

Ceremonial Tai Textiles and their Uses

Dr. Linda S. McIntosh

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THE COMPLEX TRADITIONAL belief system of the Tai requires different types of ceremonies for various purposes. Rites of passages, such as weddings and funerals, are elaborate, and textiles play important roles in them. Other rituals, such as those for healing, spirit appeasement, and honoring ancestors, call for woven accoutrements for their success. Although many Tai groups are Buddhist, pre-Buddhist beliefs are still part of the lives of the Tai people, and many Tai subgroups are not Buddhist but animist, or belief in spirits.

Funerary Textiles

According to traditional Tai, each Tai clan has its own heaven, and when a person dies a shaman must lead the newly deceased's spirit to the correct heaven. Textiles are important in the funeral ceremony because their motifs allow for the spirits to recognize members from their own clan. When a man passes away, one of his wife's head cloths is placed on his gravesite so they can be reunited in heaven. When

a woman passes away, she will be dressed in the *sin phii* she made for herself, as well as the one her mother-in-law made for her. (This special garment is decorated with a specific motif, mating serpent deities whose bodies form a triangular shape that symbolizes the grave-house roof gable.) When a son marries, she will give her daughter-in-law a *sin phii* similar to the one she wove for her own funeral. All women will wear the *sin phii* given to them by their mother-in-law at the funeral rites of their in-laws (both parents). The similar patterning will allow them to recognize each other in the ancestor world. Special robes or coats (*seua hii*, *seua long*, or *seua nyao*) were worn in the past at funerals and continue to be worn at other ceremonial occasions.

Wedding Textiles

Marriage is another important rite of passage that requires the exchange of textiles between the bride and her husband's relatives. The wedding itself may not require a shaman, but a shaman is required when notifying the guardian spirits that there is a new member joining the clan when the bride moves into her husband's family's home. Many of the Tai groups are patrilinear, and when a woman marries, she must cut kinship ties with her

parents and clan and join her husband's.

Shamanic Garb

Special textiles utilized by shamans include clothing. A hat or cap, *muu* or *muk phii*, with a tail is worn during rites. Shamans who conduct funerals, *mau thang yao*, wear special robes, and the color of the robe changes depending on which part of the ceremony he is conducting. Most shamans, regardless of gender, wear skirts and other women's clothing while conducting rites. In the past, the human figure motif was the distinctive pattern of a skirt worn by a shaman, but these days anyone can wear clothing with the human motif for any occasion. Shamans also utilize a shoulder bag composed of patterned cloth to carry their amulets and other tools. Some bags are adorned with boar's tusks.

Below, Funerary skirt, *sin phii*, Tai ethnic group, NE Laos, first quarter of 20th century. The red bands of weft ikat contain patterning of hong mythical birds, and the indigo ones are decorated with the motif that, in the past, restricted the use of this skirt to funerals. This motif is bodies mating *ngeuak* serpent deities forming the grave house gable.

Right, Long coat, *seua nyao* or *seua long*, Tai ethnic group, NE Laos, first quarter of 20th century. In the past, a woman attending the funeral of one of her in-laws was required to wear this upper garment along with a *sin phii* skirt.

Textiles for Healing

Textiles are accessories used by traditional healing specialists or shamans. A shaman is asked to perform a ritual to improve the sick person's condition when other methods fail. Many households continue to rely on traditional or herbal medicine to heal illnesses, since modern medicine is not readily available to those living in remote areas or to those without the funds to pay for such care. Sometimes, the sick person who has been treated with modern medicine but remains ill then asks a shaman to heal him or her.

During a ceremony, a shaman decides how the textile accessories will be used. The shaman may wear them as sashes, shawls, and head cloths. Textiles are displayed on and around the spirits' altar, and weavings are often part of the offerings to the spirits. Shamans also receive textiles as symbols of gratitude from



the healed and their family members. If the shaman is female, she may weave these textiles, too. If the shaman is male, his wife may produce them. The textiles often become soiled or damaged in the rituals by spilt food, alcohol, candle wax, etc. Thus, they often are replaced with new ones, or the damaged sections are removed and the remnants continue to serve a function in future ceremonies.

Spirit Appeasement

The textiles also play roles in annual spirit appeasement ceremonies. The shaman performs

a ceremony to pay respect to the spirit he or she summons in ceremonies. The people that the shaman has healed must attend, or at least make an offering to the spirits. The shaman's apprentices and former students must also attend and pay respect to their mentor and the spirits. All participants use elaborately woven textiles during the rites, but the shaman is dressed in especially elaborately decorated textiles.

Symbolic Imagery

Complex supplementary weft patterning covers the textiles (*phaa mau phii*) that serve important roles in the ceremonies. The motifs symbolize real and mythical animals, vegetation and flora, objects found in the man-made environment, stars and other illuminating objects, and human figures that symbolize various spirits. Some of the real creatures symbolized by the motifs include elephants and various types of birds. Mythical animals seem to dominate the imagery. The *hong* is a majestic bird that can travel between the natural and supernatural realms. Serpent deities are depicted in numerous forms. There are several types of snake-like supernatural creatures: *ngeuak*, *naak*, and *luang*. Other imaginary creatures are hybrids of real ones, such as *sang hong* or the elephant/hong mix. The *maum* is part horse and part deer.

Various designs symbolize different types of flowers and vegetation. Motifs of sandalwood flowers, vines, rice, and other plants are recurring symbols found on Tai textiles. The motifs of flowers, leaves, and seeds represent a fertile land; agrarian life is strenuous, and households often do not have an adequate supply of food. Droughts and floods also wreak havoc on the annual rice yield, decreasing the

food supply. The Tai believe that the heavenly realms are abundant with food without the threat of natural disasters.

Different objects from the weaver's social environment, such as trays of offerings, are incorporated into the designs. A manmade tree that plays an important role in animist rites is often rendered in the design composition of textiles utilized in special rituals. This arrangement of bamboo and/or tree branches is considered a tree of life connecting the different realms. Most importantly, human figures are found atop the various animals, on vessels in the form of serpent deities, or standing alone surrounded by the rich flora and fauna of both realms. The figures represent the shaman's spirit, the ill person's spirit, ancestor spirits, and other types of spirits, including *mot* and *mon*.

The imagery on the textiles assists the shaman by allowing his or her spirit to travel to the supernatural realm to communicate with various spirits that are causing the illness. The Tai supernatural world consists of different levels, including the ancestor world, and heaven where the gods reside. For example, one type of spirit, *mon*, lives in a specific realm. Sometimes, the shaman's spirit must travel to these realms to converse with the spirits to ask for their advice or assistance. On the journey, the real and imaginary creatures protect the shaman's spirit, luminary sources light the pathway, and vegetation provides sustenance.

Contemporary Usage

In some areas, traditional beliefs are not as strong, or some people have converted to Buddhism. Thus, many of the rituals are no longer carried out or held less often than they were in the past. Many ceremonies occur without the elaborately woven textiles. For example, intricately decorated coffin covers have been



Shaman's hat, *muuk*, Tai ethnic group, NE Laos, first quarter of 20th century.

replaced by textiles adorned with paintings or with pictures cut out of magazines. Many shamans wear everyday clothing while conducting rites.

Production of some ceremonial textiles continues. The special weavings may still be used in various rites, but they are also consumed in different ways. With a growing demand for these textiles due to their beauty, commercial production began 20 years ago. Sales of these textiles allow women to earn an income to support their families. The textiles, including those reserved for healing ceremonies in the past, still function as identity markers of the Tai groups and are worn



Shaman's cloth, *phaa mau phii*, Tai ethnic group, NE Laos, first quarter of 20th century. The creases in the textiles are evidence that a shaman wore it as a head cloth.



Tai Dam mon shaman and his altar, Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos, 2005.

for various special occasions. The creativity of Tai weavers is internationally recognized, and their beautiful works of art are found in museums and homes throughout the world.

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Tree of life motif on a funerary skirt, *sin phii*, Tai ethnic group, NE Laos, first quarter of 20th century.

Tree of life sculpture in a Tai Dam *Bun Pii Muang* Festival, Luang Nam Tha Province, Laos, 2005.