Social Messages and Cultural Information in the Clothing of Southern Lao Women

Dorothy K. Washburn

Archaeologists typically classify the objects they excavate into “types,” that is, groupings of artifacts that appear similar, generally from the point of view of their shape and assumed function. Yet one of the most fascinating and elusive questions about archaeological or ethnographic artifacts is not how they were used or shaped but how their original makers and users thought about them.

As an archaeologist interested in the meaning of style, I am concerned with developing better ways to classify and analyze material culture. Might understanding the category systems of peoples living today help us decipher the material culture of peoples of the past? Take, for example, clothing. Should we wish to learn about an individual’s thinking behind his wardrobe choices, it would appear to be a simple matter of asking. Yet, while determining the reasoning behind the clothing of ancient peoples appears impossible, it may sometimes be equally as difficult to pinpoint the reasons for clothing choices today, even when you can directly interview the individual.

One reason for this difficulty is that individuals often make decisions based on unconsciously held criteria, as well as on information they consciously consider. So, if we want to ask very basic questions, such as why people wear the clothes that they do and why their clothing is styled and decorated as it is, we have to develop ways to tap the unconscious mental processes in order to learn about both the unconscious and conscious reasons for their choices.

It was this problem which stimulated me to investigate ways to recover maker and user categories and category criteria that people use when making their choices. Categories can be useful indicators of the kinds of things—whether it be tools for a particular agricultural task or clothing as a status marker—that are important in a culture. They are a way into understanding how people differentiate classes of objects and therefore how they think about them. Through a fortunate set of circumstances I was introduced to a group of women from southern Laos living in Rochester, New York, in the late 1980s (Fig. 1). To their patient and gracious help I owe the following insights into the question of why people wear the kinds of clothes that they do.

THE FIELDWORK

In Laos styles of textile technology and design vary regionally. Weavers living in southern lowland Laos use four techniques to make skirts; each is distinguished by the way the specific loom setup controls the patterns produced. Kabu creates designs in simple plain weave; mii creates patterns in tie dyed weft threads; muk creates striped patterns in the warps; and jok creates patterns in the wefts with pattern sticks in a pattern heddle (Figs. 2–4).

The women I worked with all come from the Mekong Valley towns of Savannakhet and Palse in lowland southern Laos. At the time of the study, they had been in Rochester for from as little as a year to as long as eight years. Twelve of the women knew how to weave, although only one of them was still a practicing weaver; five were non-weavers. All of them, however, wear skirts of traditional weave at least on occasion. The
women in Rochester who have full-time jobs no longer weave. However, they continue to import skirts from relatives or other southern Lao weavers in Thai refugee camps. My initial interest was in whether subsets of individuals with different knowledge bases, such as women who weave and wear the skirts as opposed to women who do not weave but wear the skirts, will form different categories of skirts.

Working in conjunction with Andrea Petitto, an experimental psychologist from the University of Rochester, I asked weavers and nonweavers to sort photographs of skirts into categories. (The skirts were ones the women themselves owned and wore.) We found that these women used two kinds of categories when talking about their skirts: categories of identification—what an object is—and categories of function—how an object is used. We found that the categories differed depending upon the women's knowledge of weaving. Weavers formed categories of identification based on technological features of skirt manufacture, while nonweavers formed categories based on more general criteria. However, both weavers and nonweavers formed categories of function based on criteria which addressed cultural values and social customs.

The story of the process of discovering these criteria differences among women with different experience in weaving is an interesting one. The mistakes we made in our discovery process clearly indicate the extent to which people and their perceptions of things are products of their own cultural surroundings. For example, when we prepared the 4" by 5" photographs which we asked the women to sort (Fig. 5), we focused on the highly elaborate design band around the hem rather than the entire skirt. This decision was made on the assumption that the criteria for skirt categories would be based on decorative features, which appeared to me and to most analysts to be the most visible aspect of the skirts. However, when we found that weavers were continually labeling every design band as nok regardless of differences in the design, it became clear that for the weavers, pattern was not the primary criterion for skirt differentiation. Rather, the most important features were technological.

When the skirts were rephotographed in their entirety, weavers subdivided them into the four types of weaving: nok, muok, kohn, and sii. Upon questioning we learned that to them the most important part of the skirt is the planter body section because that contains the technological information about how the skirt was woven. Thus, by focusing our queries on what to us were important stylistic features, we had, in effect, superimposed our own criteria on another's material culture. Such cultural biases prevent us from seeing a clear picture of why a people act as they do.

Properly chagrined and with our sorting materials corrected, we revisited the women and spent some wonderful afternoons learning about how the southern Lao women use their skirts to "talk about" who they are (see Fig. 1). We found, first, that for categories of identification, weavers always sorted the photographs in terms of the four weaving techniques. Nonweavers simply sorted them according to whether they were handwoven or machine-made and whether they were made of silk or cotton. No one sorted them by hand design.

However, when talking about categories of function, women wore what we wear," traditional and nonweavers considered whether a skirt was handwoven or machine-made and whether it was silk or cotton. Furthermore, when talking about the material, weavers valued a silk skirt in terms of the time it took to weave, nonweavers in terms of monetary cost.

The distinction between handwoven silk skirts and machine-made cotton skirts is an important one for the southern Lao. Machine-made cotton skirts, generally made by the Thai and purchased by southern Lao women, are worn for daily work, while handwoven skirts of silk are worn for special occasions, such as religious ceremonies, weddings, and state holidays. Wearing the appropriate clothing is thus part of the proper observance of these occasions.

The women also used the handwoven/machine-made distinction as a way to define their ethnic distinction from the neighboring Thai. That is, on special occasions it is proper to wear only silk handwoven skirts in public. Other people will then know that you are southern Lao. It seemed curious to me, given this effort to show their ethnicity through their clothing, that they would wear the Thai machine-made skirts on a daily basis. The southern Lao women explained that they wear the Thai cotton skirts not so much because they are inexpensive, but because the "Thai are always up on the latest fashion." Machine-woven cloth can incorporate a wide array of patterns and this repertoire can be continually and quickly expanded, so machine-made skirts reflect changes in fashion more quickly.

It now seems clear that southern Lao women choose to wear certain kinds of skirts at certain times because the technological features apparent on the skirts have important social functions. They indicate a woman's financial situation, her fashion awareness, and her adherence to traditional southern Lao values. She wears low-cost, high-fashion Thai-made clothing for everyday wear, but high-cost, traditionally produced clothing for culturally important occasions. A southern Lao woman's categories of identification are related to technological features, but her categories of function are related to visible features.

**OTHER TESTS**

We found this focus on technological factors fascinating, but we wanted to explore other reasons and features. Was the story more complex? In order to satisfy our concerns we devised some other tests which would essentially ask the same questions in other ways. For example, to determine the importance of technology, we asked the weavers to construct patterns from small right triangles cut from colored contact paper. We chose the right triangle since four such triangles form a diamond, the most typical motif in the hemline design bands. But the weavers were unable to com-
The patterns in this weavings are composed of geometric motifs which have a horizontal reflection symmetry. The most common motif is a diamond. Pattern sticks are needed only for the rows of weaving that mark the lower half of the diamond. Upon completion of this section, the sticks are reversed to complete the upper half.

The band of design at the base of this skirt is more complicated than that of Figure 3, but is achieved by the same technique of jok weaving.

We return to our question of why people wear the kind of clothing they do. Not surprisingly, we found that southern Lao women make choices that relate to factors beyond the necessity to appropriately cover the body for reasons of modesty and warmth. Indeed, clothing is used by peoples the world over to clearly demonstrate important aspects of their cultural position, such as their cultural ethnicity, position in society, wealth, occupation, age, and knowledge. We found that all southern Lao women adhere to the same clothing canons when using their clothing as indicators of their cultural knowledge and affinities, but that some have more detailed knowledge about the production of the clothing and thus think about it in different ways because of their role as weavers. And we found how much observers can be misled when they apply their own assumptions to another's cultural categories.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fraser-Lu, Sylvia

Gittinger, Matteielle, and H. Leedam Lefferts, Jr.

Maxwell, Robyn

Sangsak Prapupawtthanakun, and Patricia Cheesman

Washburn, Dorothy K., and Andrea L. Petitto


22 EXPEDITION Volume 38, No. 3 (1996)

SOCIAL MESSAGES AND CULTURAL INFORMATION