Finding a Balance Between the Old and the New

The 2nd Generation’s Struggle to Understand and Preserve the Tai Dam Culture

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12/03/2013
Introduction

“So why are you so interested in the Tai Dam?” This was a question that was asked, sometimes twice, by every informant I interviewed during my study. “Well I am interested in your culture, I am an Anthropology student so this is kind of what I want to do as a career” was a version of what my response was to this common question. This usually put my informants at ease a little, but they still seemed a little confused as to why I would want to do my ethnography on them. At first I thought that the question was some sort of interrogation to ensure the protection of the Tai Dam culture, but after doing several interviews I realized that this was really genuine curiosity as to why I would ever want to learn about this small, dying, culture.

In this ethnography I am arguing that the 2nd generation of Tai Dam American’s attitudes toward their Tai Dam heritage is shaped by the challenges that their parents faced as immigrants. These attitudes then shape the preservation of the Tai Dam culture in America. To understand this I first explain why the Tai Dam came to the U.S., and what struggles they faced as immigrants in America. I go on to explain how the parents’ challenges in America effect the 2nd generation growing up, and how it brings a new set of challenges for the 2nd generation. Finally I explain how those challenges shape the 2nd generation’s views of their Tai Dam heritage and how it shapes their identity as Tai Dam American. All of these aspects of the ethnography are supported by examples from my two main informants. For the sake of privacy I will be using the pseudonyms Sun and Cathy for my two main informants.
For my study I was able to gain access to the Tai Dam community through the Tai Community Center in Des Moines. It was through the Tai Community Center that I was introduced to the Tai Dam history and culture. They also introduced me to my first informant, Sun, and then I was put in contact with her niece, Cathy, my second informant. With the cooperation of the Tai Community Center and two 2nd generations Tai Dam American’s living in Des Moines I was able to conduct my study with several face to face interviews. For my study I would drive to Des Moines anywhere between one every two weeks to three times a week to do my interviews. These interviews were both formal and informal interviews, usually done in a public place and were during coffee or dinner.

Finding my informants took some time, but with the referral by my school to the Tai Community Center I was able to set up a meeting with several board members to talk. After they introduced me to who the Tai Dam were and I explained what an ethnography was, they were able to get me in contact with Sun, my first informant. After meeting with her I was introduced to her niece, Cathy, who was more than willing to help with the study as well. Both women were raised in the U.S. and are completely “Americanized”, but Sun, who is 44, was not born in the U.S., instead she immigrated here with her family at the age of 5. Because she only remembers her life in America and was for the most part raised in the U.S. I am considering her part of the 2nd generation. Her niece, Cathy, is in her early 20’s and was born and raised in American. Her father is a Tai Dam immigrant who came over in the 1970, while her mother is Caucasian and American.

**Literary Review**
In my research I have attempted to find other studies on the Tai Dam that were similar to mine. The databases I used were JSTOR and SocINDEX, and Academic Search Premier. I used the search terms “Tai Dam” and “Black Tai”, which is the other term for the Tai Dam, on those databases. After sometime time of searching and researching all of my databases, I couldn’t find anything on the Tai Dam people that were relevant to my study. To make up for this I then searched for similar studies that focused on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generations of Asian Americans. I did this search by using search terms such as; “2\textsuperscript{nd} Generation Asian American”, “Asian Americans”, “Second Generation”, and “Southeast Asian Americans”. With this search I found several articles that were somewhat related to my study, but still not close enough to my study to use.

**Coming to America**

The Tai Dam people came from a small country called the Tai Federation, which is now known as Northwest Vietnam. During the Vietnam War the Tai Dam people were being murdered by communist Vietnam troops and fled their home for Laos, the neighboring country. After a few years in Laos the war moved south forcing them to flee again, this time to Thailand. After living in the terrible conditions of the refugee camps, the Tai Dam were invited to come to Iowa in 1975. The reason the Tai Dam were invited to come to Iowa, was because of Iowa’s decreasing population. After hearing about the Tai Dam people and being told that they were farmers, Gov. Robert Ray invited 1500 Tai Dam to stay in Iowa. He did this by asking people in the community to sponsor the Tai Dam. From my interviews I have made the observation that most of these sponsors were
church groups, or had some affiliations to a Christian church. Since 1975 over 10,000 Tai Dam have immigrated to America, with 80% living in Iowa.¹

During my first interview with Sun we talked about the challenges her family faced when they first came to America. “We struggled a lot” is how she describes her family after they came to America in 1975. From my interviews with both Sun and Cathy I realized that there are two basic types of challenges that the Tai Dam immigrants faced when they first came to America: Discrimination and Culture Shock. These challenges can be split into even more sub-categories that further describe the different types of challenges that the Tai Dam Immigrants faced in their years in the U.S.

*Discrimination*

I was first told about the discriminations that the Tai Dam immigrants faced in my first interview with Sun, she had mentioned it in passing as she explained the challenges that her family faced. I asked her to explain the kind of discrimination she and her family faced, while she was growing up. Sun explained by saying,

Uhm, Well you know a lot of times when I get discriminated because like I’m Asian, and in the 80’s and late 70’s there is discrimination everywhere, whether your black, your white, your Asian and a lot of people think that when we come, a lot of people think we get all these free ride but that’s not true.

Sun’s family faced racism in many forms such as stereotyping and xenophobia, not just because they were Asian but also because they were immigrants. Sun gave me the example of her bus rides to and from school, “I guess when I was in high school, or

¹ Tai Dam: No Where to Stay. DVD. 2011.
maybe the middle school, I get sorta discriminated in a way like this is with another black
group of people where ‘you can’t sit in front of the bus’ okay, there is another way
around and ‘You Asian people sit in the back’. Sun explained that one of the reasons she
was told to sit at the back of the bus by some of her classmates was because the
immigrant stereotype that all immigrants were getting a free ride from the government.
This was not true of course and according to Sun, they got very little from the
government and had to rely on the generosity of the churches in the area.

Cathy also talked about how her dad faced discrimination throughout his years in
America, but while her father faced racial discrimination from the public, he also faced
other forms of discrimination that prevented him from practicing his Tai Dam traditions.
During one of my interviews with Sun she mentioned the fact that Cathy’s mother would
not allow Cathy’s fathers shrine to be kept in the house; and finds that the practice of the
Tai Dam shrines is sin to her Christian religion. The Tai Dam keep a shrine for each side
of the family’s ancestors, the husbands ancestors shrine is kept in the house and is passed
down through the first male heir, while the wives ancestors’ shrine is kept in a building
outside. Because Cathy’s father is the oldest son of the family it was his duty to look
after the shrine after his parents died, but because of his wives negative views of the Tai
Dam traditions he wasn’t allowed to keep his families shrine in the house; and it had to
go to Sun’s husband, the next oldest son.

This kind of discrimination against the prevention of Tai Dam traditions makes it
difficult to preserve Tai Dam culture. The Tai Dam immigrants are a defeated people
who, to paraphrase one of the Tai Community Center board members, have lost
everything during their time as refugees and are not going to risk losing what they have
now. When faced with conflict between cultures, which happens with the high rates of inter-racial marriages, the Tai Dam are likely to conform to the more dominant religion. The reason why was explained to me by one of the Tai Community Center members. According to her the Tai Dam feel that it is better to conform to these new religions then risk losing what they have gained in their new life in America.

**Culture Shock**

Discrimination isn’t the only type of challenge faced by the Tai Dam immigrants, Culture Shock is a major challenge that every Tai Dam immigrant went through. For the Tai Dam their experiences with culture shock came from several sources: Language, Customs, and Gender Roles. The Tai Dam’s struggle with language stems from the large difference between English and the traditional Tai Dam language. The customs that the Tai Dam have trouble with are the different holidays, greetings, and particularly food. Finally the gender roles are a part of culture shock because in traditional Tai Dam culture women had little power, but when they came to the U.S. that changed.

**English**

The English language was something completely different for the Tai Dam, who only spoke the traditional Tai Dam language. The reason for this difference was due to the origin of the two languages. The Tai Dam language is an East Asian language that if very similar to the Laotian language, which is very different from the English language. This created additional challenges for the parents, like not being able to help their children with homework, and trying to find a job. Some of the Tai Dam responded to these challenges by taking ESL classes that were set up by the government. The Tai Dam
then would also avoid using their traditional language to sharpen their English. But there
were some Tai Dam who didn’t respond quiet as positively to these challenges and
instead just didn’t learn English. One example would be of Sun’s mother, who even after
35 years in the U.S. is still illiterate in English. When I asked Sun why her mother didn’t
learn English she said that it was because Sun’s father was fluent in English, as well as 4
other languages, and so she didn’t need to learn English.

Customs

Not learning English can make it difficult for someone to get used to life in
America. But it doesn’t prevent them from starting a new life and experiencing the
different customs and traditions that are available. From my interviews I came to the
conclusion that the most challenging custom was the different types of food. During one
of my visits to the Tai Community Center I was shown some of the traditional Tai Dam
pepper and herb plants that they make their food with, along with the rice plants and
banana tree plants that they were attempting to grow that year. “When we came here
there wasn’t any place to get our traditional food” is what Song, the director of the
Community Center, said to me while showing me the plants. For the Tai Dam, their
traditional foods were a large part of their culture. When they came to the U.S. they
couldn’t keep that part of their culture because of its lack of availability in the U.S. This
was a major challenge for the Tai Dam immigrants to cope with; both physically, due to
the change in diet, and psychologically.

Shifting Gender Roles
Gender roles for the Tai Dam while living in Southeast Asia were mainly patriarchal, but when they came to America everything changed and the traditional structure of the Tai Dam society started to change. In Southeast Asia, Tai Dam men were the ones in charge and help the authoritative roles in the societies. This was especially true for those who had political positions in the Tai Federation or any of the countries that they found refuge. When they came to America, however, the men lost their power and were at a loss for what to do. It was at this time that the women started to take more of a leadership position, “The men didn’t have their power anymore and didn’t know what to do; but the women, who didn’t have much power before, started to gather the Tai Dam community” is how Bob, one of the Tai Community Center board members and a former Tai Dam ESL teacher, describes the shift in power. But this wasn’t a total power shift. Not all women were allowed out of the home, but for those who did, it was a big step that influenced the next generation of Tai Dam women.

**Asian Upbringing**

During my interviews I started to realize that there were certain challenges that the Tai Dam immigrants faced that impacted the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation and, in some cases, caused more challenges for them. The main challenge that affected the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation’s upbringing is Discrimination. For example as a response to the discrimination she faced growing up, Sun named her kids American names instead of traditional Tai Dam names.

Sun: I also feel that at the time when you go apply for a job your name always, you are Asian already, Asian name and everything and they don’t always look at you first. And I bet that is still going on till now, you know, I mean doesn’t
matter if you are black, white, whatever or Asian, but that is still going on and
maybe that is why when I have kids I name them American names, a lot of them
do right now.

Other challenges for the parents, like learning English, also affected the children growing
up. All of these challenges have an impact on the 2nd generation and will have
consequences for the future of Tai Dam cultural preservation.

The discrimination that the 1st generation faced also affected the 2nd generation in a less
direct way; Cathy experienced this first hand with a friend. During one of our interviews
she told me the story of how her friend made a comment about immigrants, saying “why
can’t they speak English, we are in America”. Cathy said that this made her feel angry
because her friend knew that her father was an immigrant and that it was really hard for
him to learn English. But her friend’s statement also made Cathy wonder what her friend
thought of her father being an immigrant, and what she thought of Cathy for being the
child of an immigrant.

One of the other challenges that affected the 2nd generation while growing up is
the parent’s lack of English. Sun was the first to talk about this when she mentioned that
it was hard growing up because her parents couldn’t help her and her siblings with their
homework in the beginning. Her father was eventually able to help them out with
homework but her mother was never able to, and because of this Sun’s parents never
pushed them to do better in school; a complete contradiction to the Asian stereotype that
they always face.
The Tai Dam 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation both faced a Asian stereotyping that have caused a certain amount of anger in my informants, but at the same time there are certain parts of the stereotype that come true in a self-fulfilling way. Asian stereotypes were first brought up by Sun who talked about her time on the bus, but also how her kids are facing the stereotype that Asians American are not minority in the U.S.; and are not discriminated against. Then Cathy brought up stereotypes, again expressing anger and frustration, but this time at how Asian stereotypes are not seen as a form of racism. Despite my informants anger towards how society uses Asian stereotypes I found that in some cases they fulfill these stereotypes, Cathy’s parents pushed her and her brother to do their best in school, which she attributed to her father’s Asian heritage, though not specifically Tai Dam. When I asked Sun if her parents’ Tai Dam heritage caused them to push her in school she said no. But it was because her parents didn’t push her that she now pushes her kids; creating a self-fulfilling stereotype.

**Who am I?**

Growing up as a Tai Dam American is a very challenging life that can cause the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation to feel like they must choose between either preserving the Tai Dam culture or continuing their modern, American life. I have found that there are three main experiences that 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation Tai Dam American face. The experiences are: Connection with Heritage, Self-Consciousness, and Acceptance. These experiences then cause the feelings of conflict and confusion. All three of these challenges make it hard for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation to keep the Tai Dam culture from dying in America; and with 90% of the Tai Dam population in American the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation almost has sole responsibility of keeping the Tai Dam culture from going extinct.
“I go to the festivals but I never feel this deep connection with what is going on” said Cathy. This was Cathy’s answer to my opening interview question asking her if she felt connect with her heritage. During the rest of our interview it showed in Cathy’s answers to my questions that she really didn’t have any connection with her heritage, but rather it was just a part of her past. It wasn’t until after the interview that I made the connection between the challenges that Cathy said her father faced, and her experiences with as an adult trying to discover who she was. Because of the challenges her father faced as a Tai Dam immigrant in the U.S. he never really taught Cathy about the Tai Dam culture, most of her knowledge of the Tai Dam came from her Aunt Sun.

Because of the parents challenges with being an immigrant they raised their kids a certain way that affected how they saw their Tai Dam heritage. Their experience with discrimination causes the 1st generation to become more Americanized and thus make their kids more Americanized. It is this process of Americanization that has caused the 2nd generation to feel a lack of connection with their heritage. But along with the lack of connection I found that in Cathy’s case, there was a suppression of the Tai Dam heritage. This suppression of heritage is shown in the form of connecting more with American culture then with Tai Dam culture.

While talking with Sun one day she mentions how some of the 2nd generation have completely lost their Tai Dam heritage. “Look at Cathy she is completely American, it only took one generation to lose the Tai Dam culture”. But it is important to keep in mind that the loss of culture isn’t just due to the second generation not trying to learn
about their Tai Dam past, but more because they don’t know where to get the information or where to start. Cathy had mentioned to me one day that she wished she knew more about her Tai Dam past, later I asked her what it was she wished she knew more about. “I don't know if I can pin-point one thing about the Tai Dam culture I wish I knew more about... I think I would just like to know more about it as a whole - so traditions, customs, trends, etc.”

Cathy isn’t the only Americanized 2nd generation Tai Dam that I interacted with, while I talked with Sun at her house I was introduced to her teenage daughter who fit the American teenage stereotype to a “T”. Although Sun’s daughter may have more knowledge about the Tai Dam traditions because her parents practice them more, it seems that Sun’s daughter also has turned to the American culture and chooses to connect with that heritage rather than find out more than her Tai Dam heritage. These decisions to focus on the American culture rather than the Tai Dam culture have an effect on the 2nd generation identity.

Growing up we all have to discover our own identity that makes us who we are, but that is slightly more difficult for the 2nd generation when they don’t even know what it really means to be Tai Dam. With the lack of knowledge being passed on by the 1st generation, the 2nd generation struggles to connect to their heritage. To add to the struggle is the fact that the heritage that they’re trying to connect to is scattered across the world. The Tai Dam came from the Tai Federation, which was taken over by communist Vietnam, thus the country doesn’t exist anymore and its people, though mostly occupy Iowa, are also found all over Asia, Europe, and Australia. Without the Tai Federation the 2nd generation feels even less of a connection to their Tai Dam heritage. This affects how
the 2nd generation develops their identity as people and, in Cathy’s case, causes her to not even include her Tai Dam heritage as a part of her identity.

**Self-Consciousness**

The 2nd generation doesn’t just struggle with the fact that they cannot connect with their Tai Dan heritage, but also feel a form of self-consciousness because of their Tai Dam heritage. I have realized that these feelings of self-consciousness stem from several challenges that the 2nd generation face. One of these is the experience of being the child of an immigrant. This obviously causes issues for children because of the ignorant comments that are made about immigration in the U.S. and leads into the second challenge, which is the idea of whether or not they belong in the U.S. This issue is not just because they are children of immigrants but is directly linked to the fact that they not just American but also Tai Dam. Another reason the 2nd generation feel self-conscious is because of societies, and their own, lack of knowledge of the Tai Dam. All of these challenges all seem to be different forms of self-consciousness that the 2nd generations face growing up in the U.S.

The main feeling of self-consciousness stem from the challenges that are caused from being children of immigrants. While talking to Cathy she mentioned how her friend made a comment about immigrants in the U.S. and it made her wonder what people thought of her being a child of an immigrant. This challenge is something that all 2nd generation children face, but for the Tai Dam it just creates more challenges that come with being a 2nd generation Tai Dam American. The self-consciousness that comes with being a child of an immigrant goes right along with the wondering if you belong in this
society that your parents weren’t originally a part of. With all of the xenophobic and racist comments that are directed toward immigrants of any kind, the 2nd generations of Tai Dam have to deal with more than just connecting with their heritage. Sun also had her own experiences with feeling self-conscious about her Tai Dam heritage, but as she got older she was able to chalk up all of those comments that made her feel self-conscious and ignorant.

But ignorance also plays into the theme of self-consciousness that the 2nd generations face, this ignorance though is about the Tai Dam culture and history in general. The 2nd generation face a lack of knowledge about their Tai Dam culture for a number of reasons previously discussed, but those reasons on top of the lack of societal knowledge makes some of the 2nd generation creates a feeling of self-consciousness. Cathy was the first one to bring this up, she said that she always felt self-conscious about bringing up her Tai Dam heritage in a conversation because “I felt like if I brought up the fact that I was Tai dam the conversation would just die because people wouldn’t know what Tai Dam is and they would just stop talking”. She also felt that because of her own lack of knowledge she couldn’t talk about the Tai Dam culture.

Acceptance

These feeling of self-consciousness seem to lead into the need for acceptance by American society that both my informants talked about. Sun told me once that she felt like she needed to work harder to show society that she was an American and that she belongs here. Cathy told be something very similar but her dilemma seemed to be directed more towards the Tai Dam community, rather than American society. During
one of our interviews Cathy said she felt like she wasn’t a part of the Tai Dam community, but at the same time wasn’t quite part of American society. This, she explained, was due to her father being an immigrant and because of the discriminatory comments she would hear about immigrants. Sun on the other hand had felt this need to be accepted in to American society even though this is the only place she has known as home. It seemed, while Sun was describing her feelings that they stemmed from her experiences with discrimination.

These feelings affect how Cathy and Sun see their Tai Dam heritage and how they incorporate it into their lives. Cathy feels the need to be accepted by both Tai Dam communities and American society. But because she has a better understanding of her American culture she feels like she is more accepted in that society. This contributes to her suppression of the Tai Dam heritage and as a result causes the loss of more of the culture. Sun on the other hand feels more connected with her Tai Dam heritage, most likely because of her closer connection to the culture, and instead feels that she must work harder to show that she belongs in America; even though this is the only place she has known as home.

**Conclusion**

The Tai Dam culture is being threatened by extinction and the 2nd generation holds the key to saving it, but balancing the past and the future is easier said than done. After most of my research had been done I finally was able to understand why my informants kept asking me why I was interested in the Tai Dam. It was because for them, whether they had a close connection or no connection at all with the Tai Dam culture, it
was all part of their past and not nearly as important as their future in America. The 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation is burdened with the impossible job of saving a dying culture in a world that just wants you to conform. With the past pulling at one end and the future pulling at another the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation of Tai Dam is struggling to find a balance that keeps everyone happy.

But for some that is harder when the knowledge isn’t being passed down through the generations and then 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation has little to connect with, creating an identity crisis that turns them away from the Tai Dam culture. This identity crisis can then lead to the craving for acceptance in American society, the only society that the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation has ever known. All of this is caused by the challenges put forth unknowingly by their parents and society, and it is because of these challenges that the Tai Dam culture is now being threatened. From my observations and interviews I have come to the conclusion that the challenges blocking the way to culture understanding and preservation may be too much for the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Generation of Tai Dam Americans; and the Tai Dam culture will fade away into history.

In the future I plan to do more research that will focus on the experiences of the Tai Dam immigrants. I wish to answer the question of what are all the challenges that the Tai Dam immigrants faced that affect their children. In this study I only covered a small amount of the challenges that the Tai Dam faced when immigrating to America. The parents of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generation most likely grew up as refugees in Laos and Thailand. This also may have some effect on how they raised their children in America. In order to fully understand the 2\textsuperscript{nd} generations experiences growing up and what they are going through now, we need to understand what their parents went through.
Another area that I would like to investigate is if there are different views on education between the 1st and 2nd generation Tai Dam. This would be a very interesting area to look into, especially to see if there are any gender differences. Both of my informants had gotten a college education and my older informant, Sun, was encouraging her kids to get college degrees as well. But Sun had mentioned that her parents didn’t push her and her siblings in school. At the time this was explained with her parents learning English, but her father did become fluent in English. This then raises the question of did her parents want her to continue her education.

The final area I would like to investigate more is the issue of stereotypes. This issue was brought up several times from both of my informants. They expressed annoyance and anger towards the Asian stereotypes that are used casually in society. They would tell me how frustrated they felt when they heard jokes about Asian stereotypes and people wouldn’t consider them racists, even when they clearly were. Both of my informants have witnessed these jokes, or comments, being said without any regard for the Asian community. In the future I would like to talk more with my informants and find others to see if they have had similar experiences and feelings with stereotypes. I would also want to find out if there are different types of stereotypes that are sub-categories of the main ‘Asian Stereotype’ category. This could give me further information on the challenges that the parents and children face, and whether they are the same or not.
Works Cited

Tai Dam: No Where to Stay. DVD. 2011.