Figure 1: *A Flower Hmong bride from Nam Khat commune, Mu Cang Chai district, Yen Bai province, wearing a headdress, long shirt, vest, skirt, and waist band. Her long indigo-dyed hemp apron hangs over the front of her skirt. Acording to Flower Hmong traditions, the red skirt bottom symbolizes happiness and protection. Photo by Tran Thi Thu Thuy*

Textiles of Vietnam's Ethnic Groups

Tran Thi Thu Thuy reports on four ethnic textile traditions and contemporary textile-making practices

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has been especially interested in collecting and researching the textiles of Vietnam's fifty-four ethnic groups since the museum opened its doors. After language, textiles – particularly costume – constitute the primary basis for distinguishing among ethnic groups. Textiles provide an important means of identifying traditions shared by groups speaking languages of different families, living in different parts of Vietnam or elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

From its establishment in October 1995 and its public opening in November 1997 until today, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has gathered a relatively large textile collection representing all ethnic groups in Vietnam. In only two years, the museum researchers travelled to most of Vietnam's provinces to research and collect objects from the different ethnic groups (including more than 100 sub-groups). The textiles are displayed in the museum, showing the adaptations to the specific environmental contexts of each group, the methods of cultivating fibre, the technologies of weaving and design, aesthetic concepts (such as colour and decoration), and cultural and social values.

I have chosen the textiles of four groups with different traditions to give an idea of the range, from the most ancient practices to more modern technologies adopted by diverse ethnic groups

In this article, I focus on some specific kinds of textiles displayed in the museum. Each ethnic group in Vietnam has its own traditional textiles, so the collection is very diverse and abundant. There are many similarities and differences with regard to material, technique, and design from one group to another. I have chosen the textiles of four groups with different technologies to give an idea of the range, from the most ancient practices (such as the use of bark cloth) to more modern technologies adopted by diverse ethnic groups (including loom and textile equipment ranging from simple to

sophisticated). I also point out some of the textile traditions shared among these four ethnic groups, or with other groups in Asia.

The Hmong

The Hmong have been present in Vietnam since the 18th century, with 558,053 people living in the highlands and border regions according to the 1989 census (Huy:69). They live on steep and high mountains in the most northern provinces and in the northern part of central Vietnam.[1] The Hmong include local groups: Hmong Du (Black) Hmong, Hmong Dawb (White Hmong), Hmong Njua (Green Hmong), Hmong Leenh (Flower Hmong)[2], Hmong Shi (Red Hmong)[3], Hmong Sua (Chinese Hmong)[4] and Na Mieo[5]. Most cultivate dry fields and practise shifting cultivation, but some cultivate wet rice paddies. The village is a community of neighbours, but lineage relationships have maintained an important position. Families are patrilineal, with virilocal residence. Symbolic "marriage by capture" is practised in many places (Dang:291).

Most Hmong garments are made of hemp. Men wear shirts and loose trousers, while women wear skirts, blouses, aprons, and hats. Special items have symbolic significance for weddings, funerals, and festivals. For her wedding, a woman of the Flower Hmong must wear a hemp skirt with the colour red at the bottom because red is the protective and colour of happiness (figure 1). She wears this skirt only once in her life, but keeps it until she dies to wear again in the afterlife.

Cloth is also a unique property that a girl brings with her when she gets married. Her loom is a gift from her husband after their wedding. A Hmong woman never sells her loom, and she keeps it until she dies. In the winter, if there is a special important guest

[1] The Hmong live in the provinces of Cao Bang, Ha Giang, Yen Bai, Lao Cai, Son La, Lai Chau, Thai Nguyen, Bac Can, Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An.

[2] In Vietnam, there is a local group called Hmong Leenh. In Hmong language, Leenh does not mean Flower, but because there are many designs in this group's textile, in Vietnamese ethnological documents, Leenh is translated as Flower.

[3] In Hmong language, Shi does not mean Red, but it is translated as Red in Vietnamese ethnological documents, which I follow.

[4] Sua means Chinese in the Hmong language.

[5] The language and customs of Na Mieo are very different from other Hmong local groups. It is another branch of the Mieo group.

visiting and sleeping in the house, the husband will choose one of his wife's most beautiful skirts to give to the guest as a blanket.

In the winter, if there is a special important guest visiting and sleeping in the house, the husband will choose one of his wife's most beautiful skirts to give to the guest as a blanket.

Hmong shamans do not normally wear special costumes, but the higher-level shamans use a black cloth to cover their face when performing ritual ceremonies. In some areas, Hmong shamans wear a red head-cloth in a cockscomb shape.[6] This will help the shaman to have more power.

The Hmong are well-known for weaving hemp fibre, with the exception of the Chinese Hmong and Na Mieo who weave cotton. From ancient times until now, growing hemp has been contributing towards the self-sufficient economy of each family. For the Hmong, hemp is not only the main material for weaving garments, but also serves as a symbol of longevity, and expresses the connections between partners. Loose hemp fibre is even used in shamanic funeral rites, where it symbolizes the connections of the deceased to the ancestors and the afterlife.

Depending on the weather in each area, Hmong plant hemp in the middle of February or March, and harvest occurs in June and July. The processing is done by hand. First, the women break the hemp stalks in the middle and pull off the outer layer, which contains the hemp fibre. The remaining stalk is discarded. The loose fibre is then tied into small bunches and pounded in a mortar for about half an hour. This eliminates knots and makes the fibre stronger and more flexible. Next, the worker wraps the mass of loose fibre around her waist and drawing one strand of fibre at a time, she begins the work of joining the individual fibres into a continuous length. The fibres are joined end to end with a simple twist rather than a full knot. The continuous filament is wound loosely by hand into balls. Using a large hand-turned wheel, the worker plies together the filaments from four of these balls to make a single plied strand of yarn. The plied yarn is wound into balls, and boiled in water mixed with ash. Following this, the yarn is brought to a nearby stream to be washed, formed into skeins, and dried in the sun.

[6] This belief is based on a legend about how a chicken brought about the proper sequence for the appearance of the sun and moon. The chicken was granted a red comb, and chickens became a sacrificial animal for humans. The red in the skirt symbolizes the colour of the cockscomb.

The boiling is repeated two more times. Some beeswax is added to the last boiling to make the yarn whiter, smoother, and more durable.

The Hmong loom is a body-tension (or back-strap) loom. The long warp is wound onto the warp beam, which is mounted between two upright wooden posts about 150 cm tall (figure 2). The cloth beam, instead of being fixed to a frame as in the Thai or Muong frame loom, is attached to a backstrap. The weaver sits on a bench and applies tension to the warp by leaning back against the backstrap, which is often made of water buffalo hide. Hmong weavers do not use a foot treadle system to raise and lower the heddles as the Muong or Thai do. Instead, a lever attached to the heddles is activated by a rope tied to one leg of the weaver. When the weaver pulls her foot back, the heddles are raised. To lower the heddles, she slides her foot forward. This system is identical to that used in Korean and Japanese looms (Broudy 1979:114, Roth 1977:93, Nagano and Hiroi 1999:fig.40). Hmong women weave whenever they are free, but they normally concentrate their weaving in September. By this time of year, the new crop of hemp fibre has been processed; labor is not much needed in the rice fields; and new garments can be prepared for the upcoming New Year Festival in late November or early December (lunar calendar). The women weave inside or outside the house, depending on the weather. When using the loom indoors, the weaver has to tie the warp beam to a post inside the home; outside, the loom may be attached to a tripod.

Figure 2: *A Flower Hmong weaver works at her loom in Mo De commune, Mu Cang Chai district, Yen Bai province. The rope tied around her right foot is used to raise the heddles. Photo by Vo Mai Phuong*

The Hmong use a large variety of different technologies (weaving, embroidery, appliqué, and batik) to decorate their textiles. They are perhaps the only group in Vietnam to use so many different techniques at once.

Batik *(nthu taz)*. Hmong women employ a wax-resist technique (batik) to decorate their clothing. To create their batik patterns, they use a pen-like tool *(da suz taz)* of various shapes and sizes. The point of the pen is made from a piece of copper that is folded over and

attached to a piece of bamboo (hot wax, known as *chaz mur*, is held in the copper reservoir). The pen is dipped in hot wax, and its tip is applied to the cloth. When all the wax is applied to create the intended designs, the cloth is dipped numerous times into vats of indigo, which dyes the cloth a dark, rich blue. Later, the cloth is boiled and the wax melts away, revealing the design in white against the indigo blue background. If they want to have yellow motifs, they paint over the white motifs with a dye made from the root of a forest tree. Depending on the decorative motifs, the size of the pen varies: small ones for flowers, medium ones for fringe designs, large ones for straight lines, circles, and spirals. Most of the patterns consist of rows of small motifs. The most important of these is a round spiral; Hmong describe this as a snail motif and relate it to legends about their history.

Cross-stitch embroidery *(xous taz)*. The Hmong women produce their own silk thread *(xur cangz)*, which is favoured for embroidery because it is durable and beautiful. They always carry thread with them, and embroider at any place, any time when they are free. The embroidery technique is very complicated, with motifs created by sewing many small cross-stitches in different shapes on the back of the cloth, so that the motifs appear on the front, contrary to the method of embroidering among other groups.

Appliqué *(txous ntauz)*. There are many different kinds of appliqué; the simplest of which is cutting the cloth into small geometrically shaped pieces, and sewing them to the garments. The most difficult kind is that of sewing together many differently coloured layers of cloth.

The Hmong often appliqué cloth for women's skirts, to the sleeves and collars of men's shirts or vests, and especially for children's caps and the back of old men's shirts. They believe that the spirit of a child is kept in the cap, so they decorate it with special motifs to protect the child's spirit from evil. On the back of old men's shirts, they always appliqué two crossed sticks as symbol of longevity.

In recent years, in areas where Thai people also live, Hmongs have increasingly adopted handwoven Thai cotton cloth, which they buy and make into their own garments. In areas bordering China, Hmongs adopt Chinese industrial cloth (including batik) and use imported woolen Chinese thread for embroidery. Despite these changes,

almost all Hmongs still grow hemp and practise weaving, batik, cross-stitch embroidery, and appliqué because of their traditional beliefs. The garments produced with these techniques are needed because they believe their ancestors will not accept them when they die unless they are dressed in traditional clothing.

The Muong

The Muong speak a language belonging to the Viet-Muong language group (Austroasiatic language family). Numbering some 914,596 people, according to the 1989 census (Be:115), they live in valleys in the northern provinces of Hoa Bihn, Thanh Hoa, Phu Tho, and Son La. There are many indications that Viet and Muong in the past were one, and that together they comprise one of the indigenous groups of Vietnam (Bihn:73).

Traditionally, Muong women weave cotton and silk cloth to meet the needs of the family. Muong farmers plant cotton in February, and harvest it in May. After the harvest, the cotton is dried in the sun during the day, and exposed to the dew at night until the cotton bolls are white and soft. Then, it is kept in a dry place until it is needed. The work of spinning and weaving cotton requires a number of steps. Different kinds of cotton are separated, and the seeds are removed; following which, the fibre is beaten into a fluff with a bowed string. The spinning of the thread is done on a spinning wheel. After spinning, the thread is wound onto bobbins using another wheel. Before weaving, the thread is dipped into rice starch, then dried, so that it will be more durable and easier to weave.

The Muong make dyes by using forest products such as the *pang* tree or stick-lac for red or the *vang that* tuber for yellow. If they want to have a black colour, they put red cloth into mud many times. If they want to bleach or whiten cloth, they use the juice of the papaya fruit *(Carica papaya)* or the fruit of a type of mahogany *(Meliaceae)*.

Hmongs believe their ancestors will not accept them when they die unless they are dressed in traditional clothing.

A frame loom with fixed warp and cloth beams (figure 3) is used by the Muong. This loom uses a treadle system to raise the heddles in two shafts. There are two versions of the Muong loom, one used for plain cloth, and the other for supplementary weft weaving. The loom for supplementary weft has added string pattern heddles in the back of the two shafts.

Figure 3: *A Muong woman weaves plain white cotton cloth on her frame loom. She uses foot peddles to raise and lower the heddle shafts. Photo by Vi Van An*

The Muong weave their plain cloth for garments and the supplementary weft cloth for blankets, mattress covers, and the decorative waisbands of skirts. Muong women are not fancily dressed. Most parts of the costume are traditionally made of plain white or black cotton cloth. Only the silk waistbands, which are woven separately but sewn to the tops of skirts show many colours and motifs. A weaver's creativity and skill are particularly evident in these supplementary weft waisbands. The most important motifs are animals (dragons, phoenixes, frogs, tortoises, fish, spiders), plants (lotus seeds, eggplants), and geometric patterns. The techniques and decorative motifs are transmitted by mothers to their daughters, the many different motifs identifying individuals, villages, and social classes. Formerly, the ability to weave the decorative waistbands was one criterion Muong used to evaluate the skill and taste of a weaver.

The Muong have different costumes for weddings, funerals, and shaman's ceremonies. At funerals, they use cloth with a dragon scale motif to cover the coffin; symbolically, the coffin is a dragon that takes that spirit of the dead to the afterlife. Cloth is also given as a gift at

funerals and weddings. At funerals, you can tell what the relationships between the participants and the deceased are by the garments they wear. The full formal costume consists of three layers, with a black full-length wrap-around skirt underneath, a white blouse, and a black robe over all. For everyday wear, just the skirt and blouse are worn. In recent times, many women have purchased pastel commercial cloth for making their blouses (figure 4).

Today, in many places, Muong women have a tendency to use shorter waisbands or new materials such as cotton or industrial cloth, because weaving waistbands are very difficult and require much time. According to custom, at weddings and funerals, Muong women have to wear dresses with silk waistbands. This has kept waistband weaving alive and many women have become professionals who weave waistbands, to sell in the market.

Figure 4: *A Muong woman from Dich Giao commune, Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province in her everyday dress. She wears a square white hand-woven head-cloth and a blouse made of commercial cloth. For informal wear the waistband of her skirt is worn at waist level rather than under the arms as in formal dress where it would also be topped with a robe. Photo by Nguyen Van Huy*

The Ta Oi

The Ta Oi speak a language of the Mon-Khmer language group (Austroasiatic family). They live in provinces of western Quang Tri and western Thua Thien-Hue (Thau:164). Their total population of 26,044 people (1989 census) includes the local groups, Pa Co, and Pa Hi (Hung:153).[7]

The Ta Oi loom is a simple body-tension type, like those used in parts of Indonesia and among most ethnic groups speaking Mon-Khmer and Austronesian languages in the Central Highlands of Vietnam (figure 5). It does not have a fixed frame like the Muong loom or a bench which is part of the Hmong loom. The weaver sits directly on the ground; the warp passes around the cloth beans in a continuous loop, approximately 120 cm long. Only when the warp is put under tension, do the different pieces of the loom take their proper positions. The tension is obtained by the weaver leaning against the backstrap. The other end of the loom is braced directly with her feet or suspended from a crossbeam of the house; thus, the weaver becomes part of the loom. The heddle rod is lifted by hand to create the shed, allowing the weft threads to be passed through the warp using a bamboo shuttle or a large needle. While the looms of other groups in northern Vietnam (including the Muong, and Hmong) only

Figure 5: *A Ta Oi weaver works at her loom in A Dot commune, A Luoi district, Thua Thien-Hue province. She inserts the weft threads through the warp using a large needle. Plastic beads have already been added to the weft yarn. Photo by Vu Hong Thuat*

[7] The Ta Oi have other names including Toi Oi, Pa Co, Ta Uot, Kan Tua, Pa Hi.

Figure 6: *A Ta Oi woman from A Dot commune, A Luoi district, Thua Thien-Hue province. Her blouse and skirt are decorated with plastic bead designs. Photo by Vu Hong Thuat*

produce cloth 30-40 centimetres wide, with this loom the Ta Oi can produce cloth up to a metre wide.

Along with their neighbours the Co Tu, the Ta Oi have a tradition of weaving black cotton with coloured stripes in the warp. The most distinctive Ta Oi designs are made with beads woven into the cloth. Formerly, they shaped lead into small beads, threaded them onto the weft thread, and wove them into the cloth. However, lead is very heavy and poisonous, so now they use a new material, plastic. For the Ta Oi, cloth decorated with lead or plastic beads has very high value, as it is a symbol of wealth and beauty. Normally, the Ta Oi wear clothing with simple colours. Men wear loincloths. Women are dressed in short wrap-around skirts, topped with a blouse (figure 6). For worshiping ancestors, weddings, festivals, and New Year celebrations they wear costumes decorated with lead or plastic beads. At weddings, the bride is given cloth decorated with beads along with other objects such as gold, silver, livestock or gongs. Cloth with lead or plastic beads is also used to decorate the communal house and the place of worship.

Today, in addition to the cloth they weave themselves, the Ta Oi buy cloth woven in Lao communities across the border in Laos, or they wear commercial garments like those of the Viet.

The Bru-Van Kieu

The Bru-Van Kieu population in Vietnam is 40,132 (Hung:18) and includes many local groups: the Bru, Van Kieu, Mang-Koong, Tri, and Khua. They live in the Central Highlands in the provinces of Quang Tri, Quang Binh, and Thua Thien. They speak a Mon-Khmer language (Austroasiatic language family), close to the languages of the Ta Oi and Co Tu. They are one of the groups who have lived the longest in the Central Highlands (Dien:126).

The Bru-Van Kieu are notable for preserving the custom of making clothing (including shirts and loincloths for men and wrap-around skirts, blouses, and headdresses for women) from the bark of the *amung* tree (*Antiaris toxicaria*). Using tree bark for garments is the most archaic technique used in Vietnam. Today it exists only among a few groups such as the Xo Dang, Bru-Van Kieu, and the Muong of Thanh Hoa province. This technique represents an important and unique heritage.

Figure 7: *Bru-Van Kieu men from Ta Rung commune, Huong Hoa district, Quang Tri province. The men use a knife to cut the tree bark into a length of cloth. Photo by Pham Loi*

Antiaris toxicaria is a straight tree, with white bark that has two layers: the outer bark (0.3cm) and the thick, strong and fibrous inner bark (0.6cm). The tree grows in forests or along streams. Bru-Van Kieu men go into the forest to find *amung* trees only when they need clothing. The selected tree has to be big enough for one garment. The men first cut any small trees away from under the *amung*. They plait a small bamboo piece about 20x20cm and hang it at the base of the *amung* as a symbol of ownership.

Before cutting down the *amung*, they have to hold a ceremony to worship the spirit of the tree. A boiled chicken, a bottle of wine, and a handful of sticky rice in a bamboo basket are placed at the base of the tree as offerings to implore the tree spirit not to bring misfortune to humans. If for some reason they have not prepared an offering before cutting down a tree, they take a forest vine and tie it to a tree branch or clump of grass, promising the tree spirit that they will hold a ceremony when they have enough offerings. They only untie this vine when they have repaid their debt to the tree spirit.

The tree is cut down about one metre above the ground. To produce a man's shirt or loincloth requires one section of tree; a woman's blouse, skirt or headdress requires two pieces. The sections of trunk are soaked in water for ten days to release the sap. They are dried, and a hole is dug about 30-40 cm deep. The trunk sections will be put in this hole for beating the bark to remove it from the tree. After beating around the top of the tree following the horizontal direction many times, the outer bark will be broken loose and can be pulled off. The inner bark becomes softer, and separates from the tree. When the thick and strong inner fibre can be pulled up and folded over about ten cm, they begin beating vertically at the top of the log. As the beating continuous, the entire layer of fibre is turned down the outside of the log and is eventually completely loosened and turned inside out. They then use a knife to cut the tree bark into a length of cloth (figure 7). A special kind of bamboo needle is used to sew bark cloth. Thread is made of rattan fibre or from the bark of jungle creepers. An eye is made in the bamboo needle by pounding it until its fibres open enough so that threads can be pulled through.

Bark cloth is made directly into a variety of items; these include skirts, vests (figure 8), loincloths, blankets, mosquito nets, baby-carriers, elephant and horse harnesses, and bags. Bark cloth is even

used to make coffins. The fibre may also be removed completely from the inner bark, then spun into cord and plaited by hand into coarse cloth. This represents a higher level of technology than beaten bark cloth.

Since 1975, except in remote areas, most Bru-Van Kieu no longer use bark cloth because they can buy woven cloth or trade for it with other ethnic groups. Now, Bru-Van Kieu men wear clothing similar to that worn by the Vietnamese, and the women wear clothing like the Lao people do.

Conclusion

The costumes and textiles of Vietnam's ethnic groups are abundant and diverse in material, form, colour, and decoration. They are a valuable cultural property that serves to identity the distinct culture of each ethnic group. Thus, researching, collecting, preserving, and exhibiting the textiles of different ethnic groups at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology are very important tasks that must be encouraged and promoted.

Figure 8: *A Bru-Van Kieu man from Ta Rung commune, Huong Hoa district, Quang Tri province. He wears a vest made of bark cloth. Photo by Pham Loi*

Textile products are primarily made by hand, aimed at meeting the needs of a self-supporting economy. The government and foreign organizations must have policies that support traditional craft in order to make full use of Vietnamese ethnic groups' capacities in textile production. By expanding the scope of these items from goods in a self-sufficient economy into trade and market commodities, the people benefit from increased employment opportunities.

Tran Thi Thu Thuy, a researcher, is also the co-author of various books on ethnic groups in Vietnam

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