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TRIBAL ARTWORK SYMBOLS IN XEKONG PROVINCE, LAO PDR

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ABSTRACT

This article is part of a research on The Design of Souvenirs Form Pattern and Symbolic Representation, Tribal Artworks, Xekong Province to study the symbols that exist in Xekong province tribal artworks. The research was conducted using the qualitative research method. The research tools consist of field surveys, observations, and interviews with the informants in the Xekong province Tribal artworks. The data was analyzed using the Semiology Theory by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914).

The research result revealed that the majority of Xekong Province tribal artworks that are still being produced and can be found today are paintings, wood carving, woven cloth, and wickers. Symbols were created as a medium for communication in patterns or other kinds of arts, mostly containing the beliefs, traditions, and rituals that the tribes have been practicing. The object/external reality and the signified, or the mental concept, were created by the convention of the tribe members. According to Saussure and Peirce, this relationship between people and symbols made arts another form of sign that can measure the use of symbols and the level of communication of the symbols, which is the main principle that caused the communication system of the symbols to be simpler or more complicated. The theory focuses on the phenomenon that occurred within the tribal communication system of meaning through the use of symbols within the arts by placing the importance on the identity of specific areas, or culture of specific groups, reflecting the true identity of the tribe.

INTRODUCTION

Xekong is a province in the southeastern part of Lao PDR. It is a new province that was separated from Salavan province in 1984. The name of the province was taken from the Xekong river, which is an important river in this area. The location of the province is 815 kilometers from Vientiane. The province shares its border with Champasak province, Salavan province, Attapeu Province, and Vietnam. The province consists of four districts, Lam Mam districts, Kaleum districts, Tha Teng district, and Dakjung district (Royal Thai Embassy Vientiane, 2013). Most of the terrain is plateau area. There are only a few commute routes, which are mostly gravel roads. Furthermore, the roads are not usable during the rainy season. There are around 123,000 people in the province (Lao National Radio, 2018), who are mostly farmers, foragers, and making handicrafts (Singyabuth, 2005). Throughout the 200 years in which the Xekong province had to continuously face the disaster from wars, starting from when it was under Siam until before the country was established as Lao PDR. The people in the area migrated to other areas or scattered deep into the forest. This migration had prevented access to knowledge, progress, science, and technology. This is another factor why most people in the province have been able to maintain their tribal livelihood. (Xekong Province Historical Research Team, 2019)

The word “tribe” is used to call people living together to maintain their livelihood through the economic system of self and nature reliance (Wongsurawat, 2017). The tribal society starts with the smallest social unit, which are families of relatives living together (Sengpracha, 1998). Later on, when the members of the family expanded, the relationship that was based on the same bloodline faded and became the relationship as a tribe instead of family. More than 95 percent of the population of Xekong province belongs to the tribe that uses Mon-Khmer language (Luangthongkum, 2001), which consist of nine following tribes: Katu, Suay, Lavi, To Oi, Laven, Alak, Yae, Trieng, and Kriang tribe, which are scattered on the plateau and the mountains. Each tribe has its own different social and cultural livelihood. However, there are some similarities since they are living within the same environment since all the tribes within Xekong maintain communication between their tribes, such as during wedding ceremonies and migrations. Additionally, when society expanded, there was a need to create a mutual agreement amongst the tribe members to create order. Beliefs were used to make regulations and practices. The tribe leaders normally rule based on ideas and beliefs rather than on principles and reasons (Wongsurawat, 2017). Similar to the study by Chantadara (2011) on *The Development of the Cultural Tourism of the Mon-Khmer Ethnic Groups: A Case Study at Bolouvane Plain of Southern Laos PDR.*, who found that the people with Xekong province hold on to their beliefs, traditions, and rituals more than the laws. This kind of livelihood has been passed down from generation to generation through different kinds of expressions. One of the clearest and tangible expressions is the expressions through different kinds of fine arts.

Arts are things that are considered artistic (Royal Institute, 2011). In a society with tribal livelihood, arts are mostly created to respond to the needs of living and their beliefs. The arts within Xekong province can be broadly categorized into the following two groups based on the objectives: fine arts and applied arts (Phu-ngamdee, 2004). Fine arts are the arts that focus on the different aspects of the expression of beauty, emotions, feelings, faith, beliefs, thoughts, etc. The beauty aspect creates happiness, faith, relaxation, ideology, etc., to the members of the tribe, as well as the guests that come to visit and have the opportunities to observe the fine arts and the wood carvings in the Hor-kwan, which are the sacred structure of the tribes in Xekong province. It is believed that those are the structures where the spirits who are protecting the tribe members reside. Additionally, the structures are also used as a place for conducting traditions and rituals, meetings, or festivities and might be referred to differently in each tribe (Singyabuth, 2005). Applied arts are the arts that have benefits that go along with their beauty which can be used in daily lives, adding convenience and bringing happiness at the same time, such as woven textiles and wickers. These arts have important roles in determining the behaviors of the people in the tribe, help to create order within the society, the advancement in both the materials and the minds, expressing the way of life, and clearly reflecting the characteristics of the tribe members. The tribes in Xekong's expressions of their arts, apart from the beauty and the usages, reflect their beliefs in the form of symbols.

Symbols are a form of symbolic expression of human beings' beliefs. When people live together, there are always interactions between them that are based on their own beliefs. The beliefs that they follow will eventually become their own way of life. When human beings accumulate the beliefs or follow the same type of beliefs, those beliefs will become the way of life of that society (Kamdee, 2002). The morals are used as a tool to remind the people to follow the same practice in living their lives and keep the order within society. Apart from being expressed through proverbs, tales, music, and performances, morals are also expressed in symbols to help explain the relationship between those symbols and society (Maneerat, 1982). This is similar to the morals of the tribes in Xekong province, which are also used in visual objects in addition to the literature since some content cannot be expressed through words. Therefore, the tribes need to create the symbols and use the method in interpreting to understand the true meaning of those symbols and the morals. Even though there are also similar tribes in other areas in Lao and the neighboring countries, the tribes in each area have different learning and adjustment due to the differences in the surrounding. This is why the expressions of symbols and beliefs differ from one area to the other, which are worth the preservation.

Today, development is reaching rural areas. The development and the technological advancement have a trend to expand continuously (Sengpracha, 1998) in addition to the cultural diffusion that was created from the communication between the tribes within Xekong province and with people from other areas. This is another factor contributing to the rapid development of the tribes with the traditional livelihood to have less ego. Poumisak (1992) interestingly mentioned about the tribes and people in Lao that "Lao culture is superior, Lao production is also superior, so it is not difficult to persuade the

tribe to live a Lao lifestyle.” Soon after, the cultural identity, especially in symbols that exist in the arts of the tribes in Xekong province that had been passed down, might fade away. The government of Lao PDR sees the significance of the problem and puts in an effort to preserve the arts of the tribes within Xekong province. It was also included in the 8th National Economic and Development Plan (Department of Domestic and Foreign Investment, 2016) by focusing on the integration of the tribes into the society. The agenda of protecting traditional culture and the improvement of the quality of life in both the materialistic and spiritual aspects of the ethnic minority in the country had become one of the main agendas (Laohoua Cheutching, 2000), which goes in line with the National Economic and Development Plan concerning Xekong province. The plan includes encouraging the tribes to see the values of their arts in both forms and symbols and use the arts to make economically beneficial products. This is a strategy that will help maintain the tribal arts within Xekong province (Party Committee Xekong Province, 2015). From the reasons and importance mentioned above, the research became interested in studying the symbols in the Xekong province’s tribal arts in both the different types of symbols and the communication of their meanings to accumulate the knowledge and create the direction for the government and private sector in Lao to use the data for social, cultural, and economic benefits, as well as creating the pride for tribes in Xekong province.

RESULT OF THE STUDY

From the field study in Xekong province to conduct the survey and collect the tribal arts, it was found that the nine tribes are scattered throughout different areas of the province. The suggestions of the government’s officers revealed that the following villages still have many members, as well as the arts to conduct the study: Katu Tribe, Don Gun Mai village, Tha Teng District 2) Suay Tribe, Tha Teng Nua village, Tha Teng 3) Laven tribe, Hua Se village, Tha Teng District 4) Ta Oi tribe, Palaeng village, Tha Teng District 5) Lavi tribe, Lavi Fang Daeng village, La Mam district 6) Alak tribe, Tok Saming village, La Mam district 7) Yae tribe, Dak Jiang Yai village, Dak Cheung district 8) Trieng tribe, Dak Cheung village, Dak Cheung district and 9) Griang tribe, Wak Nua village, Kaleum district. It was found that the main arts that contain symbols or are used as symbolic items can be categorized into four types: 1) paintings 2) Wood carvings 3) Woven cloth, and 4) Wickers



Figure 1. The patterns and shapes of the tribal arts in Xekong province.

Searching for the meanings of the symbols in each type of tribal arts can be done by accumulating and categorizing the different kinds of arts according to the following table.

Table 1. Types of arts in Xekong Province

Types of Arts	Patterns	Examples
Paintings	- Flora Patterns	Flowers and vines
	- Patterns of people	Representatives of ancestral ghosts or tribe members
	- Patterns of animals	Snakes, Nagas, Owls, etc.
	- Lines or geometric patterns	Straight vertical lines, straight horizontal lines, diagonal lines, curved lines, freestyle lines, circles, triangles, squares, and rhombus
	- Text patterns	Lao or English letters
	- Appliances and tools patterns	Pots, jars, or Ta Laew
Wood carvings	- Patterns of people	Representatives of the house spirits, ancestral ghosts, and government's representatives
	- Patterns of animals	Snakes, frogs, nagas, buffalos, dogs, pigs, chickens, ducks, monkeys, elephants, turtles, lizards, owls, etc.
	- Lines or geometric patterns	Vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines
	- Appliances and tools patterns	Pots, jars, and Ta Laew
Woven Cloth	- Flora Patterns	Flower and leaves
	- Patterns of people	Representative of ancestral ghosts
	- Patterns of animals	Cows, buffalos, frogs, fish, pigs, rats, chickens, peacocks, tigers, insects, etc.
	- Lines or geometric patterns	Straight vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines. Dots in rhombus shapes.
	- Text patterns	Lao letters
	- Appliances and tools patterns	Ta Laew and Helicopters
Wickers	- Household appliances patterns	Kratib, Kradong, Kratok, etc.
	- Utilities	Kra Jao, Ka Pha, Ka Sang, KA Leb, etc.

	- Animal traps and cages	Kong, Sai, Son, Yang Kai
	- Talismans	Ta Laew

From the table, it was found that the artworks in the categories of paintings, wood carvings, and woven cloth can be further categorized into six following groups based on the patterns: 1) flora patterns 2) patterns of people 3) patterns of animals 4) lines or geometric shapes 5) texts and 6) tools and appliances. Wickers can be separated into four groups based of the objectives of their usage: 1) household appliances 2) utilities 3) animal traps and cages, and 4) talismans Fine arts and wood carvings were mostly created for spiritual aspects and are placed in the Hor-kwan or the spiritual center of the village, which is a sacred building. The tribes believe that it is a sacred building where the spirits that protect the villages and their members reside. There are often rituals conducted there to assure a peaceful livelihood. Additionally, Hor-kwan is also used for receiving guests who came to visit from other areas. Therefore, the stairs, the walls, and the beams are beautifully decorated with paintings and wood carving that the members of the tribes created. From the current survey, only the Katu tribe Ta Oi tribe and Kriang Tribe have paintings and wood carvings in the Hor-kwan to be studied. The woven cloth and the wickers were created for beneficial use, which every tribe still preserves for study. Most of the cloth were made as traditional skirts since the women still wear traditional skirts in their activities, such as the local traditions, school uniforms, governments, and private uniforms. There are three ways to wear traditional skirts, halfway to the calf level, ankle level, and used for covering the body. The symbols on the skirts can be found in the middle part and the edge of the skirts. Lastly, wickers can be categorized into four types, household use, miscellaneous use, animals trap, and talismans.

According to the members of the tribes and the academics who are knowledgeable on tribal arts, all the symbols that exist in the arts have meaning to express their beliefs. The paintings, the wood carving, and the woven cloth use the patterns of symbols to communicate the meaning. The flora patterns are mostly used as symbols of goodness, such as communicating beauty, happiness, and the celebration during the festivals uses the symbols of flowers. The symbols of leaves and vines are used to communicate prosperity, growth, and abundance,

The symbols of people mostly represent spirits and are used in the rituals since they hold the power to grant both the good and bad things to the lives of the tribe members. Currently, the tribes in Xekong are still under the government. The government officers have the authority to prevent, protect, and bring about good livelihood. The wood carvings are also of the people with international uniforms as a reminder. The carvings of people also reflect the behavior, activities during the rituals, or celebrations during traditions, such as people playing Can or playing drums. The carving of people smoking tobacco reflects the way of life of the people in Xekong province. Both children and adults smoke tobacco since they believe that smoking tobacco helps the body be healthy since some ingredients are considered herbs.

The symbols of animals are used for conveying many meanings. Frogs and toads are used for communicating the power that can bring abundance to the tribe. It is believed that these animals can cause the rain to fall. The rain helps any area to have good agriculture. Barn owls and normal owls are used to predict future unfortunate events, whether people in the tribe will get sick and die. Human beings' characteristics are another thing that the tribe uses as symbols. For instance, peacocks represent beautiful women, monkeys or tailorbirds represent those who steal or want things that are not theirs, tigers represent those who practice dark magic, turtles represent those with long lives, and elephants represent those with greatness. As for survival by eating animals, each kind of animal is eaten in different incidents. Animals that are eaten on a daily basis are ducks, chickens, fish, rats, rabbits, and lizards. Animals that are mostly used in ceremonies are goats, pigs, cows, and buffalos. Another meaning for buffalos is a symbol of valuable items. Those who own a lot of buffalos are considered rich, which is why buffalos are often given to the bride's families at weddings. Therefore, they are the animals that are eaten during special events. The animals that are being controlled in terms of consumption are armadillos. If a son-in-law finds an armadillo from the forest on the same day that the father-in-law comes to visit, it will have to be cooked for the father-in-law to eat as a form of paying respect. For civets, it is believed that when cooking civets for family members or friends, it is prohibited to count the pieces of the civets that had been cut. Otherwise, the same amount of people will die. Additionally, many dangerous animals are overlooked, and symbols were created to remind people of them. For instance, bedbugs that can suck people's blood can be found on the walls and bed, the ants and the scorpions, as well as the cat symbols that are used to communicate the animals that the tribe members like to raise to get rid of the cats. Line patterns and geographic forms are symbols of simplicity and are mostly used in almost all tribal arts because they reflect the simple characteristics of the tribes living their simple and uncomplicated lives, relying on nature, kindness, and honesty. The two curved lines on top of the pillars of Hor-kwan represent the attitude towards the parents.

Symbolic letters of the tribes in Xekong province use the language in the Mon-Khmer family, and there are no written language. Currently, the Lao educational system has reached different tribal villages and cause them to be able to write and understand the Lao language and the basic English language. Additionally, many villages are also destinations for tourist groups; both Lao and English are used in the arts, such as in paintings and woven cloth, to congratulate or to tell their identity to the outsiders.

The patterns on the household objects are mostly related to the traditions and the rituals. For instance, pots, which are made from metal in reality, but the patterns are put into paintings and wood carvings. They have a value equal to one buffalo and are also used as a dowry in asking women for marriage. Jars represent fun and festivities. The talismans carved in the form of Ta Laew on the top of the entrance of Hor-Kwan, or put as a pattern on the local skirt, are used to prevent all evils from coming in. Ta Laew is a pattern similar to the star of David. There are also patterns of helicopters that signify the war before the establishment of Lao PDR.

The last part is the meanings of symbols in the wickers. It was found that the wickers that is the household items have meanings according to their shapes, which determine the objectives, such as threshing baskets are used for drying food, steaming baskets are used for steaming sticky rice, sticky rice baskets are used for storing sticky rice, and trays are used for laying out food plates. As for the wickers that are for multipurpose use, such as Ka-Jor, Ka-pha, Ka-sang, and Ka-leb, apart from having the meanings according to their usage of transporting agricultural produce, used in agricultural activities, or storing household items, they also have meanings pertaining to the funeral as well. Some of the items are given to the deceased since it is believed that the deceased can use them to store items for their next lives. Similarly, the wickers that are made as animal traps also have meanings according to their beneficial usage. These items also have meanings related to the beliefs, such as the tribal people in Xekong province have a belief similar to the Lao people that Sai, or bamboo fish trap, can also be used as a talisman to trap fortune and money. Therefore, there are normally small size Sai hanging at the front door. The talismans that are found mostly are Ta Laews, small bamboo woven into a form similar to the start of David since they are believed to keep the evil away. Ta Laews are normally hanged at the front of the houses, the ceremonial and ritual ground, to keep that evil from hurting the community members.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

The arts that the tribes in Xekong used in communication have the characteristics that relate to their belief in spirits, supernatural power, sacred beings, survival, myths, self characteristic expressions, nature, the administrations, norms, traditions, and rituals related to the spirits. These arts' objectives are for predictions, asking for forgiveness, and sacrifices, such as in the third moth ceremony, weddings, or funerals. Additionally, it is also found that the tribal arts are symbols created through the communication between the tribe members since symbols within the arts are tangible and can be used as a representation while containing meanings, the relationship amongst the individuals, and between the individuals and nature. This is used to explain that the communication of symbols in the tribal arts of Xekong province between the messenger and the receiver is different from general groups of people. It is considered a unique culture of a group and the pride of the people in the area that should be preserved. They can also be used as cultural capital to help move the economy forward in responding to the policy of the country and the province. Semiology can be used to further understand communication characteristics since it is the study of the system of symbols in the human mind.

Semiology consists of the word “semio” and “logy.” Therefore, it means the science of symbols that focuses on the study of the meanings from observing the nature of the communicating unit as well as its process. This is to help understand how the meaning was communicated. The focus of the study was on the use of semiology in explaining the phenomenons related to the communication form of symbols through the arts of the tribes in Xekong province from the starting point without considering whether the meaning was conveyed successfully or not. Only the social study points out the variety of the cultural mindset that accepts the symbols in the art of tribe in Xekong province as being different from elsewhere. The semiology theory by Ferdinand de

Saussure categorized the level of the meanings within the symbols into two types. “Denotative Meaning,” or direct meaning, is the kind of meaning which only connects on the surface level between the symbols and the objects in reality. This is the meaning that most people accept or have the same understanding when referring to. Additionally, it also includes the meanings in the dictionary. As for “Connotative Meaning,” or indirect meaning, it is created by the agreement within the group or from the personal experience. It is the meaning that was created to connect on a deeper level. Interpreting this kind of meaning requires knowledge about the society or the local culture of that specific area. The fact that a symbol was created to have meanings that represent the objects within the text and the context. According to Peirce’s semiology theory, which consists of two characteristics: Signifier and Signified. Artworks such as paintings, wood carvings, and woven cloth that the tribe in Xekong province mostly use lines or geometric patterns. The patterns used less often than the two were people, animals, flora, appliances, and letters. The signifiers in the wickers have shapes that are connected to the usage and the body shape of the users, which is the same for every tribe. Apart from this, Peirce is also interested in studying the relationship between symbols and real objects while using the signifier and the signified to help with the consideration, categorizing the types of symbols into three types.

- 1) Icon is a sign that resembles the object/external reality.
- 2) Index is a sign that has a casual relationship with the object/external reality
- 3) Symbol is a sign that is not related to the object/external reality but was created by the convention between people.

From the analysis, it was found that the symbols in the tribal arts of Xekong province have no icons that can be seen with the eyes but can extract the real meaning. The use of signs starts as an index within the paintings, wood carvings, and woven cloth, in which the patterns are compared with real objects. The wickers use shapes that can be compared with real usage. These symbols use rationale as a connection in order to interpret the meaning that the messengers intend to communicate. These patterns are those of ducks, chickens, fish, rats, rabbits, lizards, cats, and people—for instance, patterns of people playing Kan, a traditional musical instrument, or smoking tobacco together. When people see these patterns, they do not understand the true meaning right away. After considering the survival instinct and the life experience of the tribes in Xekong, people can understand the deep meaning that these animals were either used as domestic animals or as food. The characters of the people in the patterns might communicate activities related to the traditions and rituals of the tribes. These patterns communicate implicit meanings. As for the signs in the form of symbols, the connection is further apart when compared with real objects since the meanings of the signs are only agreed upon and accepted within the tribes in Xekong province. Those who lack an understanding of the tribal culture will not understand the true meanings. For instance, the symbols of flowers, leaves, buffalos, snakes, nagas, owls, birds, deer, musk, frogs, elephants, ghosts, lines, geometric shapes, pots, vases, and helicopters, communicate the meanings related to the beliefs, traditions, and rituals the tribe in Xekong province practice and contain underlying meanings. There are also explicitly conveyed meanings, such as the symbols consisting of letters in the paintings and woven cloths. The

symbols within the wickers are mostly in the form of an index, which is considered by the shapes and the usage to determine if they are similar, such as the household items or animal traps. After the comparison, people can understand what those tools are used for and how they are used. This is the form of communicating through letters since the meanings are also mentioned in the dictionary for people to understand. The wickers use the signs in the form of both index and symbol, such as the multipurpose tools that are used for several activities and, therefore, contain several meanings. The meanings are both explicitly and implicitly. The kind of wickers that only contains symbols are those that are talismans, such as Ta Laew. The shape and the usage do not connect in terms of meaning. The meaning and the symbols are also disconnected. Most of these items are used in beliefs that convey implicit meanings.

CONCLUSION

The tribes living in Xekong province are groups of people who created arts to benefit their livelihood, similar to other groups in other areas of the world. However, one thing that made these tribal arts different is the symbols that exist on those arts, whether they are paintings, wood carvings, woven, fabrics, or wickers, which are used to express their beliefs, traditions, and rituals that they have been practicing. These arts reflect their true spiritual roots and emphasize that they have a unique cultural value. The system of the symbols in the arts are like codes that the tribe in Xekong province used to communicate with one another, while people, in general, cannot interpret, extract the meanings, and develop the understanding of these hidden codes. Therefore, the study on the symbols in the tribal arts of Xekong province is important and helped the provide the understanding in the social and cultural differences, which relate to the expression of thoughts of the people who have a different livelihood compared to people in general. Their unique culture can also bring pride to the tribes in different areas for their interesting culture, which should be preserved. It is also the source of knowledge that can be used in developing community products and develop tourism in response to the government's policy of moving the economy forward.

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