

Tai Dam Diaspora Consciousness and Routes of Migration: An Analysis from Funeral Manuscripts

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to analyze Tai Dam funeral manuscripts called *Kwam Bok Tang* or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa*. It is a comparative study conducted among Tai Dam or Lao Song in Thailand and Tai Dam in northwestern Vietnam. The texts reveal that *Mueang Lo*, Nghĩa Lộ in Vietnam, is the place of origin where the first community was established. It illustrates that the *Khwan*, the spirit or essence of life of the deceased, will be sent from the current settlement back along the route of migration to *Mueang Lo* before ascending to heaven to meet their ancestral spirits. Fittingly, this could be considered as Tai Dam diaspora consciousness of their ancestral homeland and the place of origin that records historical memory and historiography in forms of funeral manuscripts and rituals their funeral ceremony.

Keywords

Tai Dam – diaspora – migration – funeral manuscript

1 Introduction¹

Tai Dam are ethnic people who speak a language belonging to the Kra-Dai language family and reside principally in northwestern Vietnam, the site of what is believed to be their original homeland, in *Sip Song Chou Tai* ‘twelve Tai provincial principalities’. According to *Kwam To Mueang*, Tai Dam chronicles are seen as traditional historiography recorded in Tai Dam script. The ancestors of the Tai Dam were sent by *Thaen* from heaven and first established their homeland at *Mueang Lo* (Đặng 1977; Cầm 1978; Burusphat 2016). Vietnamese ethnologists have determined that the Tai Dam established their first settlement in northwestern Vietnam around the 11th century (Đặng 1977; Cầm 1978). It is recognized in their ethnohistory that *Mueang Lo* was the place of origin of the Tai Dam ethnic group. At present, *Mueang Lo* is known in Vietnamese as Nghĩa Lộ District, Yên Bái Province; however, Tai Dam people currently call this place *Mueang Lo*.

The Tai Dam in Thailand relocated from *Mueang Nghee* and *Mueang Muay* in Vietnam in 1779, as mentioned in the historical documents recorded in the Rattanakosin Royal Court Chronicle, King Rama I period. (Thiphakornwongsa 1995, 21) Ever since, they have been called by the Siamese people by other names such as *Lao Song* or *Lao Song Dam* instead of Tai Dam. Initially, they settled in Phetchaburi Province, and from there, between 1779 and 1893, they were forced to move at least seven times. Eventually, the Tai Dam living in Thailand had spread out in many provinces throughout southern, central, northern, and northeastern Thailand. (Saiphan 2018, 20–22)

Tai Dam funeral manuscripts have been of interest to scholars chiefly because they contain the origin myth, including the place and route by which spirits were sent to meet the ancestors in heaven (Chamberlain 1986, 72). Research was conducted to study ritual practices and manuscripts in funeral rites and proposed dynamics of the cosmology and worldview in the Tai Dam ritual of death (Saiphan 2018). Another study of Tai Dam death rituals investigated documentary linguistic points of significant change whereby Tai Dam in some locations integrated parts of the surrounding culture, such as aspects of Buddhism, into their own practices (Patpong 2019). This study tries to compare the funeral manuscripts collected from five examples from fieldwork research both in Vietnam and in Thailand, including a participant observation of the ritual process, to investigate the recitation and functions of the manuscripts in Tai Dam communities. A comparative study conducted among Tai Dam or Lao

1 This article is part of the research project. Saiphan, P. Dynamics in Cosmology and Worldview of Lao Song/ Tai Dam's Ritual of Death. Bangkok: The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center (in Thai).

Song in Thailand and Tai Dam in northwestern Vietnam confirms that these people in both areas still recite the texts in their traditional funeral rites, using the same plot and particular information. Interestingly, Tai Dam ethnic groups today have managed to preserve their ethnic cultures. Seeing themselves as all sharing the same origin as recorded in their ethnohistory, they continue to practice their ethnic culture to represent their ethnic identity. Regarding the focus of the current study, the manuscripts from the funeral ceremony will serve as prominent examples to verify this.

The funeral manuscript maintains an orthodoxy of Tai Dam belief systems based in *Thaen*, a supernatural god, and *Phi Dam*, the ancestral spirits. It gives a detailed account of the Tai Dam cosmology, which forms a binary structure between *Mueang Fa* and *Mueang Lum*, or Heaven and Earth. The text seeks to convince listeners to believe strongly in the principle or doctrine of a moral system and righteous position in the context of a cosmology under the control of the god *Thaen* and ancestral spirits. The right practices in funeral rites will sustain the social world and preserve the proper order.

Kwam Bok Tang or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa*, is a significant traditional funeral manuscript still recited among Tai Dam in Vietnam where the place of origin, *Mueang Lo*, is mentioned. As they migrated from *Sip Song Chou Tai* to Siam more than 200 years ago, the Tai Dam people in each area in Thailand practiced the same traditional funeral rite. The manuscript not only describes a belief system and ritual process surrounding the funeral ceremony, but is also a category of historiography recording the route of migration from their place of origin to current settlements. The text is to be read by a specialist, *Khoei* or *Khoei Kok*, during the funeral rite. Tai Dam people believe that when they die, their *Khwan*, or spirit, will be sent back along the route of migration to *Mueang Lo*, a place believed to be their first settlement. Subsequently, the *Khwan* will be sent to the sky to live with their ancestral spirits in a specific area in heaven.

The storylines of the text describe the route back to heaven along a path between binary worlds from the current settlement in *Mueang Lum* to *Mueang Fa*. *Mueang Fa* is considered the heavenly world, a sphere for life after death and the space of the god *Thaen*, where spirits and gods live eternally. *Mueang Fa* has a geographical landscape parallel to the human world composed of land, rivers, fields, forests, mountains, houses, and villages with many kinds of spirits including ancestral spirits. The sphere is structured into different areas for spirits, with the highest arena belonging to the superior God, *Thaen Luang*. On the other hand, *Mueang Lum* is regarded as a human world, or Earth. On the passage back to heaven, the *Khwan* will be introduced to the places of migration in their history. Significant place-names mentioned in the manuscript expose the relocation route from the current settlement to

the place of origin at *Mueang Lo*, the last place on earth before the *Khwan* will be taken into heaven. Details describing the world of *Mueang Lum* sketch out a geography of prominent places in the memory of their migration history. Therefore, it is reasonable to regard it as Tai Dam diaspora consciousness of their ancestral homeland.

2 Comparative Funeral Manuscripts

This study compares documents among Tai Dam in Thailand and Vietnam. Despite the migration of the Tai Dam from *Sip Song Chou Tai* in northwestern Vietnam to Thailand more than two centuries ago, the Tai Dam in both areas still hold to their traditional funeral manuscripts describing the same narrative in precise detail. The five versions of these funeral manuscripts, called *Kwam Bok Tang* or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa*, from various places in Thailand and Vietnam were collected for this comparative analysis. All of them are written in Tai Dam script.

The first manuscript was collected from *Mueang Thaeng*, Bả Bua, Điện Biên Phủ District, Điện Biên provinces in Vietnam. The author photocopied the manuscript in 2000 from Lò Văn Kho, a specialist in funeral rites, when the latter was 89 years old.

The second one represents the original version that purportedly came from *Ban Phia*, Phetchaburi Province. During the 1890s, Uncle *U Ob* brought it when he moved to *Ban Don Khamin*, Nakhon Prathom Province. This version was duplicated in 2001 by Chavalit Arayutitham, a local Tai Dam sage and the founder of the Tai Dam Association (Thailand). It was broadly distributed among Tai Dam communities and the ritual it describes is widely practiced in Nakhon Pathom, Ratchaburi and many Tai Dam villages in Thailand.

The third version was collected from *Mo Khun*, a Tai Dam specialist in Surat Thani Province, the most distant location of the Tai Dam communities, in southern Thailand. This group separated from the Tai Dam in Petchaburi in the 1950s. The manuscript is also similar to the version of uncle *U Ob*, who moved from Phetchaburi to Nakhon Pathom, because they share the same lineage, having come from the same original settlement in Thailand.

The fourth one is the version used in Don Maklua Sub-district, U Thong District, Suphan Buri Province, in central Thailand. It is referred to in the thesis titled *The Writing System of the Song People* (Suwanwiwake 1981, 236–237).

The last was gathered by the Institute of Folklore, Vietnam, and published in *The Customary Law of the Thai in Vietnam* (Ngô and Cầm 1999, 862–925). It is said that this version is a rather complete funeral text from the area of *Sip Song Chou Tai* collected by local Tai Dam ethnologists in Vietnam.

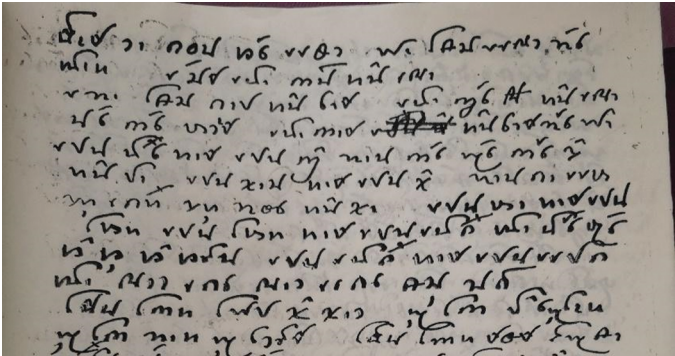


FIGURE 1 *Kwam Bok Tang* from Mueang Thaeng, Bân Bua, Điện Biên Phủ District, Điện Biên Province, Vietnam.
PICTURE FROM FIELD NOTE BY PICHET SAIPHAN

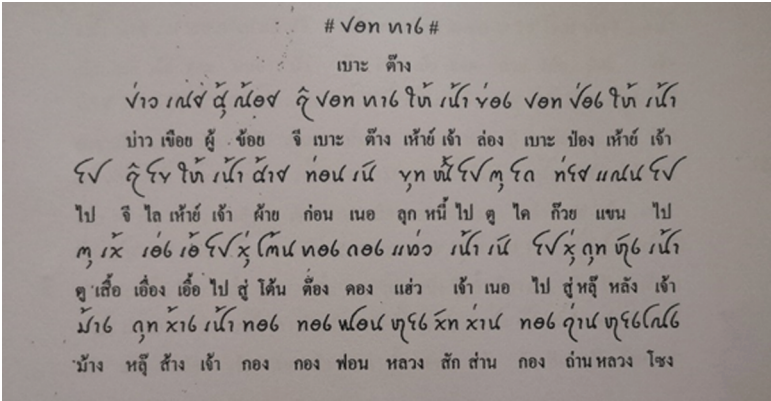


FIGURE 2 *Kwam Bok Tang* from Chavalit Arayutitham, a local Tai Dam sage and founder of the Tai Dam Association (Thailand), Nakhon Prathom Province.
PICTURE FROM FIELD NOTE BY PICHET SAIPHAN

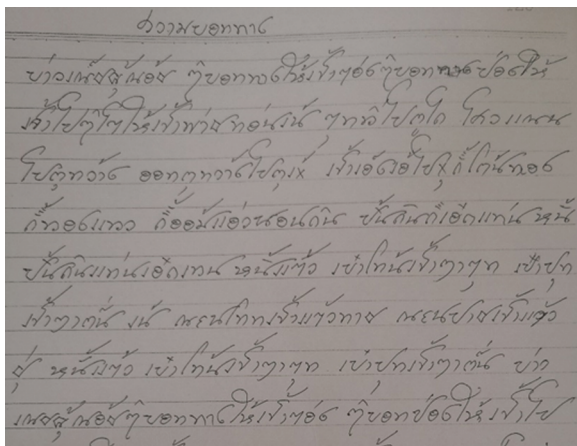


FIGURE 3 Kwam Bok Tang from from Mo Khun, a Tai Dam specialist from Surat Thani Province, Thailand.

PICTURE FROM FIELD NOTE BY PICHET
SAIPHAN

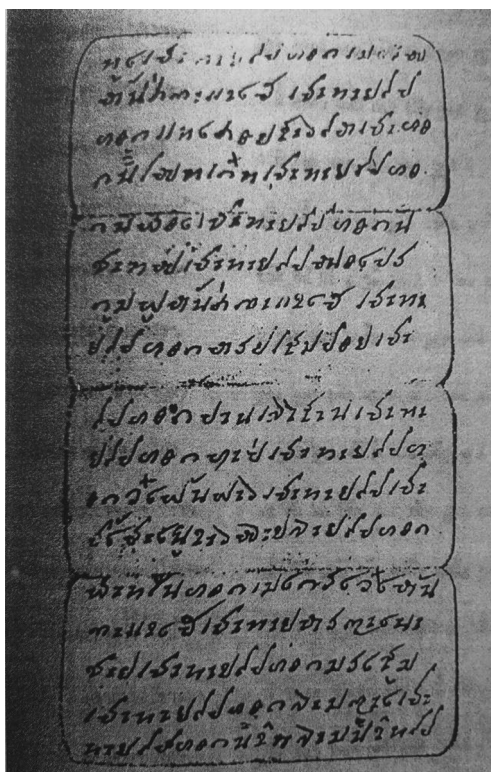


FIGURE 4 Kwam Bok Tang from Don Makluea Sub-district, U Thong District, Suphan Buri Province, Thailand (cited in Suwanwiwake 1981, 236–237).

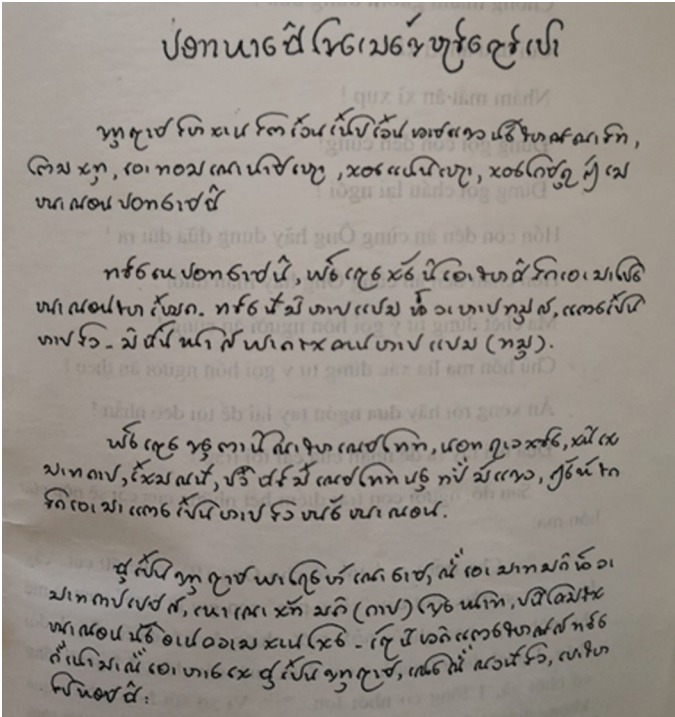


FIGURE 5 Kwam Bok Tang gathered by the Institute of Folklore, Vietnam, published in the book titled *Customary Law of the Thai in Vietnam*. (Ngô and Cầm 1999, 862–925)

3 Route to the Place of Origin

The significant part of the funeral rite occurs when the specialist introduces the long path by which the *Khwan*, or spirits of the dead, are sent to meet their ancestral spirits in heaven. The Tai Dam believe that the *Khwan* should live in the proper place in heaven where their ancestral spirits have already settled for eternity. Otherwise, the *Khwan* will transform into bad spirits and harm people, especially members of their family or lineage.

The message that the specialist gives the *Khwan* telling them to go back to meet the ancestral spirits is part of *Kwam Bok Tang* or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa*. The rite is concluded at the deceased's house before participants move to *pa hew*, the burial ground where the last activity is performed and the remains of the deceased are interred.

Apart from explaining the proper long journey for the *Khwan* to travel from *Mueang Lum* to *Mueang Fa*, which reflects the Tai Dam belief and cosmology, the narrative contains historical memories of migration related to the myth of creation and place of origin at *Mueang Lo*. A comparative study of the five

versions of the manuscript from five different places in Thailand and Vietnam where current Tai Dam communities are residing reveals that place names mentioned in the manuscripts have a significant relevance and accurate geographic location to the historical route of migration. Every version of the text collected in the case studies share a common storyline, starting with the *Khwan* traveling from the current settlements back to their places of origin at *Mueang Lo*, before ascending to heaven. It is fascinating that all of them give a picturesque description of the same migration route beginning at *Nam te*, the Black River or sông Đà, a great river in northwestern Vietnam. The meeting place named in the manuscripts as the point where the Black River was crossed is near *It Ong*. This ancient name recorded in the manuscripts is still called Ít Ong municipality. It is located by the bank of the Black River, in Mường La District of Sơn La Province in Vietnam. From *It Ong*, each route follows the main path through *Mueang Tien* (*Chien*), *Mueang Dung* (*Lung*), to *Mueang Lo*, to the final Mueang (city) in *Mueang Lum*. The names of the three main Mueangs were later changed into Vietnamese. *Mueang Tien* (*Chien*) became Ngọc Chiến sub-district, Mường La District of Sơn La Province. *Mueang Dung* (*Lung*) today is named Tú Lệ sub-district, Văn Chấn District of Yên Bái Province. *Mueang Lo* was given the new name Nghĩa Lộ District of Yên Bái Province. All of these places are currently home to principal Tai Dam settlements in Vietnam.

In this study, the data from the funeral manuscripts clearly draws out the routes of Tai Dam migration from the original place at *Mueang Lo*, before moving to *Mueang Dung* (*Lung*), *Mueang Tien* (*Chien*), *It Ong*, and later crossing the Black River. At the latter point, there could be a split in at least three major directions, leading the people in search of new settlements.

1. The first direction (see manuscript E in Table 1) represents the texts gathered from northwestern Vietnam and appears to cross the Black River leading to settlement areas in any location in *Sip Song Chou Tai* in Vietnam.
2. The second route (see manuscript D in Table 1), collected from Mueang Thaeng, stretches out a migration line from the spot of dispersion at Ít Ong, crossing the Black River to Mueang Mouay, Mueang Ek, Mueang Kwai, Mueang Muak, Mueang Ang, Mueang Phang and Mueang Thaeng.
3. The third line (see manuscript A, B, C in Table 1), according to the manuscripts gathered from Tai Dam communities in Thailand, portrays a very interesting point of the migration line these people followed in moving to Thailand around 200 years ago. The record in the manuscripts also mentions Ít Ong as the location of division. Later, these groups crossed the Black River as the other manuscripts describe. However, details appearing in the texts from Northwestern Vietnam do not mention any prominent principalities. In particular, Mueang Thaeng is not visible in

this part of the manuscripts from Thailand, whereas this place in oral tradition is commonly said to be somewhere in *Sip Song Chou Tai* before the Tai Dam relocated to Thailand.

TABLE 1 Place name and geographic pot from funeral manuscripts

Manuscript A ²	Manuscript B ³	Manuscript C ⁴	Manuscript D ⁵	Manuscript E ⁶
From settlement	From settlement	From settlement	From settlement	From settlement
–	–	Surat Thani	–	–
–	–	Chumphon	–	–
–	–	Prachuap Khiri Khan	–	–
Phetchaburi	Phetchaburi	Phetchaburi	–	–
–	–	Ratchaburi	–	–
–	–	Nakhon Pathom	–	–
Suphan Buri	Suphan Buri	Suphan Buri	–	–
Krung Thep	Krung Thep	–	–	–
Sao Hai, Saraburi	Sao Hai, Saraburi	Sao Hai, Saraburi	–	–
Korat	–	Korat	–	–
–	–	Chaiyaphum	–	–
–	–	Choomphae	–	–

2 The funeral manuscript of *U Ob*, referred to as the original version from Ban Phia, Phetchaburi Province, Thailand, was duplicated in 2001 by Chavalit Arayutitham, a Tai Dam local sage and founder of the Tai Dam Association (Thailand).

3 The funeral manuscript from Don Ma-klua sub-district, U Thong District, Suphan Buri Province, central Thailand.

4 The funeral manuscript from Surat Thani Province, southern Thailand.

5 The funeral manuscript from Bán Bua, Mueang Thaeng, Điện Biên Phủ District, Điện Biên Province, Vietnam.

6 The funeral manuscript gathered by the Institute of Folklore, Vietnam, and published in the book titled *Customary Law of the Thai in Vietnam* (Ngô and Cầm 1999).

TABLE 1 Place name and geographic pot from funeral manuscripts (*cont.*)

Manuscript A ²	Manuscript B ³	Manuscript C ⁴	Manuscript D ⁵	Manuscript E ⁶
Nong Bua Lamphu	Nong Bua Lamphu	—	—	—
Huai Sompoi	Huai Sompoi	Huai Sompoi	—	—
Ban Khao San	Ban Khao San	—	—	—
Viang Chan – Phan Phrao ⁷	Viang Chan – Phan Phrao	Viang Chan – Phan Phrao	—	—
Nam Sang	Nam Sang	Nam Sang	—	—
Phone Tha	—	Phone Tha	—	—
Ngam Cham	—	Ngam Cham	—	—
Moang Chum	—	Moang Chum	—	—
Mueang Phuan ⁸	—	Mueang Phuan	—	—
Mueang Saen	—	Mueang Saen	—	—
Mueang Hiam ⁹	Mueang Hiam	Mueang Hiam	—	—
Phu Daen Mueang	Phu Daen Mueang	Phu Daen Mueang	—	—
—	Nam Et	—	—	—
Mueang Xon ¹⁰	Mueang Xon	Mueang Xon	—	—
Mueang Kao	Mueang Kao	Mueang Kao	—	—
Mueang Pua	Mueang Pua	Mueang Pua	—	—

7 Phan Phrao is now a sub-district in Nong Khai Province, Thailand, located on the bank of the Mekong River. Viang Chan is now Vientiane, the capital of the Lao PDR.

8 Mueang Phuan was a traditional principality located on the Xiangkhoang Plateau, which today is Xiangkhouang Province, Lao PDR.

9 Mueang Hiam is located south of Mueang Xon. It is today Mueang Hiam District, Houphanh Province of the Lao PDR.

10 Today this place bears the same name as recorded in the manuscript and is known as Mueang Xon District, Houphanh Province of the Lao PDR.

TABLE 1 Place name and geographic pot from funeral manuscripts (*cont.*)

Manuscript A ²	Manuscript B ³	Manuscript C ⁴	Manuscript D ⁵	Manuscript E ⁶
Sop Kob	–	Sop Kob	–	–
Nam Ma	–	Nam Ma	–	–
Mueang Luan ¹¹	Mueang Luan	Mueang Luan	–	–
Nam Luan	Nam Luan	Nam Luan	–	–
Mueang Bu ¹²	Mueang Bu	Mueang Bu	–	–
–	–	–	Mueang Thaeng ¹³	–
–	–	–	Phu Lan Chuang ¹⁴	–
–	–	–	Mueang Phang	–
–	–	–	Mueang Ang	–
–	–	–	Mueang Muak ¹⁵	–
–	–	–	Mueang Kwai	–
–	–	–	Mueang Ek	–
–	–	–	Mueang Muay ¹⁶	–

11

At present Mường Luân sub-district, Điện Biên Đông District of Điện Biên Province, Vietnam lies in the southern part of the province about 100 kilometers from the center of the city.

12

Today this is Mường Bú sub-district, Mường La District, Sơn La Province, Vietnam.

13

Mueang Thaeng is now the central part of Điện Biên Province, northwestern Vietnam.

14

Phu Lan Chuang is the hill in the center of Mueang Thaeng. It was named by the Tai Dam people in memory of Pu Chao Lan Chuang, the hero who first established Mueang Thaeng. Nowadays, the hill is known in Vietnamese as Đồi A1.

15

Mueang Muak in Vietnamese is Mai Sơn District of Sơn La Province.

16

In Vietnamese, Mueang Muay is called Thuận Châu District of Sơn La Province.

TABLE 1 Place name and geographic pot from funeral manuscripts (cont.)

Manuscript A ²	Manuscript B ³	Manuscript C ⁴	Manuscript D ⁵	Manuscript E ⁶
Nam Te ¹⁷	Nam Te	Nam Te	Nam Te	Nam Te
It Ong ¹⁸	It Ong	It Ong	It Ong	It Ong
Mueang Tien ¹⁹	Mueang Tien	Mueang Tien	–	Nam Chien
Mueang Dung ²⁰	Mueang Dung	Mueang Dung	Mueang Lung	–
Lo Cha	Lo Cha	Lo Cha	Lo Cha (Ya)	Lo Cha, Lo Ya
Lo Luang ²¹	Lo Luang	Lo Luang	Lo Luang	Lo Luang
Nam Tok Tad	Nam Tok Tad	Nam Tok Tad	Nam Tok Tad	Nam Tok
Phi Pai ²²	Phi Pai	Phi Pai	Phi Pai	Tad Phi Pai
End of	End of	End of	End of	End of
Mueang Lum	Mueang Lum	Mueang Lum	Mueang Lum	Mueang Lum

Notably, the funeral manuscripts from Thailand suggest another remarkable route of Tai Dam migration that may represent the passage of Tai Dam sub-groups forced to move to Thailand. It could be said that this is another migration line running through the southern part of *Síp Song Chou Tai*. Once departing from Ít Ong and crossing the Black River, they proceeded in a different way to Mueang Bu, which today is Mường Bú sub-district, Mường La District, Sơn La Province. After that, they moved to Mueang Luan, about 100 kilometers

17 Nam Te is the Black River, also known as sông Đà in Vietnamese. It is the great river in northwestern Vietnam.

18 Today, it is still called Ít Ong district municipality, Mường La District of Sơn La Province.

19 At this time, it is known as Mường Chiến, Ngọc Chiến sub-district, Mường La District of Sơn La Province, Vietnam.

20 Today it is called Mường Lung, Tú Lệ sub-district, Văn Chấn District of Yên Bái Province, Vietnam.

21 Lo Luang is the center of Mueang Lo. Today in Vietnamese it is called Nghĩa Lộ District of Yên Bái Province, Vietnam.

22 Nam Tok Tad Phi Pai literally means waterfall of the spirit going away. It is located on Phu Khâu Kí mountain in the southern part of Mường Lo or Nghĩa Lộ, about 10 kilometers south of the district center.

south of the center of Mueang Thaeng principality. At present this is Mường Luân sub-district, Điện Biên Đông District of Điện Biên Province in Vietnam. Thereafter, they might have crossed the Nam Ma, or Ma River, near Sop Kop, which is today located along the border between Vietnam and the Lao PDR. From this point on, the route moves southward to central Thailand. They passed Mueang Xon and Mueang Hiam, which today are known as Mueang Xon District and Mueang Hiam District in Houphanh Province of the Lao PDR. Continuing along this path, they reached Mueang Phuan or Xiangkhouang Province, and continued to Viang Chan or Vientiane, the capital of Laos where they crossed the Mekong River. They passed Phan Phrao in Nong Khai Province and other provinces in northeastern Thailand to Nong Bua Lamphu and Korat, or Nakhon Ratchasima, before crossing central Thailand to Sao Hai, Saraburi, Suphanburi and eventually arriving at Phetchaburi, the place of destination during the first migration to Siam.

The written record in the Tai Dam funeral manuscripts corresponds to the Siamese chronicles of the early Rattanakosin period, which report several incidents of Tai Dam relocation from marginal areas between Vietnam and Laos to Thailand in 1779 (Thiphakornwongsa 1995, 21), 1792 (Silapakorn 1963, 344), 1825 (Rama III Archives No. 3 Cho.so. 1187, 1825), 1836 and 1838 (Silapakorn 1963, 354), 1839 (Silapakorn 1969, 214) and 1886 (Surasakmontri 1961, 1–7, 88). This suggests that from 1779–1886 these Tai Dam people were forced to move to Thailand on a number of occasions. Phetchaburi was the first settlement and became the main location for this group in Thailand. With the abolition of slavery in the 1870s, common people and slaves became subject to laws of the Siamese government, and consequently, Tai Dam people were able to find new lands and settlements (Piyaphan 1986, 93–94). The Tai Dam and future generations spread out across many provinces nearby Phetchaburi in central Thailand and moved on to other areas in northern, northeastern and southern regions of the country, in such provinces as Ratchaburi, Nakhon Pathom, Suphan Buri, Kanchanaburi, Samut Songkhram, Samut Sakhon, Samut Prakarn, Bangkok, Lopburi, Saraburi, Loei, Nakhonsawan, Pitsanulok, Sukhothai, Pichit, Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Surat Thani (Thuamchareon 1975, 68–69; Suwannawiwiek 1981, 22; Burusphat 2016, 31; Saiphan 2018, 20–22). For this reason, the funeral text collected from Surat Thani Province in southern Thailand (see manuscript C in Table 1) contains details of the migration route southward from Phetchaburi, mentioning place names from Prachuap Khiri Khan, Chumphon and Surat Thani.

All the funeral manuscripts in this study show that information recorded in the storyline pertaining to the journey of the *Khwan* back to reunite with ancestral spirits in heaven, represents not only the belief system of Tai Dam

cosmology but also accounts for routes of migration in Tai Dam historical memory. These beliefs and history of migration are manifested in the funeral ceremonies of any of the Tai Dam communities even today. According to the text and ritual performance, all Tai Dam people came from the same origin. Wherever they may be living in the world, when they die, their *Khwan* must be brought back on a long journey to live in eternity with their ancestral spirits. Furthermore, on their proper route back, the last place on earth is *Mueang Lo*, which records show was the first settlement of the Tai Dam. As a result, *Mueang Lo* to the Tai Dam symbolizes the place of origin. For those Tai Dam who were relocated to other places outside their fatherland, the texts and rituals processes signify to Tai Dam people a recognition of diaspora consciousness as well.

4 Diaspora Consciousness

Kwam Bok Tang or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa* is an essential part of the funeral manuscripts. The text describes the Tai Dam cosmology structured in the form of a two-world binary composed of *Mueang Fa* or heaven and *Mueang Lum* or Earth. *Mueang Fa* represents the endless world of life after death. It is the sphere of the god *Thaen* who controls the universe and the living land of ancestral spirits, whereas *Mueang Lum* is regarded as the world of present life on earth. The passage of the *Khwan* in the funeral ceremony expresses an inter-relational linkage between the two worlds. After death, the *Khwan* are sent to meet their ancestral spirits in the land of eternity in heaven. After receiving approval from the spirits of actual ancestors within their lineage, the *Khwan* become a part of *Phi Dam*, the ancestral spirits, having a role and status to protect members in the family of each lineage. In other words, the Tai Dam have integrated religious belief with a social structure based on family lineage. This suggests that the *Khwan* in the funeral rites has a symbolic function to connect religious belief and a system of lineage.

In *Mueang Lum*, there is a significant spot on the route the *Khwan* takes to meet ancestral spirits at *Mueang Lo*, which is the final destination on earth before the *Khwan* ascends into heaven. It is an outstanding place that is a very meaningful place in Tai Dam ethnohistory. Traditional historiography written in Tai Dam script called *Kwam To Mueang*, the Tai Dam chronicle, recounts that Tai Dam heroes established *Mueang Lo* as their first settlement. The story of *Kwam To Mueang* is also recited in the funeral rite, but separately from *Kwam Bok Tang* or *Kwam Song Phi Khuen Mueang Fa* (Kashinaga 2010). However, both texts recited at funeral rites help to explain and affirm the significance of the origin of Tai Dam groups with the ancestral homeland at *Mueang Lo*.

The manuscript explains the significance of the word *Lo*: it was the name of a leader and a place name. The first hero to receive the mandate from *Thaen* named his first son *Lo*, after the place name *Mueang Lo* where the child was born. Later, the son was given the title *Tao Lo* and appointed by his father to rule over the people of Mueang Lo. Later generations expanded to establish Tai Dam communities in other areas nearby with a network of principalities famously known as *Sip Song Chou Tai* (Chamberlain 1986, 1992; Đặng 1977; Cầm 1978; Hartmann 1981; Mukdawijitra 2014; Burusphat 2016; Saiphan 2013, 2018). As a result, *Mueang Lo* signifies a place of origin for the Tai Dam people.

Regarding the social status inherited from father to son, *Tao Lo* adopted the surname *Lo*, originating systems of lineage and social class. The *Lo* lineage became the traditional ruling class. Members of this lineage would be accepted as chiefs under Tai Dam customary law. This long-established social practice marks a crucial point in Tai Dam society where, as scholars have concluded, patrilineal lineage and patrilineal ancestral worship are central (Kashinaga 2009). Because of this patrilineal custom, where status is passed from father to son, the establishment of the first lineage by *Tao Lo* at Mueang Lo means that this settlement is considered by the Tai Dam as their place of origin and the fatherland of all Tai Dam people.

Tai Dam ethnohistory recounts the efforts of a migrant group to keep the social memory of their place of origin. The stories of the routes the *Khwan* travel on their return to the ancestral spirits align with Tai Dam's actual route of migration. As a result, having relocated in a new land, they have become a diaspora group. 'Diaspora' commonly refers to people who migrated from an established place or an ancestral homeland but still retain memories of that place (Connor 1986). According to an explanation by Gerard Chaliand and Jean-Pierre Rageau,²³ William Safran and Robin Cohen point out essential elements characterizing diaspora groups: 1) they have been relocated or migrated away from their homeland; 2) they have historical consciousness and keep up with the cultural heritage of the group; 3) their social status is that of a minority group in other countries with a will to survive; 4) they have prominent collective identity, and 5) generally, they share and keep memories or myths of an ancestral homeland (Cohen 1977 and Safran 1999).

Applying the diaspora concept, evidence from manuscripts and funeral rites reflect the Tai Dam diaspora as sharing a type of consciousness where the memory of an ancestral homeland still exists. This allows Tai Dam people to confirm their own historical perception. Although they moved away from

23 Cited in Safran 1999, 255–256.

their original place of settlement a long time ago, they continue to believe that the fatherland is a reality that is meaningful to them (Vertovec 1997). Because the memory of a place of origin or ancestral homeland is recorded in the Tai Dam manuscripts and reaffirmed in funeral ceremonies, diaspora as a type of consciousness still exists among Tai Dam people and has become one of the most prominent characteristics of the Tai Dam ethnicity.

In conclusion, diaspora as a type of consciousness constructed in the form of funeral manuscripts and practices in funeral rites makes it possible to construct Tai Dam ethnic consciousness and ethnic identification which integrates living Tai Dam people in an imagined ethnicity. The shared belief of having *Mueang Lo* as an ancestral homeland allows Tai Dam living in any area to remain as a collective ethnic group and sustain their identity in the present time.

5 Conclusion

This article proposes an analysis of Tai Dam funeral manuscripts focused on three main points.

1. Funeral manuscripts do not only express belief in a cosmological system, but also explain the route of migration and historical background. It could be said that the Tai Dam funeral manuscripts represent a kind of traditional historiography of their ethnicity as well.
2. *Mueang Lo* is perceived as the place of origin or ancestral homeland. It is also the final destination on earth where the *Khwan* of all Tai Dam people assemble before ascending into heaven.
3. Funeral manuscripts and funeral rites preserve a diaspora consciousness and serve as a basis for a distinct Tai Dam ethnic identity.

The routes of migration recorded in funeral manuscripts reflect the Tai Dam belief in the return journey all *Khwan* make to rejoin their ancestral spirits. A comparative study of traditional texts from Thailand and Vietnam confirms that these manuscripts contain similar storylines and details. *Kwam Bok Thang* and *Kwam Song Phi Khun Mueang Fa* both recount the long journey of the *Khwan* from the present settlement back to *Mueang Lo*, the place of origin or ancestral homeland located on earth, before they join their ancestral spirits in heaven. Since 1779, Tai Dam people have relocated several times from the marginal areas along the border of northwestern Vietnam and northeastern Laos to central Thailand. Later, they resided in many provinces in Thailand. Hence, funeral manuscripts in Thailand mention more place names along the

stretched-out route of migration and make it possible to identify their current locations. In contrast, in the Vietnamese manuscripts, all the routes start in the area known as *Sip Song Chou Tai* in northwestern Vietnam. However, all the routes can be retraced to *Mueang Lo*, the final destination on earth, which signifies their fatherland and place of origin.

The Tai Dam diaspora as a type of consciousness is created from a complex web of ethnohistory, sacred ritual, and customs recorded in funeral manuscripts which have served to transmit social memory from generation to generation. Particularly, the first settlement at *Mueang Lo* is the most significant place of origin to all Tai Dam people. No matter where they live, belief in this fatherland is conveyed to the new generation by the traditional practice. It can certainly be concluded that the funeral manuscripts and funeral ceremonies uncover implicit meanings about Tai Dam beliefs, ethnohistory and the idea of diaspora which have combined to create and sustain the distinct characteristics of the Tai Dam ethnic identity over the centuries.

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