting “such differences reflect age, status, region, as well as the whims of fashion,” which is analogous with the Black Tai in Loei Province. With both groups of Black Tai, married women wear their hair up in a bun covered by a head cloth, making for a pointed appearance, while unmarried women wear their hair down and, thus, their head-cloth has a flat appearance.

The aforementioned literature on Black Tai dress is by no means exhaustive in scope. It illustrates, however, a common thread among the Black Tai living in different geographical areas. Although, as noted by several of these authors, (Cheesman 2004: 73, Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard 1997: 110, Howard and Howard 2002) neighbouring ethnic groups commonly share aspects of dress with the Black Tai, nevertheless, the Black Tai in all three countries retain distinctive elements in their dress and for them their style of dress remains an important part of their ethnic identity.

Textiles in Ban Napanad

Traditional Black Tai dress has been little affected by commercialization and acculturative influences. In fact, one Black Tai Dam villager:

If we do not produce Black Tai dress we are no longer Black Tai. Dress differentiates us from all other ethnic groups. We are a proud people and want everyone to know that we are Black Tai. Without Black Tai dress we are also not recognizable to our ancestors in *Muang Fa*. We then cannot ask them to join us in important ceremonies and festivals. For example, when we celebrate *Pae Daong* we are required to wear Black Tai dress, for if we do not, our ancestors' *phi* will not come and join us because they do not know we are Black Tai. Also, when we die, if we are not dressed in Black Tai dress we cannot go to *Muang Fa* because the keeper will not recognize us as Black Tai. Therefore, Black Tai dress serves a purpose in both this life and our afterlife. (Interviewee 08, September 24 04, 2004)

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad are the most recent Black Tai group to migrate from Vietnam and Laos to Thailand and therefore they retain traditional dress more so than other groups of Black Tai that have lived in Thailand for longer periods of time and exhibit acculturative influences to a larger degree. Various researchers such as Sams (1987) and Howard (1998: 33-34) have noted the extent to which wearing traditional dress has declined among the Lao Song Dam and declined in cultural importance and as a marker of ethnic identity among them. The Black Tai have been living in Loei Province for approximately 125 years, in contrast to the Lao Song Dam, who have lived west of Bangkok for 225 to 165 years. Moreover, Loei Province itself has been far more isolated from outside influences during this period than have the areas occupied by the Lao Song Dam. The more isolated second-generation migrants of Ban Napanad⁴ are closer to their cultural roots than the Lao Song Dam and continue to preserve and pass on traditional Black Tai cultural traditions to a far greater extent.

⁴ A number of interviews were conducted with this particular age group (50 years plus), for their interviews provided the richness of data I was looking for. A number of the other younger weavers did not know the significance of many of the textiles and textile traditions and weaved more for practical reasons.

As recently as a decade ago most households in Ban Napanad grew their own cotton (*phai* in Black Tai and Central Thai), raised silkworms (*mon* in Black Tai) to produce their own silk (*dai* in Black Tai, *mai* in Central Thai), and used natural dyes. A number of different plants were used for natural dyes. Indigo, from the *Indigo tinctoria* L. (Cardon 2003: 274-275) bush and called *horm* by the Black Tai, is one of the main dyes traditionally used by the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. It produces various shades of blue. Maroon shades of red were produced from lac, *Kerria lacca* (Kerr. 1782; this is part of a designation of a plant in its scientific name and refers to Kerr's work) (see Cardon 2003: 509-515), which the Black Tai refer to as *ki khung*. Lac is comes in the form of globules that are formed by small insects along the branches of trees. The Black Tai people would create a hospitable habitat for the insects and feed them. Sappan-wood (*Caesalpinia sappan* L.) is another source of red dye. The jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus* Lam.), turmeric plant (*Curcuma longa* L.), and annato plant (*Bixa orellana* L) are used to produce yellow dyes.

Inexpensive commercial cotton and silk thread and aniline dyes have become more readily available recently and the use of local products for dyeing and weaving has declined sharply. At the time of my research only one household in Ban Napanad continued to produce silk thread (Figure 3.1) and approximately ten households were growing small amounts of cotton for personal consumption (Figure 3.2). It seems that the households that continued to produce cotton were predominantly poorer and did not purchase many commercial products. However, a few of the households with elderly weavers insisted on the tradition of growing their own cotton and producing their own traditional textiles. As one 76-year-old woman villager remarked:

Traditional textiles, in the past were produced from the soil we lived on. Today, the textiles are haphazardly put together using commercial cotton, commercial dyes, and unskilled weavers. The textiles produced only last a year or so and the colour fades quickly. But I can't complain, at least some younger women are still trying to weave, while others simply go to the markets and buy everything commercial, as my son's wife does. She is not Black Tai. (Interviewee 08, September 24, 2004, Ban Napanad)

A younger weaver, 22 years of age, listening to the older woman above, shrugged her shoulders, sighed, and whispered to me "don't listen to her, she is old." The younger woman then commented:

The younger weavers are more innovative and utilize the commercial dyes and commercial cotton because this allows for efficiency and beautiful, vibrant textiles to be produced. If we spent all of our time growing cotton or harvesting silk, we would not have time to weave. The households that grow cotton can't afford to buy the commercial cotton and the households that produce silk, produce it for commercial sale. (Interviewee 09, September 24, 2004, Ban Napanad)

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad employ a type of frame loom (*ki* in Black Tai) (Figure 3.3). The loom used at present is larger than those used in the past. The type of loom that was commonly used in Northeastern Thailand and in Laos and Vietnam in the past was smaller than looms often used elsewhere in Thailand. Formerly this allowed one to distinguish between the textiles of the central Northeast where larger looms were introduced by the Thais in the 20th century and the north since the cloth woven on the smaller looms was smaller. An elderly Black Tai woman stating that in the past the weavers of Ban Napanad used such a small frame loom, noted that the old loom did not have a flying shuttle and produced smaller pieces of cloth. Therefore, with larger textiles such as a blanket cloth, panels would be woven and then stitched together to produce a larger textile. Today, however, the frame loom that is used is larger and is equipped with a flying shuttle. This allows for more rapid weaving and the production of larger textiles. This particular type of frame loom is now widely used throughout Northeastern Thailand and Laos.

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad have traditions of employing a variety of weaving and other decorative techniques, although some of these are rarely employed any longer. These include supplementary warp (*muk* in both Black Tai and Central Thai), supplementary weft (*khít* in Black Tai and Central Thai), weft ikat (*mi*, *mat mi*, or *ta mi* in Black Tai, and *mudmee* in Central Thai), warp ikat (*mat khan* in Black Tai), and embroidery (*séo* in Black Tai). Below I will briefly discuss the use of these techniques by the Black Tai and related Tai-speaking groups in Laos and Vietnam and I will discuss the use of these techniques in Ban Napanad in more detail in the sections that follow.

The ikat technique is a resist dye technique whereby threads are bound and dyed prior to weaving to produce patterns. Howard (in press) provides a useful discussion concerning the Black Tai terms employed for the ikat process in Vietnam:

Thai warp ikat patterning consists only of very simple dashes. The Thai refer to warp ikat as *mat khan*. *Mat* in Thai refers to a bunch, as in a bunch of vegetables. *Khan* means to spread dye or paint (*thon* has roughly the same meaning). The Thai in Vietnam refer to the weft ikat technique as *mi* (pronounced as me) or as *mat mi* or as *ta mi* (*ta* meaning an eye or dot, as in the eye of a pineapple, and in Vietnamese the word is *mat*). There are some dialectical variations in the pronunciation of these terms and the spelling in Roman letters is not uniform. Thus, *ta* can also be spelled *tah* or *dtah*.

The warp ikat technique employed by the Black Tai and other Tai-speaking groups consists of tying warp threads to make fairly simple dashes. Howard and Howard (2002) and Howard (in press-b) describe and illustrate tubeskirts with warp ikat patterning made by Southern Tai Black

Tai from Thanh Hoa Province and indicate that this technique is no longer used by Northern Tai Black Tai in Son La and Dien Bien provinces. Howard (in press) describes these skirts as follows:

There are several distinct types of ikat patterned cloth woven by the Thai in Vietnam. The simplest of these is referred to as a *sin ta lai* or *sin ta lan* (*sin* is pronounced as seen). *Lai* means line or stripe, as in a tiger's stripes, while *lan* means to spread as ink spreads out beyond the intended line. This cloth has plain black weft threads and various colours of warp threads that form very narrow horizontal warp directional stripes across the body of the skirt. Most of these threads are plain and dyed dark colours (black, brown, and purple), but there are also a few lighter coloured threads to serve as decoration. The warp threads are mostly cotton, but there are often silk threads mixed in as well. Sometimes warp threads are added with simple white ikat dashes. Such warp ikat dashes are quite common on older pieces of cloth, but at present they are becoming increasingly rare.

Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard (1997) and Cheesman (2004) describe similar warp ikat patterned skirt-cloth woven by Black Tai and neighbouring Tai-speaking groups in Laos.

The Black Tai and closely related Tai-speaking groups such as the White Tai and Red Tai have traditions of weaving a variety of styles of weft ikat patterned cloth that is used for the bodies of their tubeskirts. The two most important types of such cloth are those woven for the bodies of tubeskirts called *sin muk mi ko* and *sin mi* or *sin ta mi*. Both styles of skirt-cloth are woven by Black Tai in Thanh Hoa Province in Vietnam and by various Tai-speaking groups in Laos. The *sin muk mi ko* style of tubeskirt is illustrated in Howard and Howard (2002: 250-52, Figs. 152-55) and features a combination of supplementary warp (*muk*), weft ikat (*mi*), and supplementary weft (*ko*) patterning as well as often warp ikat patterning. The weft ikat patterns include depictions of human figures and frogs within rectangular spaces that are bordered by lines of supplementary warp and supplementary weft patterning. The *sin mi* or *sin ta mi* style of tubeskirt is also illustrated in Howard and Howard (2002: 239, Figs. 107-08; 249-50, Figs. 147-49) and features wide weft directional bands of weft ikat patterning that often have patterns depicting water dragons (*tô hòng luông*, *tô ngawk*, or *tô ngueak* in Black Tai), a bird that Howard (2004) has identified as a Gray heron, and a funeral hut and artificial tree (the hut is called a *thiêng hèo* in Black Tai and the tree is called *ko hèo*) These patterns are discussed in detail in Howard (in press).

The supplementary warp technique refers to a decorative technique whereby additional decorative threads are added to the warp. In the case of Tai-speaking groups of Laos and Vietnam, including the Black Tai, Howard (in press-a) says that they “commonly use the term *muk* to refer to a particular type of supplementary warp patterning that takes the form of a narrow warp directional band with supplementary warp geometric patterns that are woven with white threads on a dark ground.” He adds that “The term *muk* in Tai languages such as Tai Dam (Black Tai)

also refers to the nectar of flowers and ... the patterns in this band are often identified as types of flowers.” Such bands of supplementary warp patterning may appear as the dominant form of patterning on the cloth of the skirt body in the case of tubeskirts called *sin muk* or in combination with other types of patterning in the case of the *sin muk mi ko* described above.

Whereas the decorative techniques described so far are employed almost exclusively for skirt-cloth, the supplementary weft technique is used on cloth intended for a wider range of purposes. In the case of skirt-cloth woven by the Black Tai and related Tai-speaking groups in Vietnam and Laos it most often appears in combination with other techniques as with the *sin muk mi ko* and *sin mi* styles of tubeskirts. It sometimes appears by itself in a particular style of tubeskirt called a *sin bok* (flower skirt) that is woven by a groups of Black Tai known as Tai Muang who live in northern Nghe An Province and by related Tai who live immediately across the border in Laos (see Howard and Howard 2002: 260-61, Figs. 184-87). The supplementary weft technique is also used to decorate blankets (*pha lai* and *pha daeng*), the decorative top piece of a mosquito net (*cha poi*), women’s head-cloths, and women’s belts (*sai huot*). Examples of all of these are described and illustrated in Howard and Howard (2004).

In the past, Black Tai society in Vietnam and neighbouring parts of Laos had distinct class differences that divided people into nobles and commoners and class distinctions were clearly manifested in dress. For example, noble women were only to wear silk or more elaborate tubeskirts, while cotton was the common material of clothing worn by commoners. In the case of males, noble men wore gold or silver buttons on their shirts, while commoners fastened their shirts with string ties. Howard and Howard (2002: 102) note noble men wore trousers reaching down to their feet, and commoners wore them shorter.

Let us now turn to the textiles of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. While such traditional textiles are not often worn on a daily basis any longer in the village, a number of tradition-based textiles are still produced and worn on special occasions, primarily within a ritualistic context, despite the influence of commercialization and acculturation. Unfortunately, many of the older traditional textiles of the Black Tai in Chiang Khan have been sold and there are few surviving examples in the village at present.

Traditional Male Dress

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad continue to preserve much of the traditional male dress for wear on special occasions, like festivals.

Daily dress coincides with more generic Thai⁵ fashion. Traditional male dress consists of a *sua Vat*⁶ (black shirt), *song hua long* (trousers), *muak kalom* (head-cloth), *thung pai* (shoulder bag), *sai laew* (sash), and *sua hi* (long-coat or robe).

The traditional *sua Vat* or male shirt is made of cotton cloth and is always dyed black or dark indigo. It has long sleeves, a round stand-up collar, and fastens down the left side. In the past, it was important that the *sua vat* was longer in the back and shorter in the front because it was said that evil spirits could enter from the back of a person (Figure 3.4, Figure 3.5). Today, however, contemporary shirts often fasten down the centre and their front and back are of equal lengths. In the past, the buttons of the shirt expressed the class of the wearer. Nobles only were allowed to wear shirts with silver or gold buttons. Commoners could wear shirts with plastic buttons or string ties. In Ban Napanad, the silver buttons are shaped like a morning glory seed (*kén phac bong* in Black Tai and *med pak boong* in Central Thai).

Traditional dress for men also includes *song hua long* or trousers, which were either long or short in length. Short trousers were often worn in the fields while working, and the longer reserved for more formal occasions. The trousers are made of cotton cloth that is dyed black or dark indigo. They are tailored so as to be baggy and are folded and knotted at the waist. Such trousers are rarely worn any longer and most men in Ban Napanad wear commercially made trousers that are purchased at the market.

Traditional male attire also includes a head-cloth (*mu* in Black Tai and *muak kalom* in central Thai). It is made of cotton cloth and completely dyed black or dark indigo. Older men in Ban Napanad continue to wear this style of head-cloth (refer to Figure 3.5) on special occasions. Cheesman (2004: 162) describes a similar head-cloth for Tai Dam and Tai Waat men in Laos, however their particular cloth had tie-dyed white patches at each corner and the head-cloths were called *phaa dam nin*. She mentions the cloth was wrapped around the head and then knotted with the ends hanging down the back. The head-clothes worn in Ban Napanad were not worn in such a fashion. In Ban Napanad their particular head-cloths were sewn together and were simply placed loosely on the head, in the same fashion as a regular baseball cap.

⁵ Thai refers to the people of the Kingdom of Thailand.

⁶ Sua Vat refers to Muang Vat in Vietnam although this is not recognized in Ban Napanad and also there is a term *sua vat* in Black Tai that refers to a customary man's shirt, but in this particular case we are referring to the name Vat (a *muang* and sub-group of Tai) and not *vat*. Moreover, a number of informants referred to the traditional male shirt as *sua waad*, similarly mentioned by Cheesman (2004).

A *thung pai* or shoulder bag also is part of traditional male attire. A plain shoulder bag is used while working in the fields and one with decorative patterning is worn on special occasions. The latter are often decorated with supplementary weft patterning or embroidery. The shoulder bags were commonly given by women as gifts to men to show their affection. Today in Ban Napanad very few women continue to weave such elaborate shoulder bags. More commonly, shoulder bags are purchased at nearby markets or are sewn from leftovers of other textile forms. Similar shoulder bags are woven in Vietnam and Laos. In Vietnam, Howard and Howard (2002) illustrate and describe several Thai shoulder bags from Vietnam. Of particular interest is a Black Tai shoulder bag (2002: 232) from Son La town, Son La Province, which is very similar to the traditional shoulder bags found in Ban Napanad.

A decorative sash (*sai laew*) is often incorporated in a man's attire also. The sash is most commonly decorated with supplementary weft (*lai khit*) patterning. The decorative sash was cotton with discontinuous and continuous supplementary weft patterning at each end. The patterning consisted of the *toom* or diamond motif, apparent on most Black Tai textiles, the *gab* or hook motif, and the flower motif. Cheesman (2004: 157-58) describes similar sashes found in Muang Phuan and Nam Noen in Laos.

Traditionally, men's dress also included a long-coat (*sua hi*). The men of Ban Napanad have ceased to wear the *sua hi*, and there are no surviving examples in the village. This is because they were buried with their owners. The man's long-coat is similar to the women's long-coat. However a distinct motif is added to the back of the men's long-coat (Figure 3.6). Formerly, the long-coat was worn during festivals and important ceremonies and maintained an important role in the funeral rites of Black Tai men. The long-coat was cotton and dyed black or dark indigo. The male long-coat is decorated with decorative strips of cloth on both the inside and outside. The outside was worn for festivals and rituals, and the more elaborate inside, which often showcased strips of cloth with weft ikat and supplementary weft patterning, was reserved for funeral dress for the deceased. A number of Black Tai informants remember burying their parents in *sua hi*, and emphasized the importance of the long-coat within their culture. Despite this attitude, they had little to say regarding why it was not produced or worn today.

The Black Tai men of Ban Napanad also have a tradition of wearing jewelry. Traditionally, men would wear a silver arm bracelet and a silver ankle bracelet. At the time of my research most of this traditional jewelry had been sold in the past to raise money to cover the costs of such things as medicines to treat illness and to cover funeral expenses. Only the *mo mon* or

spiritual doctor *and mo mod* or sorcerer still possessed such jewelry. Its importance was commented on to me by one of them:

Today, very few people have silver jewelry. But I need it. For the ethnic jewelry also marks me as ethnic Tai Dam. The jewelry was made by Tai Dam, and worn by Tai Dam much like cloth. But silversmiths were always men in the past. Again, today Ban Napanad no longer has a local silversmith and much of the newer jewelry is purchased by relatives in Laos and sent to Thailand. (Interviewee 81, February 16, 2005, Ban Napanad)

Black Tai men living in Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand also have a tradition of extensive tattooing. In general, this aspect of dress has ceased to be practiced; however, the older generation still have tattoos. Today, in Ban Napanad many older men have tattooing on their bodies (see Figure 3.7). Tattooing as a form of dress served three social functions. Traditionally men were tattooed at puberty either all over their body or on specific parts, depending on their pain tolerance or threshold. For the Black Tai this was a rite of passage from puberty to signify adulthood. Second, tattooing was believed to provide protection against harm from nature (such as snakebites and attacks by tigers) or human foes (such as sword or knife attacks). Lastly, tattooing is said to be sexually appealing to the women. For, as many informants remarked, any man who is not tattooed was not a real man. Therefore, in this case, tattooing served a similar role as dress in having a socially ascribed importance. Religious practitioners often were tattooed extensively in scripture written in Khmer. Tattoos often depicted similar motifs to those found on traditional textile forms. For example, the water dragon, centipede, and motifs such as the *toom*, *gab*, and other material representations of Black Tai ethnicity were also extensively tattooed on men. An extensively tattooed Black Tai *mo mon* (Figure 3.8) suggested that the ancient tattoo tradition is tied closely to animism and Buddhism, and many motifs are religious in origin and worn by religious practitioners. He indicated the hand tool was a long brass tube, with a sliding pointed rod that runs down the inside. After being dipped in ink, one hand steadies the end against the skin and the other provides the piercing action. In the same breath, he stated that in the past, often the hand tool mentioned was not available so any metal or iron rod that was thin enough for tattooing was heated and then dipped into ink and then pierced into the skin, as he then showed me one tattoo on his body that had been done in with this precise method.

Traditional Female Dress

Black Tai women's dress in Ban Napanad seems to have retained much more of its traditional aspects than men's dress, but it too has undergone changes, most recently with the advent of the use of commercial materials. Traditional women's dress also includes a much wider

array of items. In the past, the Black Tai women of Ban Napanad produced nine types of skirt-cloth⁷: *sin muk* (*sin muk*), *sin mi tang jue* (*sin mii tang jue*) *sin kan* (*sin kan*), *sin ta lai* (*sin tah lae*), *sin kuew* (*sin kuew*), *sin taang mo*, *sin ta cong* (*sin tah kong*, *sin nang han* (*sin nang han*) [*nang* in Black Tai means noble woman], and *sin mi* (*sin mee*). Only five types of skirt-cloth are produced today: *pha sin nang han*, *pha sin mi moo*⁸, *pha sin mi*, *pha sin muk*, and *pha sin taang mo*. The following discussion will be divided into three categories of skirts for clarity and organizational purposes: Type I textiles are traditional Black Tai textiles that are linked to the original Black Tai in Vietnam; Type II textiles are newer, but still traditional Black Tai textiles that were adopted due to influence of other groups in Laos and Northeastern Thailand; and Type III are textiles that are new innovations.

Type I Traditional Black Tai Skirts. The *sin teng mo* was a typical everyday style of tubeskirt worn by Black Tai women of Ban Napanad in the past. Among Black Tai in Vietnam at present it is associated only with the Black Tai of Muang Vat and in Laos only the related group that is called Tai Wat (obviously referring to Muang Vat) wear it. The Tai Wat people live in a few villages in Xieng Kho District, Houa Phan Province (see photographs in Cheesman 2004: 119, Fig. 5.62; 148, Fig. 6.95). It is also the traditional everyday tubeskirt of the Lao Song Dam Black Tai in central Thailand. *Taang mo* means watermelon in Central Thai. The word for watermelon in Black Tai is *teng 'nam*. This type of tubeskirt is made of cotton and dyed black or dark indigo with thin plain weft directional stripes that are white or light blue (Figure 3.9). This particular tubeskirt appears to have been worn by women of all social classes in the past. This type of tubeskirt is simply called a *sin ta lai* or striped tubeskirt in Muang Vat, and the watermelon designation seems to be a recent innovation. This would seem to be indicated by their use of the Thai term for watermelon.

In the past, the *sin nang han* was reserved for women of the noble class (as was noted above *nang* refers to a women of the noble class and *han* refers to brave in Black Tai) and almost always was woven in silk. Such class restrictions no longer exist and this style of tubeskirt is usually made of cotton. There was an example of a *sin nang han* made from silk in the village. The body of this skirt had alternating bands of supplementary weft and weft ikat patterning (Figure 3.10). A separate hem-piece and waistband are always added to this style of skirt. Sometimes the hem-piece (*tin sin*) has very elaborate supplementary weft patterning. The weft

⁷ Black Tai spelling is followed by Thai spellings in parentheses.

⁸ *Moo* is another word that means nothing in the Black Tai language or central Thai language, however has been adopted by the villagers of Ban Napanad. The weavers referred to *moo* as many smaller ikat patterned motifs on a skirt cloth.

ikat patterning on the body of the skirt often features representations of water dragons (often in pairs that are said to be male and female respectively), turtles, funeral houses, fish, centipedes, and prawns swimming in a river. This skirt appears to be a version of *sin mi*, which was only worn by noble Black Tai women in Vietnam.

The particular patterns, especially the male and female water dragon are always found in the weft ikat patterning. The pattern is said to hold particular significance, and is also found on Black Tai textiles found in other regions, more specifically many of the Black Tai groups in Vietnam and Laos.

The *sin muk* when woven using the traditional supplementary warp patterning should also be categorized as Type I. This type of skirt is still commonly woven by Tai in parts of Vietnam and Laos and represents a very ancient style of skirt. In regards to this particular cloth, I searched the village numerous times to find out if any weavers produced an old-fashioned *sin muk* skirt cloth. None of the weavers knew of one and stated that warp patterned cloths were too hard to weave and required too much time and effort to produce, so they have not produced them in years. However they were adamant in stating that they had woven such textiles in the past (Interviewee 08, Interviewee 38, Interviewee 56, December 18, 2004, Ban Napanad). Eventually, by chance while walking through the village I noticed a woman wearing what appeared to be a *sin muk* skirt (Figure 3.11). I quickly approached her, and asked where she had acquired such a skirt. Fascinated by my interest she invited me back to her place to show me more *sin muk* textiles. Subsequently, I found out that her daughter was the last remaining person producing these particular *sin muk* cloths in the village. During the course of my research, I never stumbled upon any other person who had woven a *sin muk* cloth in recent times in the village.

Type II Traditional Black Tai Skirts. The following skirts are more generic types of Lao skirts that are like those woven in the Vientiane area and northern part of Northeastern Thailand. These skirts are worn by women of many different ethnic groups in this area, including Mon-Khmer speaking groups such as the *So* who have been influenced by the Tai as well as by Lao and Phutai.

The *sin mi* is the third type of skirt produced by the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. This skirt is made from cotton and the warp threads are most often dyed in indigo, red, violet, or other colours. The weft threads to produce the weft ikat (*mi*) patterning are often left the natural white colour of cotton (Figure 3.12). The weft ikat patterning often features the *tuang hor* (holy snake) (the Black Tai of Ban Napanad refer to this pattern as a holy snake, however, no such words as

tuang or *hor* exist in the Black Tai language), *mak jab* (fruit nut, *mak zat* in Black Tai), *tum* (a symbol of the Black Tai Dam), *lai gab* (means used to make more beautiful), *ton xon* (tree motif; *ton xon* means imitation tree, *ko hèo* is the term used by Black Tai in Vietnam). These particular motifs represent Black Tai culture and ethnic identity and are found on most material artifacts. The Black Tai of Laos and Vietnam also incorporate these motifs in their cloth (see Howard and Howard 2002; Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard 1997; Cheesman 2004).

The fourth skirt, a type II skirt cloth, is the *sin mi mú* (*moo* in Thai). It is made from cotton and the skirt has many motifs or weft ikat patterning vertically aligned on the skirt (Figure 3.13) The ikat patterning is sometimes separated with supplementary weft patterning or simply ikat bordering. It is called *sin kan* or striped skirt in Laos and by most people in Thailand as well. This type of skirt was popular during the French period in the early 20th century in Laos and was not woven in Vietnam.

Interestingly, despite the obvious Lao influences on the above two skirts the Black Tai of Ban Napanad insist on their authenticity for traditional Black Tai culture. A younger weaver, a recent bride from Muang Phuan in Laos remarked:

Most of the textile forms in Ban Napanad are from Laos. This is where we are originally from. Therefore, to deny the authenticity of such pieces because other ethnic groups have adopted Black Tai dress is wrong. If one were to go to all Black Tai villages, one would immediately recognize that these skirt clothes are traditional Black Tai textile forms. The weavers are more talented in Laos, so they produce all traditional forms. (Interviewee 60, December 21, 2005, Ban Napanad)

Type III Black Tai Skirts: The Black Tai of Ban Napanad also have new types of skirt-cloth, such as the *sin bai sii* or painted skirt cloth (Figure 3.14) and a version of the *sin muk* cloth (see Figure 3.11). These particular skirt-cloths I have categorized as Type III since they are innovations. For example, the *sin bai sii* is a version of a *mudmee* or ikat patterned cloth made using a method introduced to the village from outside sources. The new method allowed those incapable of producing traditional ikat textiles to produce similar textiles by simply painting colour on tied bunches of yarn. The other innovation is a new version of the *sin muk* skirt-cloth. The older style of supplementary warp patterned *sin muk* skirt (which is categorized as Type I) required considerable skill to make. The newer *sin muk* cloth produced in Ban Napanad, however, appears to be made using a warp float technique rather than a true supplementary warp. Tai commonly use the warp float technique for hem-pieces and it is easier to weave than supplementary warp.

Hem-pieces and Waistbands. Traditionally, a separate hem-piece (*tin sin* or *teen sin*, skirt foot) and a waistband (*hua*, head) were always added. The tubeskirt was considered incomplete without a “head” (*hua*) and “feet” (*tin*). Moreover, in the past, the smaller looms were unable to make the wider pieces of cloth that the larger frame looms are capable of producing. Therefore, a waistband and hem-piece served a practical function in lengthening the skirt. With the *sin teng nam* style of skirt a plain indigo dyed cotton waistband and a simple hem-piece were most often added. The hem-piece (*tin sin*) is most often patterned cloth. This piece is decorated with elaborate supplementary weft geometric patterning (Figure 3.15).

The waistbands (*hua*) of the Black Tai are often quite simple (Figure 3.16). Most often they are made of cotton with alternating coloured weft directional bands. Sometimes a plain cotton black or dark indigo dyed cloth is utilized by simply sewing it onto the body of the skirt, as with the *sin taing moo*. Some informants indicated that in the past the tubeskirt would be worn on the breasts and a blouse was not then needed. This was the style of wearing tubeskirts by Thai women in Laos and Vietnam in the past as well.

The waistbands produced by the Black Tai weavers in Ban Napanad are predominantly larger pieces of plain cotton cloth. The hem-pieces sometimes were more complex, and included supplementary weft patterning. The *sin nang han*, for example, was traditionally fitted with a large plain cotton waistband, and hem piece with extensive supplementary weft patterning.

Blouses and Long-coats. Women’s dress also includes a 3/4length-sleeved, tight fitting blouse (*sua dam*) made from cotton cloth dyed black or dark indigo. The blouse includes silver clasps that fasten down the centre of the blouse. The Black Tai say that the clasps are shaped like butterflies (The butterfly motif is also found on the *nang han* skirt in the supplementary weft patterning). An elderly weaver explained:

The butterfly clasps are not only beautiful they have important significance. If the women have lost her spouse, the butterflies are synonymous with the deceased person close to their heart. We explain it as if, “they are stepping on our chest”, as she smiled empathetically. (Interviewee 53, December 11, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Black Tai women of Ban Napanad also have a tradition of wearing a short-sleeved long-coat (*sua hi*) on special occasions (Figure 3.17). This long-coat, like that formerly worn by men, serves both a practical and ritual function. The long-coat is normally worn with the right side out. The more elaborately decorated inside is worn as the owner’s funeral dress. The deceased person is dressed in this manner in order to be granted admission into *muang fa* (the *muang* in the sky) and the heavenly afterlife. Interestingly, unlike men in the village, the women continue to produce

this type of long-coat and consider it to be a fundamental aspect of dress representing Black Tai ethnic identity.

Head-cloths and Hair. Black Tai women in Ban Napanad also wear head-cloths. The head-cloths are worn differently according to the women's marital status. A recent innovation is the use of these cloths by men and women as scarves. The head-cloths are called *pa pok hua*, or *pa pua hua* (in Black Tai *pok* means to cover by wrapping). Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard (1997: 108) note that the Black Tai head-cloth seems to be the one piece of textile "inviolable to borrowing—more so than any other item of costume." These head-cloths are made from cotton cloth, dyed either black or dark indigo. The cotton cloth is largely plain except for an area at the ends, which is decorated. The central portion of this area has supplementary weft patterning in a variety of bright colours. The use of the supplementary weft technique by the Black Tai of Ban Napanad is significant since Black Tai in Laos and Vietnam now embroider this area. It is likely, however, that they too used the supplementary weft technique in the past, but that as weaving skills deteriorated among the Black Tai in these countries they began to use the easier embroidery technique. The Ban Napanad head-cloth has end-pieces and small tassels are often added as well. Howard and Howard (2002: 82) refer to similar embellishments in reference to the head-clothes worn by Black Tai living in Vietnam. These embellishments are referred to *kut*. Their account gives reference to a Black Thai folk concerning the number of *kut* on the head-cloth. However, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad did not know of this particular folklore and most weavers believed the *kut* were primarily for aesthetic purposes.

In the past, decorative patterning on head-cloths was done using silk thread, but today commercial cotton thread is used (Figure 3.18). The Tai Dam of Ban Napanad interpret the main motif on the head-cloth, which is also incorporated into many other textiles, as a symbol of Tai Dam unity. They call this symbol *tum*. The *tum* motif is physically a rhomboid shape, and most Black Tai textiles of Ban Napanad contain this particular motif. Similar motifs are found in Black Tai textiles in Laos and Vietnam. After review of numerous interview transcripts, the importance of this particular motif was apparent in all of the participants' responses. They all identified this specific motif as a symbol of Black Tai ethnicity. The *tum* motif is always surrounded by smaller representations of a water hook, which are called *gab*. The motif can be described simply as a hook that retrieved the water pail from the water well. However, like the *tum*, all my Black Tai informants identified the *gab* motif as an important Black Tai symbol. Today, representations of flowers are also incorporated into the head-cloth patterning to add beauty.

Black Tai pay considerable attention to women's hair. In the past, the length of a women's hair was very important. A mother would often take hours washing and combing out her daughter's hair. The arrangement of Black Tai women's hair holds particular significance. The placement of the chignon indicates the age and marital status of a woman. Unmarried women wear the chignon at the nape of the neck whereas married women wear the chignon at the top of the head. Divorced or separated women wear the chignon on the left side of the head and widowed women wear her chignon on the right side of the head.

Jewelry. Black Tai women of Ban Napanad also have a tradition of wearing silver jewelry. Women decorated their hair with silver jewelry in the past. Black Tai women also wore silver earrings, silver bracelets, silver necklaces, and a silver belt. In particular, this jewelry is worn on special occasions, such as at marriages, festivals, or religious ceremonies. Today, however, very few women have such jewelry in their possession, as it was sold to raise money. Furthermore, Ban Napanad does not have a silversmith to produce jewellery⁹.

Tattooing. Black Tai women also have a tradition of tattooing (Figure 3.19). In the past women were often tattooed at a very young age, approximately the age of 15 or 16 (similar to the men). However, female tattooing was exclusively for the purpose of fashion or sex appeal, unlike the explanations given for men's tattooing. The Black Tai participant photographed in Figure 3.19 believed that there was an ancient tradition of tattooing women's faces, which long ago disappeared among the Tai, but persisted among other groups [such as the Kadai speaking Li of Hainan Island]. Black Tai women often tattooed the outside of their hands. The tattoos most often featured the *dog mai* flower motif. This flower motif is highly revered as the most beautiful motif in textiles among the majority of those interviewed.

Other Textiles

In the past, the Black Tai produced a wider range of textiles than at present. Some of these were utilitarian in nature, while others were employed for specific social or religious functions. Many of these textiles were important to Black Tai cultural identity and therefore functioned in much the same way as traditional dress as cultural and ethnic symbols. Despite such importance, the villagers of Ban Napanad have abandoned a number of these textiles. Inquiry revealed that commercialization, acculturative influences, or the deaths of important members of

⁹ At present the villagers of Ban Napanad are trying to revive this tradition.

the community (for example, the *mo mod*) often resulted in the removal of certain textiles from their repertoire for they no longer served a practical or ritual function.

Utilitarian Textiles. Among the utilitarian cloths that are no longer produced are bed-sheets, baby blankets, blankets, and mosquito nets. Inquiry concerning this matter was often met with the simple remark that it is easier to buy such things at the market. Moreover, the commercialized replacements usually were much more desired than the traditional items. In fact, inquiry concerning the abandonment of certain textile forms was often met with the same cynical response. It was often remarked: “It is easier to buy the latter textiles in the market. And in fact, given the time spent to make the larger items, it proved cheaper to buy the commercial fabrics” (Interviewee 80, January 25, 2005, Ban Napanad). I was also told that if the mosquito nets were still used people would laugh at them, for the nets were not practical and they were old-fashioned.

Special Purpose Textiles. The Black Tai of Ban Napanad have also ceased to weave a number of important textiles that had special religious or social functions. A number of cloths that once served important ritualistic functions ceased to be made or used upon the death of important religious practitioners since there was no one left to use them in an appropriate manner.

The *pha hang kam* (*hang* means to tie in a knot, *kam* by itself has no meaning in this context, but *kham khep* means a colourful textile). Howard and Howard (2002: 234, Fig. 92) illustrate an example of such a cloth from Muang Vat in Vietnam. The Black Tai here refer to it as a *khan khit* (*khan* being a general term for a small rectangular cloth for personal use like a face cloth, head-cloth, or shoulder-cloth; and *khit* referring to the supplementary weft technique). This type of cloth usually has a cotton ground with supplementary weft patterning in silk either covering the entire cloth or in sections at both ends with the centre left plain. A man wore this cloth over the shoulder. The cloth was often included among the wedding gift sets as a sign of respect. The cloth was always placed in the coffin at the owner’s burial and was considered one of the important cloths to include with deceased men.

The *pha hang kam* was also worn as a shoulder-cloth at the important *sae paeng* ceremony. However, with the death of the village *mo mod*, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad can no longer truly celebrate *sae paeng*. The Black Tai of Ban Napanad often imitate the ceremony for visitors, but in a proper ceremony a *mo mod* is required to invite the spirits (*phi*) from *Muang Fa*, the Black Tai heavenly place, to stay within him or her for the duration of the ceremony. Similarly, with the loss of *mo and mo mod*, certain funeral rituals have also ceased to exist. Where

the Black Tai of Ban Napanad once followed traditions similar to their ancestors in Laos and Vietnam, they no longer do.

The *pha tum*, a cloth draped over the coffin of the deceased, is no longer produced also because the village no longer has a *mo mod*. These particular cloths are produced by Black Tai groups in Laos, where they are called *pha pok luang* (long-cloths), *pha pum*, or *pha tum*. Tai in Vietnam refer to them as *man bang*, which is the same term used for an altar screen. The significance of this cloth is well documented with other Black Tai groups.

Another important cloth is the *pha ko ma* or *pha kama* (also spelled *pha kaw ma*; Gittinger and Lefferts 1992: 258, also discuss terms for this type of cloth). This particular cloth was recognized as having varied significance to the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. Some Black Tai villagers indicated this type of cloth was adopted in Laos or Thailand, while others remarked it is a traditional Black Tai textile from the distant past in Sipsong Chau Tai region among Black Tai peoples. Cheesman (2004: 158-59) illustrates this type of cloth and reinforces the idea that this particular type of cloth may have been adopted as a result of Lao influence. Moreover, while Howard and Howard's (2002) survey of Tai textiles in Vietnam illustrates various types of checked cloth used for sheets and blankets (2002: 221, fig. 48; 233, fig. 88), they provide only one example of checked cloth being used for clothing. This is a style of checked cloth being used for the body of a tubeskirt called a *sin lai mai* that is worn by Tai Muang from Quy Chau District at funerals (2002: 262, fig. 192). Thus, in general it does not seem that checked cloth is used for clothing neither by the Tai in Vietnam, nor by the Black Tai in particular. Although the Tai Muang example does raise the possibility that there was once a tradition among Tai in Vietnam of wearing checked cloth for special occasions, given the limited distribution of the use of such cloth among the Tai in Vietnam in Vietnam it is quite possible that this group of Tai Muang adopted the use of checked cloth from further west.

In Ban Napanad the *pha ko ma* serves culturally as a symbol of respect to elders and ancestors and of ethnic pride. For example, when offering food to the *phi luang* (*house or ancestral spirit*) at the *kalohong* (*ancestor altar*) the Black Tai men of the village will always and must drape the cloth over their shoulders. Many villagers remarked of the particular significance the cloth had in relation to showing respect. Another villager spoke fondly of his initial meeting with his in-laws. He mentioned:

When I first met my future parents (in-laws) I remember wearing my *pha ko ma* because a man who didn't wear this shoulder-cloth, they would be considered disrespectful and unknowledgeable of one's cultural heritage. However, with the cloth draped over your

shoulder, the parents knew this “man is true Black Tai” In the past, Black Tai parents wanted their daughters to marry Black Tai men; this insured a proper marriage and future. Today, however, many Black Tai people marry outside of their ethnic group and this has caused serious problems for ‘our peoples’. (Interviewee 20, October 01, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Basic Textile Forms from Birth to Death

Traditionally, when a child was born, a Black Tai woman prepared a number of textiles in advance. Of these textiles, a *pha pu* (in Black Tai, *pu*, means to spread out a mat or a cloth), which is a type of bed-cloth or sheet, was considered most important and these were often passed down from generation to generation. Today, however, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad have abandoned this tradition and simply purchase commercial cloths at the local market.

Pha pu textiles were still woven three generations back. These cloths were considered to possess the grandmother’s spirit. The cloth, through the grandmother’s spirit, would protect the child from any harm or danger. The *pha pu* is made from cloth with supplementary weft patterning. Each panel is woven separately and then sewn together on a larger red cotton cloth. In the past, both cotton and silk strips were added to this cloth (Figure 3.20). Similar blankets of the *pha lai* type are still made in Vietnam (see Howard and Howard 2002: 256-57, figs. 174, 176).

In the past when a young woman was to marry she produced a number of textiles for her new mother-in-law and father-in-law. The presentation of textiles in this manner is still common among Tai in some parts of Vietnam and Laos, but is no longer done in Ban Napanad. At the time of marriage she would present this gift set and often receive money and jewelry in return. The set would include a variety of textiles, but most often consisted of: *pha pu* (bed-cloth), *pha sin mi* (ikat-patterned skirt), *pha ko ma* (male cloth), and *pha hom* (blanket). The in-laws often subsequently would return most of the gifts to the bride as a gesture of good faith. The number of textiles given was dependent on the status of the young woman and the number of relatives on the groom’s side, for a larger family would require a greater number of textiles since textiles are also given to close relatives and family. When the new in-laws accepted their daughter-in-law they presented her with a gift of silver jewelry (including silver earrings and a silver necklace).

The groom also would give a silver bar and money to the bride’s parents. The quantities involved are dependent of the status of the groom. This presentation of money still takes place in Ban Napanad, but Thai baht is more commonly used than silver. The groom also has to bring pigs with a handful’s ankle girth to the bride’s house to sacrifice for the ancestors. Here they sacrifice and clean the pigs, but then the ceremony is held at the groom’s home. The *mo mod* invites the spirits to join the festivities. After, the ceremony the pigs are prepared for a feast.

Traditional women's dress at the time of her marriage was most often a *sin mi mai*, a skirt completely woven with silk and with elaborate weft ikat patterning. The traditional women's blouse (*sua dam*) was also worn. The hair was arranged in a chignon worn at the top of the head with silver pin. The most elaborate jewelry was also worn at this time. The newly acquired silver earrings, silver necklace, and bracelet from her in-laws were also worn.

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad have, until recently, maintained traditional funerary practices at the time of one's death. With the passing of their senior *mo mod* in 1999, a number of funeral cloths ceased to be produced. In particular, the *mo mod* cloth (*pha mo mod*), the cloth for the casket, and the *sua hi* for males. In fact, an informant indicated that the last male *sua hi* was worn by the *mo mod* at the time of his funeral. Just to reiterate the importance of the *sua hi*, this particular textile form, acts as a 'passport' (Gittinger 1998) to the heavenly realm. A number of informants indicated that without this cloth, the Black Tai who have already passed cannot recognize their ancestors and therefore, they will not find their way to *Muang Fa*. One informant stated that the *sua hi* allows the keepers of *Muang Fa* to appropriately place the deceased with his awaiting ancestors. In other words, the cloth is similar to a birth certificate in that it can identify the wearer and more importantly the cloth maintains the trademark of the person who wove the cloth, therefore, allowing for an identification of one's ancestors. At present in Ban Napanad, only a few villagers have *sua hi* prepared for their funerals. The *sua hi* is worn with the more elaborate side facing out for the funeral. The casket is filled with traditional Black Tai textiles, and family members give raw cotton and silk. One informant provided a personal anecdote of the recent passing of a relative:

For those who are going to *Muang Fa* (heavenly realm) the daily supplies required to survive are given to the dead. For the women, so they can weave there, for the men to give to their ancestors, so their ancestors can weave them the appropriate textiles for daily life. The dead are wrapped with silk around the head, and cotton below the waist. In the past, the dead were wrapped with bamboo and on bamboo floor. The dead remained at their home for three days until auspicious day, where the *mo mod* is responsible to choose the day to bury. Today, I have concern because many of these traditions are lost but we try to follow ancient traditions of our ancestors in Sipsong Chau Tai. I am concerned the dead will get lost when we do not dress them in Black Tai dress that is why I still follow Black Tai traditions. (Interviewee 24, October 10, 2005, Ban Napanad)

Summary

Traditional textiles were and are woven by Black Tai for a variety of functions both secular and sacred. A number of traditional and tradition-based textiles continue to be produced in Ban Napanad. Other cloths have ceased to exist due to a number of reasons. Nonetheless,

Black Tai dress has been little affected by commercialization and acculturative compared to other textile forms. Most villagers were indifferent to the demise of some textile forms, such as the *pha hom* or blanket cloth, the mosquito nets or religiously motivated clothes. But the expression of ethnic identity through dress among the Black Tai of Ban Napanad is crucial. Traditions, customs, and value systems are conditional upon the production and wearing of traditional dress. As one person stated: “If we do not produce Black Tai dress we are no longer Black Tai” (Interviewee 21, October 04, 2004, Ban Napanad). The quote illustrates the symbolic manifestation that dress serves to Black Tai ethnic identity. Cultural meanings are also expressed in behaviour through dances, songs, and conventions. In my analysis, via participant observation and the observation of such activities, dress always served a fundamental role, both practical and spiritual. For example, in the celebration of the *phi ban* (village spirit), traditional head-cloths are used in particular dances (see Figures 3.21), and more importantly serve symbolically as a symbol of ethnic identity for both the living and the dead or the ancestors of the Black Tai.

The importance in the expression of ethnic identity via dress has been illustrated by the ethnographic findings. Because of their historical and cultural importance, a discussion is warranted in regard to both Type I and Type II traditional Black Tai skirt cloths. The reason for my categorization of these two types of cloth is that the Type I cloths seem to represent the more traditional cloths produced by other Black Tai groups in the old Sipsong Chau Tai regions in Vietnam. The Type II cloths seem to be more recent innovations by the Black Tai in Ban Napanad, related to the influence of Tai people in Laos and neighbouring areas of Northeastern Thailand. Despite being newer styles, the Type II cloths are still considered traditional Black Tai skirt cloths in Ban Napanad.

Album Three

Figure 3.1: A group of Black Tai women processing silk cocoons. The production is located in Ban Napanad village, *mu sip song* or hamlet 12.



Figure 3.2: A few families continue to grow cotton and produce cotton thread. The elderly Black Tai women depicted here continue to only grow her own cotton and not use commercial threads.

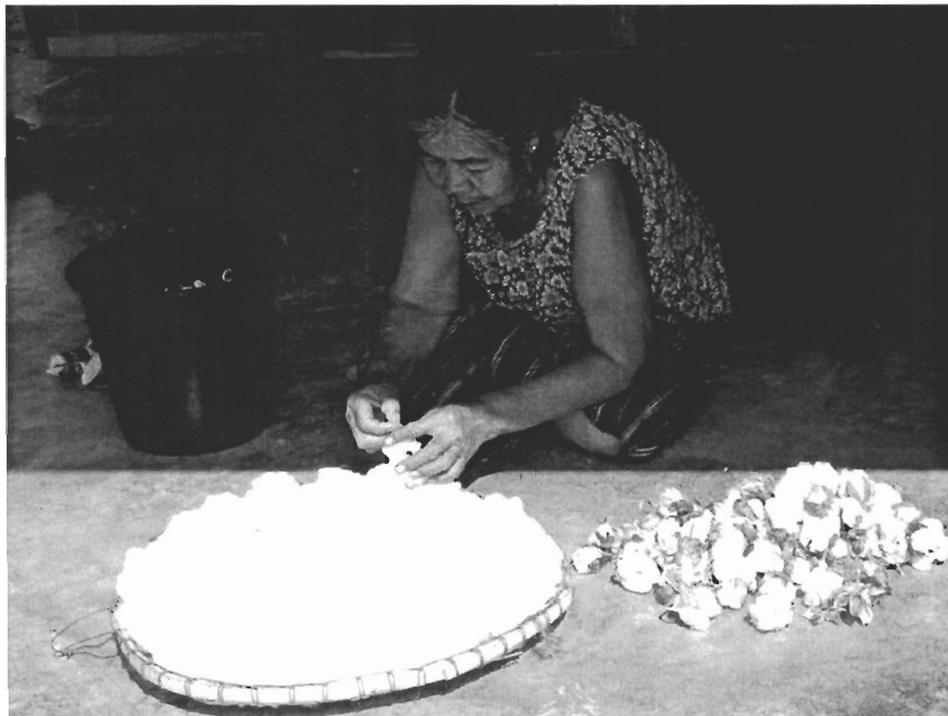


Figure 3.3: A traditional frame loom used by all Black Tai women. The Black Tai woman pictured here is setting up the loom for weaving.



Figure 3.4: A group of Black Tai men. They are all wearing variations of the traditional Sua Vat or black shirt. Noteworthy, is how the shirt fastens, the colour variation, and the buttons on each shirt.



Figure 3.5: The Black Tai man on the left is wearing a shirt that used natural dyes and shows the conventional cut of a shorter front and longer back piece. On the right, the Black Tai man's *sua vat* is fastened down the right side with silver buttons that are in the shape of morning glory seeds. The buttons are imported from Laos as currently the Ban Napanad village does not have a local silversmith. The man is also wearing a traditional *muak kalom* or headdress.



Figure 3.6: The motif is a reproduced example of the motif that was traditional applied to the back of Black Tai men's long coats (*sua hi*). No surviving examples were available at the time of my research.

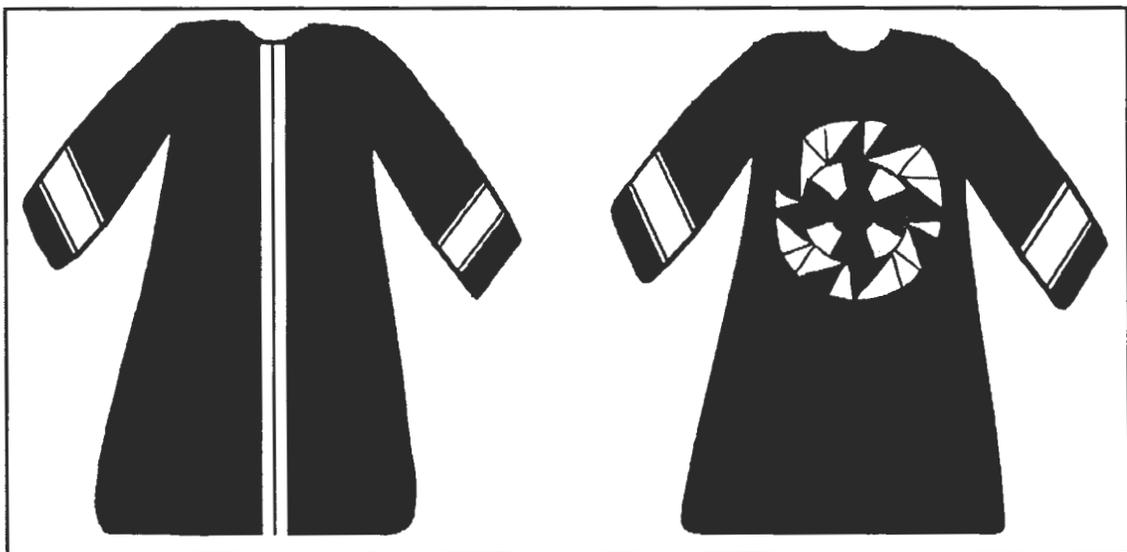


Figure 3.7: An elderly Black Tai man with extensive tattooing. He indicated that the tattooing was to protect him from evil spirits, enemies or wild animals.



Figure 3.8: The *mo mon* depicted in this picture indicated that the scripture tattooed on his body has religious significance. It is also noted that most religious practitioners would have similar tattooing in the past.

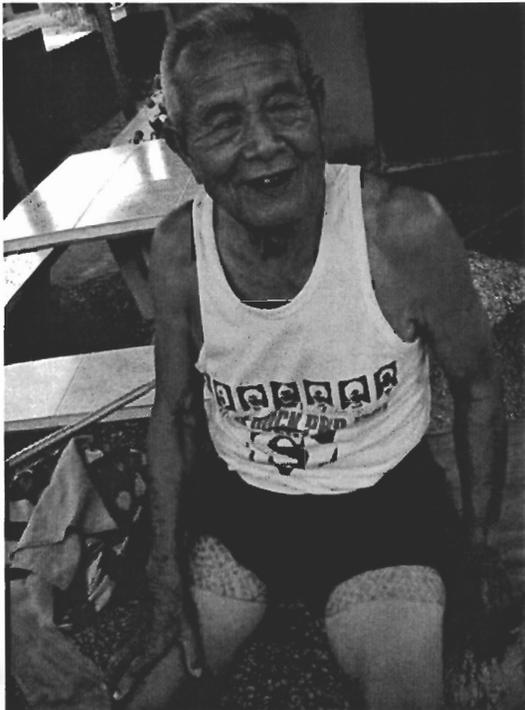


Figure 3.9: A *sin teng mo*, a traditional Black Tai tubeskirt is considered ethnic Black Tai dress in Ban Napanad. Similar skirt clothes are found in Muang Vat, Vietnam. The Black Tai women pictured here are also wearing a traditional women's blouse and headdress.



Figure 3.10: A *sin nang han* tubeskirt. This particular skirt cloth was reserved for noble women in the past, however it is worn more liberally today. Nonetheless, it is rare to see women wearing this except in formal events. It is said the cloth is very difficult to weave and few have the ability to weave such an elaborate cloth in Ban Napanad.



Figure 3.11: A Black Tai women wearing an example of a *sin muk* skirt found in Ban Napanad. Only one remaining individual in this village continues to weave such a cloth (in fact, it is the daughter of the women photographed here).



Figure 3.12: An example of a *sin mi* skirt cloth. This seems to be the type of skirt cloth most worn in the village. The picture also illustrates the most common hem (teen seen) and plain cotton waistband (hua) that are added to skirt cloths in Ban Napanad.



Figure 3.13: The Black Tai woman is wearing an example of a *sin mi mú* skirt cloth. The *sin mi mú* skirt cloth can be recognized for its many smaller motifs or weft ikat patterning vertically aligned on the skirt. The woman depicted in this photograph is preparing cotton threads for ikat or mudmee dyeing.

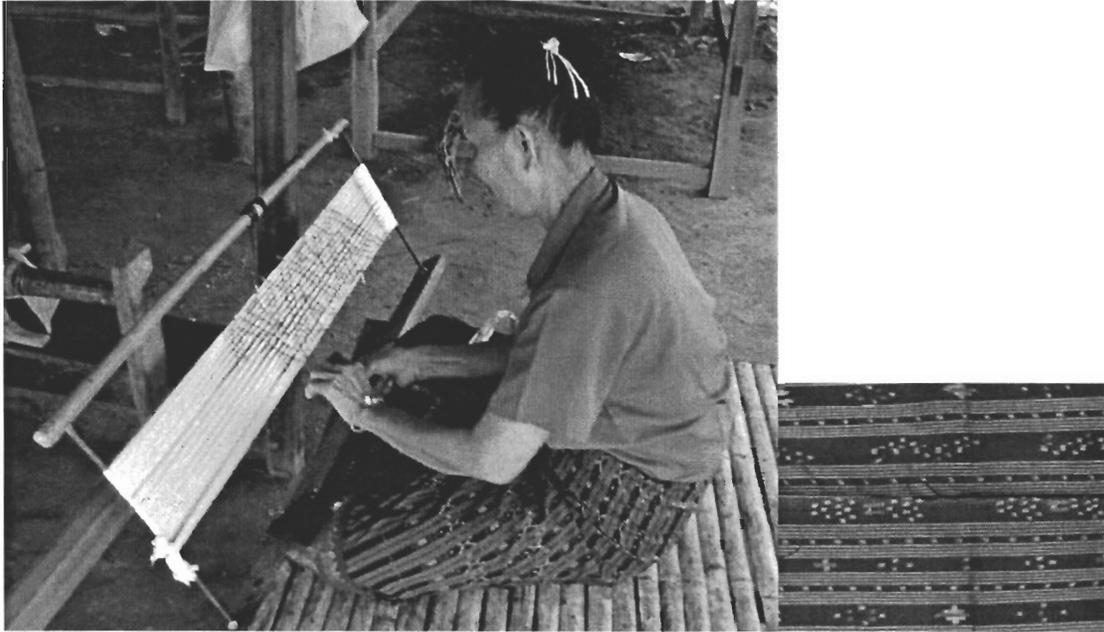


Figure 3.14: This a new type of skirt cloth produced in Ban Napanad (*sin bai sii*). It is a painted skirt cloth and is a version of the more difficult *mudmee* or ikat patterned cloth.

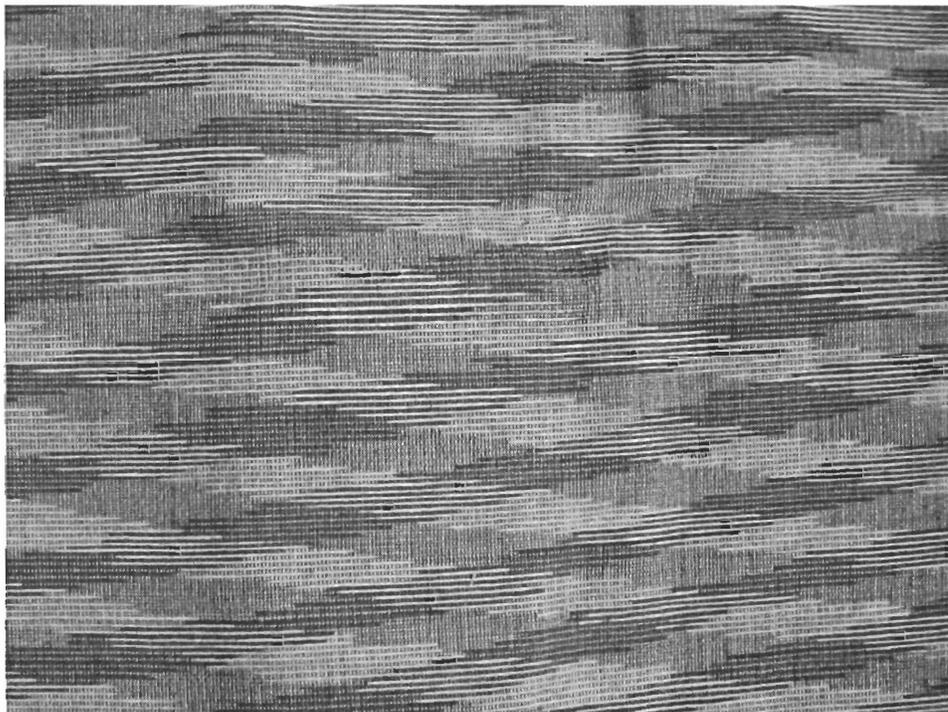


Figure 3.15: An example of a *teen sin* or the hem piece of a tube skirt. In the past, all tubeskirts needed to have a skirt foot or they were considered incomplete.

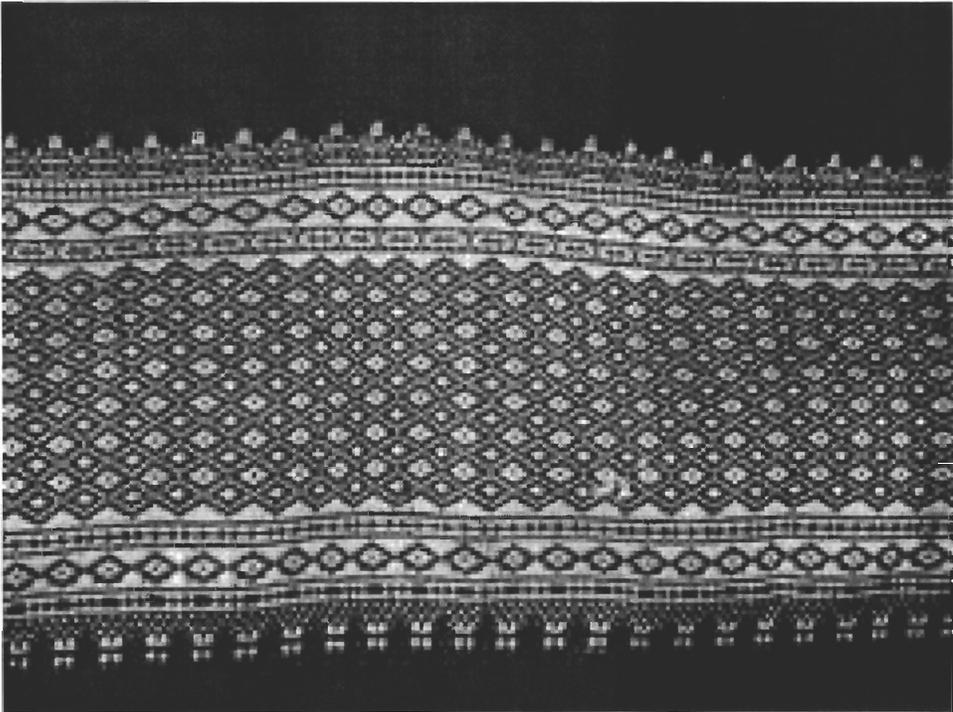


Figure 3.16: An example of a *hua* or waistband most commonly woven in Ban Napanad.



Figure 3.17: An elderly Black Tai woman wearing a traditional short sleeved long coat or *sua hi*. The photo to the right shows the inside of the long coat that is reserved for the burial of the owner. It is the more elaborate of the two sides. It has extensive supplementary weft patterning and embroidery work.



Figure 3.18: An example of a Black Tai women's headcloth. This particular example is said to have come from Laos.



Figure 3.19: An elderly Black Tai women's hand showing the traditional tattoo of a flower motif.



Figure 3.20: An example of a *pha pu* cloth. Traditionally, this cloth was used as a blanket.



Figure 3.21: A and .B. Two views of a traditional Black Tai dance utilizing the women's headcloth within the dance. These particular photographs were taken during the celebration of the village spirit or *Lieng Ban*.



CHAPTER 4: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE USE OF TEXTILES

Buddhism or more specifically Theravada Buddhism is the state religion and the religion of the majority of Thai people. Census Figures for 1980 indicated that Buddhists comprise 94 to 95% of the population of Thailand (Lepoer 1989). However, there are also many minority religions found among the people of Thailand: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Taoism, Spirit Religion¹⁰ and animism. Some of these religions appear in the census data, but others, since they are linked syncretically with Buddhism, are not represented in census data.

While most Thai are Buddhists, albeit with many animistic spirit elements in their beliefs, the Black Tai of Vietnam and Laos are not Buddhists. The Black Tai of Ban Napanad are nominally Buddhists, but they retain more animistic or spirit elements than do many other Tai groups in Thailand.

The notion that rituals “chart geography and define the architecture of sacred space and are expressed in material symbols” (Tambiah 1970: 35) guides the theoretical framework for the analysis because “repetition, habit and stability [found with rituals] provide a framework of references for the individual” (Barth 1987). Therefore ritual guides “repetition, habit, and stability”, fundamentally norms of any given socio-cultural system, and functions to highlight the symbolic meaning of cultural phenomena. These symbols then “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of general order and existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that.... seems uniquely realistic (Geertz 1973: 94-123, cited in Sparkes 2005: 3). The daily activities of the villagers in

¹⁰ Of note, Sparkes (2005) examines the complex cosmology of the Isan people. He refers to the religious traditions of ancient Tai spirit belief, as “Spirit Religion” which is “used to describe the belief in spirits, khwan, gods and other supernatural phenomena of the ancient Tai tradition instead of animism” (Sparkes 2005: 5). Sparkes contends that animism is not relevant because the original Tai traditions are an amalgamation of Brahminical practices and the use of Buddhist texts and symbols (Sparkes 2005: 5). It seems like he is referring to the syncretic beliefs of Tai people in Thailand that have resulted from contact between their original spirit beliefs and Buddhism.

Ban Napanad are compliant on their religious beliefs that in turn establish “general order and existence”. Dress, specifically, plays an important role in religious customs and conventions among the Black Tai. As mentioned before, a number of important clothes have ceased to exist as a direct result of a religious practitioner passing away. However, the villagers’ daily lives are governed by their animistic beliefs and essentially establish meaning and order within their society. An elderly Black Tai woman in a conversation highlighted this point:

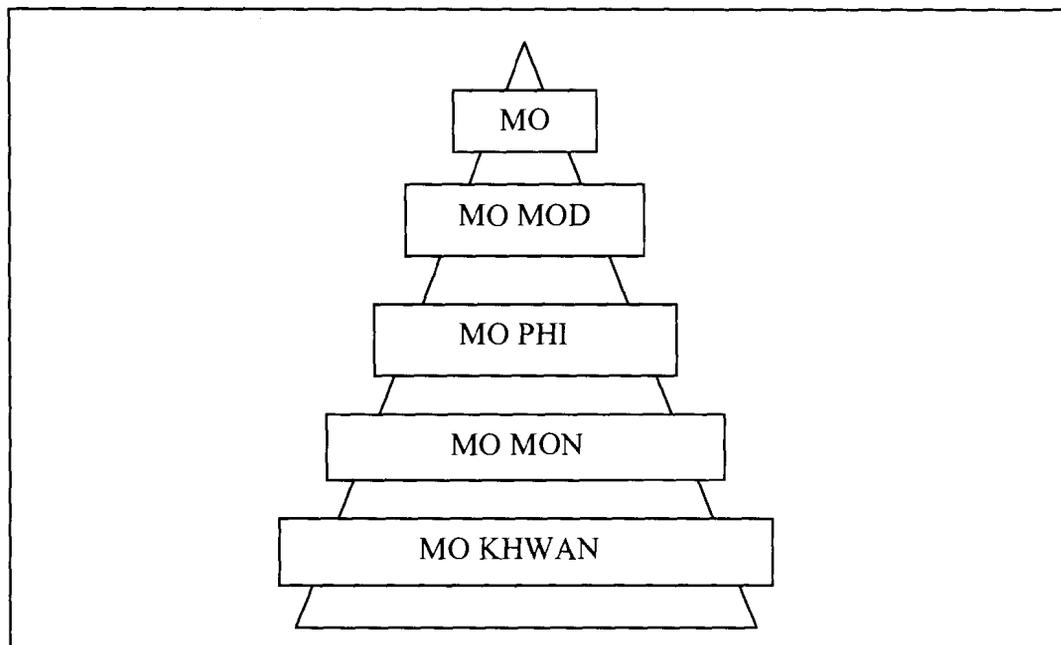
We believe in spirits and if we didn’t we would have chaos and corruption prevalent in our villages. One knows that if they hurt someone, they have to deal with their ancestors who see and hear all. The spirits can get you! [I inquired further regarding textiles] She answered... if one were not to wear a cloth that they need to wear in a particular ceremony or custom, the ancestors spirit will be disrespected and will cause harm to you (usually in the form of an illness). (Interviewee 40, November 12, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Ultimately, Black Tai religious beliefs often give meaning to seemingly powerless pieces of cloth, that in turn, provide “general order and existence”. This order presents itself in identity politics. The religious potency of certain clothes, such as the ones discussed in the previous chapter, remain an important aspect of the beliefs in the village. For the Black Tai ethnic identity and religious identity often share a symbiotic relationship.

Religious Beliefs and Practices in Ban Napanad

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad practice a spirit religion and strongly centre their religious beliefs around life essences (*khwan*), spirits, (*phi*), and cosmology (see Pitiphat 1980, Schliesinger 2001). Along with these beliefs, the Black Tai employ a number of religious practitioners including a variety of priests (*mo*) and shamans (*mo mod*), that specialize in specific rituals, ceremonies, or customs (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Diagram of the Hierarchical Status of Priests and Shamans of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad



The Black Tai of Ban Napanad share similar beliefs with their ancestors in Laos and Vietnam; however, some changes are noted¹¹. The researcher contends that the Black Tai of Ban Napanad, in fact, due to their forcible displacement lost much of their customs and rituals, however, due to the group's efforts much of the traditional aspects of their culture during the past century have been revitalized due to complex ritual idioms. In fact, earlier ethnographic accounts in this particular region stipulate that this particular group had no traditional material culture or rituals (Personal Conversation, Aajaan Boonserm, May 2004, Mahasarakham University). However, upon closer review of the literature, one can contend that being a new migrant group to an area with no resources the group's material culture consisted only of which was carried on their backs. For example, for a simple reference point, looms were yet to be fabricated to continue producing material culture specific to Black Tai groups. However, rituals and festivals encouraged textile production in that certain rituals could not be done without certain articles of dress, or pieces of textiles, etcetera.

Black Tai beliefs undoubtedly manifest Black Tai ethnic and cultural identity. The material manifestation in dress and textiles serve as a powerful medium of communication between this world and the world beyond (see Gittinger 1992, Howard and Howard and others

¹¹ See Sumitr Pitiphat (1980) for a comprehensive summary of the religious beliefs of the Tai Dam.

2002). Thus the paramount role textiles and dress play in this ‘communication’ highlights the importance of maintaining and sustaining traditional cultural values, traditions, and material culture. The interdependence of beliefs and material culture reinforces cultural and ethnic continuity with the Black Tai.

Black Tai Beliefs: *Khwan*

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad believe the human body is composed of 32 *khwan* that are located in 32 important organs of the body¹². The *khwan* are said to be very sensitive beings and may leave the body for any given reason, therefore, Black Tai when sick perform a ceremony to recall the person’s missing *khwan* (the ceremony is called *suu khwan* which literally means to buy back your spirit). In the latter case, a shaman (*mo khwan*) is required to call back the *khwan* to the body (Figure 4.2).

As illustrated in Figure 4.2, this particular *mo khwan* is calling back the *khwan* of a sick woman that lives in the home behind her. The *mo khwan* holds a burning stick, which wards off evil spirits and over her shoulder the traditional *pha ko ma* cloth encloses the traditional shirt of the ill woman, her husband, and the researcher, who was a welcomed addition as a family member. The cloth also holds a chicken prepared in a ritualistic manner for this particular ceremony. The net is used to catch the spirit when it arrives. A *mo* or *mo mod* is required if the sickness is more serious or life threatening.

When a person dies it is believed that the person’s *khwan* will go to a heavenly place called *Muang Fa*. The *khwan* that leave the body must be sent to different places by the *mo* (priest) or *mo mod* (shaman). According to Black Tai mythology, the final place of a *khwan* is in *Muang Fa* and is directly related to their original standing (socioeconomic status) in the world; for example, those of high standing in society are sent to Luen Phan, a heavenly like place for Black Tai. *Lam Loi*, a lesser heavenly place, is reserved for commoners and those who are lost with no direction. The latter or those lost with no direction, include individuals who have no material representation of being Black Tai and therefore cannot be recognized by his or her ancestors. Notable, *Luen Phan* and *Lam Loi* are both located in *Muang Fa* for the Tai Dam have no depiction of purgatory or hell in their beliefs.

¹² Other Tai Dam groups in Vietnam believe that the body is comprised of 80 *khwan* (Personal Conversation with Dr. Cam Troung)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, textiles play a vital role in the process from earth to their heavenly realm. Gittinger, Chungyampin, and Saiyalard (1997: 98) say that textiles act as a “passport” to heaven to the Tai. A number of informants in Ban Napanad commented on the importance of textiles and dress that were paramount to the transmission of the body from earth to heaven. In fact, one informant remarked, and as mentioned by a number of other Black Tai: “Without the proper ethnic dress, an individual would be lost. The ancestors of the ‘gatekeeper’ to *Muang Fa* would not know where he or she belonged. The person would not be reunited with their ancestors because no one would know they were Black Tai” (Interviewee 03, September 20, 2004, Ban Napanad).

Black Tai Beliefs: Phi Ban

Today, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad continue to worship the spirits of the village (*phi ban*). The *phi ban* is located in the village, approximately 1 km from the centre (Figure 4.3). Here, small houses are erected in order of importance: the largest spirit house is reserved for *Chao Hua Khao*, literally translated as the leader with the white hair. He was the leader of Muang Thanh, a city located in Sipsong Chau Tai. The second spirit house is reserved for *Chao Anu Vientiane*, who was the son of *Chao Hua Khao*. The third is reserved for the *Chao Phu Kaew* (spirit of the local mountain) and the fourth for the *Chao Phu Huad* (spirit of the local mountain peak). The latter two are local spirits, the former being the spirit of the mountain and the latter being the spirit of the mountain peak.

The village spirit (*phi ban*) continues to hold grave importance to the villagers of Ban Napanad. The *phi ban* is offered flowers twice a month, 15th and 30th of the month, and once every year in November after the harvest during a large ceremony called *Lieng Ban*, when offerings are given to the village spirits in gratitude for the healthy harvest, or if in the case of misfortune, they ask for forgiveness and better fortune the following year. In this ceremony the spirit priest (*mo phi*) is the primary practitioner. However, the *mo mod* is also involved.

Textiles play a fundamental role in the *Lieng Ban*. Each offering to their village spirits (*phi ban*) includes a *sua hi*, *sin nang han*, *pha piu bok*, *kangkaen*, unprocessed cotton (for making yarn for weaving), and traditional Black Tai silver jewelry, all which represent Black Tai ethnic and cultural identity (Figure 4.4).

Black Tai informants stressed the importance of the Black Tai textiles in this ceremony stating that the spirits cannot and will not recognize them as Black Tai, if not for the textiles; thus a medium of communication between this world and the world beyond.

Black Tai Beliefs: *Phi Ruen*

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad also worship their ancestor spirits (*ruen*). When a parent or child passes away a part of his *khwan*, three days after burial, is invited to stay in the house of the deceased relatives. Thereafter, a small shrine (*kalohong*) is erected for the spirit (Figure 4.5).

The ancestor spirit receives a large feast every year (the *Pae Daong* festival) (Figure 4.6), which is thought to bring good fortune and health for the family. If the family fails to celebrate the *Pae Daong* festival illness upon that specific household may be one of the consequences. In fact, some people do not have *kalohong*. However, in the event of sickness, the ill person may visit the *mo mod* and here the *mo mod* recognizes that the reason for the sickness is because the ancestors want to stay with this person. If so, a ceremony to erect a *kalohong* is immediately commenced. In the past, all those who attended the festivities were obliged to wear traditional Black Tai dress, but today the constraints are less enforced and only close family and relatives must wear Black Tai dress, for the spirits will not join them in the festivities if they do not recognize who is offering the feast. Again, Black Tai dress is vital in this festival.

The ancestor spirit is also offered food, water, and other items every five to ten days during the *Pae Daong* ceremony. Every five days is reserved for the noble class, and ten days is the usual practice for the commoners. Traditionally, this practice was only reserved for men but today both men and women share the obligation. For men, they must wear traditional dress and drape a *pha ko ma* over their shoulder as a sign of respect. Black Tai women must wear a traditional Black Tai skirt, for example, *sin taeng moo*, or *sin nang han* and the traditional women's blouse (*sua dam*). This tradition is strictly enforced and practiced among the villagers whom have *kalahong* or an altar in their home.

The worshipping of ancestor spirits is fundamental to the cultural system of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. The Black Tai religious system is intricately tied in with their ethnic and socio-cultural society, as the ethnographic research illustrated.

Dress and other textile forms serve a crucial role in ethnic and cultural identity maintenance. Dress, textiles, religious beliefs, social structure systems, customs, ceremonies, and rituals all tie together to foster an ethnic and cultural identity that in turn establishes social

networks, and social customs that require specific textiles to emphasize their ethnicity; which is paramount in many of the rituals and customs.

Their belief system is dependent on textile production, and/or more importantly dress...of particular interest to visiting scholars or researchers is to examine the influence of Thai Buddhism on the rather homogenous animist group. There are two Buddhist temples on the village site, and a number of individuals practice Buddhism, however, animism is their dominant belief system, which plays a fundamental role in the maintenance and the continued production of certain textile forms to carry on specific cultural traditions in Black Tai society. If one were to remove their animistic beliefs then one can assume that more textile forms would disappear from their repertoire. Religious beliefs and textiles share a symbiotic relationship in the Black Tai socio-cultural system.

Religious Practitioners

As mentioned previously, the Black Tai employ both *mo* (priests) and *mod* (shamans) as their religious practitioners. The *mo* and *mo mod* are considered the wisest and most knowledgeable of the Black Tai beliefs and practices and therefore perform the most sacred ceremonies. The religious practitioners must live a virtuous life and cannot practice immoral behaviour. The position of *mo* is hereditary and can only be male, however, the position of *mo mod* is available for both males (*mod lao*) and females (*mod ying*). However, it is not anyone who can practice in these positions, it is only those who possess the *mod* spirit, who can do this.

Mod can be of both sexes, but a *mod* must come from the *mod* lineage where his father or relative has been a *mod*. Once the candidate is recognized to possess the *mod* spirit he or she must be trained in astrology, performing ceremonies, curing the sick, and contacting different spirits by the senior *mod* (Pitipat 1981). In fact, in Ban Napanad today, the senior *mod* recently passed away in 1999 without passing on his knowledge. Consequently a number of ceremonies cannot be properly orchestrated. The *mo mod*, for example is the only one who possesses the ability to invite the spirits of *Muang Fa* to stay with him during the time of the *Sae Paeng* festival. The festival was celebrated every three years for three days and three nights. Today, however, the festival is mimicked for tourists and visitors. Similarly, without a *mo mod*, cremation is not available for the villagers of Ban Napanad.

Those individuals who possess the ability to speak with the spirits are highly regarded in Black Tai society. Their social status is high, yet surprisingly their economic status was not

analogous. *Mo* and *mo mod* are strictly guided by rules and regulations with every respect of their lives and therefore a number of individuals despite their inheritance of the position decline to practice. In fact, in Ban Napanad, one such case is apparent, as one individual remarked:

We have a powerful *mo mod* but him and his wife think it is better for them not to practice. They have all the tools [i.e. traditional dress, jewelry, tattoos, family genealogy, etc] but think the moral lifestyle is too hard. It is believed that if a religious practitioner were to breach his moral standing, the spirits would punish this individual harshly often taking their life as you can see to be a *mo mod*; one must dedicate their lives fully. (Interviewee 20, February 10, 2005, Ban Napanad)

It is also believed that if you are *mo* or *mo mod* you should not leave the village and obtain a livelihood from outside sources. It is believed that if one is *mo* or *mo mod* you should be living in the village at all times, therefore, their low economic status is evident, however, their social standing is very high and revered. All Black Tai villagers in Ban Napanad would first consult a religious practitioner (i.e., *mo*, *mo mod*, *mo phi*, *mo mon*, *mo khwan*) before a doctor in the nearby cities in regards to sickness or other problems. The traditional mindset of the villagers persists despite the modern alternatives available in the nearby towns such as Chiang Khan and Muang Loei.

Mo dress has in recent years been less constrained by tradition. The traditional *mo* dress consists of a black shirt (*sua dam*), and black trousers, with a *pha ko ma* draped over the shoulder. Today, however, most *mo* wear Western style pants and shirt but maintain and preserve the tradition of the *pha ko ma* (see Figure 4.7). The *pha ko ma* is worn as a sign of respect to those living and dead.

Mo mod dress is theatrical—much like their histrionic behaviour. *Mo mod* dress consists shirt or *sua wad* a decorative sash, or *pha phook aew*, which is of red and white and indigo and yellow in colour. The sash crosses at the chest of the wearer; this crossing is referred to *pha being*. The *mo mod* also has a very decorative head-cloth or *pha pan hua*, which maintains the same colour sequence as the sash (Figure 4.8). A Black Tai informant mentioned the dress of the *mo mod* really only consists of the sash and head-cloth for in hot weather the *mo mod* often removes his shirt and performs the ceremony bare-chested with only the sash across his chest. The Black Tai of Ban Napanad have no surviving examples of this dress for it was buried at the time of the funeral of *mo mod* in 2002. The *mo* and *mo mod* costumes are exemplar of the mixing of ethnic identities with religious identities.

Album Four

Figure 4.2: A women *mo khwan* performing a ritual to call back the spirit of an elderly Black Tai women, referred to as *suu khwan*.



Figure 4.3: The *phi ban* or village spirit housing two local spirits and the other two connected to ancient times in the old Tai confederation Sip Song Chau Tai.



Figure 4.4: The photo depicts the offerings given to each village spirit during *Lieng Ban*, a festival celebrating the village spirit.



Figure 4.5: A traditional alter or *kalohong* erected in some Black Tai households.



Figure 4.6: The Pae Dang festival incorporates a very important offering to ancestral spirits or *phi ruen*. The photo depicts a Black Tai *mo phi* performing the prayer to village spirits.



Figure 4.7: A Black Tai *mo phi* or religious practitioner on his way to make a village offering to the *phi ban* or village spirit. The *mo* in this photo is wearing Western clothing, however, a *pha ko ma* remains very important component to his dress.



Figure 4.8: An example of traditional *mo mod* head-cloth. There were no surviving examples at the time of my research; however, a Black Tai woman reproduced an example for me.



CHAPTER 5: ETHNIC IDENTITY

The present chapter will examine in more detail the relationship between dress and ethnic identity in Ban Napanad. Tarlo's (1996) discussion of the importance of examining choice in relation to identity and dress is of particular relevance. As was discussed earlier, the people of Ban Napanad in general consider certain forms of dress as important symbols of their Black Tai identity. In this chapter I will look more closely at the choices of dress available to them and the choices that they make in what they wear, focusing on how such choices relate to questions of ethnic identity.

The Ethnic Environment

Loei Province is ethnically relatively homogenous in the sense that the vast majority of people living there are ethnically some kind of Tai. Further east in Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Sakon Nakhon, and Nakhon Phanom provinces there are several Mon-Khmer speaking groups that have been assimilated to varying degrees into the surrounding Tai culture, but such groups are not found as far west as Loei Province. There are also significant numbers of Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants living to the east. Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants are found in Loei Province as well, although there are relatively few Vietnamese in the province.

The early history and ethnicity of the inhabitants of Loei Province is not well known. During the period AD 650 to 1000 the Loei area lay just beyond the frontiers of the Mon Kingdom of Haripunjaya, which extended into nearby areas of Phitsanulok Province, and the Khmer kingdom of Chenla, which lay to the south. After AD 1000 the Khmer Empire extended its reach to the northern parts of what is now Northeastern Thailand. There was a Khmer centre known as *Sai Fong* near the site of present-day Nong Kai. Wyatt (1984: 25) makes the point, however, that this was a multiethnic empire and that the territory beyond the core area in particular was "inhabited by a substantial non-Khmer majority population." Thus, while there were at least some Khmer in the area, it is likely that the people living adjacent to the Mekong near *Sai Fong* were local Mon-Khmer speaking groups and/or perhaps Tai or Lao speaking groups. Following Chao Fa Ngum's founding of the Lan Xang empire between 1351 and 1353,

the northern part of Northeastern Thailand fell within Lao territory (see Wyatt 1984: 83) and the Lao became the predominant ethnic group in the region.

At present most people living in Northeastern Thailand are of Lao ancestry. To distinguish them from Lao in Laos, most of the Lao in Northeastern Thailand are referred to as Lao Isan. There are over 20 million of them. The Lao Isan category, however, is a rather heterogeneous one and there are a number of distinctive sub-groups. Thus, Brown (1994: 170) notes concerning these sub-groups “The main sub-group distinctions are between the Lao Wieng in the north, west and south-east of the region; the Lao Kao in the north and south-east; the Lao Pan in the centre.” The Lao Wieng are descendants of war prisoners who were brought to the northeast from Vientiane by the Siamese. There are also a large number of Phutai living in the northeast, whose language is close to Lao.

While many Lao Isan people today wear dress that has been influenced by Central Tai, there are distinctive local styles of dress. Howard (in press) notes “in general the textiles of the Lao in Northeastern Thailand are similar to those of the Lao from the Vientiane area in Laos,” but points to some differences, including four regional styles of Isan Laos dress. Of particular relevance to the present discussion is the northern Lao Isan style, which is “associated mainly with the Lao and Phuan in Nong Khai and Udon Thani provinces and the surrounding area. Howard (in press) describes the northern style as follows:

[It] includes blue and white weft ikat patterned cotton skirts similar to those from the Vientiane area. Bold white patterns are spread across the cloth. These include depictions of water dragons, trees and ferns, and various geometric shapes such as eight-pointed stars, rhombuses, and hooks. Versions of such skirts are also woven at present with cotton, silk, or synthetic threads using other, often brighter colours. There are also silk skirts with weft ikat patterns arranged in narrow weft directional stripes in the *mat mi kan* style. Older versions of these skirts usually are woven using dark colours. In general these skirts have fallen out of favour and are now generally only worn by older women, but even older women do not wear them much any more. Women in this area traditionally weave on a relatively narrow frame loom like the looms used in Laos. These skirts have both a waistband and a decorative hem-piece attached to the body. In addition to Lao (and some Mon-Khmer speaking groups), there are also Phuan living in this area. The Siamese moved them here after the fall of Vientiane and many of the weavers in this area are descendants of these Phuan.

Howard (in press) also refers to a Loei style: “Textiles woven for the local nobility is mainly what distinguishes the Loei style and the Southern style of Udon Ratchathani Province from those of the other two regions. These are textiles, commonly called *sin long*, that are woven with gold or silver thread (today metallic gold and silver looking threads are usually used) on a silk ground. The metallic threads are used to make supplementary weft patterns.” Such skirts,

being worn mainly by noble women, do not appear to have been of relevance to the dress of the Black Tai of Ban Napanad.

In addition to Lao Isan, Loei Province a distinct Lao sub-group known as Lao Ngaew also is found in Loei Province. Lao Ngaew people also live in Lopburi, Nakhon Sawan, Singburi, Saraburi, Chaiyaphun, and Phetchabun provinces. Schliesinger (2001: 46) estimates their total population to be between 20,000 and 30,000. Their ancestors came from the border area of Xiang Khoang and Hua Phan provinces in Laos, having fled from there in the latter part of the 19th century when the region was devastated by Chinese Haw bandits. Schliesinger (2001: 47) indicates that they now longer wear distinctive dress and “Young Lao Ngaew women like to dress in modern fashion,” many now preferring to wear trouser rather than tubeskirts. He (2001: 47) mentions “During festive events, Lao Ngaew women often wear festive costumes bought from other ethnic Tai groups in their neighborhood.”

The Tai Dan are yet another sub-group of Tai-speaking people living in Loei Province. Tai Dan live in Loei’s Dan Sai District and are also sometimes called Tai Loei. (Schliesinger 2001: 41-45) lumps them together with the Lao Lom of Phetchabun and Nong Khai provinces and estimates (2001: 41) their total population at about 25,000. These people appear to be Lue who moved across the Mekong River from Laos when the Siamese army destroyed Vientiane in 1828. While in the ancestors of the Tai Dan wore Lue style dress, as reported by Schliesinger (2001: 43), at present the women “wear either the ankle-long Thai *phaa sin* or the knee-length Lao Isan *phaa sin*.”

Ethnic Context of Ban Napanad

The population surrounding Ban Napanad is overwhelmingly not Black Tai. Ban Napanad itself has only about 365 people and I estimate that there are no more than 1,000 Black Tai living in all of Loei Province. Such a situation makes ethnic endogamy difficult, although going to Laos in search of a Black Tai marriage partner is an option. I witnessed two such cases in Ban Napanad in 2004. When I asked villagers in Ban Napanad about their preference to marry within their ethnic group or outside their ethnic group, the answers varied. An elderly man answered,

We always think that marrying other Black Tai people is the best. That is why most of us try to go to Laos to find brides. If not, we will ask the other villages in Thailand. We often try to have annual events at our villages to allow other Black Tai villagers to meet here in the hope to arrange some marriages. You know, this is one of the only ways we can

preserve our cultural heritage. But this is sometimes not possible. (Interviewee 101, April 04, 2005, Ban Napanad)

It is clear from the elder's words, as well as from interviews with others, that older people still have a keen interest in preserving their cultural heritage through endogamy. Others, however, disagree or diverge from this interest. Thus, one younger person told me,

At one time it was in the best interest for Black Tai to marry Black Tai, but today it is often better to find someone [i.e., a non-Black Tai] outside of your village. This way, you can build your [social] networks. Also, if you marry outside your village you can often make more money with your in-law's family. And, if you marry outside in other villages you have more choice. I know my family wishes I marry Black Tai but I am not interested in anyone here. (Interviewee 86, February 20, 2005, Ban Napanad)

The ethnic relations among Black Tai and between Black Tai and others are generally amicable. People from neighbouring villages often visit their friends in Ban Napanad and vice versa. There are a number of instances where relations with non-Black Tai from neighbouring villages have taken the form of marriage. During the time I spent in the village there were two such instances. The Black Tai women who married would then move to their husband's village. There are also economic relations with neighbouring non-Black Tai. Thus, a nearby village may produce certain household items that are not made in Ban Napanad, for example brooms, large blankets, jewelry, belts, etcetera. Most villages have local markets where they sell crops, eggs, meat, and other household items to fellow villagers as well as to people from surrounding communities, although there is an unspoken rule that the best is saved for those in one's own community. Also, all nearby villagers, especially those where marriage has built stronger networks, often lend a hand in time of need. I witnessed this especially at the time of rice harvesting that a number of Black Tai villagers who have married outside the village returned back to Ban Napanad during this time and also men and women both helped.

The situation in Ban Napanad in regard to government officials is especially interesting in ethnic terms. Village officials are predominantly outsiders. Therefore the relationship between them and the villagers is not simply hierarchical, but hierarchical with an ethnic flavour. In fact, elders in the community cannot even communicate very well with such officials because the native language of the elders is Black Tai and they speak Thai poorly. Therefore, the village headman tends to take care of matters involving outside officials. The village headman holds an important position in the village community, and the position is elected via a democratic vote. I was fortunate to have witnessed the event in Ban Napanad from the beginning to the end and I was amazed of the resemblance it had to a Western election process with all the political mishaps, scandal and promises; however on a much smaller scale. Outside officials such as the Chiang

Khan sub district officials are mostly not Black Tai. Furthermore, the current village headman is of Lao origin (he married a Black Tai woman); a village headman has to be at the very least married to a Black Tai, as was noted by a number of villagers.

The Black Tai of Laos are also of relevance to the present discussion since the people of Ban Napanad have been in contact with fellow Black Tai in Laos in recent years. Chazee (1999: 41) estimates that there are about 50,000 Black Tai in Laos, while Schliesinger (2003: 112) place their population at around 65,000. Although the Black Tai are especially numerous in northern Houaphan and eastern Phongsali provinces, many of them are widely scattered around northern Laos, with settlements being found near Northeastern Thailand in Vientiane and Sayaburi provinces. The closest village in Laos that is most visited is just across the border and takes one day from Ban Napanad.

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad maintain amicable relations with Black Tai living in Laos and Vietnam. In recent years, since travel restrictions to Laos have diminished, they have made visits to their ancestral home in Muang Phuan and to other Black Tai villages in Laos on an annual basis, although the village headman indicated that the trips sometimes had to be cancelled because of heightened security at the border. While the trip is made available to anyone wanting to make it, certain people go more often than others do. Thus, people associated with the cultural centre seem to always make the trip. The trip often allows for villagers to see relatives in Laos and to pass on pictures, videos, and other memorabilia to them. The trip also serves the purpose of allowing young people to meet potential spouses and for people to engage in other activities related to cultural preservation. A visit that took place while I was doing fieldwork included a valuable discussion concerning the training of a new *mo mod* in Ban Napanad and people also obtained material items associated with their Black Tai identity such as the butterfly clasps for women's blouses and silver buttons for men's shirts. During the visit people dance, drink alcohol, and eat food. The geographical proximity allows for these communities to remain in contact despite living in different countries. Vietnam is further away and more difficult and costly to reach, but the Black Tai of Ban Napanad did manage to send an elected representative to visit Black Tai living in the Dien Bien Phu region in 2001. Again, this was an attempt to regain valuable cultural heritage that had been lost over the years. The villagers remarked that they learned how to perform more dances (the video recorded such events), produce different textile motifs (they returned home with examples for the skilled weavers in Ban Napanad), and gain more knowledge of traditional Black Tai culture. The trip was only made once, but people told me that they hoped that such a trip could be made again in the future.

Thai Government Policies

During the period of Lao control over northern Northeastern Thailand the area that is now Loei Province formed something of a frontier zone between the rival kingdoms of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Thus, Wyatt (1984: 122-123) mentions that in 1707 the border between the two kingdoms was established at Chiang Khan. Chaophraya Chakri established Siamese suzerainty over Vientiane in 1778 and later as king of Siam he received tribute from the *muang* in the area. The Loei region remained marginal to the main historical events in the region during the 19th century, such as the sacking of Vientiane by the Siamese under Rama III, although it sometimes served as a refuge for those seeking to avoid the troubles associated with this period in neighbouring Laos. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn steps were taken to strengthen Siam's control over the northeast (see Brown 1994: 173). Wyatt (1984: 201) comments in the late 1880s "the first commissioners were appointed in the northeast, residing in Luang Prabang, Nong Khai (opposite old Vientiane), and Ubon Ratchathani" in order "to promulgate laws and organize revenue collection." Wyatt (1984: 201) characterizes Prince Prachak, the commissioner in Nong Khai, as being a very effective administrator who "began to organize a territorial army to check the chaos of central Laos and defend against the rising military threat of France in the region." As French control over what had been regions under Siamese suzerainty in Laos increased, the Siamese responded by "strengthening the powers of the royal commissioners at Nong Khai, Ubon, and Chamassak and readying the region's military defenses" (Wyatt 1984: 203). At the same time, much of local administration remained in local hands with local Lao nobles retaining a degree (albeit diminishing) of autonomy. While Loei remained on the margins, it was being drawn more firmly within the administrative sphere of Siam.

The administrative reforms of Chulalongkorn may have increased Siamese control over the northeast, but they had little direct effect on ethnic identities in the region. This situation was to begin to change significantly during the reign of King Vajiravudh, who promoted the notion of Siam being a Thai nation and enacted the country's first Nationality Law in 1912 (Laungaramsri 2003: 161, Wyatt 1984: 229). While Vajiravudh's ethno-nationalist sentiments were directed specifically at the Chinese, they set a precedent that would eventually lead to efforts to suppress cultural differences throughout the state. Wyatt (1984: 237) characterizes the situation for the Laos of the northeast during the inter-war years thus: "The Lao of the northeast and north were now virtually leaderless, caught up in the process of rapid integration into a not completely foreign 'Thai-land'." Thus, while discriminatory policies might be focused on the Chinese,

assimilation and acculturation of the Lao into the national culture was taking place because of their greater integration into the state through its institutions and through economic market forces.

From the 1950s until the early 1980s the policies of the Thai government had a much more direct impact on ethnicity and ethnic identity in Northeastern Thailand, including Loei Province. Two particularly significant developments took place at this time. First, within the context of Communist activities within areas inhabited by ethnic minorities and active recruitment of minority peoples to the communist insurgency, as noted by Laungaramsri (2003: 162), status as an ethnic minority came to be identified as a potential problem that was linked to concerns for national security. Second, and leading on from this concern with national security, was the appearance of a definition of ethnicity within the context of the Thai nation in which status as an ethnic minority was reserved for non-Tai peoples, while Tai-speaking groups became regional variants of the Thai people rather than distinct ethnic groups (see Keyes 1997). Accordingly, the Lao Isan and other Tai-speaking groups in Northeastern Thailand were all jumbled together as Isan Thai or Thai Isan—i.e., Thai people living in the northeast—or even the more generic *khon Isan* (Isan people). Laungaramsri (2003: 162) refers to statements by the deputy secretary of the National Security Council at this time saying the Tai-speaking people in the northeast “are actually Thai because they have never caused any problems to the government administration. The regional distinctiveness of the ‘Lao’ is not regarded as a problem by the state, because ‘the more development expands [in the northeast region], the greater the chance that these people will become real Thais’. Brown (1994: 184) comments “From the mid-1960s onwards Northeasterners were subject to anti-Communist propaganda campaigns which stressed loyalty to the King and the unity of the Thai people. Apart from any beneficial economic effects of the associated rural development programmes, the political effect was to increase the scope of central control over village affairs.”

While the label Thai Isan served to lump together all Tai-speaking peoples in Northeastern Thailand, the label *khon Isan* was even more inclusive and incorporated the various Mon-Khmer-speaking groups into the region into a single region-based identity that also included the Tai-speaking groups. In fact, this regionalism reflected to some extent emerging sentiments among at least certain segments of the population in the northeast, including poorer people and communists who were responding to the impoverishment of the region by Central Thais (see Brown 1994: 173-184) and disgruntled regional elites. In his fieldwork conducted in the region in the 1960s, Keyes (1967: 3) found: “Within recent years the term Isan, already used by people of other regions to indicate the people of the Northeast, has been taken up by a growing segment of

the northeastern population to indicate their own ethnic identity. Northerners have begun to speak of themselves as being *khon isan* or *phu isan* ('Isan people), as using *phasa isan* (lit. Isan language) and as living in *phak isan* ('Isan region')." Writing on the same theme, Luther (1978-79: 54) comments that the people of the northeast "have a specific regional identity that is neither Lao nor Thai but genuinely 'Northeastern' (*khon pakh isan*), and they say that they have other customs, eat other food (sticky rice, in Thai *khao niuw*), wear different clothes, and speak another language compared to the people in Bangkok and the central plains of Thailand."

While the people of Ban Napanad have managed to retain a distinct identity as Black Tai, economic changes and government policies since the 1950s have had a significant impact in reducing the cultural distinctiveness of the people of Ban Napanad from their neighbours and posed a threat to the maintenance of their distinct identity as Black Tai. From the 1950s onwards Thai government officials began to visit isolated areas of Thailand and offered the villagers aid, in the form of health services, seeds and fertilizer, wells and other means of obtaining water, electricity, roads, and other forms of infrastructure. The people of Ban Napanad were propositioned with the promise of land and government funding in return for demonstration of their loyalty to the Kingdom of Thailand by their adoption of elements of Thai culture, use of the Thai language, and adoption of Thai surnames.

Villagers were also required to have personal Identification cards and house registration documents. Only those in possession of such documents could deal with government officials. In order to register with the Thai government, villagers were also strongly encouraged to change their surnames to ones that were more readily identifiable as Thai. Several informants in Ban Napanad recounted this happening. An elderly, 98 year old man, an original migrant of Laos, recalls his crossing the Mekong River:

We were forced out of home in Laos because of problems with the government. We decided to make our way to Thailand. We carried our belongings and children on our back across the Mekong. At that time, the Mekong was not so deep. When we arrived in Thailand we were told that we can become Thai citizens and have all the rights Thai people have. However, we did not want that, we wanted to be Black Tai. They began to force their way of life on us, they wanted us to speak the Thai language, and listen to their rules and laws. Eventually, we had no choice because the school system was in the Thai language and to live here we needed to change. I remember the time when my parents were talking about having to change their Black Tai surnames to Thai ones so that they would not be harassed. (Interviewee 62, December 22, 2004, Ban Napanad)

Today all people in the village have Thai surnames. The thirty original migrants who migrated to Thailand consisted of approximately six married couples with their children. The original migrants included those from the kinship clans of Sing Lo Cam, Sing Lo Noi, Sing Wee,

Sing Gwang, Sing Ga, and Sing Rung. These names are no longer used. For example, according to an elderly female informant, those Black Tai from the Sing Lo Cam clan adopted the surname Pai Soon and those of the Sing Lo Noi clan adopted Thai surnames such as Oryner and Tunha.

Schools played an especially important role in the acculturation process. Instruction in the village's elementary school and secondary schools (the nearest one is located a short walking distance just beyond the village) is exclusively in Central Tai (Standard Thai). However, the elementary school located in Ban Napanad in recent years has made it mandatory for all the children to dress in Black Tai ethnic dress each Thursday (See Figure 5.1 and 5.2).

Rather than attending the secondary school near the village students may also attend a secondary school in Chiang Khan District, which requires a 15 to 20 minute bus trip. Surprisingly, this school was the one of choice among the Black Tai youth. When asked why the common answer given by young people was:

If we continue to stay in Ban Napanad we will only know Black Tai. We want to know and interact with Thai people. We do not want to leave behind our Black Tai identity, but we must to live in Thailand. We are Thai first and Black Tai second. (Interviewee 68, December 25, 2005, Ban Napanad)

Chiang Khan Secondary School's instruction is exclusively in Central Tai (Standard Thai). The curriculum actively promotes nationalism and identification with national Thai culture. Thai culture and society are explicitly encouraged as illustrated with the Thai national anthem being listened to and sung each morning and afternoon. All national and Buddhist holidays are dutifully followed. Thai history as taught in the school largely ignores the role of ethnic minorities. In particular the secondary school's curriculum offers little with respect to Black Tai culture despite their important presence in Thai history.

As a result of such educational policies, today younger people in Ban Napanad speak Central Thai as their first language and identify more with being Thai than Black Tai. As one Black Tai youth stated:

We simply study here and then once our studies are complete we will leave the village to get better jobs. Ban Napanad offers no future. We do not want to be farmers like our fathers. We want to live and work in Thai society, to be Thai. (Interviewee 98, March 08, 2005, Ban Napanad)

This perspective was evident throughout a number of interviews with Black Tai youth living in Ban Napanad and commuting to the nearby secondary school in Chiang Khan District.

Theravada Buddhism is the state religion of Thailand and in the 1960s the government began a program of sending Buddhist missionaries to some minority groups as part of their efforts

to promote national loyalty among minority peoples. Generally the government did not deem such initiatives as being necessary among Tai-speaking minorities who were being incorporated into the all-encompassing Thai ethnic category since they were already Buddhists. As has already been discussed, however, unlike other Tai-speaking minority groups in Thailand, the Black Tai of Ban Napanad are animists. In an effort to promote Buddhism among the villagers two Buddhist temples were erected at each end of the village. The Thai government built these temples to promote Theravada Buddhism in the village in yet another active assimilative act. At the time of my fieldwork many people in Ban Napanad visited the temples and took part in temple activities. Most villagers in Ban Napanad attend Buddhist ceremonies held in the temples. A number of the local villagers indicated to me that although they are Buddhist, they retain many animist beliefs. In fact, adherence to animism remains strong among the villagers. When I asked about this, a large number stated that animism (*sosayna phram*) is very similar to Buddhism (*sosayna puut*) and therefore it was okay to follow both religions. Animism still is a major principle of social organizations and social control in the Black Tai community, and is expressed in a hierarchy of religious practitioners. It is worth noting, than when asked about other religions they said that to adopt Christianity or other religions was definitely not acceptable.

Black Tai Ethnic Identity and Dress

In this section I will examine the choices that people make in deciding what to wear in different circumstances and how this relates to ethnic identity. Essentially, people in Ban Napanad choose between wearing of generic Western-style dress, national Thai-style dress, regional Isan style dress, or distinctive Black Tai dress. The villagers of Ban Napanad alternate among these styles of dress depending on the specific circumstance.

Most villagers in Ban Napanad have adopted Western-style dress for their daily attire. In fact, when the villagers venture out into the nearby cities, such as Chiang Khan or Muang Loei it is very rare to see them in traditional attire unless it is for a cultural event. The above is overwhelmingly true for Black Tai men, but for women the situation is somewhat more complicated. More often than not elderly women seem to continue to wear variations of traditional Black Tai skirts. It is still common to see elderly Black Tai women wearing *sing teng moo* skirts (though with a Western-style blouse) even when visiting Muang Loei. Younger women are more likely to wear some form of regional Isan-style dress for daily attire. The cloth for their skirts is often bought from the market rather than having been made by themselves or within the village. Thus, they can be said to have adopted rather generic Isan dress. They will still put on

Black Tai-style clothing for special events instead of Isan-style dress. Interestingly, national Thai-style dress is the least worn among the Black Tai villagers. Some weaving groups in Loei Province are now producing what is now virtually a generic style of hand-woven cloth for this style of dress, but it does not seem to be popular with women in Ban Napanad.

Although generic Western and Isan-styles of dress are becoming increasingly popular in Ban Napanad, in the event of ceremonies, festivals, or rituals traditional Black Tai dress is considered fundamental for both men and women and there is little deviation from this norm on these occasions. It was clearly expressed to me by many villagers that if one did not meet these criteria of membership for the ethnic on these particular occasions then one is deemed indifferent about the group. One example that highlights the importance of ethnic dress in traditional Black Tai culture is the *kalohong* or the worshipping of their ancestor spirits. It was firmly stated to me that when one deals with matters of the *kalohong* or spirit house both Black Tai men and women must adhere to certain traditional practices. For example, for men they must always drape a *pha ko ma* over their shoulder as a sign of respect. Similarly, a woman must wear a traditional Black Tai skirt when in the vicinity of the spirit house that is located and erected in a specific location in all Ban Napanad houses. The excerpt below from an interview explains the significance of such cultural practices:

When you are dealing with ancestors it is very important to respect them. Traditionally, men were the only ones the erected *kalohong*, however today with our society the men are often away working so the women have also begun to make ancestral offerings. Black Tai people take this very seriously. A man must always drape a *pha ko ma* over his shoulder as a sign of respect and so that our ancestors can identify him as Black Tai. I [the informant was female] have to wear a traditional skirt whenever I make an offering. If we do not follow this customs we can suffer from grave illness. Some people are often very sick and it is because they did not invite their ancestors to stay with them. Therefore, we will have a ritual to invite them and erect a new *kalohong*. Those with a *kalohong* are more traditional Black Tai because they are following our cultural heritage. (Interviewee 15, September 26, 2004, Ban Napanad) (see, for example, Figure 4.5)

The material culture, specifically ethnic dress of the Black Tai, is so intrinsically related to these complex ritual idioms that they have developed a symbiotic relationship with one another; not only does ethnic dress perpetuate cultural practices and traditions, but also these cultural practices perpetuate the production of traditional dress and textiles. Ethnic dress, as highlighted throughout the thesis, serves a vital role in the perpetuation of particular cultural practices and traditions. Moreover, ethnic identity establishes and perpetuates social and group cohesiveness among the villagers of Ban Napanad. The community that has erected *kalohong* in the village is a close-knit group whose members are predominantly from *Mu Sii* hamlet and are

the members of the cultural centre that are actively promoting the revival of Black Tai culture among the villagers and outsiders alike.

The villagers in Ban Napanad have also adopted particular forms of dress that they consider traditional Black Tai dress that they wear on a daily basis in the village. In Chapter three I describe these clothes as “Type II Traditional Black Tai Skirts”. It seems the influences of Lao culture specific to this region of Thailand has incorporated these particular types of skirts into the repertoire of traditional types of skirts for the villagers of Ban Napanad. These particular cloths have been produced among the villages of Ban Napanad since the time they can remember and therefore are considered traditional among the villagers. The skirts are more generic types of Lao skirts that are like those woven in the Vientiane area and northern part of Northeastern Thailand. The *sin mi* and the *sin mi mú* (*moo* in Thai) are examples of such skirts that are often worn on a daily basis more than traditional types of skirts such as the *sin teng mo*, which was a typical everyday style of tubeskirt worn by Black Tai women of Ban Napanad previously.

In the past the *sin nang han* was reserved for women of the noble class. However, as is the case with many Tai-speaking groups in Lao today, villagers of Ban Napanad now may wear this type of skirt without such restrictions. Despite the disappearance of normative restrictions of wearing the *sin nang han*, few women are able to weave the cloth for this type of skirt today and only a few women also can afford to wear one. The *sin teng mo* and *sin nang han* are worn mainly by those who are more affluent and consciously wish to preserve traditional Black Tai culture.

It is very important to note that Black Tai ethnic dress is worn daily only by a particular group of individuals in Ban Napanad village. The other villagers seem to have adopted generic Western-style dress and/or Isan-style of dress for daily purposes. This particular group, approximately comprised of 10 individuals, can be distinguished from the others as having a strong desire to maintain Black Tai ethnic identity. They are closely connected with the cultural centre and actively promote cultural heritage. As one such villager remarked,

If I do not wear Black Tai dress then who will? I am member of the cultural centre and hold an important position within my community. I want to promote Black ethnic identity. It is also a way of life for many villagers to make money from *farang* [tourists]. (Interviewee 20, October 20, 2005, Ban Napanad)

In addition to these few women, other villages, despite their daily deviation from wearing traditional types of Black Tai dress, continue to follow cultural traditions and practices at least in some contexts. In particular, they continue to wear traditional Black Tai dress when taking part in ceremonies, festivals, rituals, and for a variety of other cultural activities. Therefore the situation

in the village is complex and requires a deeper understanding of the village social structure. At first appearance, one may contend that the dress of the villagers has been assimilated into Thai society. However, upon closer examination one uncovers the complexity of the situation. The villagers undoubtedly maintain their ethnic and cultural identity within the parameters of the greater Thai society and most people in the community continue to greatly value traditional Black Tai dress and to see it as an important cultural symbol even if it is one that manifest it self much in the form of daily attire any longer.

The men of Ban Napanad are less restricted by tradition when considering ethnic dress. Most men have adopted either generic Western-style dress or generic Isan or Lao-style clothing (consisting of a dark blue shirt and baggy trousers) for daily wear both inside and outside the village. As one villager remarked: “Lao clothing is the best. It is best suited for my way of life. Black Tai dress is so heavy and not good for farming.” When I asked him about Western-style of dress, he said: “*Farang* [foreign] clothing is too expensive to use for farming and its too heavy also. I prefer my clothing [i.e., Lao style clothing]” (Interviewee 88, February 23, 2005, Ban Napanad). Such views do not carry over to when a traditional event or ceremony is celebrated in the village. Most men still possess a traditional Black Tai shirt (*sua wad*) to wear on special occasions, although it tends to be worn in combination in combined with Western-style trousers and accessories. Most men also still possess all of the important textile forms that are significant for rituals. Thus, while traditional forms of dress have largely vanished as everyday attire, such dress continues to be worn or used in settings that are considered to be of vital importance to Black Tai culture and identity.

The Black Tai people in general are widely viewed as an ethnic group that has sought to preserve its culture, while at the same time adapting to the modern world. This characterization certainly seems true in regard to the Black Tai of Ban Napanad. The majority of the people in this village remain keen on the preservation of their ethnic identity and continues to make a fervent effort to promote and continue the traditions and customs of Black Tai culture. Despite acculturation in many aspects of their lives, the villagers have created a functioning Black Tai cultural centre, sought to revive lost arts and customs, and have continued to produce important items of the repertoire of Black Tai material culture, with an emphasis on ethnic dress. Modernization in the Black Tai village has constrained and at the same time contributed to a distinct ethnic identity as the people of Ban Napanad have sought consciously to maintain distinctive aspects of their culture that they consider to be important in the modern world. Despite alternative types of dress being readily available and having many positive connotations in terms

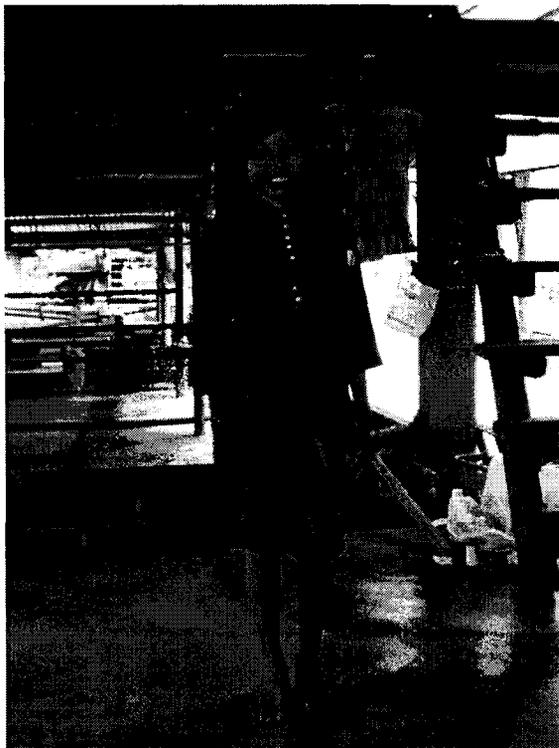
of its suitability to the modern lifestyle and identification with the culturally and economically dominant group, the villagers of Ban Napanad continue to produce and wear traditional Black Tai dress as testament to their persistence as a people with distinct ethnic identity.

Album Five

Figure 5.1: The local elementary school located in Ban Napanad, hamlet four.



Figure 5.2: A Black Tai girl preparing to leave for school. Each Thursday all students are required to wear Black Tai traditional dress.



CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS

We are the original Tai people. Once we had our own country [in reference to the old Sipsong Chau Tai federation] and it was lost through war and invasions. But we are a proud peoples and the one thing that the politically advantaged cannot take from us is our ethnic identity. We will exist forever. (Interviewee 08, September 24, 2004, Ban Napanad)

The thesis of the present study is that Black Tai material culture, specifically through dress and textiles, plays a central role in the maintenance and perpetuation of their ethnic identity. Black Tai dress and textiles serve as not only markers of Black Tai ethnic identity, but also play an active role and influence the continuance of the cultural system that generates this identity. However, Black Tai dress and identity do not exist in isolation and are innately tied to a broader political, social, and cultural environment that interact to influence the demarcation and maintenance of Black Tai ethnic boundaries. As Sams (1987: 291) has argued in his study of Lao Song Dam in Thailand, “ethnicity originates and endures as a cognitive construct of local and economic relationships, expressed through cultural media, shaping and shaped by changes in the social and material environment.” In regard to the link between dress and ethnicity, as Hamilton and Hamilton (1989) note, “dress serves as a powerful influence on the socialization of individuals and the continuance of a cultural system.”

Numerous authors have commented on the strength of cultural tradition among the Black Tai in a variety of settings (e.g., Gittinger 1998, Howard and Howard 2002, Sams 1987, Schliesinger 2000). The testimony of Black Tai elders in Ban Napanad indicates how important they view preserving cultural traditions and practices. Cultural preservation is manifest socially in marriage preferences. Older Black Tai discourage marrying non-Black Tai and tend to view marriages among Black Tai as the only proper unions. As was discussed in Chapter 5, young Black Tai men from Ban Napanad commonly travel across the border to Laos to meet their future brides in nearby Black Tai villages. The villages surrounding Ban Napanad in Chiang Khan district have been largely assimilated into the dominant Thai society and a distinct ethnic identity is not expressed among the inhabitants of these villages. This leads one to ask, as I did, what makes the Black Tai people of Ban Napanad different from their neighbours? Why do these

Black Tai maintain their ethnicity while the others choose to shed it? In addition, what factors or variables allow for such ethnic minorities to resist assimilation and/or acculturation to the dominant Thai society? These particular questions were fundamental to the present study and served as guides to my ethnographic research.

The thesis was divided into chapters covering specific themes that include history, economics, religious beliefs and practices, dress and textiles, and ethnic identity. Despite the separation of the material into distinct chapters it is important to keep in mind that the data contained in these chapters is closely interrelated. It is the interaction and persistence of this socio-cultural system that allows for Black Tai to continue and persist as a distinct ethnic group in Thailand. For example, dress and textiles share a symbiotic relationship with rituals, traditions, religious beliefs and essentially all are inter related in Black Tai social structure. In essence, with the absence of a textile form a closely related ritual may cease to be practiced or followed. Moreover, as was given as an example in the textile chapter, with the passing away of religious practitioners the villagers of Ban Napanad stopped producing certain textiles; this underscores the fundamental relationship these particular cultural forms maintain.

In recent years, however, external pressures undermining Black Tai culture and promoting assimilation have increased to an unprecedented extent. Such changes have had a profound impact on weaving and dress in Ban Napanad. Nevertheless, traditional and tradition-based textiles continue to be produced in the community and still play an important cultural role. Dress and other textile forms continue to be a vital vehicle in the transmission of cultural heritage among the Black Tai peoples. Furthermore, dress serves to unite and demarcate ethnic boundaries that “are asymmetrical power-based relationships between structurally dissimilar groups (Comaroff 1987, cited in Lynch 1999: 9). Thus, “dress serves as a powerful influence on the socialization of individuals and the continuance of a cultural system” (Hamilton and Hamilton 1989), attesting to the importance of such textile forms to the villagers’ socio-cultural and economic social system. Modernization has had a profound impact on Black Tai social life and, on the whole, is seen in a positive light by the people of Ban Napanad. The ethnographic findings reveal, however, that despite rapid modernization many people in Ban Napanad continue to value the preservation of cultural traditions and knowledge.

Modernization and the Black Tai

The relationship between modernization and economic development on the one hand and cultural preservation on the other hand is a complex one. Modernization and economic

development have improved the lives of the villagers in many ways while also contributing to the decline of traditional culture. Infrastructural, educational, and other improvements in village life have accelerated acculturative influences and, consequently, the younger generation seems to have lost most notions of their cultural traditions and practices while those of the older generation strive to preserve them. The village elders recognize the perplexing dilemma posed by the desire for a better life in terms of economic development and education while seeking to preserve a cultural heritage of which they are proud. They have sought to link the preservation of their cultural heritage to economic development in the form of seeking to gain income from tourism for example.

A cultural centre was built in Ban Napanad in 1996 in order to promote and preserve Black Tai culture and ethnic identity. The four founders of the cultural centre saw it primarily as a means of promoting the revival of lost or endangered cultural traditions by teaching members of the younger generation their cultural heritage. This heritage included such things as teaching young people to make traditional tools, plait baskets, weave traditional textiles, and to speak and write the Black Tai language. Furthermore, cultural and ethnic identity is seen as enhancing relations among villagers, to which seems the case as observed by the researcher.

It has not been necessary to completely abandon traditional patterns to meet new market demands. A number of informants remarked that while traditional Black Tai textiles were often relatively plain, by simply applying vibrant colours (such as red, yellow, and purple) to a number of traditional designs and increasing the amount of space devoted to such patterns the textiles would sell more quickly. Tourists from other Asian countries, for example, were recognized as loving the bright and colourful textiles. Therefore, the use of bright and cheap Chinese aniline dyes became very popular among the Black Tai weavers since their natural dyes could not achieve the vibrancy of these aniline dyes. In addition, many from the domestic Thai market, such as university professors, other Black Tai people, and visitors from nearby areas, were seen often to prefer the more traditional textile forms rather than the innovative ones.

Thus, despite these changes, many aspects of the art and weaving techniques involved in textile production were preserved and ultimately many cultural practices and traditions persist in the village community and the Black Tai of Ban Napanad continue to weave traditional and tradition-based textiles. The people of Ban Napanad have also continued to use traditional textiles on a variety of occasions. Traditional clothing is worn not only for community events, but also for cultural performances that are staged for tourists. In this way tourism has both created a market for new styles of textiles and also helped to preserve traditional forms of weaving and dress and

helped to ensure many traditional practices and customs to be passed onto the youth and to diminish the threat that such cultural traditions will be lost.

Dress and textiles occupy a crucial role in the cultural systems of the Black Tai, specifically in the perpetuation of a distinct ethnic identity and the continuation of rituals, beliefs and traditions. Moreover, the contemporary role of dress and textiles is paramount in this effect. Black Tai of Ban Napanad continue to maintain their culture and identity as they see themselves as a distinct group in Thailand as supported by their ethno political history, social systems, and cultural systems.

The dichotomy that exists between the old people and young in Ban Napanad is perhaps the most daunting of the factors that determines their future existence as a distinct ethnic group. Nonetheless, the older villagers are continuously initiating projects, such as tool making, textile weaving cooperatives, and the cultural centre in the hope of generating interests among the younger Black Tai; and the contemporary situation among the villagers of Ban Napanad holds promise. During the time I spent in the village I recognized that some of the attitudes among the young people had changed. They began to recognize the importance of being proud of their identity and the importance of maintaining their ethnic identity; especially, as a number of villagers remarked, since a foreigner had travelled so far to conduct research among them. While many of the young villagers valued their identity and were proud of being Black Tai, they often remarked to me that more opportunity was available to them if they shed their ethnicity in the “real” world beyond the village. Essentially, they adopted a dual identity. Such a situation allows for cultural continuity at least within the village community, while at the same time allowing the people from Ban Napanad to take advantages of opportunities available to them in the world beyond the village. However, there is no doubt that the perceived relative superiority of the encompassing Thai identity means that considerable effort will continue to be required to keep Black Tai cultural traditions alive.

The Black Tai of Ban Napanad have succeeded in preserving their traditional culture to a remarkable degree. Their success has depended on the maintenance of a cultural system that includes material culture, religious beliefs and practices, and a socio-political system. This complex system of shared beliefs, practices, and products has served to preserve their distinct identity as Black Tai within Thailand. In particular, as has been demonstrated, dress and textiles have played an especially important role in the cultural traditions of the people of Ban Napanad and in the perpetuation of their ethnic identity as Black Tai within Thai society.

APPENDIX: BLACK TAI ALPHABET

Consonants

high ʷ ɖ ɓ ɔ ɕ ɗ ɛ ʎ ɠ ɣ ɗ ɓ ʷ ɣ ɰ ɣ ɓ ɗ ɓ

low ʋ ɣ ɣ ʷ ʋ ʋ ɓ ɗ ɓ ɣ ʋ ʋ ʋ ʋ ʋ ɣ ɣ ɓ ɓ ʋ ɓ

Vowel Diacritics

ˊ ˋ ˌ ˍ ˎ ˏ ː ˑ ˒

˓ ˔ ˕ ˖ ˗ ˘ ˙ ˚

Tone Indications	(no mark)	ˊ	ˋ
low consonants	tone 1	tone 2	tone 3
high consonants	tone 4	tone 5	tone 6

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