APPLYING OF EDFAT THEORY ON PORTRAITURE OF THE KALOMESE IN LUANGPRABANG, LAOS PDR

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Received: May 26, 2025 **Revised:** August 6, 2025 **Accepted:** August 10, 2025

ABSTRACT

This study applies the EDFAT theory comprising Entire, Details, Frame, Angle, and Time as a visual ethnographic framework to explore the portraiture of the Tai Lue Kalom community in Ban Nayang, Luang Prabang Province, Laos. The research aims to investigate how EDFAT-guided portrait photography can enhance both the technical and interpretive dimensions of ethnographic documentation, specifically focusing on elderly Kalomese men who retain traditional tattoos. These tattoos, often featuring motifs such as the "Mom" and "Phoenix," are believed by the community to hold cultural and identity significance. The objectives of the research are 1)To apply the EDFAT theory to the composition of portrait photography in ethnographic fieldwork and to document the remaining tattoo culture among the elderly as a form of intangible heritage preservation. Using qualitative methods—including in-depth interviews with key, general, and contextual informants, as well as field observations and visual analysis—the study identifies that the tattoo designs can be categorized into three body zones: top, middle, and bottom. Each element of the EDFAT model contributes uniquely to the creation of images that serve both as aesthetic portraits and ethnographic evidence. The findings affirm the capacity of EDFAT-based photography to function not only as a tool for cultural preservation but also as a method for interpreting meaning within visual anthropology. The portraits produced offer a compelling narrative that underscores the urgency of safeguarding the disappearing yet significant practice of tattooing within this ethnic community.

Keywords: Tattoo, Tai Lue, Photography, Ethnicity, ASEAN, EDFAT, Luangprabang, Laos

INTRODUCTION

Tattooing is one of the most enduring artistic and cultural practices in human history. Although its precise origins remain obscure, archaeological and anthropological evidence confirms the existence of tattooing across nearly every continent throughout time. Traditional tattooing generally involved puncturing the skin with sharpened tools to embed pigments, resulting in visual inscriptions on the human body. These designs often served as symbolic expressions of belief systems, markers of identity, or forms of protection against spiritual or physical harm (Schneider, 2021). While modern perceptions of tattooing vary globally from fashion to rebellion—its role in many indigenous communities remains profoundly connected to cultural heritage and sacred symbolism.

In Southeast Asia, tattooing traditions have thrived across multiple ethnic groups, notably among the Burmese, Thai, Lao, and Cambodian populations. In northern Laos, particularly within the Kalomese (Lue Ka Lom) community of Ban Nayang, tattooing has historically played a central role in cultural identity. The Kalomese, a Tai subgroup that migrated from southern China, settled in the Nam Bak district of Luang Prabang province. In Ban Nayang—a small but culturally rich settlement surrounded by fertile valleys and forests—many elder males once bore tattoos stretching from the waist to the knees. These tattoos served both aesthetic and spiritual purposes, often believed to protect the bearer from harm, animal attacks, or supernatural entities (Toth, 2013).

Today, tattooing among the Kalomese has become a vanishing tradition. With modernization and the pressures of globalization, few younger community members retain or replicate these ancestral practices. The last generation of tattooed elders represents a living archive of this heritage. Capturing and analyzing this visual legacy is thus not only an anthropological necessity but a cultural act of preservation. In this context, ethnographic portraiture becomes a powerful method for documenting identity through the

human body. However, producing photographs that are both analytically rigorous and culturally respectful requires a robust methodological framework.



Figure 1 Nayang Village in Nambak District, Luangprabang

This research introduces the EDFAT theory—an acronym for Entire, Details, Frame, Angle, and Time—as a guiding framework for ethnographic portraiture. Initially developed in the field of photojournalism (Toth, 2013), EDFAT has since been applied to visual anthropology and ethnographic research (MacDougall, 2006). The framework encourages the photographer-researcher to capture subjects holistically and systematically by considering the full scene (Entire), significant close-up components (Details), thoughtful composition (Frame), varied viewpoints (Angle), and temporal progression (Time). These five elements work in tandem to deepen the researcher's engagement with both subject and context.

By applying EDFAT to the visual study of Kalomese tattoos, this research bridges aesthetic representation with cultural meaning. The Entire shots provide the geographic and cultural context of Ban Nayang its temples, houses,

and community spaces. Detail images document the fine lines, motifs, and textures of traditional tattoos, highlighting patterns unique to the Lue Ka Lom. Framing decisions emphasize the relationship between the body and its environment, while Angle variation captures how tattoos follow the body's form and gesture. The Time component, perhaps most crucial, enables visual comparisons between generations, or across different seasons, providing insight into cultural persistence and change.

Importantly, EDFAT enables a respectful mode of representation that avoids exoticizing or essentializing the subjects. As Clifford and Marcus (1986) argue, ethnography must navigate the balance between narrative voice and cultural truth. The application of EDFAT as a methodological tool aligns with this imperative, allowing the camera not only to "see" but to "understand." Through this lens, the tattooed bodies of the Kalomese are not simply aesthetic surfaces, but living narratives of migration, identity, spirituality, and change.

Ultimately, this research seeks to demonstrate that ethnographic portraiture, when supported by a theory like EDFAT, is capable of conveying complex layers of meaning embedded in cultural embodiment. The Kalomese tattoos of Ban Nayang, captured and interpreted through this framework, offer more than visual interest they provide a portal into a vanishing world of indigenous wisdom and visual storytelling.

OBJECTIVE

1. To apply the EDFAT theory to portrait photography of the Lue Kalom people who still bear remaining tattoos.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on ethnographic approaches to explore the cultural significance and visual representation of traditional tattoos among the Kalomese (Lue Ka Lom)

community in Ban Nayang, Luang Prabang Province, Laos. The research focuses on the application of the EDFAT theory comprising Entire, Details, Frame, Angle, and Time as a methodological framework for ethnographic portraiture.

Data were gathered through fieldwork conducted in both Ban Nayang North and South. In-depth interviews were carried out with three categories of informants: Key Informants (elderly men bearing traditional tattoos), Context Informants (community leaders and cultural historians), and General Informants (younger residents and cultural practitioners). These interviews aimed to elicit personal narratives, cultural interpretations, and intergenerational perspectives on tattooing traditions.

Participant observation and photographic documentation played a central role in the data collection process. The EDFAT framework guided the production of visual data, ensuring a systematic approach to capturing both individual portraits and their environmental and symbolic contexts. Photographs were not merely illustrative but were analyzed as ethnographic texts in conjunction with interview transcripts and field notes.

Thematic content analysis was employed to interpret both verbal and visual data, identifying recurring motifs, cultural values, and patterns of transmission or discontinuity in tattoo practices. The study ensured methodological rigor through data triangulation, member validation, and thick description, while adhering to ethical protocols regarding informed consent, anonymity, and cultural sensitivity.

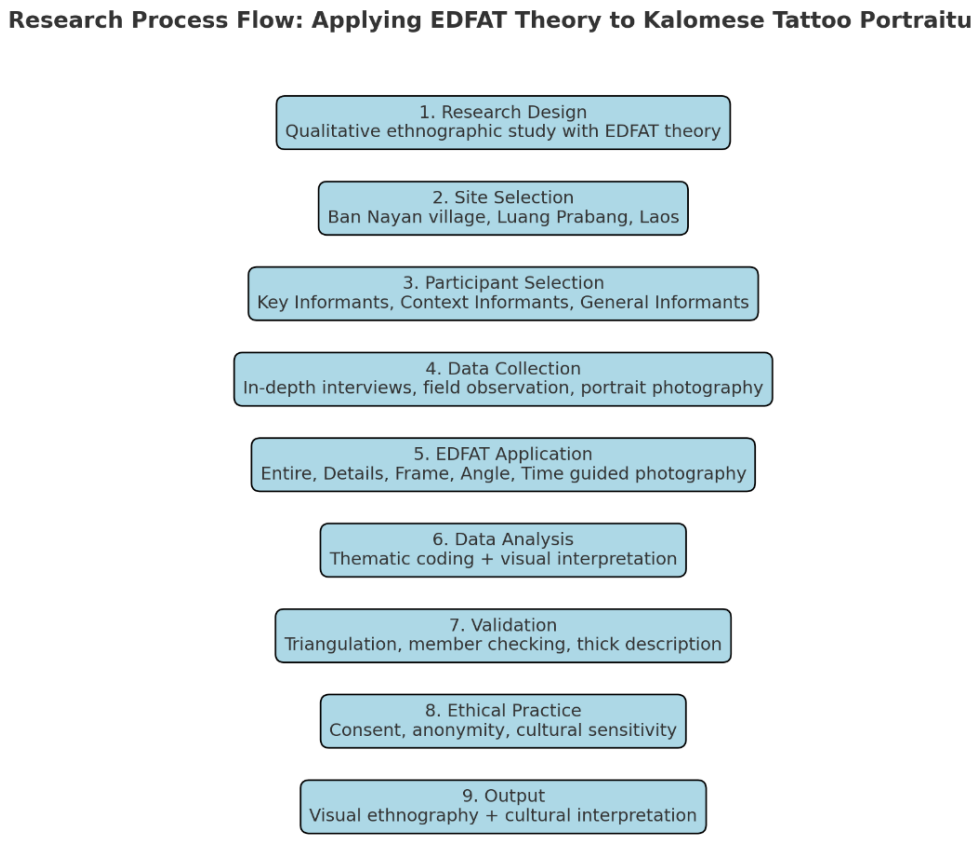


Figure 2 Research Process

RESULTS

Apply the EDFAT theory to portrait photography of the Lue Kalom people who still bear remaining tattoos

In the process of creating the photographic work "Portraits and Tattoos of Tai Lue People," the researcher aimed to present portraits of individuals showing traditional tattoos of Tai Lue people from the northern and southern Nayangg village. The photography process used real-life backgrounds to reflect the context in which these tattoos existed and are now fading away. The

documentary-style photography highlights both the models and the patterns of tattoos on the models. The creative process is divided into three steps: pre-production, production, and post-production, following standard practices in photography and motion picture production. From the field survey in the northern and southern Nayangg villages, Nam Bak District, Luang Prabang Province, Laos, it was found that there are still elderly people who have traditional tattoos and are willing to provide information and allow photographs, totaling 15 people. The researcher then carried out the photography according to the prepared plan from the pre-production process, resulting in the following photographic works.

Through the implementation of an ethnographic research, the photographer is able to explore the subject matter in more depth and aims to portray the subject's actions, motivations, beliefs, interests, and traditions (Kuntjara, 2004). Therefore, using a qualitative technique in documentary photography is the most efficient strategy as it enables a realistic examination. Active personal engagement is crucial for grasping the core ideas put out by Kratochvil & Persson (2001), who stress the need of understanding the underlying motives and strategies behind the subject's behavior. Gaining genuine knowledge and comprehension of a topic can only be achieved via complete immersion, actively participating in their activities, and concurrently critically analyzing both the subject and our own actions. A photo narrative should be presented as a coherent entity, including a compilation of pictures that together convey a narrative. By immersing themselves in the whole compilation, observers might get more extensive and profound understandings of the subject matter or narrative being portrayed, as opposed to only seeing isolated images. By using this "package," viewers may cultivate a more holistic and profound comprehension of the subject matter. Moreover, there is a fundamental concept that the complete collection should have a greater effect or influence than the individual photographs on their own. The photos possess meaning alone when shown as a cohesive entity to a viewership. Hence, it is essential for a photographic project to have a well devised strategy

for disseminating the pictures, usually via exhibits that serve as platforms for their display.Contrary to photo essays, which often convey a certain perspective or argument, documentary photography aims to maintain an impartial stance. The photos shown to viewers enable them to exercise their own discernment, drawing upon their intellect, personal encounters, and even skepticism (Kratochvil & Persson, 2001).

Nevertheless, it is essential for the documentary's purpose and storyline to be unambiguous and coherent throughout. Hence, the analysis is crucial for assessing the results of every picture session. The photographer should evaluate if the shot satisfies both technical and non-technical standards. The technical parts of photography include composition, exposure, lens selection, lighting, and creative and aesthetic traits, which can be easily evaluated. Conversely, non-technical elements pertain to inquiries such as: Does the image effectively depict a significant component of the overall context? Does the documentary effort adhere to its intended aim, storyline, or title? One must assess the qualities of each photograph and decide which ones to retain and, if feasible, redo. In a documentary photography project, an image must possess both aesthetic appeal and effectively communicate a crucial aspect of the narrative, and vice versa. In the end, the shot must blend seamlessly with other photographs to create a unified storyline.

The EDFAT hypothesis, developed by Frank P. Hoy, may serve as a research tool for researching photography. It encompasses the analysis of Entire, Details, Framing, Angle, and Time in photographs. This technique offers a complete framework for doing research in the field of photography, taking into account several facets of the photographic process. The EDFAT theory may be used in the field of photographic research in the following manner: Whole: The investigation starts by analyzing the totality of the image, taking into account the general arrangement, subject matter, and visual influence. Researchers examine the interplay of components inside the frame to produce a unified and captivating picture. They evaluate the overall impact and storytelling communicated by the shot.

Analysis (E = Entire): Researchers proceed to examine the image meticulously, directing their attention into the finer components, textures, and complexities present within the composition. They meticulously scrutinize the intricate particulars to reveal concealed subtleties and strata of significance. Through meticulous examination, scholars might get a more profound comprehension of the photographer's meticulousness and the possible symbolic or narrative importance of certain components.

Framing: The framing component of the EDFAT theory urges scholars to analyze the photographer's deliberate selection of how to position and enclose the topic inside the picture. The photographer's use of composition methods, such as the rule of thirds, leading lines, and symmetry, is analyzed. Researchers also investigate the deliberate use of negative space or other framing decisions to examine how framing affects the overall visual effect and narrative of the image.

Angle: Subsequently, researchers analyze the specific angle or viewpoint from which the shot was captured. The analysts examine the selected perspective, whether it is elevated, lowered, aerial, or at eye level, and evaluate how this angle enhances the visual impact and storytelling of the picture. Researchers analyze how the angle of view increases or modifies the viewer's impression of the subject matter and impacts the overall composition.

Time: The temporal dimension of the EDFAT theory focuses on analyzing the time-related elements shown in the image. Researchers examine whether the snapshot preserves a particular instant, portrays movement, or encapsulates a more comprehensive notion of time. The analysis focuses on how the depiction of time in the image enhances the storytelling, evokes emotions, or explores themes.

By integrating the EDFAT theory, which encompasses the elements of Entire, Details, Framing, Angle, and Time, as a study approach in photography, researchers are able to thoroughly examine and evaluate photos. This technique facilitates a more profound comprehension of the comprehensive structure, intricate particulars, framing selections, perspectives, and temporal

elements included within the photos. It offers a systematic framework for revealing the photographer's goals, visual storytelling strategies, and the possible narrative or thematic importance contained in their work.

Photographs of individuals with traditional tattoos of the Tai Lue people:

Photographic works of individuals with traditional tattoos, still remaining, were documented by the researcher in the environment and locations where the target group lives their daily lives in the villages of Nayaang North and South, in the city of Nambak District, Luang Prabang Province, Laos. The photographic works are as follows (Figure 3)



Figure 3 Photographs of Various tattooing people

In ancient times, it was mandatory for all Lue males from Nayaang Village in northern Thailand to obtain tattoos as a means of demonstrating social assimilation. There was a prevailing belief that those without tattoos were not held in high regard, and that those who did not participate in communal river bathing were expected to wash in a different, less desirable area of the river. Traditionally, Lue males would begin the practice of tattooing around the period of their late teens, often between the ages of 14 and 20. The tattoos were mostly located on the upper thigh region, spanning from just below the waist to the middle of the shin. The arms and cheeks of Lue males were adorned with tiny tattoos known as "karnsak khay" in the native language, which were regarded as important cultural characteristics.



Figure 4 Lue males in their river

The tattoos of Lue males from Nayaang Village are characterized by horse-shaped motifs surrounded by fences, accompanied by two stacks of grass in the front, and a rectangular design like a saddle atop the horse, referred to as "an-ma." The tattoos spanned many regions, ranging from the waist to the knees. In addition, a variety of additional motifs were included, including cage patterns, peacock patterns, net patterns, and flag patterns. The tattoo designs were basically categorized into three primary sections: top, middle, and bottom. The tattoo patterns in these three primary portions largely

mirrored those of the Tai ethnic tribes inhabiting the Mekong River basin, with minor changes in the particular motifs included.



Figure 5 The tattoos of Lue males

The tattooing apparatus comprised of tattoo needles and ink. The tattoo needle's handle was crafted from a long teakwood of about 60-75 cm, while the tattooing component might be fashioned from either iron or red brass. Tattoo ink was produced by charring animal bone with high-quality animal oil, such as from bears or snakes, and then combining it with lamp soot.

Prior to receiving a tattoo, a customary practice called "ka jao" or the teacher's fee existed in the Lue language. This price was given to the tattoo artist and represented the labor expenses associated with the tattooing procedure. The charge was computed at 2.5 mone each tattoo, with an additional 1 mone for the waist region, resulting in a total of 6 mone or around 6,000 Baht in current times. Individuals seeking tattoo designs have to use

opium as a means of mitigating discomfort. Each tattooing session required many sessions, generally totalling five.

The tattooing custom among Lue males from Nayaang Village is motivated by many factors: 1) Tattooing as a means to assess one's own resilience, 2) Tattooing for the aim of enhancing aesthetics, 3) Tattooing driven by personal values, and 4) Tattooing as a way to uphold traditional rituals.

Concerning the photos of persons adorned with traditional tattoos, a mere 15 individuals are now residing in Nayaang Village and Nayaang South. A solitary individual has relocated to a nearby hamlet, where the researcher has successfully obtained photographic evidence. The photographic approach employs authentic environments where the models reside in their everyday routines to depict the surroundings where these tattoos formerly were and are progressively diminishing. The photography utilizes a documentary technique, focusing on the models and the tattoo designs on their bodies. This includes the river in the town, which used to serve as a location for bathing and showcasing tattoos as a symbol of maturity and manhood among Lue men of Lue ancestry.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

1. Conclusion

Tattooing is a culturally and socially important activity among Lue males from Nayaang Village in northern Laos. In antiquity, tattoos were obligatory for all Lue males as a manifestation of societal assimilation and individuality. The absence of tattoos marked individuals as social outcasts, underscoring the significance of tattooing within their group. The tattoo designs, adorned with equine motifs and accompanied by diverse supplementary components, were dispersed throughout numerous anatomical regions, resulting in a multifaceted and distinctive artistic expression.

From an ethnic theory standpoint, the tattoo designs of Lue males in Nayaang Village have notable similarities to the tattoo patterns of the Tai

ethnic groups in the Mekong River area. This resemblance suggests cultural exchanges and perhaps common historical roots between the Lue people and other ethnic groups in the region. Tattooing undoubtedly functioned as a conspicuous symbol of the Lue ethnic identity, signifying their particular cultural legacy within a varied ethnic milieu. Furthermore, the practice of tattooing may be examined as a means of cultural defiance and safeguarding. Amidst the growing marginalization of indigenous cultures in a globalized society, the persistence of tattooing traditions in Nayaang Village serves as a testament to the community's unwavering commitment to preserving its cultural identity and values.

Utilizing documentary-style photography to depict people adorned with traditional tattoos provides a captivating visual account of the cultural legacy of Nayaang Village. The photographer captures the models in their authentic environments and everyday routines, offering a contextualized portrayal of the diminishing tattoo heritage. The incorporation of the village's river, once a prominent location for communal gatherings and exhibition of tattoos, enhances the images by providing a fuller understanding of the tattoos within the community's overall way of life.

The images not only center on the tattoo designs but also highlight the models themselves. This method imbues the subjects with human qualities and establishes a connection between the audience and the Lue men, resulting in photos that are more sympathetic and powerful. The images serve as a visual record of a distinctive cultural custom, safeguarding the recollection of the tattooing legacy for future cohorts and maybe enhancing consciousness about the significance of conserving cultural heritage. The tattooing practice among Lue males in Nayaang Village has profound cultural importance, serving as a representation of social cohesion, artistic manifestation, and devotion to age-old traditions. Through an examination of the custom from an ethnic theory standpoint, it becomes apparent that tattooing functioned as a distinctive symbol of the Lue ethnic identity and perhaps shared cultural ties with other Tai ethnic groups in the area. Moreover,

the photographic record of persons adorned with customary tattoos is a visually captivating account, emphasizing the significance of safeguarding culture and the diminishing but enduring practice of tattooing in Nayaang Village.

2. Discussion

The application of EDFAT theory in this study provided a structured and reflexive approach to visual ethnography that illuminated the rich, yet fading, tattoo traditions of the Kalomese (Lue Ka Lom) community. Each element of EDFAT Entire, Details, Frame, Angle, and Time offered a unique interpretive layer, allowing the researcher not only to document but also to decode the cultural meanings embedded in the body art of this ethnic group. The Entire component was essential in contextualizing individual portraits within the lived environment of Ban Nayang. Wide-angle photographs captured the landscape, housing styles, and communal spaces, anchoring the portraits within the socio-cultural and geographic realities of the community. These environmental shots underscored the interconnectedness of body and place a concept central to ethnographic thought (MacDougall, 2006). The spatial framing made visible the material conditions that have both shaped and threatened the continuity of tattooing practices, including increasing modernization and agricultural shifts.

The **Details** dimension served to highlight the intricacy of tattoo designs, many of which are rapidly disappearing from public view. Close-up imagery of tattoo patterns revealed not only the aesthetic characteristics but also symbolic motifs, such as animals, geometric shapes, or religious iconography, each tied to protective beliefs or rites of passage. Through these details, the portrait work fulfilled an archival function—preserving visual knowledge no longer passed down orally or practically.

Framing, both literal and conceptual, shaped the way subjects were visually positioned in relation to their surroundings. Choices about background, foreground, and cultural artifacts included in the frame helped communicate the identity of the tattooed individual as a cultural bearer. In some portraits,

inclusion of weaving tools or ritual objects expanded the narrative beyond the body, showing how tattooing interlinks with broader cultural systems. This framing reflects what Schneider (2021) terms "multi-sited visual ethnography," wherein cultural meaning is constructed across various symbolic fields.

The use of varied Angles from eye-level to low and high perspectives allowed for a re-negotiation of power dynamics between photographer and subject. Rather than presenting tattooed individuals as passive or exoticized, the chosen angles emphasized dignity, agency, and presence. Some portraits were taken from below the eye line to elevate the subject symbolically, reinforcing their role as cultural elders and custodians of traditional knowledge. This reflects Clifford and Marcus's (1986) argument for co-constructed ethnography, where representation is negotiated rather than imposed.

The time element played a vital role in capturing cultural change and continuity. Repeated visits over months enabled observation of generational contrasts, such as how younger Kalomese no longer carry visible tattoos, while the elderly remain living archives of tradition. Temporal layering—photographing subjects at different times of day, seasons, and life events—also revealed how tattoos aged with the body, becoming palimpsests of memory, identity, and social transformation. This temporal sensitivity affirms EDFAT's strength in supporting longitudinal visual ethnography (Toth, 2013).

Collectively, the EDFAT framework not only improved the technical execution of portrait photography but also deepened the interpretive power of visual data. By positioning photography as both method and medium of analysis, this research demonstrates that traditional tattooing among the Kalomese is not merely a visual phenomenon—it is a culturally situated practice, now at risk of extinction. The photographs, when viewed through EDFAT, thus function as cultural texts: layered, situated, and historically contingent.

This study reaffirms the value of visual methodologies in the preservation of cultural identity and ethnographic research. The application of EDFAT theory comprising Entire, Detail, Frame, Angle, and Time—enabled the

researcher to capture not only the physical appearance of the Kalomese elders' tattoos but also the layered meanings embedded in these bodily inscriptions. By carefully composing portraits through thoughtful framing, varied angles, and consideration of temporal context, the photographic process becomes more than documentation it becomes interpretation. Each image is crafted to reflect the continuity of ethnic identity, historical memory, and socio-cultural transformation. As the Kalomese navigate the tensions between cultural continuity and erosion, the EDFAT-guided approach allows portraits to serve as ethnographic testimony, preserving vanishing heritage while visually honoring the resilience and distinctiveness of the community.

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