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## Hmong Intercultural Communication through Story Cloth Products at Luang Prabang Night Market, Lao PDR

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of Hmong intercultural communication through story cloth products sold by Hmong Lao vendors at a night market in Luang Prabang City. Data relied on 14 Hmong story cloths obtained from four Hmong Lao vendors. Findings revealed that the Hmong Lao vendors sold traditional story cloths which reflect aspects of Hmong life in harmony in nature with nature elements as portrayed in trees, crops, and animals. This reinforces Hmong identity and their strong attachment to agriculture and joint gender work cooperation. Themes including work diligence and strong family ties are also supported as seen in story cloths. There are also a few story cloths created by Hmong youth using embroidered English captions with themes about family, harvesting, and travelling. Other interesting story cloths referred to Biblical elements about the birth of Jesus and his resurrection. The findings also showed that Hmong Lao vendors were young and used limited intercultural communication strategies to convey Hmong cultural information about story cloths because of their limited competencies to other languages. Most cultural sharing among researchers proved productive with the use of Hmong language which explains why intercultural communication between tourists was weak.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, Hmong story cloths, Hmong culture, cultural products



## Introduction

Luang Prabang Night Market, Lao PDR is a popular place among tourists and visitors and is very popularly known as the shopper's choice of local and national cultural products. These products show case their culture and lifestyle. There are many Lao ethnic groups who sell their cultural products at the night market and one of these groups is the Hmong Lao. Gerdner (2015) noted that the Hmongs are some of the tribes who reside in different global communities. Statistically, the majority of them live in Lao, PDR. Their cultural products have unique symbols that reflect their cultural identities in terms of their traditions, and values as portrayed in story cloths. This is related to Hickner-Johnson's (2016) study noting the historical relevance of textile arts that have existed for hundreds of years, specifically the Hmong story cloths, which record and express their historical and cultural roots.

Selling cultural products requires a competent intercultural communication among ethnic vendors to bridge communication between customers. Samovar et al (2010) noted that communication is a symbolic system, created by humans and is "based on symbols" (p. 37). Murray and Kimura (2006) noted that symbols share cultural meanings for people within the same group. Symbols are diverse in styles and designs and differ according to specific particular cultural contexts of a particular

ethnic group. In addition, symbols depicted in product designs can be used to communicate information about culture. For example, available literatures showing the symbols of cultural products reveal important information about the identity of a particular ethnic group (Moalosi et al., 2007; Popovic, 2002). Another source referred these cultural products as "cultural ambassadors" (Chang et al., 2011, p. 2) that transmit cultural information to visitors. But this is not enough, however, to convey the deeper meaning hidden between these cultural products. To share this deep cultural information, it is necessary for the vendors of these cultural products to have intercultural communication competence. Bennett, (2016) explains further the meta-coordination process when two different cultural groups meet and try to coordinate their cultural messaging.

To achieve the study purposes, three research questions were formulated:

## Research Questions

1. Which of the Hmong cultural products are sold by Hmong Lao vendors at the Luang Prabang Night Market?
2. Which of the Hmong important symbols are portrayed in Hmong story cloths with their story telling narratives?



3. How do Hmong vendors relay their cultural information about these products at the Night Market to market costumers?

### Method

Data were collected from Hmong Lao vendors, who sold 14 Hmong story cloths through informal multi-lingual interviews, observations, videotapes, and photos of Hmong cultural products.

The interpretive approach (Martin and Nakayama (2010) and intercultural communication approach (Bennett, 2016) were utilized for data analyses to understand the effectiveness of Hmong intercultural communication between Hmong Lao vendors and the researchers.

Data about products and symbols, and intercultural communication competency were analyzed and interpreted to achieve research results.

### Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings to answer the three research questions which are presented under the headings of Hmong cultural products, story cloth narratives, and Intercultural communication between Hmong Lao sellers and outsiders.

### Hmong cultural products

Results showed that Hmong Lao vendors were multilingual speakers of Hmong, Thai and English. They belong to the millennium youth generation who reside in nearby Hmong communities and sell Hmong cultural products (e.g. story cloths, pencil cases, pillow cases) at the Luang Prabang Night Market.



Figure1 Hmong way of life and identity

Findings also showed that Hmong textiles sold at the Luang Prabang Heritage City Market were Hmong cultural products that portray different aspects of Hmong culture. They represent symbols of Hmong culture through their designs, patterns and motifs that were embroidered on different textile items including story cloths, cloth cases, pencil cases, pillow cases, blankets, and souvenir cloth patches. All Hmong Lao vendors sell almost the same products. The findings support the concept of Chang et al. (2011) as noted earlier that they are “cultural ambassadors” of Hmong culture



and that they attract attention to transient tourists. Unfortunately, it is not certain if tourists get appropriate cultural meaning from the symbol messaging of the story cloths and other products.

Data from the interviews, conducted in Hmong, also asserted that some Hmong Lao vendors ordered Hmong cultural products from Vientiane, the capital city of Lao PDR. These products were made from machines in factories. While, some products came from nearby Hmong communities were Hmong women embroidered patterns according to the demands and popularity of customers. The findings further revealed that the millennium Hmong youth vendors possessed less background cultural knowledge about their traditional values as reflected in the products on displayed at the market. During the interview process, they could not freely express information about their traditional culture and needed frequent clarifications from the researchers. Sometimes they replied with certainty, but most often they didn't know or they would say their parents or grandparents knew about their culture. This contradicted the previous studies that emphasized the importance of cultural products as "ambassadors" (Chang et. al. p. 2) because not enough information is clearly presented in the symbol messaging of the Hmong products.

### Story cloth narratives

Findings revealed that the four youth among Hmong Lao vendors at the Luang Prabang Night Market have a general knowledge of Hmong culture especially their core values as taught by their parents and extended families. They lack deep understand, however, of the cultural tools portrayed in story cloths because of their lack of interest with them in an age of smart phones and modern amenities. Accordingly, they explain more as observers rather than as participants. They described the Hmong story cloths not as narratives, but as statements about cultural themes of the Hmong ways of past life. According to these vendors, the Hmong life is related to agricultural activities because agricultural crops. Cultivated are named in the cloths such as rice, corn, chili, eggplants, bananas, pineapples, sugarcanes, pumpkins, and cucumbers (Figures 1 and 2).

In addition, they revealed that the Hmong people in their communities still raise domestic animals for household food consumption as portrayed in the story cloths. However, these animals used for agricultural labor, however, are not visible in the current circumstances. Those animals in the story cloths included pigs, horses, cows, dogs, chickens, and ducks. Hmong literature sources stated that these horses were used as the animal vehicles to



take all of the agricultural equipment to their farms and back to their homes. The cow rose for household consumption and for funeral ceremonies is still utilize currently.



**Figure 2** Hmong way of life and identity

Other noticeable cultural products displayed in the story cloth pictures included houses, male and female costumes, mill stone, rice grinders, shoulder baskets, threshing baskets, ladders, knives, sickles, chicken coops, troughs, animal feed containers, bridles, hours packing equipment, path ways, and crop gardens. These Hmong cultural artifacts serve as strong indicators of their agricultural identities self-sufficiency in the past. These findings are in agreement with the statements of Duffy, et al. (2004) as noted that the

Hmong are self-sufficient and have enough to sustain themselves and live harmoniously with the environment. In addition, observations showed that most of Hmong houses were built at the foot of the mountains and were surrounded with trees as seen on the top of the Hmong story cloths (Figures 1 and 2). The Hmong's traditional houses were built with timber, bamboos, and thatches with rooftops consisting of a V-shape decoration and each consisting of three doors. Hmong men and women normally worked jointly at home doing chores and tending their gardens. Other activities at home also included grinding rice and maize for household consumption and animal feed such as feeding chickens and pigs as seen in Figures 1, 2. These activities were organized on the top of the story cloths close to the houses. In terms of agricultural activities, the gardens were located away from their homes. They were embroidered at the bottom of the story cloth as shown in Figures 1 and 2. These gardens consisted of rice, corn, pumpkin, cucumbers, pineapples, and sugarcane fields. Data from the interview among Hmong Lao youth vendors revealed that the Hmong story cloths have designs based on the seasons of agricultural products harvested associated with the Hmong way of life. A Hmong vendor mentioned that in the past until to

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1975, the Hmong people did not own vehicles. Each member of the Hmong family had one or two horses used to carry the crops from the farms. For those who did not have horses, they had to carry their own crops back home. Data also showed that these Hmong story cloths transmit messages about the Hmong farming and living close to nature. This is a Hmong identity that each of the vendors confirmed and felt was important for Hmong's identity. One of the Hmong vendors mentioned that these Hmong story cloths are very interesting for those Hmong people who have immigrants to more developed countries. These story cloths can be used as learning tools for young Hmong who may not have access to the kind of life styles portrayed in the story cloths.

In terms of male and female costumes, one Hmong vendor stated that the Hmong costumes display in the story cloth pictures were designed according to the Hmong daily life garments. Based on observations of the story cloth pictures, the Hmong men wear different costumes from women. The Hmong men wear black trousers and black long sleeve T-shirt tied, with red waist cloth, and black hats on their heads. On the other hand, the women wear colorful skirts with pink, black, green, and white colors. Their jackets are in black color tied with red cloth on their waist which distinguishes them from the Hmong men. The story cloths also show that the Hmong men and women use knives to cut the garden crops and used a shoulder baskets to carry

those crops back to their homes. These demonstrate the image of the Hmong people and their agricultural identities which clearly distinguish them from other non-Hmong (Cooper et al., 1991).



**Figure 3** Hmong story cloths made by Hmong young Children

The story cloth picture in Figure 3 is about stories of family embroidered in English ranging from “I love my family”, “My parents are harvest rice”, and “Travels to Lao”. It shows the relationship of the family between father, mother, children and their pets. It also demonstrates the value and importance of children, families, and shows an attempt to communicate feelings about Hmong culture in English.

In addition, data revealed that Christianity influenced the Hmong culture and their identity. Data from the interview showed that some of the Hmong Lao people in the Luang Prabang City are converts from animism to Christianity. This shows that Christianity plays a

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role in present-day Hmong society and that the designer and producer of story cloths is influenced by Biblical themes and narratives about the birth of Jesus Christ as seen in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Hmong story cloth about Jesus Christ

#### **Intercultural communication between Hmong Lao vendors and outsiders**

According to the etic category observations concerning the intercultural communication between Hmong Lao vendors and customers, the language used at the market have intercultural communication level competency, strategies, and intentionality.

#### **Language used at the market**

Based on interviews and observation, the Hmong Lao vendors felt most comfortable in sharing information about their culture using their native language. In addition, they were able to communicate with Lao and Thai visitors quite well because of the Lao - Thai language similarities. In

matters of English as a medium of communication, it was observed that English was used among foreign tourists mainly in the language functions to buy and sell things. There was however a very limited use of English in explaining about Hmong culture, especially concerning the story cloths and other Hmong design patterns. These phenomena are in congruence with the concept as noted by Martin and Nakayama (2010) that language plays an important role in the process of interacting among intercultural communicators. They also noted that any language belonging to the same language family and with similar cultural context leads to easier and more comfortable intercultural communication than communicating with different language families.

#### **Competencies, Strategies, and Intentionality**

In matters of Intercultural competence and meta-coordination strategies, research findings showed that the Hmong vendors lacked competence and intentionality in bridging understanding through inter-cultural communication because four main reasons: 1) Lack of trust and rapport building due to the short-term exposure with outsiders; 2) Insufficient use of the international English language as a way for communication with outsiders; 3) High contextual interferences because of the heavy flow of costumers coming and going along the Heritage City Market walkway; 4) External influences effecting Hmong Lao millennium generation vendors who are distracted by new global



trends, ideas, and values. This is observed in their trendy dressing style, frequent dependency on smart phones and inability to answer Hmong cultural questions because of a limited Hmong local wisdom background.

### Conclusion

Findings of the study indicated that Hmong Lao vendors sell a variety of textile items at the Luang Prabang Night Market during a weeklong visit to Luang Prabang City. Most of the products were made and embroidered by adults, and a few by Hmong Lao young children. The Hmong cultural products have a very distinct design with symbols that help to communicate Hmong culture and promote Hmong identity. This was most evident in the symbols represented in the Hmong story cloths that emphasized different aspects of the traditional Hmong way of life. This study has also proven that there is low level intercultural communication competence because of several factors. These factors include the poor use of English to explain about Hmong culture, identity, and lack of interest in providing multilingual written forms of communication about the Hmong cultural meanings of story cloths. Their ability to facilitate intercultural communication can be made possible, if the Lao government can exert effort to organize trainings on intercultural communication. This will facilitate better communication among foreign tourists visiting at the

Market at the World Heritage Site in Luang Prabang. This will further promote and disseminate Hmong cultural information to the outside world.

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