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***Neeg Tawg Rog (War-torn People):
Linguistic Consciousness in the Hmong diaspora***

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This paper examines changing Hmong textile narratives and form, in particular how *paj ntaub* (flower cloth) draws from a unique linguistic consciousness. Traditional *paj ntaub* garments were a primary indicator of Hmong identity and can be seen as an alternate text in a culture where there was not a universally understood writing system until the mid 20th century. The complex, layered geometric patterns in *paj ntaub* established ethnic group identification and offered passive resistance to state-making projects. Through stitching, Hmong women helped impede appropriation into national majority cultures in Asia with an active but informal strategic dimension. However, the politics of the Vietnam War brought radical change to textile production and aesthetic form, as Hmong were displaced into military settlements, fled into Thai refugee camps and immigrated to the United States or other countries involved in the war after 1975.

New textile forms developed in the refugee camps traveled back to villages in Laos: story cloths with escape narratives embroidered in pictorial representation, new scripts that were transcribed into reverse appliqué and embroidery, re-purposed *paj ntaub* made into Western garments. Mediators of the refugee experience, hybridized Hmong textiles serve as a liminal site for staging identity as a displaced people. Simultaneously, they uphold a specific textile tradition that conveys a compelling linguistic and narrative capacity as they morph into global and transnational commodities.



***Fig. 1 - White Hmong collar, purchased in Laos 2009, probably stitched before 1975.
Collection of the author. Photo credit: Geraldine Craig.***

For centuries, Hmong clothing in Asia was part of a rich cosmological and psycho-sensory world where material constructs (esp. textiles and jewelry) served the users in cultural, historical, and political ways. Meaning was constructed and expressed through textiles, direct social and aesthetic messages embedded in the visual and haptic language of cloth. Hmong textile history and culture was isolated from a

Western art history tradition of painting and sculpture and its core principles—especially the concept of fine art produced for visual contemplation only. Textiles were crafted for multiple functions with physical and cosmological use, as the complex needlework and batik patterns were abstract references to what Hmong experienced daily in the natural and spiritual world. However, as anthropologist Eric Cohen has noted, Hmong visual traditions don't include drawing or painting, nor is there a history of naturalistic representation in other forms.¹ Consequently there are few points of reference to mainstream art history canons and visual traditions in spite of the extraordinary aesthetic level of Hmong material culture. This becomes relevant in a globalized world, where Hmong textiles become part of a transnational flow of goods in far reaching diasporas.

While textile production in traditional Hmong village life was specific to local norms and extended family use, the Vietnam War altered life forever, especially in the Lao PDR after 1975. Hmong textiles have undergone dramatic transformations in the past fifty years, from the onset of pictorial representation first in Thai refugee camps, further changes through immigration overseas, and ultimately tourism back to Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and China. *Paj ntaub* clothing as cultural agent and artifact has different symbolic relevance in the diaspora. What is the role of Hmong textiles then, in projecting both assimilation and nostalgic longing for a homeland? How are perceptions of culture written on the body, especially in gender politics as realized through performances of young female bodies? How are choices in clothing used to negotiate the process of assimilating into bourgeois American culture?



Fig. 2 – unknown young woman and man, Hmong New Years festival, Roger Williams Park Museum, Providence, RI, mid 1980's. Photo credit: Geraldine Craig.

After immigration to the United States, Hmong were quickly burdened by stereotypes of anti-modernity and exoticism. The elaborate garments suggested the most visually identifiable presumptions of alterity, when portrayed in America media, or as Chia Youyee Vang has written in *Hmong America*, when seen by politicians at Hmong New Year festivals. Can young Hmong Americans participate in contemporary

¹ Erik Cohen, *The Commercialized Crafts of Thailand: Hill Tribes and Lowland Villages* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 129.

² James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale

life without marginalization while acknowledging the tremendous aesthetic traditions of *paj ntaub*? Will textiles and clothing continue the extraordinary development of a Hmong art form that empowers women in advancing both significant cultural upheaval and rooted Hmongness?

The historic significance of *paj ntaub* textiles in Hmong cultural life is revealed in rituals, protections, and legends connected to *paj ntaub*. A belief shared by one Hmong friend in Providence in the mid 1980's is that *paj ntaub*, especially baby carriers and hats, must be worn to disguise children as flowers so evil spirits will not take them from the earth. These tender performative acts where the proper textile is the key ingredient were important links between generations. Mothers and grandmothers stitched the elaborate baby carriers and hats for newborns. Young girls learned cultural values, history, and rituals through narratives they heard while sewing and learned through sewing.

Another oft-repeated legend that was shared with me is Hmong used to have a written language but when the Chinese made it illegal to speak or write Hmong, Hmong women hid the alphabet in embroidery and folds of the women's skirts. Complex layered patterns were created by embroidery, appliqué, reverse appliqué (and batik by Green Hmong) in skirts made of twenty feet or more of hemp cloth compressed into tiny pleats. While traditional designs are not an alphabet in any strict linguistic definition of text, the patterns operated as a shared visual language or alternate text that was understood by fellow Hmong and were important in the ritual functions of *paj ntaub*. Several scholars [Yang Dao (2009), Hillmer (2010), Duffy (2007), and Scott (2009)] have documented this legend along with other Hmong "lost writing" legends. Scott offers a succinct account of several legends.

The White Hmong's portfolio of literacy stories allows for both carelessness and treachery. In one account, the Hmong, in their flight from the Han, fell asleep and their bones ate up their texts, or they were mistakenly put in a stew and eaten. A second and more ominous account claims that the Han, in the course of driving the Hmong out of the valleys, took their texts and burned themall. The educated ones went to the mountains, and when they died, there was no more writing.”²



**Fig. 3 - Green Hmong skirt detail, hand woven hemp, indigo batik, appliqué and embroidery.
Collection of the author. Photo credit: Armon Means.**

² James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland*

Southeast Asia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 223.

A young woman's industriousness and textile skills were among the most highly regarded attributes of a partner when a young man was searching for his future wife. Extravagant clothing for a young woman's dowry or bride wealth were made by the woman and her mother, but considered the property of her parents who paid for the threads and cloth, and had allowed the young woman time away from childcare or agricultural work to produce the labor-intensive garments.³ Inventiveness in textile pattern design was also reported to be an indicator of future fertility in childbirth. A high regard for design innovation does not mean that patterns and design motifs weren't widely shared, and re-contextualized freely.

Anthropologists Macdowell and Dewhurst documented multiple nature references for design motif names in the Detroit area Hmong community in the mid 1980's. Relational context was important to meaning, and was not fixed. Collars worn on the back of the neck might signify a clan or village, but the same geometric forms used elsewhere could take on altered meaning. Attempts to attach single names to intricate designs, such as "elephant foot" or "worm tracks" have been unsuccessful. In her study of highland southeast Asian textiles, Monni Adams suggested that determining the framework for interpretation of design names within traditional textiles could be based on the visual relationship but also other qualities such as smell or touch, i.e. the prickly quality of leaves. All of these psycho-sensory effects played a role in design names. These broader qualities or effects became essential in determining not just design interpretations but how the designs related to the interests of maker/speaker, their identity and the uses of ritual.⁴

Because of the integration of ritual with visual symbolic design in traditional *paj ntaub*, I consider these textiles a spiritual and material narrative that defined Hmongness for performative/spiritual traditions as they gave tremendous visual pleasure. Hmong women were empowered players in the story of Hmong literacy acquisition (and/or loss) and in the role of *paj ntaub* as an alternate text. They understood the close and intimate stories that were propagated in stitched pattern but that allowed for shape shifting on several levels---identity formation and historical independence being primary. Protection and the intimacy of home was believed to be so tightly bound to *paj ntaub* that Ia Yang says: "But all soldiers' wives would not sew or cut fabric when the men were at the front. They believed it could harm their husbands because they would feel the connection to home."⁵ Kao Kalia Yang describes a memory from before the war in her memoir *The Latehomecomer*. She writes about her mother's wedding and the bride wealth in *paj ntaub* from her family as "...gifts her mother handing her were pieces of history. She also knew that a young woman needed to have something of her mother's if she hoped to find her way back to her mother once life ended."⁶ Textiles with specific patterns stitched by family were essential elements in burial rituals, to help "show the way" back to one's ancestors, described by several scholars [Cooper (2008), Mallinson, Donnelly, Hang (1996), Lewis and Lewis (1984), and Symonds (2004)].

Further research into this tightly bound cosmology led me to consider Hmong textiles as alternate text in a "post-literate" Hmong culture, an idea I think stunning in its implications. In *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, James C. Scott proposes that the many minority peoples in highland southeast Asia who live with unique identities independent of geo-political

³ Jane Mallinson, Nancy Donnelly, and Ly Hang, *Hmong Batik: A Textile Technique from Laos* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), 33.

⁴ Monni Adams, "Dress and Design in Highland Southeast Asia," *Textile Museum Journal IV* no. 1 (1974): 61-63.

⁵ Ia Moua Yang and Carolyn Shapiro, *The Pa Ndau of Ia Moua Yang: Keeping Alive the Treasure of the Hmong* (Detroit: Kenneth Yang and Ia Moua Yang, 2002).

⁶ Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 17.

borders may have had texts and writing and chose to leave it behind – being neither preliterate, illiterate or non-literate groups, but post-literate. He suggests there was an active strategic dimension to the abandonment of texts to frustrate the state-making projects that require record-keeping for taxes, conscription, property ownership, etc. just as the swiddening agricultural practices and dispersion impede appropriation into a national majority culture. He writes: “There is no place in any of the standard civilizational narratives for the loss or abandonment of literacy. The acquisition of literacy is envisaged as a one-way trip in just the same fashion as is the transition from shifting agriculture to wet-rice cultivation and from forest bands to villages, towns, and cities.”⁷ Scott suggests that fixed written documents – of politics, genealogies, histories – can be a trap or impediment as they impede physical mobility and are an instrument of nation building. Once texts were no longer useful in the social structure they were left behind.

Scott also suggests that the social incentives driving the acquisition and transmission of conventional literacy would have diminished precipitously with migration to the mountains, and that the terrain and shifting agricultural practices provided a useful friction for not creating books or written records. I propose the continuous narrative or text of the textile patterns was maintained because there were social incentives for production, but unlike most literary projects, it wasn’t connected to bureaucratic power or an elite. It was a text constructed for Hmong only, produced by women only and taught along with a complex set of values connected to the rituals of which *paj ntaub* was essential – birth, mating and courtship, death and proper burial, protection from evil spirits.



**Fig. 4 – Green Hmong baby carrier, purchased in Lao PDR, 2009. Collection of the author.
Photo credit: Geraldine Craig**

There was little friction to impede design innovation while the semi-nomadic lifestyle was the perfect foil to record keeping in cloth. Innovation or re-contextualizing patterns allowed for advantageous repositioning, since fixed accounts of history could be a trap or impediment depending on the political

⁷ Scott, 224.

climate and power structure. I think it relates directly to Scott's proposal that: "To refuse or to abandon writing and literacy is one strategy among many for remaining out of reach of the state. It might seem far more prudent to rely instead upon 'knowledge that resists bureaucratic codification.'" ⁸ I suggest that if one were to sufficiently alter conventional ideas of text, such as pattern stitched in cloth, this also keeps information coded from the authorities. Hmong were cognizant of the control that bureaucratic texts in the nation-states surrounding them had on their independence, or even their hold on life. Another belief is that all Hmong bring the "documents" they need with them when they enter this world, but if someone uses up their documents they become sick, and the shaman must approach a divine otherworldly to extend the documents or one's license on life. ⁹

Closer analysis of textile design components helps one comprehend the specificity of the narrative visual language. Hmong baby carriers (tied onto the back) are typical of what would be made by mothers or grandmothers to disguise young children, like the hats, from evil that might want to lure the soul of a child. The complex designs of mazes and intricate lines were believed to confuse and disorient the evil forest spirits, and send them in the wrong direction. Equally important were the borders in the ritual protective function of the baby carrier, as they were believed to contain or hold in the soul of a sleeping child close to the mother's body. Cooper describes a Hmong cosmology where everyone has many souls, but the playful "chicken soul" of children is the most likely to wander when the child is asleep, looking for other children's souls to play with. ¹⁰ The triangle shapes on borders, most commonly identified as mountains and teeth, also added to the protective function. Baby carriers are still stitched by hand and remain the only part of traditional Hmong costume still in everyday use in Australia, ¹¹ and probably in most diaspora Hmong communities this has come to pass.

As textile makers, women in rural villages exerted tremendous cultural agency through production of elaborate clothing that carried Hmong cultural history. *Paj ntaub* garments were a primary indicator of Hmong identity independent of geo-political borders, especially in highland southeast Asia where Hmong had migrated from China several centuries ago to be free of cultural subjugation by the Han. Hmong women helped impede appropriation into the powerful majority culture with an active but informal strategy not connected to formal political structures. Stitching Hmongness into cloth. However, production of *paj ntaub* radically altered with the Vietnam War, as Hmong were displaced from villages to military settlements, many underwent perilous flight into Thai refugee camps, then immigration, forming a diaspora that includes the largest populations in the US, France and Australia. ¹² The disruption of farming and cultural practices included dramatic shifts for textile producers from primarily clothing for the family to story cloth commodity and Westernized forms.

In the camps, Hmong textile producers were encouraged by relief workers to continue traditional designs in non-traditional forms—squares for coasters, wall hangings, pillows. (Cohen's research indicates that acculturated *paj ntaub* squares for sale to tourists had begun in Laos as early as the

⁸ Scott, 229.

⁹ Jan Ovesen, "The Hmong and Development in the Lao People's Democratic Republic," in *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, ed. Nicholas Tapp et al. (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2004), 463.

¹⁰ Robert Cooper, *The Hmong: A Guide to Traditional Life* (Lao People's Democratic Republic: Lao-Insight Books, 2008), 116.

¹¹ Maria Wronska-Friend, "Globalised Threads: Costumes of the Hmong Community in North Queensland," in *The Hmong of Australia: Culture and Diaspora*, ed. Nicholas Tapp and Gary Yia Lee (Canberra: The Australian National University E Press, 2010), 108-110.

¹² "Southeast Asian Americans State Populations 2010 U.S. Census."
<http://www.hmongstudies.org/SoutheastAsianAmericans2010Census.html>. (accessed June 10, 2012).

1950's.) Textiles as commodity were not traditional cultural texts, but they carried strong economic incentive. Sewing was one of the traditional skills Hmong refugees brought from Laos that offered potential financial gain in the camps and later in Western countries. Now sewing empowered women as wage earners for the family, as it altered the continuity of Hmong culture recorded in cloth. The overt commodification of *paj ntaub* changed even the producers. Hmong men who were bored began sewing or drawing images on to cloth as way to help provide for their families, discussed by Donnelly (1994) and Hillmer.



Fig. 5 – Untitled (Hmong refugee come to America), 1986-87, by Ia Yang. Collection of Kenneth Yang. Photo credit: Gloria Joseph, John Prusak, Kathryn Vander.

A revolutionary new Hmong textile form began in the Thai refugee camps—the pictorial story cloth, a quasi-naturalistic narrative embroidery of animals, clothed figures, and landscape. Cohen notes the dramatic emergence from a geometric, highly stylized ornamental art to one of pictorial representation has rarely, if ever, been documented in detail in anthropological literature.¹³ It rarely has been documented in art historical literature either. While it is commonly reported that relief workers suggested the “illustrated” cloths as another saleable commodity, it quickly became apparent that it was another way to tell the story of the Hmong, by Hmong. Migration, bucolic village life, and tragedies of war were all vital subjects in the new form of cultural text precipitated by secondary influences of war and resettlement.

Overt commodification, whether precipitated by tourist industry demand or the projected nostalgic longing of Hmong in the diasporas, contributed to the rapid decline of the most skilled, labor-intensive stitching, especially the reverse applique. However, my discovery of another writing system in reverse applique garments, seemingly begun in the camps, makes me incredibly excited! It has not been written about in any texts I have found. I located it at the Hmong Archives in St. Paul, a spiral bound book with a cover title Ban Vinai Refugee Camp 1991 Hmong Arts Costume Book. From the small amount of introductory text in English, the book appears to have been created by the Hmong Education Foundation on the occasion of the closure of Ban Vinai in 1992, with two copies given in thanks to volunteer agencies “These letters are Hmong’s former letters and were discovered in 1988 by Hmong write’s [sic].”

¹³ Cohen, 138.

on the dedication page. The name with the dedication is Xiong Nao Der, and his title Leader of MEF Ban Vinai, Thailand. The book is comprised primarily of single pages that demonstrate how to stitch the text or characters directly into cloth, and combine the elements into what I assume are messages. I have seen these kinds of purses for sale in the Hmongtown market in St. Paul, and recently learned Mr. Xiong is alive and living in the United States! Now I am trying to locate his contact information so that I can interview him and do more contextual scholarship for the next stage of this research into Hmong visual narratives.



Fig. 6 – scan of page 33, Ban Vinai Refugee Camp 1991 Hmong Arts Costume Book.

I think it is important to note that there have been at least 14 major attempts to develop a widely adopted writing system for Hmong language over the past 100 years, documented by missionary and linguist William Smalley.¹⁴ The most dramatic is a messianic script called *Pahawh*, created by a Hmong farmer who was previously unschooled and had never written in any language, and said the script was revealed to him in a dream in 1959. The farmer, Shong Lue Yang, was believed to be a messiah and the script became also known as *Chao Fa* writing. It's often connected to a Hmong insurgency effort in Laos. Conversely, some Hmong and officers connected to the U.S. military effort in Laos/Vietnam believed that *Pahawh* originated with communists to be used for their purposes. Government soldiers assassinated Shong Lue in 1971. Whatever political or spiritual position one accepts, the development of the script was a major intellectual feat, as it matches spoken Hmong perfectly in phonographic sounds, not words or syllables.

Before I close, I do want to bring the conversation into 2012, and stress that Hmong textiles are not part

¹⁴ William A. Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnua Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1990), 149.

of a fixed cultural tableau relegated to a land far away and a time long ago. The new generation is the nexus in a fascinating visual tradition, seen in the work of young Hmong American artists and fashion designers. I had the opportunity to attend the Center for Hmong Art and Talent Fresh Traditions Fashion show in Minneapolis in 2010. Hmong American designers are asked to incorporate the five traditional Hmong fabrics into a garment in their collection - just one example is Nonmala Xiong's "Lady in Red." Of course fashion is just another visual language, with its own codes of representation. Long-held representations of Orientalism perpetuated by fashion editors in the Asian chic super-trend of the mid 1990-2000's (Tu, 2011) didn't include *paj ntaub* designs, perhaps because Hmong culture was not widely known for most people outside of Asia before 1975. Consumer's immediate identification with an undifferentiated Asia was the goal. However, the representation of Asian chic in the fashion media—magazines, television, Internet—with written descriptions and photographic images shaped a context for clothing by American-born Hmong designers. Their preview of international fashion systems has its genesis in popular culture advertising vis-à-vis Barthes semiotic representations as much as it does watching their mother or grandmother stitch *paj ntaub*, but their generation's clothing is no less historically positioned. As recent university graduates, their futures are informed by formal education in fashion and art, in addition to family and community influences that give shape to a sense of Hmongness. All are part of the second generation whose lived experience will be very different from their mothers and grandmothers, with narratives that reveal contradictory values, opportunities, and interests. Without the refugee or immigrant label, they have freedom to build a Hmong American identity through more urban avenues than were possible for previous generations of Hmong women. Their elders' example of cultural agency, seen through production of labor-intensive textiles that had spiritual and material value, had different social relationships and incentives, but the continuation of sewing as a form of linguistic consciousness with contemporary relevance is being re-defined in American life.

So the meta-narrative of Hmong textiles continues to unfold, as it always has, in the empowered choices women make using textiles as an expressive medium. Without an ur text for Hmong culture, the historic narrative stitched in cloth was always a position shaped by fleet-footed adjustment to political environments. The social and cultural border crossings that need to be intelligible for Hmong or Hmong Americans relative to powerful neighbors were and are negotiated daily, and globalization offers ever more complex ways for Hmongness to be honored and contested. Identity is reassuring and constrictive in differing contexts. For Hmong American women, innovations of any text or textile form embodies political, cultural, historical, and gendered messages. Hmong women have always been empowered agents of cultural continuity and change, and economic, cultural and material conditions now makes international art and fashion viable choices. From any art history standard, the development of Hmong textile praxis in the last fifty years is quite extraordinary, with women at the center precipitating change. Hopefully that narrative is an inspiration to a new generation, both as makers and Hmong American women.

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