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Dress of the Lolo, Pathen, Hmong and Yao of Northern Vietnam in 2005-2006: Reflections of Cultural Continuity and Change

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Figure 1. *Members of several ethnic groups come together at this local market. The ancestry of these individuals is recognizable by their dress. At the far right and far left, the women in the pleated skirts and decorative tops are Hmong. The women in the middle with the big braids are Hanhi. The tall red turban defines the wearer as a woman in a Yao subgroup. (Harrigan, 2005).*

Ethnic Dress: Reflecting Ancestral Roots

Unknown to the vast majority of the world, many people in northern Vietnam continue to wear a distinctive costume that speaks of their ties to a unique ancestral past, ancient beliefs, and time-honored cultural traditions. While ninety per cent of Vietnam's population of 84 million is from the majority group known as Viet Kinh, Vietnam is in actuality a fascinating composite of fifty-four ethnic groups. Approximately thirty of the minority groups live in northern Vietnam. Varying in size from two hundred to half a million, these groups are minute in comparison to the Viet Kinh population, yet the rich cultural diversity in this region continues to be expressed in a multitude of distinctive group costumes that are worn daily. (Fig. 1) This surprising divergence from the advanced technology and globalization of the 21st century is a vivid contrast to the homogenous modern, western-style clothing or the adapted national costumes that is sweeping across many parts of the world.

Who Are These People?

This paper is based on field studies conducted in 1999, 2005, 2006, and 2007 in remote areas of the northernmost provinces of Vietnam--Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Lai Chau**,** and Tuyen Quan. Most of these regions lie along the borderline of northern Vietnam and southwest China. Some remain restricted to outsiders, requiring special entry permits. A general overview of the

ethnic groups in northern Vietnam will be followed by a discussion of my field experiences with the Lolo, Hmong, and Yao.[1]

Protected from the outside world by rugged mountains that are accessible only by a few mountain passes and fast flowing rivers, much of northern Vietnam has been isolated from outside influences for centuries. Many continue an agrarian existence and ancient traditions while wearing a dress that clearly defines their ethnic identity and expresses their clan connection. Coexisting harmoniously with other groups in the area, these people are technically citizens of Vietnam. However, very few can speak Vietnamese; most speak only their group language. Living along borderlines that have shifted back and forth through the centuries, defined by politics beyond their control, these ethnic minorities consider themselves, first and foremost, members of their ethnic group.

The histories of these peoples are a mystery. Most do not have a written language. Without any direct information from members of these groups, the only knowledge regarding the history of these people that is accessible to outsiders is based on historic accounts--mostly surmised from records written by and about other larger, more powerful groups.[2] These few sources indicate that many of their ancestors migrated here over 200 years ago from areas that are part of present-day China and Laos. Realizing how little is known about these groups, I feel that it is imperative to record the stories of these remarkable people and add to the small body of knowledge that is available. Whenever possible, I utilize information given to me by members of these groups in order to include their voices in preserving an invaluable part of history that might otherwise be lost.

Figure 2. *Pathen woman taking supplementary weft weaving off traditional loom. This loom is unusual in that, by lifting its sides, the weaver can transport her loom as she sits inside it. (Harrigan, 2005).*

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[1] While there is an intriguing debate among scholars about the names of these groups, the constraints of this paper do not allow me to discuss this in detail. For the sake of simplicity, I am using the names commonly used in the English language texts. This is done apologetically, in recognition of the necessity for further inquiry with members of these groups regarding this matter.

[2] Jean Michaud, "The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview", *Ethnohistory* 47.2 (Spring 2000) 333-368, 2000.

Women's Dress vs. Men's Dress: Continuity and Change

Although we do not know what their ancestors wore centuries before, photos taken by French colonialists in northern Vietnam (Tonkin) dating back as far as 1906 reveal that women's dress among several groups has undergone surprisingly very little change. Details such as the colors, cut, length, and decorative motifs of many women's costumes appear identical to what was worn by their ancestors a century ago. Figure 2 is an example of the continuity of dress and traditional textile production processes. This Pathen woman continues to wear her ethnic costume daily. Expressing a unique sense of aesthetics, the Pathen woman's costume is a curious arrangement of patchwork that combines supplementary weft weaving with solid color fabric. Each dress, which consists of a top with a long tail in the back and a wrap skirt, is similar in its placement of the patchwork and embroidered motifs as well as in color tones and shape. A long strip of supplementary weft weaving (approximately 5" in width) is folded in half and wrapped into a headdress worn for special occasions. (See Bonifacy for photo of the strikingly similar dress worn by the Pathen in 1906.)[3]

Men's costume, on the other hand, has changed noticeably. Reflecting the desire to navigate easily within a modern world, men's dress is adopting modern influences. More likely to work outside the home, men often don modern clothing that identifies them as someone who is confident and capable of dealing with the outside world. Women, as culture bearers, continue to wear their group dress. However, Vietnamese anthropologist Dang Thi Hoa noted that the men still consider their women more beautiful in ethnic dress.[4] While outwardly moving into a new world, a desire to preserve traditional ways remains and is perpetuated in women's dress.

In general, minor influences of modernity such as western style shirts, t-shirts (often worn under more traditional garments), purchased cloths used as headscarves, plastic or other footwear, and inexpensive jewelry are becoming increasingly popular. However, the integrity of the ethnic costume of many of these groups remains. It is important to note that these new items, some of which can be perceived as western in style or origin, are not worn in attempt to emulate western ways. Many of these items sold in the local markets are made in China or Vietnam itself and express the acceptance of the modern ways that prevail in the larger towns and cities of Vietnam.

The Lolo

The Lolo are a small minority group of about 3,000 in Vietnam. During 2005 and. 2006, I met with members of two Lolo subgroups, the Flowery Lolo and the Black Lolo.[5]

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[3] M. Le Commandant Bonifacy, *Les Groupes Ethniques Du Bassin De La Riviere Claire*, Planche II, 2

[4] Dang Hoa, in discussion with the author, November 3, 2005

[5] For more information on the Lolo in Vietnam, refer to Michael Howard, *Textiles of the Highland Peoples of Northern Vietnam*, "Tibeto-Burman Textiles - Northern Lolo and Lolo", 75-82 and photos, 212-218

Figure 3 (left). *Flowery Lolo mother (right) in everyday dress adapted from the dress of White Hmong neighbors; daughter (left) in traditional ethnic dress worn for special occasions (Harrigan, 2005).*
Figure 4 (right). *Flowery Lolo headscarf (Harrigan, 2005.)*

The Flowery Lolo

The ethnic dress of the Flowery Lolo in Meo Vac is a dazzling display of colorful patchwork, appliqué, and embroidery combined with a stitch-resist headdress decorated with beads and pom-poms. In Figure 3, the woman on the right is dressed in an ethnic costume that is worn for festivals, ceremonies, and other special occasions. Her mother, standing next to her, is in her everyday dress, which includes a three-panel apron similar to those worn by their White Hmong neighbors. The mother made the beautifully hand-stitched patchwork garments while a specialist in the area dyed the headscarf (Fig. 4).

Figure 5 (left). *Four generations of a Black Lolo family in front of their house, (Harrigan 2006) .*
Figure 6 (right)*. Black Lolo woman sitting at market. Note panel of appliqué, patchwork, and embroidery on center back. (Harrigan, 2005).*

The Black Lolo

Living in small villages in a remote area of Caobang, the Black Lolo remain strongly connected to their ancestral past. Figure 5 shows four generations of a Black Lolo family outside their home. In the three villages I visited in 2006, all of the adult Black Lolo women continue to wear an ethnic dress very similar to what their ancestors wore over a century ago.[6] The Black Lolo woman's top is unusually short, exposing the midriff, although today a brightly colored coordinating t-shirt may be worn underneath. The top buttons in the front and has long sleeves with nine wide bands of colors at the bottom and four groups of stripes near the top. When asked about the stripes on the sleeves, a Black Lolo headman explained that their ancestors were from southern China and that the stripes symbolize Buddhist elements. In Figure 6, we see the back of the Black Lolo woman's top with its colorful panel of appliqué and embroidered squares. Also traditional to the Black Lolo woman's costume are wide legged black pants, a black or black and white turban-style headdress, and an additional cloth worn around the hips. Some of the women continue the ancient practice of blackening their teeth. Around their waists many of the women wear multicolor strings from which two stacks of old French coins and keys hang. Silver earrings in the shape of studs and strands of white beads and/or silver hoop necklaces are other common accessories.

Most Black Lolo men wear an indigo-blue or black costume that consists of a shirt with a stand-up collar and an asymmetrical opening, and wide-legged pants. Also traditional is a wrapped headdress, smaller in size than what is worn by the women. A few of the males incorporated elements of western-style dress, such as golf shirts underneath their traditional hand-woven indigo shirts or a modern baseball-style cap. Most of the school-aged kids also wore ethnic clothing similar to the adults' costume. Instead of wrapped headdresses, however, the younger children wore indigo-blue caps with embroidered star motifs and colorful cloth tassels streaming down from the center of the cap.

Cotton bolls, spinning wheels, warping reels, weaving looms, indigo plants and dye pots were visible evidence of the continuity of ancient textile traditions among the Black Lolo. Through two interpreters, a headman's wife explained to me their textile processes. Ingredients included in the dyeing process are a corn paste solution and soda ash. In a calendaring process that creates sheen on the cloth, a snail shell from a fresh water river is rubbed against the indigo-dyed cloth.

Black Lolo Memorial Rites

In one of the Black Lolo homes, I was to encounter a rare experience. The family was performing funeral rites for the woman of the house who had passed away about a month earlier. As I entered the house, I heard the resonance of metal drums. Once inside, I saw a memorial assemblage in one area. The garment and hat in the assemblage were to be worn by the daughter-in-law of the deceased and the bowl was to be carried by her as she performed in a funeral dance. This role was designated to the wife of the eldest son, suggesting the strict kinship rules of the Black Lolo. Below this paraphernalia was a basket that the deceased had used to carry her dowry and dowry gifts into the marriage.

In another area inside the house, two men were alternately beating on a pair of metal drums that

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[6] Eduard Diguet, *Les Montagnards du Tonkin,* 149, top photo; M. le Commandant Bonifacy, *Les Groupes Ethniques Du Bassin De La Riviere Claire (Haut Tonkin et Chine Meridionale,* Planche XX, top photo.

were hung from the ceiling with rope. Also referred to as "kettledrums", these instruments are an important element in the origin myth of the Black Lolo. The story is as follows:

> "Once upon a time, there was a big flood and water rose to the sky. God saved two siblings by putting them into two kettledrums - the sister into a big one, the younger brother into the smaller one. They were kept alive because the kettledrums floated. After the flood receded, the two stayed up in the mountains and eventually became husband and wife and formed a family. They were the ancestors of the Lolo people…. Through the sound of the kettledrum, the deceased's spirit would be able to find its way back to the place of the ancestors".[7]

The headman of the house related the following information. These rare ancestral drums are so valued that they are buried in a secret place and only taken out for use during funeral rites. The two drums--embodying the female and male principles of Yin and Yang--must face each other during their playing. They represent the sister and younger brother who married each other in the Black Lolo origin myth. The family was waiting for the deceased woman's youngest brother to arrive in order to perform funeral rites so that her name could be added to the family altar.

The Ha Giang Museum identifies the Lolo as one of the few groups that continue to use the ancient Dongson bronze drums. Speculation without expert analysis about whether these drums are actually one of those very ancient drums is pointless. The significance here is not whether these particular drums actually date back to the Dongson period, but that the origin story of the Black Lolo continues to be reenacted in this day and age. Ancestral lines play a key role in the culture and belief system of the Black Lolo. The headman of this family informed me that his ancestors had been living in the same place for seven generations, since 1730, and that the Lolo came from southern China 500 years ago to Ha Giang and Cao Bang. The use of their ancestral drums and the continuity of ethnic dress in the enactment of their funeral rites are ways that the Black Lolo preserve their ancestral history and beliefs.

The Yao

The Yao are one of the larger minority groups in Vietnam with a population of approximately half a million. The basis of most Yao women's dress is a straight, long indigo or black coat/dress with slits at the sides. This is usually tied or tucked up in a variety of ways. For most of the subgroups, this is worn with indigo trousers that may be long or short. The following elements of dress are common to many Yao: 1) Yarn made into a ruff, pom-poms, small tuffs of yarn, or fringe is placed down the center front of their garments. 2) Strands of alternating black and white beads are worn hanging from the front or back. 3) Silver pieces are attached to cloth and worn as a necklace underneath the dress or outside in the back. Silver pieces are also applied to cloth and incorporated into a headdress or belt. 4) Fine embroidery is applied to the pants and/or tops. 5) Distinctive and often elaborate headdress is worn. This may include an embroidered head cloth, clips and pins in the hair to mount the headdress, or a "celestial crown." Also notable is a human hair hat still worn by some of the Yao Lanten men. 6) Shaved heads and faces are distinctive characteristics of Yao women. Some shave their heads completely, while others shave only their foreheads. While expressing a wide variance, these similarities identify the wearer as a member of a subgroup within the larger group.[8]

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[7] Nguyen Van Huy, *The Cultural Mosaic of Ethnic Groups in Vietnam*, 2004, 119

[8] See Figs.1, 7, 8, 9 and 10 for Yao dress among several different subgroups.

Figure 7 (left) and Figure 8 (right). *Front and back view of Yao bride and friend-- at a wedding party-- wearing handcrafted traditional costumes. (Harrigan, 2006).*

Many Yao women living in the more remote, isolated areas continue to make and wear daily their ethnic dress. However, elements of modernity in dress are becoming more noticeable among some Yao living closer to the big towns. Some have adopted an almost completely modern costume, wearing their traditional costume only for special occasions. A curious example of the compromise of the once elaborate and cumbersome headdress worn by their ancestors is the recent conversion to a purchased terry cloth towel headdress by some Yao women in Caobang (Fig. 9).

Figure 9 (left)*. Yao mother and daughter in purchased towel headdresses. The mother continues to dress her young son in a handcrafted hat embellished with poms-poms, silver ornaments, etc.. Many of the ethnic groups in this area of the world believe that hats such as these will prevent jealous spirits from stealing their precious children.* [9]
Figure 10 (right). *Yao woman in ethnic dress handcrafted by herself and unique to her subgroup. Top is decorated with embroidery as well as supplementary weft-weave.*

In Tuyen Quan, four hours by car from Hanoi, the woman in Figure 10 was one of a group of

[9] Mary Connors, in discussion with author, Dec. 14, 2006

Yao women walking to work in their fields in their traditional dress. Their hand woven tops are decorated with both supplementary weft weave as well as embroidery. Living across the river (further from town), they make extra ethnic garments to sell to other group members who no longer make their own.

In an interview with an elderly Yao woman who lived closer to town and wore modern clothing, she revealed that her family no longer had weaving looms and that she accepted the new ways. However, she made a special point to clarify that they continue to make the traditional special clothing for their shamans, noting the importance of honoring and preserving their ancient spiritual beliefs. Figures 7 and 8 (above) show a young woman at her wedding in 2006. Despite changing lifestyles and traditions, young Yao women still handcraft and wear the traditional elaborately embroidered and embellished costumes for their weddings, expressing a respect for ancient beliefs and cultural practices.

Figure 11. *Traditional elements of Hmong women's dress--pleated skirts, apron, decorative sashes and necklines—identify these young women as Hmong. Their headdress incorporating multicolor strands of beads further identifies them as a specific Hmong subgroup. Perpetuating societal structure, ethnic dress is key in identifying possible mates at local markets such as this one. The ethnicity of the young man (far right) is also identifiable by his traditional Hmong outfit.*

The Hmong

An example of the creative and unique ways that cultures respond to change is exemplified in the changing dress of the Hmong. While the Hmong are one of the largest ethnic minority groups in Vietnam with a population of about half a million, they still represent only a tiny portion of Vietnam's population. Defining features of most Hmong women's costume are: a pleated skirt, an apron, numerous intricately embroidered sashes, and a distinctively decorated collar or neckline.[10] Some of the Hmong groups, such as the Black Hmong in Sapa, continue ancient

[10] See Figures 1 and 11 for examples of traditional Hmong dress.

textile techniques in producing their clothing. However, in recent years, an influx of clothing manufactured across the border in China, has flooded the local markets in northern Vietnam. Interestingly enough, a large number of garments are being mass-produced to appeal to specific Hmong groups. Instead of mimicking modern or western styles, these garments are replicas or "knock-offs" of the outfits of different Hmong subgroups. Hmong pleated skirts that are traditionally made in handspun and hand woven hemp are now produced in synthetic fabrics that easily retain pleats but lack the body and bounce of the hemp ones. Traditional motifs previously batiked, embroidered, and appliquéd by hand are printed in exactly the same size, colors, and placement as traditional skirts. Coordinating tops with matching bands for leggings are sold along with the skirts. In many instances, distinguishing details of the subgroups are reproduced with great exactitude. For example, Figure 12 shows a traditionally pointed collar in its new form: manufactured and stylized into an exaggerated, strikingly dramatic projectile shape.

Figure 12. *New Ethnic Dress of the Hmong continues to express cultural pride in the face of change. A new fashion spin-off on a traditional pointy collar: points exaggerated into a dramatic projectile shape (Harrigan, 2005).*

These imitations of their traditional dress have become very popular among various subgroups of Hmong women who enjoy the less time-consuming convenience of purchased clothing and the easy accessibility of new accoutrements. It is wonderful to watch these women walking with pride in their well-coordinated, colorful costumes that are uniquely made for them. The fun and excitement that these women have in being seen in their new glittery and shiny Hmong fashions

is apparent and extremely contagious.
Although modern clothing resembling western styles is readily available--and while a vast majority of the world has succumbed to wearing such dress, in the face of “progress” or modernity--the Hmong’s delightfully unique response is to continue to express their pride in their culture through wearing this new version of their ethnic dress. (Figure12) While the loss of handwork is regrettable, it is fascinating to consider how the cultural pride of a small minority group, of whom some members remain nomadic, is strong enough to command a whole industry of mass-produced ethnic costume being built around this pride. Despite its changes, this new Hmong ethnic dress continues to say, without a doubt, “I am proud to be Hmong.”

Conclusion

Ethnic dress expresses the personal identity of the wearer, not only to others but to oneself as well. For migrants whose familial homes may be far away or constantly changing, such clothing is comforting. While the politics of larger nations shift physical boundaries back and forth and redefine one's physical home, ethnic dress is an easily transportable cloak. When donned, these garments express one's sense of identity and connection to a familial home and ancestral roots.

In much of the world, “modern” western-style dress is becoming increasingly common, even in nations with histories of non-western traditions as well as in many isolated villages far from the reach of mass media. Yet a confluence of rare circumstances allow for a unique situation in northern Vietnam where ethnic dress continues to be worn. This is a remarkable phenomenon in our 21st century, where media espouses the status and value of "modern" western dress, western life styles, and western belief systems-- and rarely portrays the lives of small minority groups such as those in northern Vietnam. As we consider the role that textiles and dress plays in societies, we might ponder why ethnic dress (along with other cultural traditions) continues in some cultures and not in others. History, politics, and the tenacity and character of these people--as well as our own roles as citizens of the world--are factors worth contemplating.

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