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2004

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Torntore, Susan J., "Fashion, Tradition, and Cultural Authentication: Change in Hmong American Ethnic Textiles and Aesthetics at Hmong New Year" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 441.

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# **Fashion, Tradition, and Cultural Authentication: Change in Hmong American Ethnic Textiles and Aesthetics at Hmong New Year**

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## **Introduction**

Hmong Americans first came to the United States as Laotian refugees beginning in 1975. For over 4,000 years Hmong were an oppressed minority in China. In the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they migrated out of south and southwest China into the mountains of southeast Asia to Laos, where they lived as subsistence farmers in small hillside villages. When Laos collapsed in 1975, thousands of Hmong fled across the Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand, and many were then resettled in the United States. The Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota are today known as the “Hmong capital of the United States” (Kaufman 2004:89). Other large Hmong American communities are found in southern California, central Wisconsin, North Carolina, and the Pacific Northwest.

Their history has had an impact on their culture, on the Hmong as a people, and certainly on their textiles and dress. The Hmong have had to be very adaptable, and have said that theirs is a very democratic culture (Kaufman 2004). In a recent article about Hmong Americans in *Smithsonian* magazine, Toyo Biddle, formerly of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, states that “When they arrived here, the Hmong were the least westernized, most unprepared for life in the United States of all the Southeast Asian refugee groups. What they’ve achieved since then is really remarkable” (Kaufman 2004:86).

## **Traditional Hmong Ethnic Dress and Textiles**

My paper focuses on change in Hmong American ethnic dress worn by adolescents for Hmong New Year festivities.<sup>1</sup> Hmong ethnic dress, often called “traditional,” is historically based on birth and clan lineage, which included regional or sub-group divisions in language. In the context of Laos and Thailand, Hmong textiles were used to create distinctive ensembles worn as everyday dress and for ceremonial occasions. They were handwoven and embroidered by women, and specific patterns or color combinations in the cloth denoted membership in regional language sub-groups. The refugee generations of Hmong who came from Laos and Thailand in the 1970s and 1980s arrived with pre-existing, distinct ethnic identities and cultural practices. Making and wearing Hmong dress in the refugee generations were also based on regional language sub-group divisions.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a larger, long-term, and more general research study conducted with Joanne Eicher as principal investigator at the University of Minnesota, and incorporates work by Masami Suga in the late 1990s, and by Annette Lynch in the early 1990s. Eicher and I have together attended five Hmong New Year’s celebrations from 1998 to 2003, documenting changes in Hmong dress and textiles through observation and photographs taken by myself, and also by Masami Suga and Annette Lynch, at Hmong New Year celebrations in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The research in total covers a time frame of almost fifteen years.

In Laos and early in the United States, then, Hmong sub-groups were recognizable through variations in textiles. For example, the two main groups of Hmong were the Green Hmong and White Hmong. Distinctions between the two can still be seen today in patterning on textiles such as those used for women's skirts—Green Hmong have historically used indigo blue batik resist to create wide central bands of overall designs on their skirts, in combination with borders of multi-colored embroidery (Lynch 1995/1998). These textiles were tightly pleated and heavily embroidered to create a full skirt. The Green Hmong ensemble also featured a distinctive green-and-white checked woven cloth turban. White Hmong have used reverse appliqué to create borders and bands of designs on their predominantly white-colored skirts (Lynch 1995/1998). The embroidered panels on the back neckline of women's shirts are also different—both Green and White Hmong shirts are embellished with cross-stitch embroidery and reverse appliqué, but the Green Hmong women wear the panel face down (Lynch 1995/1998). Another major subgroup was the Striped Hmong, designated by stripes on their sleeves. Numerous other details distinguish each group, but these are some of the most visual.

In a village setting, textiles carried extensive information. They set up a relationship between the individuals wearing them and those viewing them. The textiles—the patterning, areas of pattern, colorations, and techniques—all constituted a set of internally understood visual cues and categories that led to appropriate social recognition and response on both parts. The differentiation of textile details and dress styles to identify Laotian Hmong subgroups highlights the cultural importance of dress to the Hmong as a visual expression of group identity (Lynch 1999; Lynch, Dentzler, and Eicher 1995).

### **The Hmong New Year Celebration**

Today Hmong textiles are used in the United States to express ethnic identity and display cultural heritage in a more general context, and, since the late 1980s, with a focus primarily on youth (Lynch 1999; Lynch, Detzner and Eicher 1996, 1995). Hmong teenagers wear ethnic dress in America as festive dress for special occasions such as weddings, funerals, and the Hmong New Year. The Hmong New Year celebration, held every year in St. Paul over the Thanksgiving weekend and in late December in Minneapolis, brings together old and new aspects of Hmong life in a juxtaposition of historical ritual and American popular culture in large public spaces like the St. Paul Civic Center and the Humphrey Sports Metrodome in Minneapolis.<sup>2</sup> The arena floor is dominated by young people engaged in the ball toss ritual. Middle-aged and elder Hmong Americans watch from the sidelines.

As a community celebration in Laos, Hmong New Year traditionally brought together potential mates from differing clans. As a traditional courtship ritual, the ball toss allows Hmong girls to display their personal, physical, and artistic attributes in order to find a husband. The Hmong New Year celebration stands out in Hmong culture as the stellar event to display Hmong ethnic identity in the course of the year. The family prepares and

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<sup>2</sup> The Twin Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota, are home to the world's largest urban population of Hmong (60,000 in the 2000 census). The Hmong New Year celebration in St. Paul is the largest regional Hmong event in the Midwest, drawing upwards of 50-70,000 visitors each day of the three-day venue. The Minneapolis venue is a newer event, since 2001, and is called "Hmong American New Year."

looks forward to dressing in their finest textiles and clothing to display the family's wealth and good fortune and a daughter's suitability for making a good marriage.

### **Change in Hmong Ethnic Dress and Textiles**

Significant changes in "traditional" Hmong textiles have occurred as successive generations of Hmong Americans incorporate design elements, aesthetic aspects, and materials from contemporary American fashions. We have found that these changes in Hmong textiles and dress parallel the faster pace of life and different resources in the U.S. (Suga and Eicher 1997; Eicher and Torntore 2001). The three regional dialect groups have been consolidated into one large group, and today, Hmong dress incorporates design aspects from the three groups and from contemporary American fashions. Teenage girls might own and wear examples or full ensembles of each category (Lynch 1995/1998). A Chinese Hmong sub-style from the mid-1990s, for example, shows a new Hmong American aesthetic utilizing new materials. This is what might be called a hybrid style based on the traditional indigenous textiles but increasingly decorated with materials available in the U.S. such as shiny lurex fabrics, beads, spangles, and lace.

In Laos, and early on in the U.S., ensembles for the family were woven, sewn, and embellished by hand, reflecting months of work each year by all of the women in the family (Suga 1992). Today that has changed. Our findings show that, on the average, the skills and knowledge about traditional sewing were minimal in young women compared to the technical levels achieved by their mothers' generation (Suga and Eicher 1997; Eicher and Torntore 2001). In the last five years it is possible to purchase ready-made textiles and create traditional-looking ensembles "off the rack" at Hmong New Year. These textiles are made of mass-produced, machine-embroidered, synthetic fabrics. These transformations in traditional Hmong textiles allow for an annual response to American fashion trends.

Both the Green and White Hmong skirt textiles are now mass-produced, but we have found that the colorful Green Hmong skirt is a predominant favorite at Hmong New Year. Instead of spending hours embroidering and making her pleated skirt, a young woman can purchase different styles of skirts made from fabric commercially printed with the little cross-stitches or batik pattern and then sewn into permanent pleats. In 2001, one of the vendors told us that the printed fabrics for the skirts are produced in California, and the stitching and pleating was done in the Twin Cities by Hmong women paid for piecework. Printed Green Hmong skirt fabric is also used to create a EuroAmerican-style ensemble for small Hmong girls that includes an elastic-waist skirt and buttoned vest.

Many textiles are sold as pre-formed dress items, such as "traditional" wrapped turbans produced as easy-to-wear hats. For example, in 1992, a White Hmong turban was customarily wrapped around the head with a 12-foot length of silk fabric (Lynch, Detzner and Eicher 1996). Today, these turbans can be purchased ready-made, and are often worn by women and young girls like a hat without reference to Hmong sub-styles. Textiles and ensembles no longer need to be made by hand; indeed, a young woman may purchase an entire ensemble ready-made. Hmong American teenagers are one of the major agents of transformation, adaptation and design change. Hmong American teenagers have complained to their mothers and grandmothers that the older-style layers of textiles are

heavy, bulky, and too time-consuming to make or wear in their rapid-paced, busy American lifestyle (Suga and Eicher 1997; Eicher and Torntore 2001). Newer styles incorporate fewer layers of cloth, lightweight machine-produced fabrics, plastic beads, more contemporary body-fitting styles, and fashionable American accessories.

Most recently, another agent of change has appeared—textile and apparel producers. Nothing is hand stitched, and fabrics are printed or made from commercially produced textiles such as flocked velvet. Each year, we have seen the number of vendors and the variety of products increase at Hmong New Year celebrations. One could purchase almost any style of Hmong dress as a complete ensemble or mix and match the parts, although our respondents have noted that “these garments are expensive.” We have seen skirts priced from \$45 to \$55, and the turbans priced between \$45 to \$75. One vendor in 2001 was selling a small girl’s complete ensemble with turban for \$150. Vendors at Hmong New Year have told us that new pieces such as these are all coming out of the apparel industry in China and Thailand, where they are completely made by machine. We first saw the machine-embroidered flocked black velvet ensembles for sale in 2000 and then in 2001 and 2002 saw many of them worn by young women at New Year.

Purchased garments like vests worn by young men provide an important alternative to dressing Hmong in a very busy, fast-paced world without having to make everything by hand. Hmong American boys or young men, for instance, can dress Hmong with minimal changes to their wardrobe, combining a white business shirt, tie, and black slacks with a purchased vest and sash. Or the vest and sash can be worn with a pair of Chinese style pants that are also available for purchase. In 2001, the men’s vests with coins were priced at \$250.

Young Hmong American business women can display their Hmong heritage and family wealth by purchasing more contemporary-styled jewelry made from coins and other elements found in traditional necklaces. One Hmong mother designed and made a one piece vest for her daughter to wear easily over her western-style business suit. These garments show many elements of the more traditional Hmong textiles and dress—the coins, the embroidered designs, the colors—and so are easily recognizable as Hmong to both insiders and outsiders. They show the high degree of innovative transformation that allows incorporation and integration within an American setting.

### **Hmong Ethnic Dress and the Concept of Cultural Authentication**

In examining the relationships of fashion and tradition to cultural authentication, I have been discussing how cultural authentication works as a strategy and process of adaptation<sup>3</sup> for the Hmong within their context of ceremonial life. Let me close with

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<sup>3</sup> This paper was part of the panel, “Cultural Authentication and Fashion in the Global Factory,” organized by Hazel Lutz. Cultural authentication as a process of adaptation relies on four broad categories of interrelated steps (Ereksomima and Eicher 1981; Eicher and Ereksomima 1995/1998). These four categories are selection, characterization, incorporation, and transformation (SCIT). First, the object or element is *selected* and used. Second, the borrowed object is *characterized* by naming it distinctively more different than its original name. Third, it is *incorporated* into the social life of the borrowing group in a way that gives it significance. Lastly, the object or item is *transformed* by applied design into an object unique from the original (Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz 2000), resulting in a distinctive and rich blend of both the new and the original.

some thoughts from the perspective of cultural authentication as a process for analysis and understanding change in another culture. From the researcher's perspective, this concept is very useful in trying to examine and understand change in context across time and space. We are able to use the concept here to fully analyze and understand the changes that have been introduced and that transform the style and aesthetic of Hmong American ethnic dress.

*Selection* is seen on several different levels: from the styles and elements of cultural subgroups, from American resources and availability, from youth connections and a changed aesthetic, from a technical repertoire related not only to hand production but now the global apparel industry. *Incorporation* is shown in the formation of a cohesive hybrid style from both Hmong and American resources, including American popular and youth cultures, and in the aesthetic elements of “flash” and “sparkle” that we see in newer styles of textiles and dress. The element of incorporation also highlights the extreme spirit of creativity and innovation in both Hmong youth and elders. The element of *transformation* is primary, and it highlights several new meanings in Hmong textiles—ethnic identity as Hmong American and at the same time Hmong pride of heritage. New traditions are highlighted as Hmong textiles become a response to fashion trends. Meanings are also transformed through a process of generational conflict—with losses and gains across the generations—in production processes as well as continued participation both in negotiating cultural identity and the process of Americanization. Functions of the textiles have certainly been transformed, from everyday to special occasion with youth as their focus. While we don't have the data to analyze the element of *characterization* yet, in the other three elements there is certainly much evidence to show the embeddedness of the changes within Hmong culture.

We have proposed that the process of cultural authentication is the future of ethnic dress in multi-cultural settings such as the United States (Torntore and Eicher 2002). Dress is used as an expression or demarcation of ethnicity, displaying the cultural heritage shared by a group with common national origin, ancestry, language, and customs. The concept of ethnic dress is a visible, tangible means of defining, constructing, and linking to tradition and identity. In many sociocultural settings, ethnic traditions of dress are not static and immutable symbols of times past, but dynamic, innovative, and selective expressions that incorporate change while conveying specific connections with the historic past. The American immigrant experience epitomizes a cultural context of interaction and rapid change. Within this setting, ethnic dress symbolizes group memberships and divisions and communicates ethnic identity to both insiders and outsiders. Overall, our research shows that Hmong dress and the rich Hmong textile tradition provide meaningful ties to the past and continue to have high emotional and symbolic meaning in Hmong American lives. In ethnic dress, the process of cultural authentication becomes an important means of negotiating and understanding identity and tradition within a context of fashion competition and cross-cultural exchange.

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