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The Fate of the Xam Nuea Healing Cloths

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Historical Background

Xam Nuea is the name of a Lao-Tai *muang* (the indigenous Lao-Tai administrative system) in an area covering roughly what is now Houa Phan province in the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic, hereinafter referred to as Laos. The people living in Xam Nuea are from various ethnic Lao-Tai groups including the Tai Nuea, Tai Daeng, Tai Moei and Tai Khang.

The 14th century saw the establishment of a number of large and politically powerful Lao-Tai *muang* in what are today areas of Laos, northwest Vietnam, southern China, northern Myanmar and Thailand. For example Sipsong Tjao Tai (Twelve Tai Chiefs) administered a huge population from many tributary *muang* in southern China, northwestern Vietnam and northeastern Laos from the 14th to the 19th centuries. The principal *muang* of Sipsong Tjao Tai were located in present day Vietnam and were governed by Tai Dam and Tai Khao peoples. The kingdom of Lan Xang was founded in the 14th century by the Lao and held sway in the Mekong River basin, while the Siamese had established the kingdoms of Sukhothai in the 13th century and Ayutthaya in the 14th century. A small kingdom called Muang Phuan existed south of Xam Nuea that controlled the trade route between the Lan Xang capital of Louang Phabang and the kingdom of Hué in Vietnam and traded with Siam. The Siamese claimed suzerainty over Lan Xang, which in turn claimed suzerainty over Sipsong Tjao Tai and Muang Phuan, placing the latter two *muang*, theoretically, under the indirect jurisdiction of the Siamese. At the same time, the Vietnamese received tributes from Sipsong Tjao Tai and Muang Phuan, symbolising their suzerainty over those peoples. This type of dual suzerainty was common in the Lao-Tai *muang* system. The *muang* or *baan-muang* system is the best method of classification for this kind of historical overlapping as it describes the tributary relations between political centres of the Lao-Tai peoples. The concept of modern geography was only introduced to the kingdoms of Siam and Lan Xang in the 19th century when European Christian missionaries were commissioned to map the region for the colonisation of many parts of Southeast Asia¹. The indigenous concept of profane space was cosmographic and although the equivalent of maps existed in manuscripts such as the Traiphum, they were pictures of the astrological cosmos or conceptual drawings illustrating the sacred Buddhist scriptures and drawn completely without scale. Land ownership was not an indigenous Lao-Tai concept but instead the *muang* system controlled populations. Stronger, more charismatic leaders were able to assure the allegiance of more peoples who were consequently taxed and could be called upon for manpower. Tributary *muang* paid various forms of annual tribute to a number of different

¹ Winichakul, Thongchai. 1994. *Siam Mapped. A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm books.

overlords in order to secure their independence and peace. As was the character of *muang*, areas of jurisdiction were not fixed but expanded and contracted in geographical terms on a regular basis according to the abilities of the overlords and chiefs to control the populations. As long as the tributary chiefs sent their annual taxes, the overlords left them alone. Kingdoms were made up of a number of *muang* with a lot of uninhabited space in-between.

In-depth research in the north-eastern regions of Laos and north-western Vietnam over the past thirty years have brought the author to the conclusion that the textiles of the Lao-Tai peoples show a transformation of practices of social production of textiles that are best classified not by ethnicity but by political-geographical provenance. Scholars have been struggling with identification of the extremely complex variety of textiles of the Lao-Tai peoples, with an emphasis on ethnicity and anthropological studies. The evolution of Lao-Tai textiles was not a result of ethnicity but the result of economic and socio-political interests that related directly to their geographical locations. The textiles of several different Lao-Tai ethnic groups from shared geographic locations shared textiles and clothing styles, established by the ruling classes of each *muang*. In the case of dual suzerainty, often the textile styles of both ruling *muang* were incorporated. Xam Nuea, being so cut off by high mountains, was little affected by the influence of the Lan Xang kingdom, but showed outward signs of its loyalty to Sipsong Tjao Tai in its textiles. In my most recent book, *Lao-Tai Textiles: The Textiles of Xam Nuea and Muang Phuan*, I propose that the Xam Nuea textile style is a sub-style of the Sipsong Tjao Tai style. The latter has not as yet been fully identified beyond the Late Sipsong Tjao Tai style, which was greatly influenced by Chinese and French styles.

Classification of Lao-Tai textiles using the *muang* system is more accurate than by ethnic groups and opens a new approach to the study of textiles in the Lao-Tai world. In this paper we will look at the evolution of Xam Nuea style healing cloths, which are dynamic textiles of shamanic origin that have been adapted to Buddhist aesthetics and more recently, as modern commercial items.

The Xam Nuea Healing Cloths

The Xam Nuea healing cloths include two main types, one with a red silk ground weave called *phaa sabai* and another with an indigo cotton ground weave called *phaa phii mon*. Both these types of textiles are outstanding and striking examples of the textiles of the region. *Phaa sabai* cloths are used in healing ceremonies as dancing shawls and shoulder cloths and are believed to have the power to assist healing through a dynamic combination of protective motifs and colours. The textile symbolises a pathway along which the spirit helpers of the shaman can come from the spirit world to chase out evil spirits. They are also channels for the souls of sick persons to return to their body as the Lao-Tai believe the human body has numerous souls called *khwan* that are life essences or energy sources that keep the body both mentally and physically healthy. The nature of *khwan* is to be dislodged from the body and wander off and need to be re-grouped on a regular basis to ensure complete health.

Phaa sabai are long red silk cloths, approximately 40 – 45 centimetres wide and 110 – 230 centimetres long, with supplementary weft designs at each end and a plain red silk central section. One end has a large lozenge-shaped motif while the other end has bands

of discontinuous supplementary weft motifs on a red ground. The lozenge is called *kaap khoam* (lantern) or *korng ngueak* (box of river dragons) if it is embellished with river dragon's heads. Other motifs surround the central lozenge such as *nok phii* (spirit birds), *khon* (hooks), *dork mai* (flowers), *kuut* (ferns), *khao lueai* (saw teeth), and *kaen* (seeds) motifs. The centre of the lozenge-shaped design is usually woven in multi-coloured discontinuous supplementary weft technique often depicting river dragons and the lozenge is framed on two sides by wide bands of indigo cotton continuous supplementary weft patterns, usually of birds or crested two-headed river dragons. River dragons and birds are potent symbols of female and male energy respectively, which are harnessed by the shamans to assist in healing and send menacing spirits out of the body via the other end of the textile, which has the decorative bands representing rungs of a ladder.

In Xam Nuea culture, shamans and village people use *phaa sabai* textiles for dancing at healing rituals of different kinds such as for healing the whole village and honouring the totem spirits of the shamans, which occurs at the Lao-Tai new year. At this ceremony people take their *phaa sabai*, together with a pillow and a jar of rice whiskey, to the shaman's house or to each of the shaman's houses in turn if there is more than one shaman performing this ritual in the village. The shaman makes offerings to the ancestors of the village by drinking and eating in their stead and goes into trance from time to time, rising from the ritual altar and dancing around a ceremonial tree inside the house. As the shaman dances to the rhythm of bamboo rattles, the people follow, dancing with their *phaa sabai* around their shoulders until the shaman, exhausted, falls down and comes out of trance. Vast quantities of rice whiskey are consumed by all present.

The *phaa sabai* is also used in the *tum Ming tum Naen*, a life-extension ceremony, where it is folded and placed in a miniature garden to represent the colour red needed in this ritual. (A *phaa phii mon* healing cloth is used to represent indigo and unbleached cotton yarns for white). In other healing ceremonies for individuals the *phaa sabai* is used as a shawl, belt or scarf by the shaman or laid on the sick person. In 1975 I recorded the method of wearing two *phaa sabai* in a cross-breast fashion when I interviewed two women in Vientiane, both in their eighties, who were originally from Houa Phan province. They seemed overjoyed when I took the textiles to them to ask about their use and gladly dressed up in the manner for attending a healing ceremony in the early 20th century. The two women had not worn the *phaa sabai* since they were teenagers in Houa Phan, some sixty years previously. They had been re-located to Vientiane by the French but recalled the method of tying the two textiles around their upper bodies and were able to demonstrate it without a doubt. They told me of the teasing the boys would give them by tugging on the fringes to see if they had tied them wrong which would result in the textiles falling off. This method of dress is not known in Houa Phan province today and the only other records of cross-breast textile use are from shamans' clothing and written poetry describing this kind of dress.

Phaa phii mon textiles are shamans' cloths used in healing ceremonies as altar cloths, head cloths or to cover couples' heads in the ceremony of asking for a child. Some of the old textiles have fold lines and soiled areas at the back of the textile indicating that they were used by the shamans as belts, scarves or head cloths. Other soil marks such as candle wax and burns indicate use as altar cloths. The design structure of these textiles was not set, displaying a great variety of examples, some very long pieces up to two

meters long and short pieces only thirty centimetres long. They are woven without any formal arrangements and are a fluid expression of the weaver's knowledge of the after world passed on to her by the shamans. There is an intense concentration of shamanic motifs, and complex weaving techniques are used to create the illusion of three-dimensional images. Mythical creatures loom out of the textiles or disappear into the confusion of texture and colour, giving depth to the textile. White is the main supplementary colour with tiny areas of red, yellow and blue arranged at random throughout the textile. These colourful areas have been described as representing important events in life, which also serve to disguise the underlying pattern of entwined mythical birds, dragons and rainbows. Most of the images are woven in mirror repeats, making the interpretation of the design difficult. If you half close your eyes you can see the images more clearly.

The Tai Nuea indigo shamans' cloths were woven with less dense supplementary patterns rendering the motifs more obvious. The Tai Nuea from Muang Vaen, Xam Nuea district for example, had an indigo shaman's cloth they called *phaa saang korm* (elephant cloth), which was a textile with two decorative ends and a plain section in the centre. The decorative ends had large realistic elephant motifs woven in white silk with smaller motifs in red, yellow and blue coloured silk. Sometimes these textiles were cut into two small cloths. The realistic quality of the images in these textiles is related to the Buddhist beliefs of the Tai Nuea and Buddhist aesthetics.

Buddhist Textiles

The Tai Nuea and Tai Khang people are Buddhist but also participate in shamanic healing rituals in a complex but practical combination of the two beliefs that is expressed in their textiles. The *phaa sabai* and *phaa phii mon* can function as Buddhist shoulder cloths to wear to the temple in which case they are called *phaa phai*. The evolution of the *phaa sabai* and *phaa phii mon* textiles went through three main stages: firstly keeping the *phaa sabai* structure of a lozenge at one end and a ladder at the other end; secondly with different lozenge-shaped motifs at each end separated by a plain central section and finally with decorative supplementary weft motifs throughout the textile.

While the shamanic healing cloths were woven in complex mirror image repeats that deceive the eye and incorporate images of the after life, motifs in the Buddhist textiles are more easily visible and realistic, depicting natural phenomena in this world. The arrangement of motifs in shamanic textiles is asymmetrical, often with the lozenge placed slightly off-centre; while Buddhist pieces are symmetrical and balanced, with centred lozenge motifs. In addition, the shamanic textiles and older Buddhist textiles avoided repetition in the arrangement of colours but more recent textiles can be identified by the repeat of colours in sequence.

The Buddhist interpretation and function of the healing cloths and motifs is different to the shamanic one and correlates with Buddhist iconography. In some cases, names for the motifs were adjusted to Pali language, such as *naak* (*naga*) instead of *ngueak* meaning river dragon. In shamanic textiles the river dragons assist the shamans and protect the villagers from menacing spirits but the Buddhist interpretation of the river dragon is the giant snake (*naga*) that raised the Buddha on its coils from the flood brought about by Tolanee, the earth goddess, who assisted the Buddha by flooding out

the forces of evil that were trying to destroy the Buddha. The ladder connecting this world and the next in the shamanic tradition is re-interpreted as the ladder that Buddha created, *panya parami*, to save people from the flood, an image that symbolises the thirty steps that lead to heaven, as in life there are steps to follow. Mythical animals such as the *saang hong*, a half elephant half bird creature in shamanic textiles was re-interpreted as the *kosa singh* or *siho* meaning long-nosed lion. In the shamanic tradition *saang hong* are often depicted pregnant with *ngueak* (river dragons) in their bellies. This image incorporates the male symbol of a bird with the female symbol of a river dragon in the body of an elephant – the ultimate symbol of strength, political power and prosperity. The shamanic interpretation of the lozenge motif at one end of the *phaa sabai* is a lantern to guide the shaman on his journey to the after world while the Buddhist interpretation of the lozenge is a diamond, the symbol of the opening of the third eye, knowledge and enlightenment.

The Xam Nuea healing cloths were amazingly unaffected by the conflicts brought about by invasions of the Chinese Ho, Siamese and the French in the troubled history of the region. It was not until the Second Indochina War that people in the rest of Laos came in contact with the *phaa sabai*, *phaa phii mon* and *phaa phai* of Xam Nuea. During the war, some people from Xam Nuea were evacuated to Vientiane in the Mekong Basin region by U.S. military planes while others fled to the nearest safe havens in Vietnam or lived in caves in their homelands. This was not a productive time for weaving, although people kept looms and wove essential items in their cave dwellings in Xam Nuea and some people lived like that for years. Weaving skills were never lost and as soon as peace was established in 1975 after the Revolution, weavers began to create their traditional textiles again.

In Vientiane people from Xam Nuea set up looms and began to sell their traditional textiles in the market place, a new phenomena for Xam Nuea style textiles. The first weaving workshop to produce Xam Nuea style healing cloths for sale was started by Phaeng, a master weaver and her two daughters from Xam Nuea in 1981. Today it is a thriving business called Phaeng Mai Gallery specializing in natural dyes and traditional weavings. Many weavers in Vientiane, including Thai and American entrepreneurs, seeing the success of this enterprise, started similar productions and the Xam Nuea healing cloth design took off as a contemporary textile design.

Commercialization

Today the Xam Nuea healing cloths are made into fashion garments, cushion covers, wall hangings and interior design textiles. As modern shawls, the original structures have either been adapted to incorporate two exactly similar ends with plain central sections, or woven with repeated designs throughout the textile. Whereas the historical Buddhist textiles had two fairly similar ends, the commercial textiles have exactly similar ends. This repeat of design together with commercial labour-saving devices reduces the number of pattern sticks and the weaving time considerably, both being important economic advantages for commercial textiles. In the past, pattern sticks were placed in the warp each time a pattern was woven and used once when the pattern was being picked and once again when the pattern was woven in reverse, creating a single mirror image. If further repeats were required, the whole process of placing the sticks in the

warp by hand had to be repeated, resulting in textiles with multiple repeats but with some differences due to human error.

The advent of long pattern shafts, into which pattern sticks could be stored for repeated use, resulted in textiles with many exact repeats and a simplification of designs. The simplification has reduced the number of pattern sticks from thousands to hundreds, which is still admirably complex. Colour ways have been adapted to Western tastes and a great variety of qualities are produced in different parts of the country. Weavers of different origins have started to weave healing cloths without the cultural link to Xam Nuea and as a result the symbolic meanings are unknown to the young generation of weavers. Often motifs are simplified for faster production or for lack of knowledge and in some extreme cases the image of the sacred river dragon has been cut up, usually by non-Lao designers using computer graphics, leaving only the tail or whiskers. This kind of imagery was never previously woven in traditional textiles because of the beliefs of the people. Raw materials such as synthetic yarns and chemical dyes have, in most cases, replaced the mellow, natural dye colours and when pre-dyed yarns are used, the textiles display predictable colour combinations. One of the main differences in the older textiles and the newly made pieces is the repeating sequence of colours of the commercial textiles.

Conclusion

The Xam Nuea healing cloths were once symbolic, sacred pathways for spirits and shamans in trance to travel along, incorporating motifs as protective amulets, signs of metaphysical power and pictures of the after life. Asymmetry and illusion were aesthetic values of the shamanic textiles. Their re-interpretation by Buddhists resulted in the introduction of symmetrical designs and colour arrangements while maintaining the original motifs and colour ways. Finally the commercialisation of the healing cloths has led to hybrid textiles where the integrity of the cloths seems compromised. In fact, the legends live on and continue to function silently as protective and beneficial icons in homes all around the world, perhaps little to the knowledge of those people using them.