The Ritual Importance of the Mundane
White Cloth Among the Tai of Southeast Asia
H. Leedom Lefferts, Jr.

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 bau 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 bau yen.

Baan Klang, Capital District, Maha Sarakham Province, northeast Thailand, 1989
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 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 Khmers 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 mìi (resist, tie-dyed; sometimes called ikat) techniques. However, in the not-too-distant past, white cloth was an 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 coronation of King Ram K in 1809 resulted in a total of 170 pieces (dimensions unrecorded) from 19 provinces to Bangkok's near north (Terviel 1989).

Juniko Konami (1992) undertook an extensive analysis of Bangkok's mat mìi (resist-dyed) textiles 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 saphan wood and stick lac for dyes, and ranee 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-
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 surprise: 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 indicative 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 ancestor (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 brawny and case of canned Coca-Cola presented to a member of the Thai royal family required wrapping in white cloth.
lifed up the trunk (and) folded the two arms and joined the hands (of the deceased ling). They bent the legs with the knees at the height of the hands and tied the corpse into this position with a cotton cord. This tie was wound around on two large pieces of white cloth whose horizontal extremities were tied above the head with the same cord of cotton. Four of the oldest and most important of the palace attendants were summoned to lift the body in this position and place it in the urn.

(Hahn 1904:673)

In this instant, 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 a coffin, lain 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 (Lefteris 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 arrange 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 Buddhists from other aspects of life. Women present new cloth to monks to make into robes; this cloth is a new form that the young woman and cotton yarn that monks use to lead the cloth 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 cloth into a cloth to atomize water.

I once talked with a young woman from northeastern 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 mother as he entered the monastery. This is unusual today; few young women can weave and her preparation of silk for making a robe is not at all unusual.

Some women, especially elderly women living near monasteries whose monks are dedicated to austere monastic life, are skilled in weaving white cloth on a fairly regular basis. Among Theravada Buddhists, women a special ritual can occur during which women compete in the weaving of white cloth to be presented to monks. Called a Chula Kan or Kan Lin (Lefteris 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, the Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia today, few robes are made from hand-woven white cloth. Factory production has resulted in the near universal availability, even in markets in Borneo, upland Laos, and southern China, of various grades of ready-made robes. These robes range from cotton to synthetic to mass-produced cloth. Some monks prefer factory-produced robes because they require less care; hand-woven robes, especially those made from hand-processed cotton yarn, can be rough. One monk said that hand-woven cloth used in machine-processing was preferred for the lower garment, while cloth made from coarser handspun yarn would be used for the outer 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 1994).

The ready availability of factory-produced monks' clothing 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 consisted of 36 pieces of cloth 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 35 to 36 centimeters. Fourteen squares of cloth at this width require a yard length of at least 42 meters. Today, most women using factory-produced 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 marauding from northeast Thailand, it is quite likely that Bangkok's levies of white cloth would have interfered seriously with production to the monkhood for many young men. These calculations seem to indicate that cloth—naturally 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 amassed 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-mail" 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 were, today, called traditional. I also propose that the appearance of hountful quantities of relatively inexpensive white cotton cloth permitted an attainment of Buddhist piety which had not been possible before, including the achievement of the nirvana. Every 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—today seen as useful for the most mundane as well as the most honorable purposes—was a scarce item, cherished and used in the most frugal manner.
FIG. 9. The young monk's shaved head and white clothing denote that he is a nāka (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 Song Khram, Nonthaburi Province, central Thailand, 1991

FIG. 10. Phra PanomSak Oroshaaoo 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 Mow Chirvej Koosanaphat; statues of this pre-Buddhist teacher appear on Phra Phnommok's Buddha table (see Fig. 17).

Wat Naakhonrat, Nakhon Pathom City, Nakhon Pathom Province, southern Thailand, 1992

FIG. 11. Mae luo receiving food at a prestigious monastery near Bangkok. These women follow ten Theravada Buddhist 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 Song Khram, Nonthaburi Province, central Thailand, 1991
The Making of White Cotton Cloth

FIG. A. Bud and flowers 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.
Thailand, Loei, Ban Kha Khao, Muang Loei District, Loei Province, northeast Thailand, November 1990

FIG. B. After picking, cotton is hand-ginned in a wooden press (iar). 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, connotes stereotypically reproduces the smell of the grains carved into the wooden rollers.
Photograph by Prof. A. Thomas Krich, 1962-63. The Thai people, Ban Nong Tung, Nakhon Phanom Province

FIG. C. Strumming a bow (kang) 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 (la). 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, Ban Khun Khao, Muang Phongsali District, central Laos, 1990

FIG. D. After the cotton fibers are aligned, they are rolled into long, cigar-shaped objects (iar in Tai, "rolling" 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 (jar iei), places the stick in the middle, and rolls the cotton around the stick.
Lao people, Ban Khun Khao, Muang Phongsali District, central Laos, 1990

FIG. E. Usually a jar is double the necessary length, so it is broken in half and placed on a piece of paper (broadar hor). This paper is then wrapped around the piloied jar 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, Ban Khun Khao, Muang Phongsali District, central Laos, 1990

FIG. F. Mae Souv of Ban Khun Khao, spins cotton yarn. The lint-spooler on the spinning wheel 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 spinning spindle, the fibers are spun tightly into a single strand.
Lao people, Ban Khun Khao, Muang Phongsali 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, nan jao, 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 phat din, a skirt with alternating tie-dyed, plied yarn segments (mar om).
Thai-Lao people, Ban Xe Kham, Ban Xe Kham Precinct, water-southeast Thailand, 1989

FIG. H. Weaving (Thai, tan phue, Lao, tan hui) plain weave cotton cloth. In Tai the frame (iari) is not considered part of the actual loom, as are the operating elements (true warp, heddle, tendies, and needles, etc.). This reflects the common feature that a hand can be shifted from one frame to another. Central Thailand literally call weaving "to connect cloth". Lao and other Tai languages call it "heating the loom".
Thai-Lao people, Ban Xe Kham, Ban Xe Kham Precinct, water-southeast Thailand, 1989
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.

Once asked Phra Phanomnak Oophasoo, a specialist in natural medicine at Wat (monastery) Nakhonnayok in northeastern 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 Phanomnak 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 mae phraeo, 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 chi, ascetic women who observe eight or more 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 limited 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 ordination enters the ordination hall, he must wear white cloth draped over his left shoulder (Fig. 12; Leffers 1994). Phra Phanomnak thus connected together mae phraeo, mae chi, and ordination 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 Phanomnak 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 sat 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 Phanomnak explained that these were statues of Maw Chiwok Koonmaraphat, an Indian ascetic who was the first teacher of natural medicine in pre-Buddhist times.

In leading me through these explanations, Phra Phanomnak 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 mae phraeo, mae chi, 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.
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 hypothesisized “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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My research over many years has been supported by many cooperating institutions. For research in Thailand, permission has been obtained from the Thai National Research Council. For recent work in Thailand and Laos, funding was provided by the Fulbright Program through the Thailand-U.S. Educational Foundation; for research in Laos: Social Science Research Council; for research in Vietnam: the Asian Cultural Council; and general support by a sabbatical from Drew University. Many thanks to Louise Cort, editor extraordinaire and co-researcher.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bean, Susan S.

Bowie, Katherine A.

CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique)

Gittinger, Mattiebelle, and H. Leedom Lefferts, Jr.

Hahn, Docteur

Koizumi, Junko

Lefferts, H. Leedom, Jr.

Tambiah, S. J.

Taylor, J. L.

Terwiel, B. J.