Identity of Karen Hill Tribes in Salaween River Basin:  
A Case Study of Karensigaw Hill Tribes of Mae Sarieng District, Maehongson Province.

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Abstract

This research aims to study, firstly, the Karen tribe’s, in the Salaween River basin area, identity; secondly, factors which influence the changes of the identity, and dimensions of the identity’s patterns. The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The research tools used were both structured and non-structured interviews, questionnaires and observation, and analytical qualitative data. Then the results were concluded and examined by the inductive construction with PAR (Participatory Action Research) technique. The experts and savants also used the EDFR (Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research) and the Qualitative Methodologies Research to analyze with the SPSS. The results are as follows:

1. The Karen tribe’s, in the Salaween River basin area, identity in language is influenced by the Tibetan-Burmese languages. Their original religions are Buddhism and Christianity, with religious and agricultural ceremonies. Their settlement and lifestyle depend on nature and natural resources: water, forests, mountains, and the Salaween River is the heart of their living.

2. Factors which have influenced the changes of the identity are as follows: economically, the lack of productive land has created various problems including debts, poverty and the spread of drugs, the inter-tribal marriage, and the modern consumerism. Environmentally, the lands are arrogated by the outsiders. Socially, the fading of the original belief and ceremonies, new social values among youth who lost their interest in carrying on old traditions, the changes in values and minds.

3. The identity’s patterns in the economical dimension are the growing of industrial crops, weaving fabric and wickerwork, and farming. Environmental dimension include natural ones such as forests, mountains, water and soil and also the manmade environment which are houses and work tools. The social dimension is the tradition and culture and also beliefs and both original and modern ceremonies.

4. The use of value in the Karen’s identity as a symbol used partly in fashion design, and the wickerwork design in the future is the way of using the identity lastingly.

Key word: Identity, Karen Hill Tribes, Salweeen River Basin, Symbol, Fashion
Introduction

Background and the significance of the problem

The Salaween River Basin covers the area from China down to Burma and Thailand. The area from Thailand and Burma is around 29,500 sq. kilometers. It is a big valley among high mountains and cover Maehongson, Chiang mai and Tak provinces. There are also many small rivers for example Pai, Sa-ngee, Maehongson, Muei Rivers that flow into the Salaween River. (The report on the environment quality situation in the Salaween River basin, 2551: 2.15)

This area is very fertile with natural resources: trees, wild and aquatic animals. There are at least 20 tribes who live along the Salaween Riverside for example Tai-Yai, Lahu, Lee-su, etc. (Montri Jantawong and Luntarima Longjaruen, 2550). Beside this, Sangkeet Jantanapo (2542) claimed that some Karen tribes also live along the Salaween River. The Karen tribe had emigrated across Thai border since 1888. (Hill Tribe Research Institute Academic Service Center, 1998) It is considered to be the biggest Karen community in 15 provinces which are Uthaitani, Kanchanaburi, Kamphengphet, Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Tak, Prachuapkhirikhan, Phetburi, Prae, Ratchburi, Lampang, Lamphun, Sukothai, Supanburi, and Mae hong son. (Tam Nieb Chum Chon, 1999:27) The Karen Tribe can be divided into 6 groups: 1. Sa-Ko Karen which Chiang Mai people refer to them, “Yang-Kao”. They call themselves, “ Pawa-Ker-Yor”. 2. Po Karen who call themselves, “Plong”. 3. Pa-O or “Tong-Su” in Burmese 4. Ba-Way or “Ka-Ya” in Burmese 5. Long Neck Karen or “Pa-Dong” in Northern Thai dialect and 6. Long Ear Karen or “Ka-Yor” in Northern Thai dialect (http://www.mhsdc.org/interest11.htm)

However, the anthropologist Gordon (1962:157) had explored the Karen population in Burma in 1931 and found approximately 500,000 of Sa-Ko Karen, 473,000 of Po Karen, and 223,000 of Tong-Su Karen. The Karens who live in Thailand were the ones who fled from Burma. Tadaw (1961:155) had explored in 1967 and found about 130,000 Karen people. After that Hinton (1969: 156) also explored again in 1970 and found 200,000 Karen people. The Karen in Maehong son province, according to the survey of Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Center in Mae hong son in 2005, was around 69,430. (http://www.mhsdc.org/interest21.htm) Beside this, there were about 5,503 Karen people who
had seek asylum from Burma and lived in Ban Mae La Luang camp and 6,644 in Ban Mae La Oon Camp, Sob Muei District, Maehongson province. (Thai Rath, January 24th, 2008)

Maehongson is a border town to Burma, therefore there is lot of trade in the area. The province is also very resourceful with natural resources. It is a great place for tourism. (The Thai-Burmese Border Economic Development Project in Maehong son, 2008) The Sa-Ko and Po Karen live all over the province. Nonetheless, the Karen tribe is the biggest tribe that shows a varying identity through arts, culture and lifestyle from other tribes. The Sa-Ko Karen lives in Mae Sa Rieng district the most. They have a gentle personality, and their community and culture outstandingly show their beliefs, philosophy, and values. Their lifestyle can clearly demonstrate their identity. (Paul and Elen Lewis, 1985) Nonetheless, identity is important for the tribes to present who they and their society are. Every tribe has created its identity together differently by using music, tales, houses, clothes, etc. Tribes who live along the same river join the same ceremonies. These identities are repeatedly produced and regenerated according to changes in both social relationship and way of thinking. Identity, therefore, is very significant as it shows the heart of its tribe and creates self-assurance. (Nattanai Prasannam, 2007)

There are tremendous changes socially and culturally nowadays. As a result, the identity of tribe is also changed. As the tribe accepts new culture into its community, it requires its members to adjust at different levels. This has created problems socially that have affected its identity. Jinda Jaruenkhun is a Sa-Ko Karen who leads the women’s group for the Karen Baptist Church in Thailand. Her job is to take care of Karen people in many provinces including Sa-Ko Karen in Mae Sa Rieng district, Maehongson province. She shared her opinion that the changes in lifestyle, culture and tradition, for example inter-tribal, non-tribal and inter-racial marriages, are tremendous. Even the modern tribal people refuse to wear the traditional tribal clothes because they do not want anyone to know who they are. They try to hide their identity. Young Karen now tend to come into the cities to work in mostly labor jobs such as waiters, staff in gas station, maids, etc. They abandon their original homes which creates problems such as exiled people and transnational labors among many hill tribes in Thailand.

These problems have occurred, not only Karen tribes in Maehongson, but in different tribes as well. As the study of Panadda Bunyasaranai (2003) has found that in the past years of rapid development, Aka hill tribes had encountered the loss of the tribe’s identity and...
culture. This happened as they were presented as dirty, backwards, and dangerous to the environment in different media.

Moreover, Onanong Saenyakhun (2005) studied the life experience of Lee-sau hill tribe as the society was changing. The results show that both children and youth did not know their tribal language and culture. The worship of ghosts was fading and the new generation started to become Buddhist, Christian and Muslim. They were not interested in carrying on their old tradition as well as the tribal clothes that show the original way of living. They were more interested in seeking and copying different identities which were not their own. Misunderstanding that new identity would upgrade their lives, the new generation of the tribe was not at all aware of the value of their true identity.

Henceforth, this issue is troublesome and needs to be resolved in such a way that the hill tribe will value, appreciate and take pride in their identity. In accordance with a command from Her Majesty the Queen Sirikit, the Karen Hill tribe’s identity and heritage should be preserved, restored and valued. Moreover, the identity’s value can also generate income to both the tribe and Thailand. As Pachima Thanasanti (2009) describes concerning the importance of the geographic indicators, that the use of local wisdom and cultural identity can be done through creative economic design for the creation of sustainable development in the future.

As a result, the research is interested in studying the identity of Karen Hill tribe in the Salaween River Basin, including factors that contribute to the changes in the identity, and the pattern of identity in different dimensions which can be used in the Creative Economy of the future. The research used PAR (Participatory Action Research), in order to get to know the target population, also set up the meeting stage. She also used EDFR (Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research): inviting experts and resource people to join the meetings. There were Focus groups who brainstormed in order to form patterns and find solution for the hill tribe to be able to reserve their identity lastingly according to the idea of sustainable development. This also goes along with the 10th National economic and social development plan (2007-2011) in its strategy that aims to create strong community and society.
Concept

There is much literature and research concerning the Karen tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin: Case Study of Sa-Ko Karen in Mae Sa Rieng District, Mae hong son province. Since the Karen tribe is one of the oldest tribes who live in Mae Sa Rieng District, a border to Burma with the Salaween River, they have their own identity from their history, habitation, environment, government, religion and belief, culture, relationship within the family and community. The fast change of the globalization has greatly affected the Karen’s identity. In order for the Karen hill tribe to maintain their identity, they must review their roles, lifestyle, livelihood, and the awareness of being a hill tribe. And this must be done along with the triumph to change in order to be a tribe who remain in their own identity with endurance.

This study focuses on studying the identity of Karen Hill tribe in the Salaween River Basin, also factors that contribute to the changes in the identity, and the form of identity in different dimensions which can be used in the Creative Economy in the future. The research used PAR (Participatory Action Research) in order to get to know the target population, also set up the meeting stage. She also used EDFR(Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research): inviting experts and resource people to join the meetings. There were Focus groups who brainstormed in order to form patterns and find solutions for the hill tribe to be able to preserve their identity lastingly according to the idea of sustainable development.

Objectives

1. To study the identity of Karen Hill tribe in the Salaween River Basin
2. To study factors that contribute to the changes in the identity
3. To study form of identity in different dimensions

Methods

This study of Karen Hill Tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin used the following methods:

1. Research design: The researcher used both Qualitative and Quantitative Research by doing the following steps:
1.1 The study and exploration of the Karen Tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin area

1.2 The study of all factors which affect the changes in the identity

1.3 The investigation for the form of identity in different dimensions

1.4 The use of PAR (Participatory Action Research)

1.5 The use of EDFR (Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research), inviting the experts and resource people to join the focus group and brainstorm for solutions.

1.6 The use of Sustainable Development Theory

2. Population and sample group

2.1 Population is consisted of some Sa-Ko Karen hill tribes who have knowledge about the Karen tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin, factors that affect the change of the identity, and seeking the form of identity in different dimensions leading to conservation and raising awareness in new generation of Karen hill tribes. The purposive selection method was used with the population who live in 7 sub-district and 7 villages in Mae Sa Rieng District, Maehongson – altogether 21 people.

2.2 Sample group is consisted of the experts and resource people who specialize in the Karen tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin, factors that affect the change of the identity, and seeking the form of identity in different dimensions leading to conservation and raising awareness in new generation of Karen hill tribes. The sample group in this study came from the purposive selection method – altogether 10 people.

2.3 Sample group consists of experts and resource people who specialize in designing the sample population. The researcher used the Purposive Selection in this study and got altogether 6 people.

3. Research Tools

The tools were made from 2 resources as follows:
1. Literature Review

The researcher studied and collected information about the significance and necessity of the Karen hill tribe’s identity from a number of documents, textbooks, academic articles and researches.

2. Structured Interview and Non-Structured Interview

The researcher used questionnaires and Passive Participation observation to observe the followings: people’s personalities, situations, languages, gestures, activities, skills, abilities and environment of the male leader of Karen hill tribe, female head of Karen hill tribe, and the formal leader.

2.1 Assigning the concept in order to create the Structured Interview and Non-Structured Interview which were made to serve the research objectives and the population

2.2 Examining the certainty by letting the experts to check the accuracy of the structured and non-structure interview drafts, and the questionnaires and observation forms.

4. Data Colleting

The data collection in this study was done respectively:

4.1 Submitting a form to the dean of the graduate school of Chiang Mai Rajaphat University in order to get a letter of permission for data collecting. Then sending out the letters to the governor of Maehongson, the sheriff of Mae Sa Rieng district, the presidents of Ban Kat, Mae Haw, Mae Yuam, Mae Kong, Pa-Pae, Mae Sa Rieng and Sao Hin Sub-district Organizations, the head of the Mae La Refujee’s camp, the director of Children and Community Network Development Center, Tool inspector experts, and 10 experts and resource people.

4.2 Collecting data after receiving the permission.

4.3 Using the structured and non-structure interview, questionnaires and observation forms with 12 Sa-Ko Karen hill tribes in Ta Song Yang and Sob-Muei Districts in Tak province, and with the Sa-Ko Karen hill tribes in Mae Sa Rieng district, Maehongson province who were not the research sample.
4.4 Using 100 questionnaires concerning the tribe’s identity with the group of local hill tribes of Thailand network who were not the research sample.

4.5 Using the questionnaires concerning the Karen hill tribe’s identity in the Salaween River Basin with the group of the head of the villages’ sub-districts in 77 villages.

4.6 After receiving the first data, then the researcher studied the flaws and mistakes of the data collective methods and improved the questions to meet the objectives, then did the second interview with the research samples in 7 sub-districts.

4.7 Analyzing and synthesizing the data from the interviews and used in PAR with the target population and set a meeting. This method is the way to include the target population to participate in data analysis. The idea exchange between the hill tribes and researcher led to conclusions.

4.8 Analyzing and concluding the results from 21 Sa-Ko Karen hill tribes

4.9 Defining and preparing 10 experts who specialize in Karen hill tribe by contact each one of them and ask for their participation for 3 interviews.

4.10 Using EDFR (Ethnographic Delphi Futures Research) first round by interview the experts and analyze and conclude the data for Identity of Karen Hill Tribes in Salaween River Basin: A Case Study of Karengaw Hill Tribes of Mae Sa rieng District, Maehongson Province with 21 Karen hill tribes.

4.11 Analyzing and synthesizing data from the first round experts’ interviews.

4.12 Inviting the experts and resource people for the Focus group meeting to the second round to brainstorm for the purpose to develop the form and way for the tribe to conserve their identity by the Sustainable Development theory.

4.13 Analyzing and synthesizing the data from the Focus group meeting

4.14 Sending the data above to the experts on the third round to get the final agreement from all the experts and resource people

4.15 Compiling the agreement according to the research objectives
4.16 Inviting the experts and resource people, who specialize in design, to the Focus group meeting in order to get the conclusion about the form of identity in different dimensions to be a symbol in the future Creative Economy design works.

4.17 Concluding the results getting from the meeting and test the identity forms in the fashion design and textile industry in Creative Economy.

4.18 Concluding the research findings

5. Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the content of the questionnaires from the Karen hill tribes in 7 sub-districts by using the spss statistics, and codifies the contents by using PAR and EDFR with the content from the experts.

6. Presenting the data descriptively with pictures

Conclusion

1. The Karen hill tribes’ language in the Salaween River Basin’s was influenced by Tibetan-Burmese languages. Their religious beliefs include the original faith, Christianity, Buddhism. In addition to their different religious activities, their tribal pride, beliefs and ceremonies contain both religious and agricultural ceremonies. Their habitation is both on flat ground and upland. Their local traditions are, for example, New Year, New House, New Rice and wedding. Their livelihood depends solely on nature. They live in expanded families whose main job is farming industrial crops. Their clothes can best indicate their identity. Their lives are surrounded by natural resources. They have their own musical instruments, work tools, houses and barns.

2. Factors which have influenced the changes of the identity are as follows: economically, the lack of productive land has created various problems including the spread of drugs, debts, and poverty which cause the Karen hill tribes to find new jobs somewhere else, inter-tribal marriages, and modern consumerism. Environmentally, the lands are arrogated by outsiders. The tribes lost their rights over natural resources (soil, water, forest). Socially, there are the problems of the fading of the original belief system in settlement and also old ceremonies, new social values among youth who lost their interest in carry on old traditions. The globalization has brought communication with no boundary and
transportation influencing the Karen's lifestyle. Young Karen who became educated usually haven't returned to their homes. Sometimes, they forget their roots. Hi-speed technologies like media (radio, T.V., newspaper) have greatly affected the youth's lifestyle. The young generation of the Karen tribe has quickly absorbed technologies that have tremendously changed their whole lifestyle.

3. The forms of the Karen hill tribe’s identity exist in different dimensions: economically, production of industrial crops, weaving fabric and wickerwork, farming, modern day consumerism. Environmentally, they have all natural resources such as forest, mountains, clean air and water. The man-made environment is a community. They live with families and practice their ceremonies, beliefs, traditions. Altogether, they can be used as symbols in the creative economy in different types of design works such as fashion and textiles, as Pachima Thanasunti (2009) described in her study about the importance of the geographic indicators, that the use of local wisdom and cultural identity can be done through creative economic design for the creation of sustainable development in the future.

Research Findings argumentation

This study illustrated the Karen hill tribe’s identity, the factors which cause the changes of identity, and the forms of the identity in different dimension. There are important issues from the study to discuss as follows:

1. The sustained identities in Karen hill tribes are found only in language, dressing, and certain ceremonies such as threading hands, agriculture. There is a dramatic change in their identity as a result of economic, social, and environmental dimensions. This dissipates the old identity and create new ones which are various according to their different society, economy and environment in different tribes. In a similar way, Sorapong Wichaidit (1970) summarized his research on Identity formation of Karen displaced persons: a case study of Karen in Ban Mae La Temporary shelter through civil activities. He found that the Karen created their identity under the social context together through assimilation, cutting, invention, and selection of new identity. This is to create a new image of Karen and also support their identity.

2. Economic, environmental, social, technological, educational, and media factors have had great impact on the change of the Karen hill tribe’s identity. This is corresponding
with the conclusion in Narumon Arunothai’s (2009) research. She summarized that as a result of the loss of rights in the natural resources (water, forest, sea) also the industrial crops movement. These contributed many hill tribes’ debts. It forced them to migrate from their homes to become unskilled laborers in the city, and among these, many also go into the sex industry. Being a minority has caused them to be underprivileged in different things. This also caused the destruction of the hill tribe’s cultures in a number of places. Most of the hill tribes have changed their language, lifestyle like the majority city people. This is corresponding with the results in Sansorn Pisut (2003) ‘s research on the Tai Lue Identity and adjustment for survival in capitalistic economy. He found that the communication technologies and transportations caused a fast change in the economy, the society and in values. The old values and traditions have faded away from people’s minds. This corresponds with Niti Ewsriwong (2009)’s research that the modern time youth are rejecting all of their original culture. This is happening at the same time as globalization and modernization which cause them to regretfully forget to live with their original identity.

3. The forms of the Karen hill tribe’s identity exist in different dimensions: economically, production of industrial crops, weaving fabric and wickerwork, farming, modern day consumerism. Environmentally, they have all natural resources such as forest, mountains, clean air and water. The man-made environment is a community. They live with families and practice their ceremonies, beliefs, traditions. Altogether, they can be used as symbols in the creative economy in different types of design works such as fashion and textiles, as Pachima Thanasunti (2009) described in her study about the importance of the geographic indicators, that the use of local wisdom and cultural identity can be done through creative economic design for the creation of sustainable development in the future.

Suggestions

1. The youth should be encouraged to learn about their traditional ceremonies, culture and wisdom. They should be aware of the value of their local wisdom so that they will carry on the traditions.

2. The local wisdom learning center should be promoted, also some publicity of the Karen hill tribes’ knowledge to the Karen youth who live in different district and city for common use.
3. There should be a campaign for the hill tribes to wear their tribal clothes everyday.

4. There should be an ecotourism industry in the tribal area to create both jobs and income, and to stop the young hill tribe members from moving away from their homes.

5. The government should support activities with the Karen tribe.

6. The government should support tourism for the Karen tribes in Mae Sa Rieng district by advertising them both domestically and internationally.

7. The use of the value within the identity in the creative economy: designing the tribe’s identity as a symbol and use the symbol in different design works.

**The adaptation of the research results**

The researcher designed the tribe’s identity as a symbol and used it in the fashion design in the creative economy. It was recently presented to the public for the purpose to honor Majesty the Queen Sirikit.

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