YOU HAVE A NICE HEART
Neo-tribes of Thailand

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INTRODUCTION

‘The idea seemed to me was never to fit in ... and if you never fitted in, then there was never going to be any competition’.

(Malcolm McLaren as quoted in Muggleton p.55, 1995)

It was on my journey through Thailand that we visited the community of Prom Lok, and had the privilege of stepping into the life of a Thai family. They were far from the big cities and lived on the aid of one another, communicating and trading as one. It was here I realized the importance of tight knit families and its spiritual necessity. They did not integrate in the mainstream economy of Thailand, however they made their own and there was not any competition to be greater than your neighbors. It was a life of simplicity and mutual respect in the spirit of helping one another.

Personally the importance of family and the will to believe is what drives me, which is what makes Thai society so precious, due to their togetherness. Their morals in every day life made me question my own faith that consisted of freedom, truth, natural law and conscience. The human race divides itself into tribes, whether they are based on religious beliefs or the same vision of fashion.

We seem to have a fear of being lonesome, to not fit in and have no motivation in life, which has caused us to reach out to one another. The purpose of this research is to ask what has caused society to find dependence on one another and what the world would look like without subcultures and beliefs.

This paper will attempt to understand the roots and necessity of subcultures in contemporary society starting by understanding the oldest groups in Thailand, People’s of the Golden Triangle. Further relations are made to Thai tribes of today exemplified by The Harmless Far East Eses. The research will define what subcultures are, how they function today, as well as why they are referred to as neo-tribes. Lastly, a translation is made into an AMFI graduation collection called ‘You Have A Nice Heart’, telling a story of society’s interconnectivity, the importance and will to believe.

CHAPTER 1: THAILAND

PART 1: Peoples of the Golden Triangle

Thai people have a sense of community and togetherness through their way of life that is largely influenced by their religious faith. Their morals are based on acts such as avoiding stealing, killing and any hurtful speech. It is about an act of kindness so unique far from the standards in Western society. This faith, known as Theravada Buddhism, is strongly influenced by traditional beliefs regarding ancestral and natural spirits (Lewis 1984, p.26). It is seen as a philosophy or a way of life, which
the Peoples of the Golden Triangle, some of the most fascinating old tribal people in Northern Thailand, still practice strongly today (Lewis 1984, p.26).

Through travelling and having stayed with the Lisu Tribe North of Chiang Mai, it seemed apparent how tight knit they were with one another, practicing their religion and social activity as their daily routine. The North of Thailand counts six main tribes called Karan, Hmong, Mien, Lahu, Akha and Lisu (see Fig. 1). Interestingly enough each tribe has their own language, dress and historical background and has developed cultures unlike one another. Within their definition of an ethnical group, these tribes have created a differentiation through the use of moral themes (harmony, independence, propriety, blessing, continuity, primacy) (Lewis 1984, p.10).

Beyond all their differences these people all have in common the understanding that the family is the most important social unit. There is a respect in these groups that is so unique they marry solely within their own ethnic group (Lewis, 1984). Buddhism thus plays a large role in Thai society as it has shaped their interactions with one another. It is the importance of being the best version of oneself to be the better in the next life that drives a sense of peace between the peoples of religious faith in Thailand (Landaw and Bodian, 2003). Although they believe in a life full of spirits, they might be unseen but they are as real to them as the visible world (Lewis, 1984).

What is fascinating with the eldest Thai subculture, meaning a cultural group within a larger culture often having variance in belief, is the amount of strength it has build to still be alive today. It might be in a slight overflow of tourist activity, yet these people still have a strong evolution as the younger generations still build on the modernity of the traditions, such as development in embroidery and materials. As beads have become plastic and the culture shifts, the faith and love with each other was the starting point for this graduation collection.

PART 2: The Desire to Belong Brings People Together: The Harmless Far East Eses

This unique togetherness between the Peoples of the Golden Triangle has lasted in the hearts of Thai people, as it is present in the modernity of today’s tribes.
One of these contemporary social divisions in a traditional society, with a slightly tougher edge, calls themselves The Harmless Far East Eses. They are a group of Thai men in the midst of Bangkok that have created a tribe unique in its kind (Fig. 2).

On the outside these people resemble the Cholos from Mexico who have inspired them through fashion, tattoos and hairstyles. However, tattoos and bling do not make a gangster, as they do no appreciate brutal violence that is often associated with the real Latino gangs (Arana, 2005).

The Maras, which are gangs originating from the USA and which are imported in Central American countries, have a way of life strongly focused on violence. They are known for activities ranging from assault, auto theft and drug trafficking to prostitution and people smuggling (Arana, 2005).

In an interview by Alexander Hotz (2014) with the members of three gangs of the Far East Eses, Balcony Pain, Fratez and D-Sixty expressed their concern of having no appreciation with brutal violence. They are simply a ‘brotherhood of style-conscious men who bond over baggy white shirts and gothic-baroque tattoos’ (Hotz, 2014). Every tribe are individuals within groups that express similar identities to identify with the others in a group and as a group to express a difference with other groups in order to differentiate themselves (McKerron, 2003). The Maras compared to the Far East Eses might have the same sense of fashion yet their mentality and activity, as a group, is what creates differentiation.

The roots of why this sub-culture was created still lay in the issues with the political system in Thailand. The men expressed through a song ‘Fuck The Popo’ how they describe the corrupt Thai police as parasites (Hotz, 2014). As Phil Cohen, an American sociologist and Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland expressed in his comprehensive analysis he feels subcultures can be understood as ‘attempted’ solutions by working class youth (Muggleton, 2000). These Thai men have created a sub-culture to express their vision on politics in Thailand, which can be understood as a solution to a corrupt system. Such outright vitriol is rarely directed towards the people in authority in Thailand, where the dominant culture is one of extreme deference towards the powerful (Hotz, 2014).

A resistance is not defined by violence as these men seek solutions in music, tattooing and the pure definition of a brotherhood. Most Thais seem to disagree with the men’s vision on Thai police, which is the exact reason why this gang was created. A group with the same belief system other locals disagree with (Hotz, 2014).
Modern day tribes compared to the old Peoples of the Golden Triangle have the same vision of togetherness, creating their own beliefs and sharing them as a unit. They all have their sense of style and have their personal aesthetics that they believe is the most important truth. This concept of brotherhoods, both in ancient and modern society is so pure as family does not need to be defined by blood. They create a sense of belonging and thus create their purpose in life as a unit.

CHAPTER 2: NEO-TRIBES TODAY

Part 1: Concept of a Neo-Tribe

How can these developments be explained? What drives society to create these sub-cultures in the midst of their already existing culture? Does the feeling of being lonesome add to the creation of neo-tribalism? The concept of tribes seems to have developed over the years, starting from ethnical groups to a concept present today known as ‘neo-tribalism’ or modern tribalism.

Michel Maffesoli first developed the concept of a neo-tribe in the 1980’s, playing with the ideology that human beings have evolved to live in tribal society, as opposed to mass society (Maffesoli, 1996). This results into forming social networks constituting new ‘tribes’. This theory of Maffesoli is intriguing on many levels, firstly concerning the idea that the formation of these tribes is of no means fixed.

He argues that it is all loosely organized yet still places an emphasis on style in expressing shared ethnical associations (Maffesoli, 1996). A tribe is driven on a specific culture or belief such as the Peoples of the Golden Triangle who all have their unique beliefs but overall share the same ethnic association. The difference is found in their way of expression, such as the clothes they wear or the their moral themes. Thai gangsters can be compared to Latino gangsters, however in its shared expression bump into a completely opposing vision.

Maffesoli (1996) expressed that essential to this concept is the ‘idea of shared social experience, which is born out of sharing the same territory, real or imagined’. The best example of this connected to previous research are the People’s of the Gold Triangle who have migrated from South-Central China because the men fought on the side of the anti-Communist forces and had to flee into Thailand with their families (Lewis, 1984). By sharing the same territory and being in the same social situation they were driven in a unique way to create tribes. It can also be seen as a territory in an imaged way as they are driven by the same beliefs, as the spirits are as real to them as the visible world.

Secondly, Maffesoli believes these tribes are organized around the catchwords, brand names and sound bites of consumer culture. However, he insists that in the midst of fashion fads new forms of social collectivity are taking root ‘which challenge our established models of politics and tradition’ (Maffesoli, 1996).

It seems to be a good point that tribes today are defined easily in catchwords and brand names such as gangsters, punk rockers and hipsters.
However, when looking at the Bangkok ‘gangsters’ there is that large gap again with their vision on politics and a new shift in traditions. Being a ‘gangster’ does not immediately define what vision one believes in, however through consumer orientation this could be easily assumed.

Maffesoli thus believes we are in the time of the tribes. A culture focused on a tribal society where we seek to create groups instead of being a mass society. This clearly is a strong vision in this research as tribes such as The Far East Eses are a small fraction of the tribes present today.

Part 2: Identity Construction

An interesting aspect of neo-tribes is what drives people to come together and define themselves not as an individual but a group. When travelling through Thailand there was a sense of emptiness felt as these people seemed to have such a peace and bond with one another which is a togetherness that Western society somewhat lacks. Looking at Thai family structure briefly it is a culture largely concerned with harmony (Landaw and Bodian, 2003). Social status is acquired in a previous life and respect, obedience, thankfulness and loyalty are part of their every day faith. Compared to Western culture, Thai society has a stronger bond as big families live together like small tribes on the same grounds.

An interesting theory for this was established by Foucault in 1984 stating: ‘Modern day tourists could be seeking both the excitement of breaking away from the rigidity of the identities performed in the ‘real world’ of the tourist’s home, and looking for the emotional bonding to be found in communities. On holiday we are looking for what we lack at home’ (McKerron, 2003). Foucault as explained by McKerron (2003) put it plain and simple, as the Western society seems to lack this sense of community en emotional bonding. This emptiness according to Foucault has led people to come together. The desire to belong has become so significant that neo-tribes are created.

Hetherington also communicated by McKerron (2003) agrees with this concept stating that he sees identity as primarily an issue of wanting to belong; it is an intentional community. Personally reflecting on this idea was what trigged to understand this concept. The idea of wanting to belong and being a real somebody has been forced into our society so deeply that we seek to create neo-tribes. We want people to understand us and want a reason for living.

As emotion seems to play a big role in the creation of tribes, another vision is the concept of disruption and fragmentation. The reason for this creation could be the fragmentation of present day postmodern society (McKerron, 2003). To some communities there is a lot of disbelief and questioning of truths that run from politics to religion. This fragmentation and resistance has caused many tribes to be created such as political parties.
A neo tribe is driven on an idea that motivates and guides lives. The beauty in these communities is that it can be expressed in many ways such as music, art, fanzines and other forms of creativity. ‘Think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your life’ (Andersen 1085, cited in O’Hara 1995:22). That is the beauty of a tribe, the freedom to think and create what you, as an individual belief is the truth and purpose in life. There are others that think the way you do, and so tribes can be created, in the spirit of helping each other.

CHAPTER 3: DESIGNER VISION

Inspired by these current developments in society the collection ‘You Have A Nice Heart’ aims to capture the importance of togetherness and to understand the fear of being alone. We create subcultures, families and religions in order to establish the comfort that we have a purpose in life, the feeling that we belong.

The idea is to create a collection driven on the concept of a whole, inspired by the writings of Maffesoli, the concept of a neo-tribe. This means a collection that breathes interconnectivity; as individuals in a tribe are unique yet need one another to belong. As a story-telling designer I aim to capture the essence of the Thai traditional values of family mixed with the contemporary gangster fashions. This can be seen through the wide shapes that are inspired by street wear of the Far East Eses and convey a sense of ease (Fig. 3). The colors breathe the world of Thailand full of neon clashing with pastels and black. The textures are key using raw traditional materials such as leather and linen’s contrasted with bright wovens, knits, and modern embroidery (Fig. 4). The purpose is an overflow of joy that allows your imagination to live and be the best version of yourself. This loudness is only found in the garments colours, as the mood of the collection is the feeling of being heart-cool, which is very present in the hearts of Thai society. This is done by the use of soft bells creating a sense of
Zen. The clothes express the message of pride, blessing, and happiness yet the feeling surrounding the clothes is a feeling so pure found in the hearts of Thai tribes.

The collection is made for young adults who are certain of their purpose in life and express their emotions loud and clear. They are outspoken individuals and love a quirky sense of humour in an outfit. These clothes will express an emotion of joy, which is an inspiration for my target group to share their feelings. They are a unique neo-tribe of creative individuals.

The collection would be ranged in the market like SIBLING, which is a high-end London based knitwear brand. The team consists of three designers exploring knitwear on a refined and innovative level. They sell clothes up to a 1000 pounds, yet they are all worked on by hand and cared for so uniquely.

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, the essence of this research is the understanding that togetherness can create a great sense of joy. It is the warmth and strength of one another that creates a feeling of belonging and allows us to express our true selves.

A neo-tribe brings comfort that is important to society today, as according to Maffesoli we are no longer a mass society. We have found a dependence on each other that has allowed us to differentiate ourselves from each other, in unique groups.

The collection ‘You Have A Nice Heart’ is a vision of love and appreciation between a group of people that are driven by the feeling of ‘djai’yen’ or heart-cool. There is a beauty in Thai society that is personally placed into this collection concerning the harmony and appreciation of life. Everything that lacks in the chaos of Western culture will be found in the clothing through brightness of color and carefulness of beading placement. A sense of modernity and playfulness is found and inspired by the maybe not-so tough men that call themselves the Far East Eses.

The research is brought together by creating the concept of a tribe that is inspired and clashed by the old and new sub-cultures of Thailand. Their fashions and purpose of creation might be different yet they’re religious beliefs and pure hearts towards one another remains unique and the same.

The act of self-expression and finding people who understand you for who you are is a blessing to have in contemporary society. We are no longer alone. This collection is my message: stay djai’yen.
Websites:


Books:


Images:


Fig 3. Tops, Liesa. Illustration Line up, 2015. Print