

# DIGITAL PRESERVATION ON IDENTITY OF HILL TRIBES OF NORTHERN THAILAND.

Niracharapa Tongdhamachart<sup>1</sup> & Piangpen Tommanon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>*Suan Sunandha International School of Art, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand,*

*E-Mail: <sup>1</sup>Niracharapa.to@ssru.ac.th, <sup>2</sup>Piangpen.to@ssru.ac.th*

## ABSTRACT

Among the rural population of Thailand, hill tribes were considered disadvantaged and vulnerable group of society, being largely dependent on farming with low income and employment and poverty. Today, attention addressed a wide range of issues concerning hill tribe people, not only citizenship and land settlement issues but also quality of life, tradition and culture initiated by King Rama IX. The qualitative study was employed to study the identity of hill tribes of northern part of Thailand in Chiangrai province as a case study. Focus group, in-depth interviews, on site observations and reviewed documents were used to explore and experience their uniqueness and identity of hill tribe ethnic groups. It was found that hill tribes in Chiangrai included Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Yao or Mien, Hmong, and Karen migrated from Myanmar, Tibet and southern China. Each had their own history, culture and traditions, language, dressing and occupation and religion. However, animism was still their belief as God or guardian. Their identity needed to be preserved digitally in various platforms as digital archives. In this conjunction, issues of particular attention included the relationship among environment, social-economic, technology and education for sustainable development not only a tourism destination

**Key word:** ethnic group, hill tribe, identity, highland, virtual museum, digital archive, tribal

## INTRODUCTION

There were more than 6 million ethnic people in Thailand scattered nationwide (Kwanchewan,2006)). Ethnic groups had some disparities in economy, society and culture complementing geographical and natural resources. Ethnic group who live on highland especially in northern Thailand so-called hill tribe people. Most of whom lived in a very remote highland where it was hard to access. Around 1.2 hill tribe inhabited in 20 provinces and the largest hill tribal group was Karen around 46.15% followed by Hmong, and Lahu. Northern provinces like Chiang Mai had the largest hill tribal population (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2015). mHill tribes were considered the most disadvantaged tribal population due to limited access and infrastructure. They have distinctive linguistic and cultural backgrounds without national identity.

In addition to citizenship and land settlement issues, promotion of quality of life and welfare in highland development has been drawing attention. It was partly due to factors as the changing pattern of economic activities, growing acceptance of Thai language instruction in schools, exposure to modern knowledge and other religions like Buddhism and Christianity (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2015). As such their traditional ways of life did not always fit in with the present socio-economic and political conditions of the rest of the country, and a sense of individualism among youngsters. More Thai-speaking younger generations after having received education in Thai schools.

Therefore, their distinctive cultural and traditional way of life needed be preserved before it was assimilated to the present socio-economic condition of the present world.

### Review of the Literature

The Tribal Research Institute (2019) in Chiang Mai recognized 10 different hill tribes in Thailand. Since 19th century, the tribes living in the mountain ranges were the largest non-Buddhist group. In Thai official documents, the term *hill tribe (chao khao)* appeared in the 1960s (Hill Tribes, Wikipedia). "Highland Thais" recently designated groups inhabited in the mountainous areas.

Six major hill tribes in northern Thailand—the Akha, Karen, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, and Lisu with a combined population of around 1 million people known as highland members were driven out of China, Tibet, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam in the last 200 years. Thailand was home to only a few thousand hill tribe members at the turn of the 19th century and previously they looked different in terms of language, culture, dressing and religion. Until through efforts by King Rama IX, the tribes have been incorporated into Thai society.

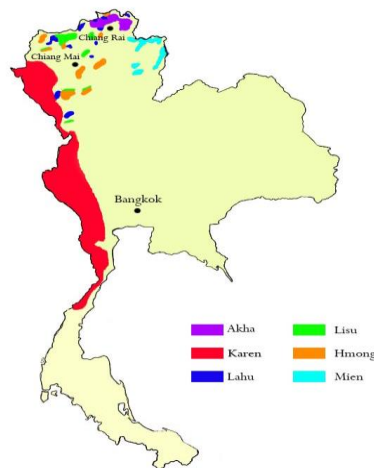


Fig 1: Hill Tribe in Thailand

<https://itdfinternational.org/village-life/from-far-to-near-how-6-hill-tribes-made-it-to-the-mountains-of-thailand/>

### Six Main Hill Tribe Groups of Northern Thailand

#### 1).Karen

The largest hill-tribe group arrived in the 17th century from Southern China and Myanmar. Around 1 million Karen lived in proximity to areas alongside the Thai-Myanmar border such as; Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and some in central Thailand. The largest concentration of Karen lived in northern provinces, around one third of Thailand's Karen population. The Sgaw or Pwakin-myaw were the largest group of Karen. But perhaps the most famous of all hill-tribe groups were the Padaung or long-neck, a small subgroup of the Karen. Padaung women wear columns of heavy brass rings around their necks to protect fierce animals and differentiated from other sub Karen groups. (Melissa Ah-Sing, 2016).



Fig 2: Long-neck Karen

<https://www.tnews.co.th/variety/393584/>

Unmarried Karen women wore loose V-necked shift dresses decorated with grass seeds at the seams. Married women wore blouses and skirts in bold red or blue. According to Karen tradition, unmarried couples were not supposed to touch each other, unless they intend to marry. Usually Karen husbands and wife stayed together for life. Adultery was considered a major taboo. Most of them were Buddhism, animism and Christian.

The Karen languages were difficult to categorize as to linguistic family. They differed from other Tibeto-Burman languages in certain aspects, and yet they did not seem to fit other classifications. Many linguists now referred to them as the Karenic group of the Tibeto-Burman family.

Karen or Paka-Kyaw were people known for their love of peace, tranquility, and solitude. They resided in remote forested as farmers and raised animals such as pigs and buffalos. The Karen traditionally built simple houses on stilts with bamboo. Interestingly size of the Karen groups adapted themselves while still retained their cultural identity. Traditionally the Karen collected food from the forest (bamboo shoots, mushrooms, wild vegetables, fish and small animals).

As many Karen hill tribe, people have been converted to Christianity. They celebrated Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter. During Easter.

Most Karen live in mountain villages and practice shifting cultivation of the rotating field type. They are primarily subsistence rice farmers since they lived in the lower mountains, they have interacted significantly with the Thai population (Greentails, 2014).

The Karen traditionally built simple houses on stilts with split bamboo for walls and floors; they kept chickens, pigs, buffalo, and cattle under the house. All traditional Karen houses were spacy used for preparing food, weaving, doing other work (Sawasdee.com, 2018). Moreover, Karen had various musical instruments such as buffalo horns, drums, harps and fiddle absorbed from Gobi desert in Mongolia

## 2) Hmong

Hmong people came to Thailand since 18th century and set up villages on the hills, or the lowlands. The Hmong or Meo were found widely in northern Thailand, and were also the most widespread minority group in southern China. Most Hmong lived in extended families in traditional houses with a roof descending almost to ground level. Blue Hmong women wore intricately embroidered pleated skirts decorated with bands of red, pink, blue and white. White Hmong women wear white skirts for special occasions and black baggy trousers for everyday use. All the Hmong were famous for their chunky silver jewelry (Nancy, 2015). Men wore soft felt, with long sleeves running down to the wrists with embroidered design. The pants would be of the Chinese "guay" style with a piece of red fabric wrapped around the waist and over the pants.



Fig 3: Hmong Dressing

[http://nahatai.blogspot.com/2014/02/blog-post\\_7775.html](http://nahatai.blogspot.com/2014/02/blog-post_7775.html)

The Hmong language was a mixture of many other languages. Most Hmong spoke to each other in the languages from their surrounding environment, such as Yunnan Chinese, Laos, or Northern Thai. All three Hmong tribes shared the same set of root words and grammar structure, but the accent varies. The Hmong were able to read and write the Hmong language by way of using Latin characters.

Hmong people usually built their houses on a hill. Each having 7-8 houses in a rough circle, with the group leader's located in the center and had many members in a house. Hmong people believed that the ancestor spirit must be offered food because in the old year the ancestor protected them from evil.

The Hmong have a tradition of relying on black magic in treating various sicknesses and ailments. The Hmong believed in sickness and pain caused by spirits.

Every tribe had the music in its heart but differed in the detail of singing the song. Hmong musical instruments were unique, but much has been lost from the Hmong way of living. Hmong musical instruments were drum, flute and red mouth organ (Sawasdee.com, 2018).

### 3) Lahu or Muser

The Lahu hill tribe originally lived on the Tibetan plateau and migrated to northern Thailand since 1870s from China. The Lahu hill tribe had diverse ethnic group who numbered about 60,000 in Thailand (Niracharapa 2017). Lahu could be found prevalently in Chiangrai.

The Lahu hill tribe group had five sub-groups: Red Lahu, Yellow Lahu, Black Lahu, White Lahu and Lahu Sheleh. The Black Lahu was the largest sub-group around 80 per cent of the Lahu population (Niracharapa 2019). Lahu used a Tibeto-Burman language and has various dialects.

About one-third of Lahu have been converted to Christianity but some still worshipped a guardian spirit. Houses were built on high stilts with grass. Some Lahu women wore a distinctive black cloak with diagonal white stripes, decorated in bold red and yellow on the sleeve while Lahu men wore the stocking. Lahu admired their hunter-warrior heritage and grew corn and rice. They respected the elderly.



Fig 4: Lahu dressing

<https://arit.kpru.ac.th/ap/local>

There were several games for children including Kong Kang, Bamboo Gun, Juping Rope, Pitch and Toss and Ar Ta Ka Da We. Guitar, drum and organ were basic musical instruments played in New Year's day. They had Songkrand day or so-called Seh Gaw day on April 14. Lahus believe that Seh Gaw ritual wiped out their sins and bring them fertility and peaceful life. They still believed in spirits as Gods.

#### 4) Akha

The Akha or the E-gaw were closely related with China and Myamar. The first Akha hill tribe village in Thailand was probably established in 1903 along Myanmar border and migrated to Golden Triangle in Chiangrai province. Subgroups included Akha Garage, Lor Mee Akha, Aha Akha, Kha Kha Akha, Akha Spring Rolls, Akha Akha. Akha used a cotton for weaving and dye a navy blue color. Akha men usually wore a jacket adorned by many color's clothes and short pants. While women wore a sharp hat with decorations; a silver coat button and a small beads(Haute Culture, 2018).



Fig 5: Akha Dressing  
Sawasdee.com

The Akha spoke Lolo/Yi branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group, but have no traditional written language and closely related with the Lisu and Lahu tribal languages. The Akha believed in animism, and worshipped ancestors. Their writing developed by missionaries or linguists employed Roman, Thai or Burmese characters. The Akha traditionally grew a variety of crops including rice and corn.

Chong was the Akha's entertainment for male amusement. The Akha Swing (Loa Cher Bee Err) happened in August until the beginning of September after the rice and corn planting. The Three-wheels, the BamBoo Longed Legs (Mor Nor) and the cup moulding (Orr Mar Tae Err) were children's games and the community. Musical instruments were

Akha's houses had two doors, one to the front porch. Christians even forced the Akha to change how their hut is built. Houses built by traditional Akha Orthodox rules in the entire village.

Their music represented in a variety of wind, string and percussion instruments. Music embodies their tradition, culture and history. Musical instruments were drums, gong cymbals, flutes, reed pipes, bamboo beaters and buffalo horns.

#### 5) Mien

The Mien or Yao migrated from Hunan province in China during the 15th-16th century and spread throughout northern Vietnam, northern Laos and northern Thailand. The Mien hill tribe considered themselves the aristocrats of the hill tribes. They had a written language following Chinese characters, and religion based on medieval Chinese Taoism, although many have converted to Christianity and Buddhism.



Men wore with a short pant, a shirt and pant made from a navy blue cotton or a black cotton. Mien women wore a black long pant with many beautiful stripes. The stripes took a long time to make like 1-5 years depending on the detailed and a time of Mien women (Niracharapa, 2017).



Fig 6: Mien Dressing

<https://mychiangmaitour.com/mien>

There were 4 major groups of Mien, the Phan (Bienh), the Bunu, the Cha Sun, and Ping Ti. Out of the 4 groups, the Phan (Bienh) group had the most man-power, and that was the group that constantly moving from place to place.

The Mien economy was previously based upon shifting cultivation of dry rice, and corn. Today, the Mien have settled animal farms. Moreover, there were more silver makers because the Mien people favor silver accessories.

The amusements for the kids for boys and girls, a top spin, made from a bamboo as a long leg to walk. Other games were bamboo gun, the pump, string trestle and marbles. they had amusements for a worship or a ceremony, frequently in wedding ceremony Most instruments were made from bamboo. The instruments included flutes, drum and gong, and cymbal.

Mien house had a big door. This door could contact with the spirit or tell the family's number. When the house had a funeral or wedding ceremonies. Miens celebrated New Year 's Eve, New Year and Chinese New Year.

## 6. Lisu

The Lisu or Lisaw migrated from eastern Tibet even before present Tibetans arrived in the plateau. Lisu, Yi, Lahu, and Akha used Tibetan–Burman languages. The Lisu tribe consisted of more than 58 different clans. Each family clan has its own name or surname. Most of the family names came from their own work as hunters and later adopted Chinese names.

People wore large amounts of silver jewelry and wore their best clothes at these times as a means of displaying their success in the previous agricultural year. Men wear short tunics and breaches reaching the knee. Some wore a black turban. The shirt was made of felt, with long-sleeves with silver buttons. A red sash wrapped around the waist and hung off the shoulder. While women wore short dresses and long skirts. Their heads were decorated with red and white glass beads and their chests with necklaces formed by strings of colored beads. The style of Lisu women's dress has changed quite significantly through the generations (Wu Jianqin, 2016).



Fig 7: Lisu Dressing

<https://www.google.com/lisu+hill+tribe>

The religion of the Lisu hill tribe had a mixture of ancestor worship and spirit. They believed all animate things have an associated spirit as do some inanimate objects. Important spirits were those of ancestors, water, mountains and villages. The style and design of Lisu houses was very similar to that of the Akha. Both tribes have developed their housing designs with practical condition.

The main Lisu Festival was the same date as the Chinese New Year and celebrated with music, feasting and drinking. Guitar, bamboo flute were musical instrument. The Lisu people adopted their own traditional dance so called "che-ngoh-che". Dance usually happened on Harvest season (Niracharapa, 2017).

In the past the Lisu people worshipped many gods and nature. Shaman or Hnee-Pha was the leader who lead and guided the villagers. Religious professionals made a living by offering sacrifices to ghosts and fortune-telling. During the religious activities, animals were slaughtered.

## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative study including primary and secondary sources was employed throughout this research by applying Spradley's approach using taxonomic analysis. The study determined the presence of certain words, themes, or concept, meanings and relationships. Data were collected from a set of texts, interviews, on site observations, focus groups or other printed materials and reviewed related documents. 24 hill tribes of six main hill tribe ethnic groups were interviewed regarding historical migration, culture and tradition, belief, religion, costume, games, festivals and other related matters. Moreover, there were in-depth interviews of 8 executives from Local Administrative units of Chiangrai provinces in terms of history, current status and government supports.

Once primary domains were defined to reflect the concerns of the study. Second primary sub sets were constructed. Components and relationship were drawn for the findings to create digital preservation.

## FINDINGS

The study defined domains from historical background, geography, language, amusements, religion costume, musical instrument, culture and traditions. Domains were divided into 5 domains including historical background, their way of life, dressing, language, culture and traditions of each hill tribe ethnic group; Karen, Lisu, Lahu, Mien, Akha, and Hmong. After analyzing domains and the relationships among hill tribe groups, types of digital preservation as text, photos, graphic, documentary, animation were identified to fit into the domain and sub-categories to experience the best interpretation.

History included sub categories of origin of hill tribes, and geography. Text, photos and documentary were described of the domain. Ways of life were occupation, religion, society and economy and language. Documentary and 3D guided their way of life.

Dressing were very important because each hill tribe groups had different style of dress such as hat, pants, decorations, and accessories. Photos, text and graphic explained how they dressed up differently.

Culture and traditions included rite and rituals, games, musical instruments. Text, photos, documentary and 3D signified their proper identity.

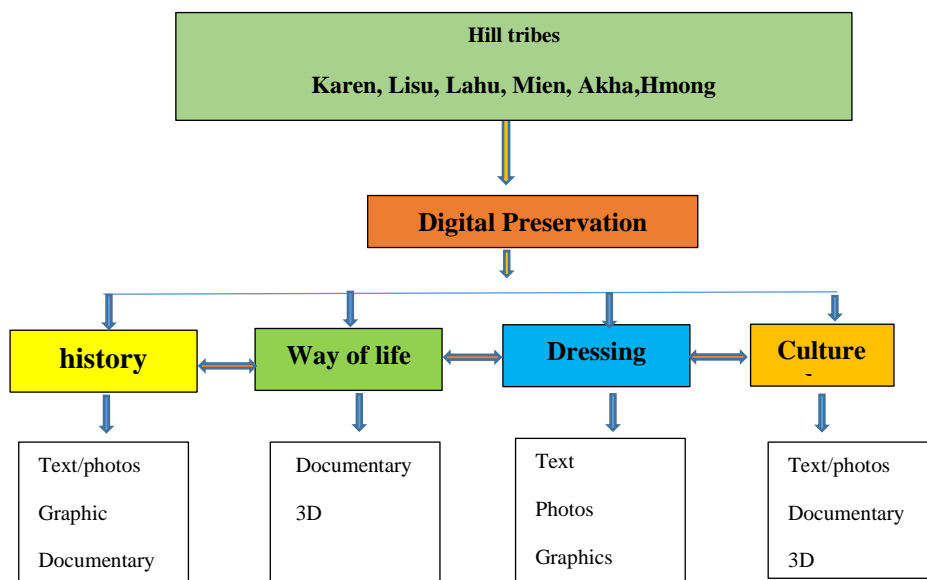


Fig 8: Digital Preservation on Identity of Hill Tribe of Northern Thailand

### CONCLUSIONS

The study has led efforts to promote the unique identity of hill tribe people on highland. While promoting their identity through digital preservation as digital archive, some concerns of their identity should be guided to sustainable development. Efforts should harmonize modern knowledge and technologies with local wisdom and practices. Holistic approaches to highland people development were needed to respond a wide range of issues, which were closely related to one another including environment, social-economic, technology and education for sustainable development. Their identity was not only a tourism attention but also values creation was needed.

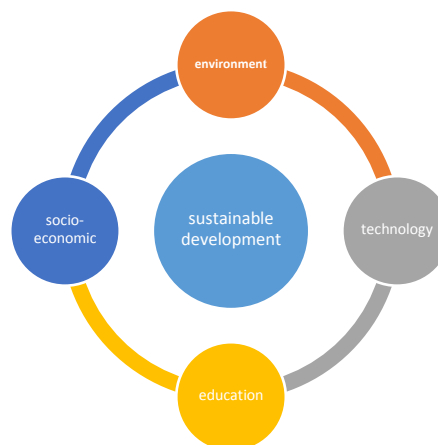


Fig 9: Relationship of Concerned Issues



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The study could not be completed without the full support of Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University. The researcher would like to convey special thanks to government agencies, district leaders, community head and hill tribe ethnic groups in providing details and supports to make the study accomplish.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Ales Alessandro Invesni and Isabella R. (2016). E Toursim for Socio-Economic Development. *Symphonya Emerging Issues in Management*, No.1, 2016. ISSN:1593-0319, p 75.
- [2] Azizan Marzuki (2010). *Tourism Development in Malaysia. Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* No. 8(17) November 2010.
- [3] Eric T.(2016) 7 Hill tribes of Thailand. Thailand hill tribe holidays.com.
- [4] Harold Goodwin & Rosa Santilli (2009). *Community Based Tourism: a Success*. ICRT Occasional paper 11.
- [5] Hojaghan and Esfangareh(2011). *Digital Economy and Tourism Impacts, Influences and Challenges*. Elsevier, *Procedia, Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 308-316.
- [6] House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills Committee (2016), “The Digital Economy”. Authority of the House of Commons, Pp. 3-8.
- [7] Haute Culture Fashion(2018). *Textile tribes of Thailand: an introduction to the Akha ethnic minority*. <https://hauteculturefashion.com/akha-ethnic-minority-textiles-in-thailand/>
- [8] <https://itdfinternational.org/village-life/from-far-to-near-how-6-hill-tribes-made-it-to-the-mountains-of-thailand/>
- [9] <https://www.tnews.co.th/variety/393584/>
- [10] <https://www.google.com/lisu+hill+tribe>
- [11] <https://mychiangmaitour.com/mien/>
- [12] Greentrails(2014). *Karen hilltribe: History and culture*. <https://www.greentrails.com/ethnic-minorities-in-northern-thailand/karen-hill-tribe/>
- [13] Kesmanee Chupnit(2018). *Hilltribe relocation in Thailand*. *Cultural Survival*.
- [14] Kwanchewan Buadaeng (2006). *Hill Tribe Policy and Studies in Thailand*. *Southeast Asia Studies*, Vol 44. No.3, December 2006.
- [15] Ian Ord (2011). *Thai Hill Tribe People? Who?.* [Wheresidewalksend.com/thai-hill-tribes-debate](http://Wheresidewalksend.com/thai-hill-tribes-debate).
- [16] Ministry of Digital and Economy Society(2016). *Digital Thailand 2016*. [www.digitalthailand.in.th](http://www.digitalthailand.in.th).
- [17] Ministry of Social Development and Human Security(2015). *Annual Report*. Bangkok: Department of Social Development and Welfare.
- [18] My Chiang Mai Tour (2018). *Hill tribe in Thailand*. [My Chiang Mai tour.com/hilltribe](http://MyChiangMai.com/hilltribe).
- [19] Nancy Young(2015). *10 Things about Hmong culture, food, language you probably did not know*. MPR News.
- [20] Niracharapa Tonghdamachart(2017). *Challenges of Thailand digital economy towards community tourism development:Case Study of Baan Yafu Maeyao District*. *Actual Economy: Social Challenges and Financial Issues XXI*.
- [21] Niracharapa Tonghdamachart & Loni Berry(2019). *An Experimental analysis of the Royal project on highland*. *International Journal of Innovative and Exploring Engineer*, Vol.8, No.8s3.

- [22] Melissa Ahsing(2016).Karen hill tribe in Thailand  
<https://www.thailandhilltribeholidays.com/karen-hill-tribe/>
- [23] Niti Wirudchawong (2013). Policy on Community Tourism Development in Thailand. Bangkok, Thailand.
- [24] OECD (2015), “ OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2015”. OECD Publishing, Paris, Pp. 11-13.
- [25] OECD (2014), “The Digital Economy, New Business Model and Key Features”. OECD Publishing, Paris, France, Pp 69-95.
- [26] Pachamama Alliance(2017). Community Based Tourism. [www.pachamama.org](http://www.pachamama.org)
- [27] Sawasdee.com(2018). Hill tribe in Thailand.  
[Sawadee.com/thailand/hilltribes/lisu.html](http://Sawadee.com/thailand/hilltribes/lisu.html)
- [28] Sripen Dabphet(2016). The Key Stakeholders in the Implementation of Sustainable Tourism in Two Rural Towns of Thailand.
- [29] Suzanne Nam(2019). Hill Tribe in Thailand.: the people, ethnical Concerns, Responsible Tours. Dotdash Publihing Family.
- [30] Teera Intararuang (2018). The study of the need for interpretation to promoting cultural tourism at Ban Wan Pai Village in Chiangmai.
- [31] Wikipedia (2019). Hill Tribe (Thailand). Retrieved on January 6, 2020 from [En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill\\_tribe](http://En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_tribe).
- [32] Wu Jiangin(2016). Social and Cultural Functions of Lisu Costume. Cross Cultural Communication, Vol 12, No.7.