

# The Transnational Narratives: A Tool for Settling

The Phu Tai Transnational Ethnic Community, Pasuta Komolman, Dr. Jaggapan Kadchumsaeng

Received 14 September 2018 ▪ Revised 23 October 2018 ▪ Accepted 24 November 2018

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the assembly of the Phu Tai ethnic group in order to settle the transnational ethnic community. This paper proposes theoretical statement differ from Charles F. Keyes's statement that indicated the separation of ethnic communities in the Mekong Basin after the ethnic groups are merged as members of the nation state. The split of ethnic groups as a citizen of the nation state has been described by Charles F Keyes as the Heteroglossia. This paper raised the reassembly of the Phu Tai ethnic group as a case study. Ethnography was implemented in research methodology, and data collection was done through the multi-sited method to demonstrate the settlement of transnational ethnic communities beyond the nation state boundary. The new narratives were used as a tool to reassemble the Phu Tai ethnic communities, and shape ethnic consciousness in order to create connection among the Phu Tai ethnic communities until they were able to settle their transnational ethnic communities.

**Keywords:** The Phu Tai, transnational community, traditional legends, and narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

"The Phu Tai" is an ethnic group considered as one of Tai-Kadai ethnic group. There is evidence to indicate the existence of the Phu Tai ethnic group in settled communities in Laos and Vietnam (Wallipodom, 1991; Thongsawangrat, 1987), and later the group moved south to settle in the Mekong basin area (Piyapan, 1998; Damrongsakul, 1987)

In the past, the community movement of the Phu Tai ethnic group has been usual circumstances that Phu Tai people moved to any suitable settlement areas. Phu Tai people moved freely to anywhere in the Mekong Basin in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, since the states or communities in the area still ruled based on political ideal of Southeast Asian Traditional State. When the political ideal, "the Nation state", was introduced, the states in the Mekong basin are separated with a clear boundary line (Leepreecha, 2002; Vinichakul, 2013; Anderson, 1996). The rise of the Nation state has caused the Phu Tai to be unable move, as they did in the past. Phu Tai communities have merged, and their people have become nation state citizens, for instance, the Tai Dam (Black Tai) and Tai Kao (White Tai) who live in the Sib Song Ju Tai region. These Tai Ethnic groups were merged with other Vietnamese communities, and finally became Vietnamese citizens (Wallipodom, 1991; Damrongsakul, 1987). Furthermore, the Phu Tai who live on the left side of the Mekong River have been declared as citizens of Lao PDR. (Thongsawangrat, 1987)

The rise of the Nation state in the Mekong Basin in 19<sup>th</sup> Century delivered extreme effects to the Phu Tai ethnic group. The effects caused new management form of the Phu Tai ethnic group under the policy on Nation state citizenship. The policy of Nation state settlement was launched through an assimilation of cultures, which was used as a tool to create Nation state citizens and a modern state (Leepreecha, 2002; Chiangthong, 2004)

The result of cultural assimilation provided unexpected effects for the Phu Tai in Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. The effects extremely hit the Phu Tai's political ideals, and they have been implanted a political ideal of Nation state until they become citizen of the Nation state. Several studies demonstrated political transformation of the Phu Tai which occurred during Nation state construction, such as Thongsawangrat. T. (1997), Warangrat (1981), and Saipanth and Duangviseth (1998), which mentioned

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The Phu Tai Transnational Ethnic Community, "Phu-Tai": Post-Nationalist ideology of Ethnicity".

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the changes and reconstruction beliefs, livings, and the performing cultures of the Phu Tai ethnic groups who settled in the Nation states. These changes resulted in different characteristics of Phu Tai in the Nation states.

Under a new form of relationship between the Nation state and the ethnic group was presented as a detribalization policy, the variety of Phu Tai culture has been slowly terminated (Soontornpasat, 2005) Charles F. Keyes (1992) gave an opinion regarding this circumstance by stating that it is impossible to consider ethnicity with a single view because characteristics of ethnicity now are in a form of Heteroglossia. The ethnic groups have merged into the Nation states that they settled in. The Nation states have invaded the ethnic groups' livelihoods, and assimilated them into a single culture in order to create the Nation state's main culture. However, this process has provided a variety of ethnical consciousness, which were created by the different experiences of the relationship between the Nation state and the ethnic group, to the ethnic people (Reung-Aramsri, 2007) Finally, ethnical consciousness is rooted within the ethnic groups who are either declared as an ethnic group and Nation state citizen (Malkki, 1997)

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the reassembly of transnational ethnic communities, the research used the reassembly of the Phu Tai as a case study. Qualitative methodology was implemented in research design with a case study approach which facilitated to access in-depth information on transnational ethnic network assembly. Data collection was conducted through the "Multi-Sited" method in accordance with George E. Marcus's guideline (1995). Data collection started at the 6<sup>th</sup> World Phu Tai Fair, and then followed the informants to various areas in order to understand process of creating the Phu Tai transnational community network and understand signs and symbols that indicate traces of relationships within society and fundamental connection that bonded the Phu Tai into the Phu Tai transnational community network.

## RESULTS

### **The Phu Tai Transnational ethnic Community: The Post-Heteroglossia**

Amid the establishment of the modern nation states and the assimilation of ethnic differences to become citizens of the nation states, it resulted in the Phu Tai, who had lived as communities in the Mekong Basin, has been separated the nation state borders. The establishment of the nation state borders disconnected ethnical relationships among the Phu Tai communities. Relationships between the nation states had been constructed with fear. Relationships among ethnic groups were observed strictly by the nation states due to colonization and the Cold War.

The phenomenon of the Phu Tai reassembly to become the transnational community has been considered as a new form of ethnic assembly occurred in the Mekong region after the end of Cold War and the nation state era that separated people into citizens of various nation states. The reassembly of the Phu Tai started in 2012. Ethnical event entitled "The Phu Tai World Day" and "The International Phu Tai Day" was set up. These events were organized with expectation to reassemble the Phu Tai communities who have lived in different places, and performed the ethnical empowerment of the Phu Tai who shared the same ethnical ideal.

The Phu Tai World Day and the International Phu Tai Day were setup as a meeting between the Phu Tai from various areas such as from Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and China to restart their relationships. The events also presented academic exhibition regarding the Phu Tai ethnic group and cultural exhibition to visitors who interested in the Phu Tai (Chaikhan, 2013). A main purpose of both the Phu Tai events was to create ethnical network among the Phu Tai, and conserve a unique culture of the Phu Tai. In addition, tourism purpose was also included in order to promote the Phu Tai identity, and promoted cultural tourism in Thailand to international-scale tourism.

Moreover, another important purpose of the Phu Tai events was to convince the Phu Tai to participate in local resources management, and empower political participation, and form the cooperation networks among the Phu Tai in order to promote academic cooperation and trade and investment in the Mekong Sub-region (The International Phu Tai Day, 2013)

In addition, reassembly of the Phu Tai had caused activities regarding ethnicity. For instance, a survey of tourism route visiting the Phu Tai in foreign countries, making merit and donating stuffs to the poor Phu Tai people in foreign countries, cultural exchange, or even online communication network among the Phu Tai in different countries. Those activities produced empowerment among the Phu Tai until they

were able to establish association named “the World Phu Tai Association” which drove the Phu Tai activities empirically and negotiated with the state agencies about financial supports.

To understand the assembly of the Phu Tai ethnic group after the establishment of the nation state that disconnect interrelationship among the Phu Tai communities, it was important to review mechanism and tools implemented in the ethnic assembly. The tool used by the Phu Tai to reassemble ethnic communities was the new narratives which were constructed through an integration between legends, folklore, and academic research in order to bond the Phu Tai ethnic communities from various states and share ethnical sense under the same transnational ethnic community.

### **The Transnational Narrative: Tool of Transnational Group Assembly**

If considering and understanding the reassembly of transnational Phu Tai ethnic groups based on new ethnical context focusing on separation of the state citizenship, one important issue that should be taken account to explain the transnational assembly was the tools that used to assemble people whose were different characteristics. The tools were constructed from the experiences of the Phu Tai people that related to the nation state. This study found that the new narratives, which were a mix between traditional legends and academic ethnicity research, were used to shape ethnical consciousness of the Phu Tai. This new narratives were considered as the narratives on transnational network which facilitated the transnational reassembly of the Phu Tai ethnic group.

### **Traditional Legends: a Traditional Mixture**

Traditional legends were the mixture of narratives on transnational network. Traditional legends were generally presented in a form of the Phu Tai origin history, and traditional legends were told from individuals to individuals orally without any empirical evidences. Contents in the Phu Tai traditional legends were mostly about history of Phu Tai origins, the movements, or the first settlement of Phu Tai community. These legends performed as a historical record in which were important tools for the Phu Tai to be aware of their traditional culture especially about the origins and relationships with the Phu Tai from different places.

The studies on history of the Phu Tai origins through traditional legends mostly found that structure of the narrative covers the statements mentioned about the movement and the settlement of the Phu Tai. Name of their Phu Tai groups were generally referred to origins that they came from. For instance,

*“Phu Tai Vang is the Phu Tai group who came from ViangVang (Vang city) in Lao PDR. They came here by different ways and different times”* [Mr.Somsuk (Alias name), interviewed on Jan 9, 2016]

*“I listened my grandparents who told that...Phu Tai Sepone at Hong Saeng Ka Village came from Sepone town...they came here during the Anuwong Prince War and the civil war in Vientiane...”* [Mrs.Pond, interviewed on Jan 8, 2016]

Regarding the movement of the Phu Tai and name of their ethnic groups, the study found there were 2 significant issues. First, to identify themselves about which places they came from, so their origin name was later used to refer their groups. For instance, the Phu Tai group settled in Panna Nikon district, SakonNakorn province. They called themselves “the Phu Tai Vang” because they came from Vang city in Lao PDR. “Phu Tai Kapong” refers to the Phu Tai group who moved from Kapong city, and Phu Tai Katak refers to the Phu Tai group who moved from Katak city to Non Hom Sub-district, SakonNakorn Province. Second, names of their ethnic groups were set in order to allow the descendants realizing on their background, and were able to visit their relatives who were still living at places of origin.

*“...Ancestors told us...if we are welcomed to visit our relatives, if we had a chance. They would tell us where our relative stayed...”* [Mr.Decha(Alias name), interviewed on Feb 5, 2016]

*“...I promised to my grandparents...if I had much money, I will take them to visit their siblings. I accidentally found information about tour program to Sepone town. I then decided to join group because I’m Phu Tai Sepone as well. I heard we came from this town...”* [Mr.Natee(Alias name), interviewed on Mar 25, 2016]

The traditional legends which were told by the Phu Tai in each places were aimed to describe history of their ethnic origins. In addition, traditional legends functioned directly to the transnational assembly of the Phu Tai ethnic group. Traditional legends of the Phu Tai were narratives that presented the existence of their ethnic identity beyond the modern nation state matters. Additionally, the Phu Tai attempted to connect their groups with other Phu Tai communities through kinship system, which was presented through names of origin. Therefore, it is to say that traditional legends were used as a bonding tool to connect the Phu Tai who resided in different nation states.

### Research on Ethnicity: a Scientific Mixture

Besides traditional legends that used as a tool to connect the Phu Tai transnationally, research on ethnicity was another element that created power to explain the truth empirically especially the telling of history by academic approach and modern record.

The studies on the history of the Phu Tai ethnic firstly were recorded in early 1967. The records were written by the Phu Tai people who received education and interested in the history of their ethnicity. Moreover, the record was an attempt to elevate narratives and legends academically, and it was worth for all the Phu Tai as a statement from interview below.

*"Have you read Ajarn's book?...who wrote about the Phu Tai Renu. You have torread it. It is a very good book. I suggest you to read this book because I'm afraid I cannot give a good information to you"* [Mrs. Ngampit, interviewed on Feb 14, 2016]

*"I'm afraid I tell you wrong. Read Ajarn's book, don't you? The book has information you need. It is better than I tell..."* [Mr. Kajorn, interviewed on Feb 14, 2016]

According to interviews and phenomena, it was clear that academic works were used to upgrade traditional legends or myths to be the ethnic work pieces that powered to explain history better than the oral legends because these academic work pieces were recorded and referenced systemically.

Research on the Phu Tai ethnic in Thailand firstly conducted by Erik Seidenfaden (1943) in research article entitled "The So and The Phuthai", while Thai researchers were interesting in research on the Phu Tai ethnic around 1977. Group of Master student from Srinakarinwirot University at Mahasarakham Province conducted research on the Phu Tai ethnic. The research focused on culture of the Phu Tai such as languages, rituals, mode of production, history, habitation, ecological system, and ethnical wisdom. These cultural elements were divided into 6 elements which were cultural characteristics, geographical boundaries, political organizations, governance, languages, eco-adaptation, and community structure (Prachuabmoh, 2004)

In addition, those research tried to create a map connecting the Phu Tai groups who lived in the Mekong Basin. A map was created by referring relationships among the Phu Tai groups and history which was supported by academic method.

The creation of story connecting the transnational Phu Tai ethnic groups through research on ethnicity was an attempt to create the truth about transnational ethnical relationships. The story reproduced the truth about bonding among the Phu Tai groups in the Mekong Basin through written language and academic methodology. These truths had power to explain the history of the Phu Tai, and it had more reliability than traditional legends.

*"...I follow by the book. I read it and decide to catch a bus to this place. I am the Phu Tai Wang. I want to know about by origin, so I went to Nayom Village in Weelabuli. In the book, this place once is a location of Wang town, and then rename to Weelabuli town..."* [Mr. Somsak, interviewed on Feb 14, 2016]

*"I follow the book as well...as per Ajarn located the town, so I want to know where exactly is. I think it is right as the book wrote. If I do not have Ajarn's book. I do not know how to start"* [Ms. Daw, interviewed on Feb 14, 2016]

### The Transnational Narrative: Tool of Assembly the Phu Tai Transnational Community

The emergence of ethnic studies on the Phu Tai ethnic group resulted in the awakening of the Phu Tai people in Thailand especially after 1997. Localism trend was introduced to Thai society after the Thailand economic crisis (Tom Yum Kung crisis). Localism caused the Phu Tai people interested in their own history. Moreover, cultural tourism and ASEAN community were conditions that contributed the Phu Tai tried to create an ethnic network in order to gain an advantage in marketing in the cultural tourism.

Due to a circumstance above, research and traditional legends on the Phu Tai were widely acknowledged especially after a foundation of the World Phu Tai Association in Thailand. The association had been established in order to reassemble the Phu Tai who lived across countries, and academic research and traditional legends used as tools of reassembly. However, an attempt of reassembly the Phu Tai was unsuccessful, since academic research and traditional legends were less effective in connecting the Phu Tai from different nation states.

A cause of less effectiveness in connecting the Phu Tai is revealed. Traditional legends used to empower the Phu Tai were told and reproduced by the Phu Tai in Thailand only, while there were no evidences about traditional legends which related to the Phu Tai groups who lived in other nation states.

However, a reason of missing details of the Phu Tai from other nation states was raised up. Since traditional legends mostly focused on their own origins, so the Phu Tai who had never moved from their own places of origin were not mentioned.

*"...Before the Phu Tai World Day started, we tried to contact the Phu Tai groups from several places. However, the problem is...although we knew where the Phu Tai groups located in, such as where the Phu Tai Sepone is or where the Phu Tai Wang is, there were no responses from them. We knew about them, but they had never known about us..."* [Mr.Piti(Alias name), interview on Jan 9, 2016]

Due to problem on traditional legends and research on ethnicity that conducted only in Thailand, the World Phu Tai Association committee tried to reassemble the Phu Tai ethnic groups, so the new Phu Tai narratives were created. New narratives were told through a journey exploring the Phu Tai origins. Additionally, new narrative was produced by oral conversation of the Phu Tai who lived in various nation states.

A journey to construct the ethnic network was a new phenomenon that led to create new narratives. Structure of new narratives focused on traditional legends or myth of "the Tan", which was used as a core of the new narratives, since the Tan legend was shared as a collective belief in every Phu Tai communities.

The creation of new narratives caused the redefinition of the Tan. The Tan was reinterpreted with 2 meanings. 1) The Tan referred to an angel, and 2) the Tan referred to the city named Tan City or Tan Kingdom. Citizen of Tan city called themselves "Tai". A word was combined with another word "Phu" which meant people. Regarding the combination, a word "Phu Tai" was used in the narratives. The Phu Tai meant Phu Tai people who descended from the ancient Tan Kingdom.

New narratives referred Tan City as a core structure in explaining relationships among the Phu Tai who lived in various nation states, and it also produced collective consciousness among the Phu Tai. New narratives became key condition in convincing the Phu Tai participated in ethnic events in Thailand.

However, the explanation of the Tan through the Phu Tai new narratives provided a surprise to ethnologists. The Tan was not only a traditional belief among the Phu Tai ethnic groups, but the Tan also appeared in other ethnic groups such as Tai Daeng (Red Tai), Tai Dam (Black Tai). Therefore, Tai Daeng and Tai Dam ethnic groups were included in the narratives, and claimed as Phu Tai people. These ethnic groups also were invited to participate in the Phu Tai World Day and the International Phu Tai Day. However, some academicians questioned about the existence of Tai Dam that included in the Phu Tai ethnic communities as below.

*"I thought ethnic discrimination among Phu Tai was a narrowed attitude. I considered the Phu Tai as a nation as same as Thai nation. The nation consisted of various descends such as Thai, Chinese, Lao, Indian, and etc. The Phu Tai nation as well, there were a variety of descend in Phu Tai nation such as Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, Chuang. They shared the same belief of Tan."* [Mr.Supap (Alias name), interview on Jan 9, 2016]

The presentation of the Phu Tai narratives to connect the Phu Tai community was accepted by a well-known documentary writer named TeerapapLohitkul, who expressed that...

*"MR.Supap's writing style may become new approach of data collection. The approach allows us to extend state of knowledge on ethnicity and other academic fields such as archaeology, geography, and etc. This writing style will be presented through the facts, and analyze the facts with creative method. Fact and presenting method should be focused equally if you want to write a good documentary paper. Documentary is a part of entertainment which is presented by fact, not a fiction. Mr. Supap's work is in a middle of fiction and academic."* (TeerapapLohitkul, 2013)

A new style of documentary was presented based on a fact of the Phu Tai transnational assembly, and was able to assemble the Phu Tai widely. The documentary was also a suitable tool that connected people amid the diversified contexts, and enable to explain the legitimacy of assembly the people better than previous studies.

The occurrence of new narratives also affected the change in explaining the Phu Tai characteristics. New narratives also caused a creation of new ideology among the Phu Tai that was created by various groups of the Phu Tai. Ecological characteristics of the Phu Tai were able to explain as follows.

1) Phu Tai Dam or the black Tai, who lived in Vietnam, Laos, northeastern Thailand, and Phetchaburi Province, was called Lao Song or Lao Song Dam.

2) Phu Tai Kaw or the white Tai, referred to Tai people in Vietnam.

3) Phu Tai Daeng or the red Tai, who lived in both Vietnam and Laos, was called the Pu Tai Laeng or Phu Tai Daeng.

Creation of ideology through the reassembly of the Phu Tai had caused different names of the Phu Tai such as Phu Tai, Phu Thai, Pu Tai, Pu Dai or Bu Dai, Pu Tai or Bu Tai), Pu Tay, Old Lao, Lao Lue, and Phu Lao. Moreover, the Phu Tai shared some common characteristics such as languages in the Tai-Lao language families, eating sticky rice, residential style, religious which respected spirits, respecting the ancestors, worshipping the Tan, and some unique ritual in wedding ceremony. However, key common characteristic of the Phu Tai was the awareness of being the Phu Tai.

Definition of the Phu Tai caused ideology of the Phu Tai. The Phu Tai, in a new definition, was not only one ethnic group, but it also counted for various groups of the Phu Tai who lived in the Mekong Basin. Therefore, meaning of the Phu Tai referred to both ethnic name and cultural characteristics which focused on culture, tradition, and way of life mixed with the ecology of the nation. The Phu Tai, therefore, had a broader meaning than a definition of the Phu Tai in term of ethnicity.

### **Conclusion: The Assembly of the Phu Tai Transnational Community**

“The assembly of transnational ethnic” is not only an ethnical phenomenon taking place with unspecific purpose, but it is also a phenomenon associated with a set of knowledge which refers to the legitimacy of the group assembly.

The changes on knowledge set about the Phu Tai narratives offer a chance to manage relationships and assembly of the Phu Tai from various origins. Therefore, a set of relationships becomes key hidden condition that presents beyond limitation of state boundary, which the states once used to restrict people.

The changes in the Phu Tai narratives, therefore, represent the change of knowledge set which leads to the changes of principle regulating the truth. Moreover, the changes of narratives result in the following changes in other narratives which are depending on its interpretation. For instance, a case of Tai Daeng and Tai Dam ethnic groups which later are included in the Phu Tai ethnic group. It is not a crucial matter to discuss about the existence of Tai Daeng and Tai Dam in the Phu Tai ethnic family because the inclusion has already been explained by the truths which are created through the dominated narratives

However, a set of fact constructed through the new narratives may not exist forever because there are many sets of fact and knowledge on the Phu Tai ethnic group. It is depending on which knowledge set would have power to explain the truths, or have a stronger power relation among other knowledge sets amid the relationships between people that are negotiated all the time.

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