

# The Ritual Importance of the Mundane

## White Cloth Among the Tai of Southeast Asia

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FIG. 1. Various edible products and tobacco are wrapped in a double layer of white cotton cloth as part of a funeral offering. The ashes of the deceased, in a bottle or miniature metal stupa, and this offering are carried in a decorated *hau yen*, or cool house, to the grounds of a Theravada Buddhist monastery. The ashes are placed in the stupa and the offering is left next to it in the *hau yen*.

*Baan Klang, Capital District, Mahasarakham Province, northeast Thailand, 1989*



FIG. 2. Close-up of sections of the large white cloth (*phaa upposot*) on which monks make fortnightly confessions to one another and repeat the 229 rules, set forth by the Buddha, which define their status. Each section of this cloth was donated by a village household, symbolizing each household's obligation and the coherence of the community in supporting this monastery.

*Wat Nay, Baan Cbaan Laan, Phanna District, Ubon Ratchathani Province, 1991*

Often, when we consider that something has ritual importance, we imagine it as exotic, strange, and, possibly, wondrously beautiful. We tend not to view as ritualistic something that is everyday and quite ordinary. We also believe that ritual items cannot be easily displaced by other objects, much less discarded entirely. Something ritualistic is somehow essential to a group's belief system; therefore, we expect that production and use of the item will be restricted. We also expect frequent mention of the item because it is essential to what makes a group of people a culture.

Anthropologists, however, often turn people's assumptions upside down. They poke holes in "common sense" ideas, showing that what looks like "common sense" is in fact a matter of convention and differs from group to group. This was the case with my exploration of textiles among Tai-speaking peoples in southern China and mainland Southeast Asia.

As I began work in a Thai village in 1970, I gave no attention to what people wore or why they wore it. By that time, the impact of Euro-American clothes on contemporary Thai rural dress had become widespread and many villagers wore blouses, T-shirts, and jeans; others continued to wear traditional clothes. Of course, I was aware that Buddhist monks wore saffron robes, but for me this was a functional issue: the robes made apparent the monks' position in the culture

vis-à-vis everyone else, permitting certain activities and prohibiting others.

In the course of the first two years of that research, however, I noted that the traditional clothes worn by village people—wrap-around skirts with shawls worn over shoulders, especially when attending ceremonies—had significance in terms of their production. They were woven and presented by women to monks, men, and women on various Buddhist and non-Buddhist occasions (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992) and signified women's control of a complicated technology. Additionally, I found that specific designs on textiles and styles of wearing them were gender-based. Wearing one or another textile connoted different behaviors: some would be appropriate in certain circumstances, some in others.

As my studies continued I became aware that I was missing a basic component of Tai weaving: plain weave, white cotton cloth. This extraordinarily ordinary yet vital textile was once fundamental to any weaver's repertory and would have been produced in great quantity. It evidently had been almost entirely replaced with factory-produced cloth perhaps a century or more ago. On investigation, however, I have found that the weaving of this textile is perpetuated in a few places. Furthermore, it retains important meanings (Figs. 1, 2). I have discovered continuing use of this textile in many

Fig. 3. Map of Southeast Asia.



locations and for several related purposes, showing that it still holds great ritual value.

## HISTORY

My studies have focused on groups speaking Tai languages, the most populous language family in terms of numbers of speakers in mainland Southeast Asia. Tai-speakers include the Thai of Thailand; the Lao and many other Tai speakers in Laos; the Shan of the Shan States, Burma; the Tay, Nung, and Black, White, and Red Tai of northern Vietnam; and several different groups in southern China, including that country's largest minority group, the Zhuang (CNRS 1985). My research indicates that white cloth has social and ritual significance among all of these groups as well as, for instance, the Khmer of Cambodia. While I focus here on the Thai-Lao of northeast Thailand and the Lao of Laos, I make reference to other peoples as appropriate (Fig. 3).

Today, white cotton cloth is not a normal part of a woman's textile production in northeast Thailand or Laos. Women usually weave textiles patterned by supplementary weft or *mat mii* (resist, tie-dyed; sometimes called *ikat*) techniques. However, in the not-too-distant past, white cloth was a major aspect of everyday production.

A vigorous overland trade in yarn and cloth existed in pre-industrial times between China and mainland Southeast Asia. Cotton seems to have been a major item moving from south to north, while silk was imported from China (Lefferts 1996). Historical records from the early 1800s indicate that the kings of Siam (as Thailand was known until 1939) called for vast amounts of white cloth on a periodic basis, either for ritual use in the capital or to support trade for more complex textiles from the outside world. Levies of white cloth assessed for the cremation of King Rama I in 1809 resulted in a total of 1970 pieces (dimensions unrecorded) from 19 provinces to Bangkok's near north (Terwiel 1989).

Junko Koizumi (1992) undertook an extensive analysis of Bangkok's *suai* (caravan) levies in what is now Thailand's northeast during the middle to late 1800s. White cloth was a major item in this taxation. This trade was part of an arrangement organized by Siamese kings by which they exchanged many local items—including sapan wood and stick lac for dyes, and ramie and kapok for cloth and stuffing—on the international market for overseas items.

Southeast Asia and Siam were major way stations on the Asian "silk route"; Siam's rulers could easily participate in this trade because of the ubiquity and near universal utility of an item such as white cloth. From the first records white cloth is figured in mone-



FIG. 4. Two young boys in homespun, handwoven village-tailored white cotton cloth. Clothing is one of many utilitarian uses for white cloth in Tai culture.

Lao people, Sam Tie district, Houa Phan Province, northeastern Laos, 1991



FIG. 5. A young man off to work in the fields in indigo-dyed work clothes, with indigo-dyed bag and bamboo knife-holder slung over his back. The clothing and the bag are made of white cotton cloth, dyed after tailoring. Today, some urban Thai wear the indigo-dyed "farmer's" shirt as a political symbol to express their allegiance with "folk."

Lao people, Baan Khun Kham, Luang Prabang Province, central Laos, 1990

#### VILLAGE PRODUCTION AND USES

During my work in northeast Thailand, where nearly every other house had a loom, I found little weaving of white cloth. However, as I traveled into upland Laos and northern Vietnam, I discovered many locations where homegrown cotton was processed into yarn and cloth. These were areas remote from markets, where factory-produced cloth was relatively expensive and supplementary employment opportunities for women were lacking.

As I inventoried production by asking women to unpack their baskets containing stores of handwoven textiles, I would often discover rolls of white cotton cloth at the bottom (see cover of this issue). When I expressed an interest in these as well as the beautiful weavings piled above them, the weavers expressed sur-



FIG. 6. A Tai Dam (Black Tai) eldest son and his wife dressed in white cloth for his father's funeral procession.

Archival photograph from the Institute for Social Sciences, Hanoi, Vietnam. Photo by Dr. Dang Nghiem Van, Pan Hamlet, Chieng Ly Village, Thuan Chou District, Thai-Meo Autonomous District, northern Vietnam, no date; reproduced by permission

prise: Why was I interested in this ordinary cloth? I replied, Why do you continue to weave it? I discovered many uses, some ritually based, for white cotton cloth at both the royal and local level that make this textile important (Figs. 4, 5).

In northern Laos and Vietnam, Tai peoples who are not Theravada Buddhists (the norm for most Thai and many Lao) had ritual uses for white cloth which I had not suspected. At funerals, almost all non-Theravada Buddhist Tai require one, if not all, of the children of the deceased—adults as well as youngsters—to dress in white clothing (Fig. 6). (I do not see this use of white cloth as imitative of the Chinese use of white for funerals. White retains its own meanings for Tai in Tai contexts.) White and red cloth flags play an important part in commemorating the dead; they are often placed in a cemetery surrounding the grave of an ances-



FIG. 7. A flagpole with rungs of alternating red and white flags (*chao faa yay*). Displayed at the east end of a funeral house and grave, it denotes a male burial. The many rungs of cloth provide a ladder for the deceased's spirit to climb up to a flying horse. The horse, made of paper and kept under an umbrella, expedites the soul's flight to heaven.

Tai Dam people, Baan Tong On, Capital District, Luang Nam Tha Province, northern Laos, 1991

tor (Fig. 7) and allowed to disintegrate in the weather. In Theravada Buddhism, a similar kind of cloth is donated to monks, never to be returned to mundane use. This pattern of displaying and disposing of cloth—woven by women—may be one of the reasons many Tai populations became interested in that form of Buddhism (Lefferts 1993).

#### ROYAL MEANINGS: THAI AND KHMER

White cloth is also important for royal daily life and ceremonial occasions. Food presented to royalty should be wrapped in white cloth; this is especially true for prepared items delivered to the Royal Palace as gifts. In one recent case I observed, I was told that a package of brownies and case of canned Coca Cola presented to a member of the Thai royal family required wrapping to



FIG. 8. Mae Luan displays her last remaining piece of homemade white cloth. She is saving it for future use, probably as a funeral cloth for herself or a close relative.

*Thai-Lao people, Baan Bung Maleng, Ubon Ratchabani Province, northeast Thailand, 1991*

ensure their purity. In Bangkok's past, royal wastes were wrapped in white cloth and placed in the Chayo Phraya River.

Perhaps the most interesting ritual use of white cloth in a royal context was recounted by a French physician living in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh at the time of King Norodom's death in the early 1900s. His account illustrates one of the purposes for the cloth requisitioned for the cremation of Rama I a century earlier (see above). Following the cleansing and dressing of the king's body in appropriate white or cream silk cloth, with gold bracelets and belts, the corpse was placed in a gold urn 1.2 meters high and 60 centimeters at its widest diameter. To accomplish this, the four princes preparing the body

lifted up the trunk (and) folded the two arms and joined the hands (of the deceased king). They bent the legs with the knees at the height of the hands and tied the corpse into this position with a cotton cord. Thus tied the body was placed on two large pieces of white cloth whose uplifted extremities were tied above the head with the same cord of cotton. Four of the oldest attendants in the palace were summoned to lift the body in this position and place it in the urn. (Hahn 1904:673)

In this instance, white cloth signifies not only purity but also the separation of this world from another, a realm of great strength, whether it be pollution or power. White cloth assists people in dealing with this power.

#### WHITE CLOTH AND TAI THERAVADA BUDDHISM

While it is difficult to gain access to royal rituals, with appropriate approval it is possible to participate in household and village rituals paralleling those of royalty. Funerals are important village rituals and cloth and yarn play an important role in these ceremonies.

At Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhist village funerals, the deceased is washed, dressed, and wrapped in white cloth. The covered corpse is placed in the coffin, laid on a mattress with a blanket and other personal cloth items around it. Hanks of unspun cotton and silk yarn are attached to the foot of the coffin, which the community's monks and novices will hold as they lead the procession to the cremation place (Lefferts 1992a).

This use of white cloth and yarn requires that village women keep a quantity on hand for sudden need (Fig. 8). When someone dies, neighborhood and village looms fall silent for the day. The family of the deceased must amass the required cloth and yarn. Often this means that household members go to neighbors and, if necessary, to nearby villages to purchase cloth. Today, if home-produced white cloth is not available, it will be purchased.

Perhaps the most significant role for white cloth among Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhists is its function in separating Buddhism from other aspects of life. Women present new cloth to monks to make into robes; this cloth is uniformly white. The white silk and cotton yarn that monks use to lead the coffin to the cremation ground is donated to one of those monks at the end of the funeral. When a monk has amassed sufficient yarn, a weaver will ask to weave this into cloth to attain merit.

I once talked with a young woman from northeast Thailand returning to be a factory worker in Bangkok who said that she had just departed from home

after completing the weaving of white silk cloth to be made into a robe. The robe was to be presented to her brother as he entered the monkhood. This is unusual today; few young women can weave and her preparation of silk for making a robe was even more unusual.

Some women, especially elderly women living near monasteries whose monks are dedicated to austere practices, engage in weaving white cloth on a fairly regular basis. Among Theravada Buddhist women a special ritual can occur during which women compete in the weaving of white cloth to be presented to monks. Called a Chula Katin or Katin Len (Lefferts 1992b), this production must take place in a 24-hour period. Following this frenzy of weaving, in which the woman who weaves the most gains the greatest merit, the cloth is donated to the monks. The production of the robes themselves—cutting the pieces of cloth into standard shapes, sewing, and dyeing—is the monks' responsibility.

Still, in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia today, few robes are made from handwoven white cloth. Factory production has resulted in the near universal availability, even in markets in Burma, upland Laos, and southern China, of various grades of ready-made robes. These robes range from cotton to synthetics to mass-produced silks. Some monks prefer factory-produced robes because they require less care; handwoven robes, especially those made from hand-processed cotton yarn, can be rough. One monk said that handwoven cloth using machine-processed yarn was preferred for the lower undergarment, while cloth made from coarser handspun yarn would be used for the outer two robes.

Monks who cut and sew robes of handspun and handwoven yarn use natural dyes, usually made from the heart wood of the jackfruit tree. This dye fades quickly, so when such a robe is washed, it is boiled in water containing this wood (Fig. 9) so that it is re-dyed as it is cleaned (Taylor 1993).

The ready availability of factory-produced monks' robes today is a far cry from the situation prior to the Industrial Revolution. At that time, Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist village women wove all the textiles for all monks. A set of clothing for a monk consists of three robes totaling 14 square meters of cloth. The average width of a piece of white cloth woven today, using homespun yarn of average denier on a standard household loom, is 33 to 36 centimeters. Fourteen square meters of cloth at this width requires a warp length of at least 42 meters. Today, most women using

factory-processed cotton yarn set up looms with warp lengths of 16 to 20 meters. To weave the minimum yardage for a set of monks robes thus probably required at least two loom set-ups. The time spent in this weaving took at least two years of near constant application; we must remember that these women also produced and processed their own yarn. We must also remember that this work precluded a woman's production of other textiles during this period.

These calculations begin to cast doubt on the common assumption that entrance into the Theravada Buddhist monkhood in pre-industrial Southeast Asia was a near universal given for every male. Katherine Bowie (1992) demonstrated that the production of cloth in north Thailand was a matter of royal politics; Chiang Mai's kings controlled textile production to such an extent that dressing in rags was a norm for many villagers. Given the reports of *suai* taxation from northeast Thailand, it is quite likely that Bangkok's levies of white cloth would have interfered seriously with progression

to the monkhood for many young men. These calculations seem to indicate that cloth generally was a scarce item; although Theravada Buddhism encouraged the reuse of discarded cloth, it is reasonable to conclude that until the advent of the Industrial Revolution many Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhists lived in a situation where they did not have the requisite amount of textiles to amass large quantities of merit.

For these and other reasons, I propose that the 19th century arrival of factory-manufactured textiles in mainland Southeast Asia resulted in a "cloth-mad" world, in which women were released from the constraints of producing yarn and cloth for routine purposes. This may have led to a fluorescence of cloth production, especially of the ornate village-produced textiles that we, today, call traditional. I also propose that the appearance of bountiful quantities of relatively inexpensive white cotton cloth permitted an attainment of Buddhist piety which had not been possible before, including the achievement of the norm that every young male ought to spend a certain amount of time as a monk. This achievement may be a relatively new—in the last 150 years—phenomenon.

Thus, until relatively recently, even plain weave, white cotton cloth—cloth today seen as useful for the most mundane as well as the most honorable purposes—might have been a scarce item, cherished and used in the most frugal manner.

#### *At Thai and Lao Theravada Buddhist village funerals, the deceased is washed, dressed, and wrapped in white cloth.*



FIG. 9. The young man's shaved head and white clothing denote that he is a *naak* (serpent) learning the stringent rules he will follow after ordination. He is washing and dyeing his preceptor's robes in a hot dye bath made from the wood of the jackfruit tree. The robes will be hung to dry in the manner specified by the Buddha.  
*Thai people, Wat Sang Khatbaan, Nonthaburi Province, central Thailand, 1991*

FIG. 10. Phra Panomsak Oophaasoo wrapping natural medicines in a double covering of white cotton cloth. Since natural medicine comes from pre-Buddhist learning, it is wrapped in white cloth. These learnings were first taught by Maw Chiiwok Koomaaphat; statues of this pre-Buddhist teacher appear on Phra Phanomsak's Buddha table (see Fig. 13).

*Wat Naakkhamwichai, Mahasarakham City, Mahasarakham Province, northeast Thailand, 1992*

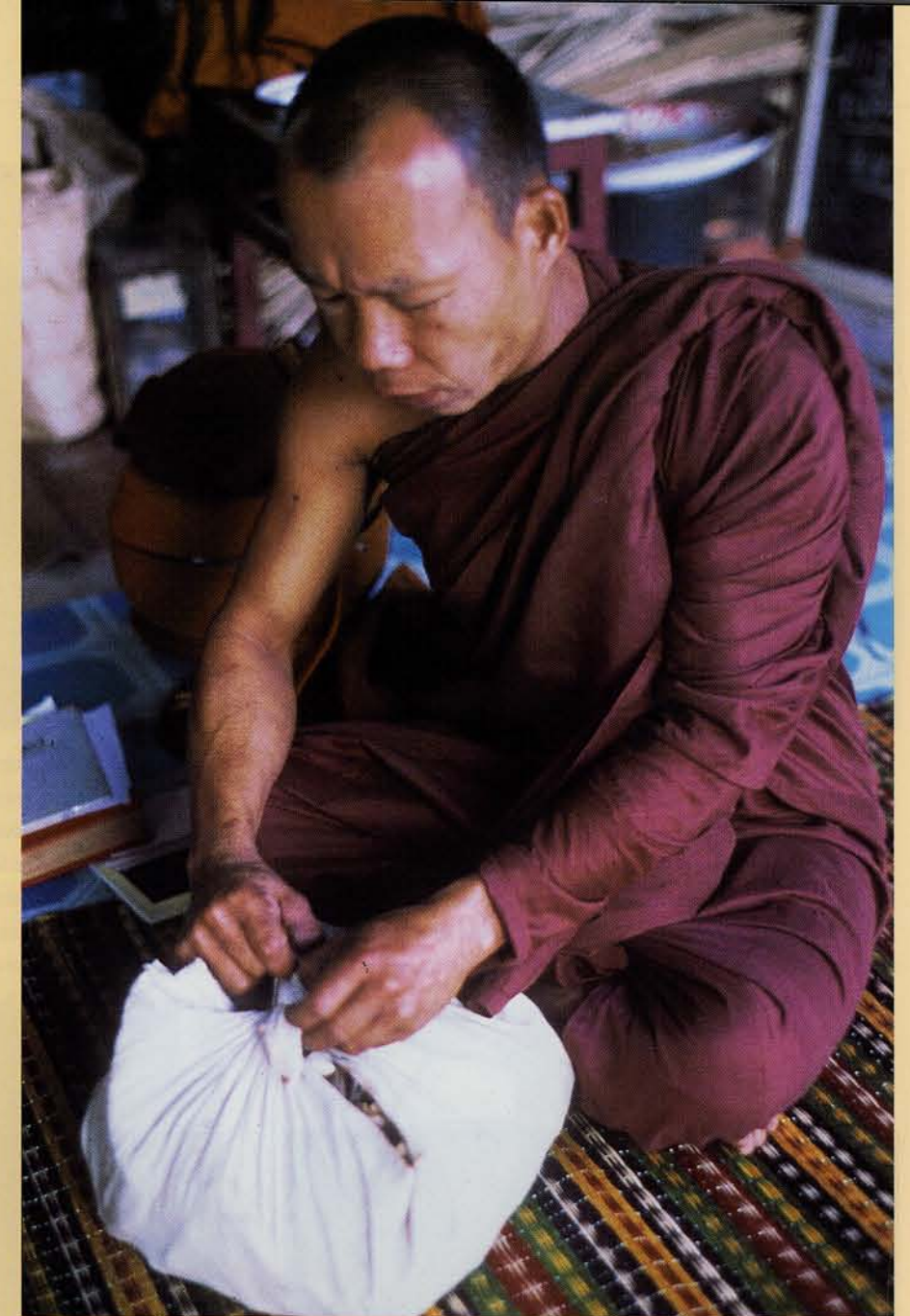


FIG. 11. *Mae chii* receiving food at a prestigious monastery near Bangkok. These women follow ten Theravada Buddhism precepts, dedicating their time to asceticism. This period could last for a weekend—in which case they might not shave their heads—or for longer periods, including the remainder of their lives.

*Thai people, Wat Sang Khatbaan, Nonthaburi Province, central Thailand, 1991*

## The Making of White Cotton Cloth

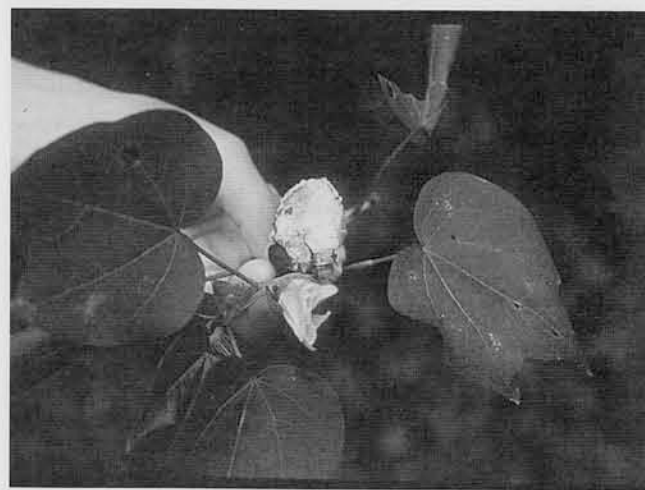


FIG. A. Bud and flower from a perennial cotton tree grown in a village in central northeast Thailand. As women cultivate less cotton, some of them shift from annual to perennial plants in order to continue small-scale production of fiber for pillow stuffing and the occasional cotton cloth. Cotton flowers appear in a variety of pale shades, from white to cream to pink, also providing a bit of color around a house.

Thai-Lao people, Baan Hua Chang, Capital District, Mahasarakham Province, northeast Thailand, November 1989



FIG. B. After picking, cotton is hand-ginned in a wooden press (*ietu*). The woman slips the cotton ball between two counter-rotating rollers which keep the seeds from going through. The name of this instrument, known throughout Southeast Asia, onomatopoeically reproduces the squeal of the gears carved into the wooden rollers.

Photograph by Prof. A. Thomas Kirsch, 1962-63. Phu Thai people, Baan Noong Suung, Nakhon Phanom Province



FIG. C. Strumming a bow (*kung*) amongst cotton fibers aligns them so that they can be spun. To keep the fibers from drifting in the wind, they are contained in a special basket (*ku*). This process is necessary because the fibers of the cotton generally used among the Tai people are short and must be aligned in order to be spun.

Lao people, Baan Khun Kham, Luang Prabang District, central Laos, 1990



FIG. D. After the cotton fibers are aligned, they are rolled into long, cigar-shaped objects (*law* in Tai, "rolag" in English) ready for spinning. The preparer takes a long, flexible stick and runs it through her hair, probably to clean it and provide a gentle coating of oil. Then she spreads some of the cotton on a special flat board (*pen len*), places the stick in the middle, and rolls the cotton around the stick.

Lao people, Baan Khun Kham, Luang Prabang District, central Laos, 1990



FIG. E. Usually a *law* is double the necessary length, so it is broken in half and placed on a piece of paper (*kradaat hau*). This paper is then wrapped around the piled *law* to keep them neat and clean until ready for spinning. Some of the aura of the romance of cotton is pictured in this photograph; the wrapper is of local paper made and decorated by young men and given to their girl friends.

Lao people, Baan Khun Kham, Luang Prabang Province, central Laos, 1990



FIG. F. Mae Sow, of Baan Khun Kham, spins cotton yarn. The iron spindle on Tai spinning wheels points downward; Khmer and Indian spinning wheels have the spindle horizontal to the floor. A woman who can spin cotton on one kind of wheel cannot easily convert to another. The processes for extruding the yarn seem identical: when pulled away from the turning spindle, the fibers are spun tightly into a single strand.

Lao people, Baan Khun Kham, Luang Prabang District, central Laos, 1990



FIG. G. A single strand of cotton yarn is collected off the iron spindle of the spinning wheel onto a winding frame (Lao, *may pee faay*; English, "niddy-noddy"). Usually this single strand of yarn will be combined with

additional strands to produce a completed yarn. It can then be dyed if necessary and made into a finished piece of cloth. The woman here wears an elegant *phaa sin*, a skirt with alternating tie-dyed, plied yarn segments (*mat mii*).

Thai-Lao people, Baan Selaphum, Roi-Et Province, northeast Thailand, 1989



FIG. H. Weaving (Thai, *tau phaa*; Lao, *tam buuk*) plain weave cotton cloth. In Tai the frame (*kii*) is not considered part of the actual loom, as are the operating elements (*buuk*: warp, beater, heddles and treadles, etc.).

This reflects the common feature that a *buuk* can be shifted from one frame to another. Central Thai of Thailand literally call weaving 'to connect cloth'; Lao and other Tai languages call it 'beating the *buuk*.'

Thai-Lao people, Baan Selaphum, Roi-Et Province, northeast Thailand, 1989



◀ FIG. 12. Two young men nearing the moment when they will convert from their status as *naak* to monk. They wear fine silk skirts (*phaa sarong*) and are in front of small mountains of offerings, mostly pillows, donated by female relatives and girl friends to make merit. While *naak* may wear silk skirts, they must have white cloth over their left shoulder. The boy on the left has a lace shawl, while the one on the right has a shawl of factory-made cloth.  
*Thai-Lao people, Baan Kii, Kantbarawichai District, Mahasarakham Province, northeast Thailand, 1990*

#### ONE FINAL USE

I have discussed the political economy of white cotton cloth and indicated the strong possibility that this plain item, produced by women, could have had a greater significance in pre-industrial Southeast Asia than it does today. There is an additional meaning of which I had been unaware until I was exposed to it by a gentle, patient monk.

I once asked Phra Phanomsak Oophaasoo, a specialist in natural medicine at Wat (monastery) Naakkhawichai in Mahasarakham, northeast Thailand, why he wrapped the rocks, wood cuttings, and other objects used for this practice in a double covering of white cotton cloth. Since he dispensed medicine in a monastery and because he was a monk, why did he not use saffron colored cloth taken from a discarded robe or similar cloth?

Phra Phanomsak said that he wrapped this medicine in white cotton cloth because the cloth, and the medicine it enclosed, represented Brahmanism, the religion before the Buddha's enlightenment (Fig. 10). He continued that this was the purest cloth; it had sacred power. Then he connected this cloth to several uses I had seen. He said that if a person ordains as a Brahman (that is, a Hindu priest), then s/he must wear white cloth. This explained the white cloth worn by the *maw phraam*, the ritual Brahmin specialist who initiates Theravada Buddhist rituals by asking monks to give their blessings and who also officiates at other, non-Buddhist rituals (Tambiah 1970). *Mae chii*, ascetic women who observe eight or ten Buddhist precepts, are also distinguished by the wearing of white robes (Fig. 11).

This also explained the white cloth donned by young men for some days or hours prior to their ordination as monks. These men must spend some time learning the rigors of their future life and responses to

the questions they will be asked during ordination. During this liminal period, some young men wear white robes constantly and live in the monastery of their preceptor. Even if a young man does not participate in this rigorous training, when an ordinand enters the ordination hall, he must wear white cloth draped over his left shoulder (Fig. 12; Lefferts 1994). Phra Phanomsak thus connected together *maw phraam*, *mae chii*, and ordinand in a conceptual pre-Buddhist framework. Just as the medicine he dispensed came from nature and was pre-Buddhist, so were these categories of people.

Phra Phanomsak then reinforced my understanding of a pre-Buddhist time by pointing to the statues placed on the Buddha table to which people bowed as they entered his dispensary (Fig. 13). At the highest

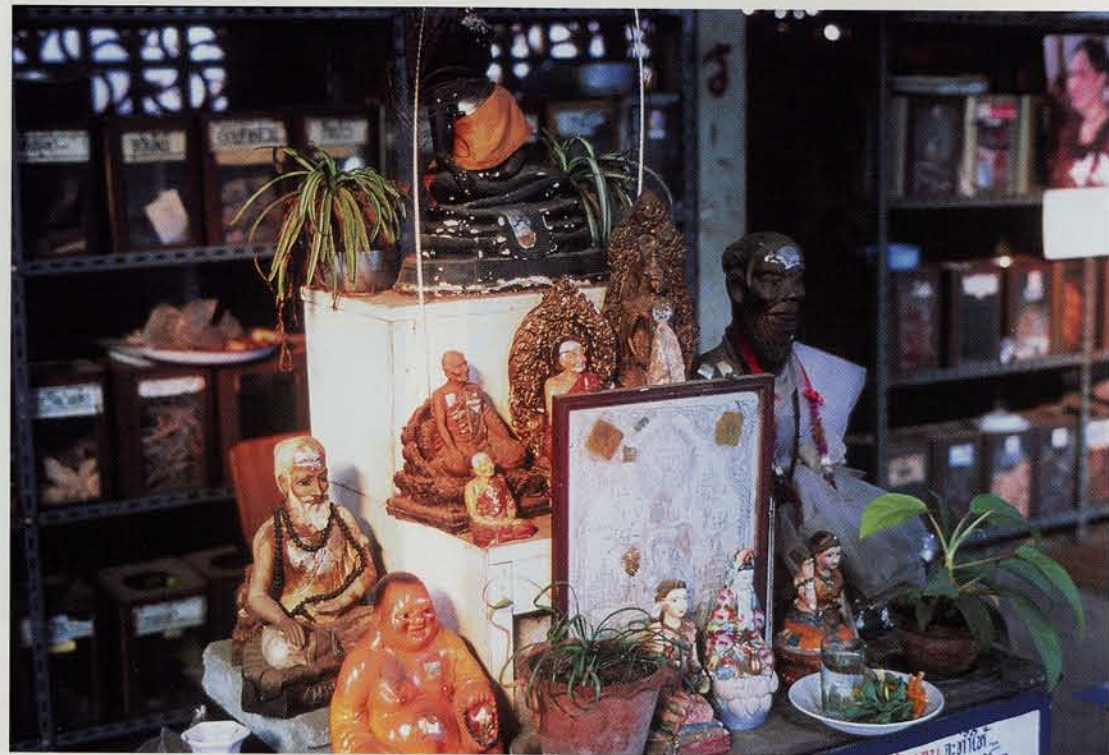
level sat a bronze Buddha in the posture of declaring his victory over the forces of evil, calling the earth to witness. Over this statue's left shoulder a saffron cloth was draped. Several statues of eminent monks resided on the next lower level. On the lowest level, paired left and right, were two statues of men with silver leaf pressed onto their foreheads, prominent beards, and white cloth painted or draped over their left shoulders. Phra Phanomsak explained

*white cloth is of importance not only because of its cleanliness and purity, but also because it represents a conceptual time before Buddhism.*

that these were statues of Maw Chiiwok Koomaaphat, an Indian ascetic who was the first teacher of natural medicine in pre-Buddhist times.

In leading me through these explanations, Phra Phanomsak made me understand that white cloth is of importance not only because of its cleanliness and purity, but also because it represents a conceptual time before Buddhism. White cloth connects several segments of different rituals—the status of the dead, whether they be king or layperson; the status of *maw phraam*, *mae chii*, and layman prior to ordination; natural medicine; and the weaving and presentation of white cloth to monks—to produce a counterpoint temporal reference to the modern world of Buddhism.

▶ FIG. 13. The Buddha table at the entrance to Phra Phanomsak's natural medicine dispensary. A bronze statue of the Buddha sits on the top-most shelf. Statues of especially important monks sit in meditation on the next shelf. The large bearded statues on the lower shelf are of Maw Chiiwok Koomaaphat. Between them are other images meant to bring good luck. The painted white cloth in the center is a magical cloth with cabalistic writing. In front is an offering of water, leaves representing flowers, and candles.



*Wat Naakkhawichai, Mahasarakham City, Mahasarakham Province, northeast Thailand, 1992*

## CHANGE

Today few northeast Thai women weave decorated cloth and even fewer spend time on white cloth. Other than for ceremonial purposes or for their own funeral, making such cloth is not a productive use of one's time. Weaving generally is a relatively less productive use of a woman's "free" time; it can result in merit if the cloth is presented to monks, but purchasing cloth is much easier. Previously, during my hypothesized "cloth-mad" time, women may not have had as many opportunities for employment outside of home and village as they do today. Of course, rice and other crop production, cooking, caring for children, and making merit in other ways occupied them, with emphasis varying according to a woman's age and skills, station in life, household wealth, and other factors. For women in many Tai groups, weaving became a fundamental way by which they asserted their formative roles in Tai culture.

Today, opportunities have changed. Many young women undertake factory work or work in the "service" economy, amassing income separate from the wealth accumulated, ever so slowly, by their village parents. Commercial white cloth, some of it machine-produced lace and therefore attractive and prestigious, is easily available. However, sufficient data exist to reveal a continuing ritual importance to white cloth. Even as its production declines, it continues to present an important aspect of Thai and Lao thought and behavior. 2

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