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## THE KINGS AS GODS: TEXTILES IN THE THAI STATE

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### INTRODUCTION

If one observes the principles of Theravada Buddhist art, Thai textiles appear to pose a paradox. On the one hand, Buddhist art is defined as progressing hierarchically from representational to aniconic motifs, replicating movement from worlds of lesser merit to worlds of greater merit. On the other hand, we have the gloriously figurative and expensive garments worn by Thai royalty and adorning gods as depicted in temple murals. How is this seeming discrepancy to be explained?

A recent translation of a section of a larger work by the noted French scholar on Southeast Asia and Buddhism, Paul Mus, titled "The Iconography of an Aniconic Art", codifies the opening premise of this paradox.

. . . whatever its ultimate meaning, the initial formula for Buddhist art appears as a partial aniconism, revealing a hierarchy among styles in which the aniconic is more sacred than the figurative. (Mus 1987:9)

The opposing facet of the paradox is represented in Thai temple murals and the ceremonial life of Thai royalty. For example, in the lower register of a cloth painting (Boisselier, 1976, plate 34, pg. 65) representing the death of the Buddha, laypeople are dressed in their normal garb: figured skirts for women and plaid skirts for men. In the middle register, wearing ornate clothing, are royalty and gods. Finally, in the upper register are members of the Buddhist Sangha, or priesthood, in their totally plain attire. This graphic depiction of the paradox is duplicated both in other murals and in the ceremonial life of Thai royalty. In sum, rather than presenting a smooth progression from figurative to aniconic as suggested by Mus's statement, Thai textiles move from a less ornate style to one that is more ornate to one that is totally plain.

Thus, Thai textiles seemingly contradict the assignment of karmic merit upon which the analysis of Buddhist art is based. This assignment holds that as one achieves greater merit, one moves from lower to upper worlds: one is less constrained by nature (Hanks 1962). Textiles, on the other hand, seem to suggest that this progression is not a straight line, but rather a kind of "J" curve. If one begins at the level of laypeople, two different designs, a plaid pattern for men and a more figurative design for women, are noted. Next, royalty and gods, whether male or female, are presented in elaborately figured, richly woven textiles. Finally, priests and the Buddha appear in extremely plain robes.



How is this seeming discrepancy to be understood? In the first place, is this depiction of textiles correct? Do Thai Buddhist textiles actually follow such a paradigm? Secondly, do these textiles contradict Buddhist precepts? Or, is it possible that this apparently aberrant use of clothing is somehow reasonable in a Buddhist context?

#### THE TEXTILES OF LAYPEOPLE AND PRIESTS:

In my research on Thai textiles, this problem did not become immediately apparent. My first paper, "Textiles, Buddhism, and Society in Northeastern Thailand" (Lefferts 1983), drawn from textiles produced and consumed in the household and village context, charted a unilinear sequence in their use. This sequence followed perceptions prescribed by Buddhist concepts of selfhood and the ultimate soteriological goals of individual Buddhists, the negation of self.

In this formulation women are most concerned with the things of this world, with selfhood, and with the reproduction of selves. This occurs in a number of contexts: in terms of birth, in terms of the weaving of textiles which defines the nature of the self possessed by each person, and in terms of the cloth they wear. The designs (laay) on women's skirts - phaa sin - usually have real-world referents such as watermelons, rice grains, or pythons, or are naturalistic in appearance, as in the combined serpent and pine tree design.

Men, most of whom ideally have the opportunity to become priests for at least a short time, wear skirts (phaa sarong) which are said by Thai to be without design. A plaid pattern is their common feature. The fundamental variation that occurs in these textiles is that, over the life of a man, the colors of the plaid will darken. As a man ages, the skirts he wears, which may be woven by his wife or daughter, evolve from vibrant red and green plaids to darker blues and browns. Eventually, the plaid pattern may disappear entirely and he will attend ceremonies in the village temple wearing plain, dark, extremely fine silk sarong or longer phaa hang.

When a man dedicates part or all of his life to the priesthood, he emulates the life of the Buddha in this world and adopts the textiles prescribed by the one who showed the Way. These are three pieces of cloth, entirely without design and of one color, that of earth. Additionally, these textiles are symbolically made of discarded remnants sewn together; today these are new lengths of cloth cut apart and resewn.

The approach to constructing priests' robes of resewn pieces contrasts with that of both women's and men's skirts. Both phaa sin and phaa sarong are made of whole cloth sewn into tubes which are then worn tied around the waist. Gender differences in the tying of skirts also appear to be normal.

Women (and some few katoey, transvestites) weave all Thai textiles except those produced in factories. The amount of time a woman puts into weaving each kind of cloth recapitulates the meaning of the textile in terms of the kind of self represented.

Women's phaa sin are almost invariably made of yarn dyed



using the resist technique known in Indonesian as ikat, which in Thai is called mat mii. Mat mii could be executed on either warp or weft yarn. Many other textiles associated with women, such as pillow covers and flags, use a supplementary weft ornamentation. The patterning, dyeing, and weaving of all of these take considerably longer than for unmodified plain weave textiles alone.

Men's textiles, of yarn dyed by the skein and woven in plain weave, may be of the highest quality silk or cotton. Of course, the dyeing and weaving of these pieces takes considerably less time than similar lengths for women.

Finally, priests' robes (usually now purchased and therefore requiring little direct expenditure of time) used to be executed from start to finish during one 24 hour period once a year. While this ritually focused weaving does not seem to occur today in Thailand, I have been informed that it does occur in Burma, on the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon on the day prior to the festival of gift giving following the Rains Retreat.

To recapitulate, my original formulation of Thai village textiles proposed a direct, unilinear relationship consonant with Buddhist concepts of karma. This relationship dovetailed precisely with Mus's statement of the formula for Buddhist art, moving from the figurative to the aniconic. What about the cloth of royalty and gods?

#### TEXTILES FOR THE THAI ROYALTY:

Today women seem to be primarily responsible for weaving royal textiles. Perhaps the most famous of these incorporate a weft of metallic yarn with a warp of the finest silk. The process is precisely similar to but more complicated than that used for producing other kinds of cloth, in the village context. This utilizes the supplementary weft technique found in pillow covers and flags. However, the results are elaborate and stunning because a supplementary harness (previously described by Blinks 1960, 1979, Keasbey 1981) involving up to 300 additional lease rods to produce weft-faced designs is used. This large number of lease rods is sufficient to produce numerous designs along the length of the cloth without reverse repetition; these previous writings described the process as solely involving reverse repetition.

Queen Sirikit of Thailand has had much to do with encouraging the production of textiles. Many of these types, now available for everyday purchase, were originally conserved for use as part of the Queen's personal wardrobe, usually using a more ornate pattern or specifically "royal" colors. For instance, it was conservation under the Queen's auspices that generated an outside market for a particular kind of shawl from the Northeast Thai Phu Thai village of Baan Pone (Charles 1986).

Additionally, production of mat mii cloth with extremely complicated designs, which was, for instance, purchased by James M. Andrews in Bangkok in the 1930's (1935), has been resumed. In Amphur Chonnabot, Khon Kaen Province, in



Thailand's Northeast, at least two groups of weavers have undertaken the arduous process of dyeing and weaving complicated mat mii patterns.

Thus we see that textiles for royalty, while utilizing techniques shared with the cloth of laypeople, push the limits of these techniques. They also involve materials, dyes, and designs which are not among the norm for commoners.

How are we to explain the use of figurative designs by those beings - gods and royalty - who are situated between laypeople and priests and the Buddha? On the one hand, it might appear reasonable to say that those people who govern simply have more wealth and power. The wearing of patterned ornate textiles might be a "cosmic" symbol which could then be seen as expressing this wealth and power (Eliade 1959).

But that approach, in light of our goal to understand people and interpret their behavior in terms as close to the original as possible, might be peculiarly ethnocentric. In particular, such an explanation would not enable us to understand how the textiles of royalty and gods might relate a Thai or Buddhist context.

#### ROYALTY, GODS, AND LANGUAGE:

In order to shed adequate light on the relationships between laypeople, royalty and gods, and elements of the realm of the Buddha as depicted by cloth, it may be useful to examine another symbolic domain. Verbal language, similar to textiles, gives access to a similarly rigorously defined, reasonably closed, symbolic domain. Thus, it provides a comparative perspective within both the Thai and Buddhist contexts by which to explicate the relationship between textiles, merit, and the beings of different worlds.

While textiles differentiate royalty and gods from laypeople and remembrances of the Buddha, linguistically royalty and gods are equated with them.

For instance, one of the titles of the King is Phra Chao Pen Din, "Lord of the Land". One way to refer to a Buddha image is as Phra Phut Tha Rup, "Lord Buddha Image". The Hindu god Indra is known in Thai as Phra In.

These brief illustrations permits us to see that the morpheme phra brings royalty, gods, and the person who showed us the way out of worldly suffering onto the same plane. This melding is reinforced by the linguistic classifier ong. Thus, a person can say that the royal family consists of five ong, or that four Buddha images together are four ong, or that four priests are also four ong. People are not classified as ong, but as khon, dissociating them from membership in the worlds of royalty, gods, and representations of the Buddha.

To make this point clearer, it might be useful to posit several examples. If one were to describe a group of four priests, three men, and five women walking together (of course, the priests would be walking at the front of the group and it is likely that the men would be walking in front of the women), one would classify the members of the group not as twelve "whatever" (it should be evident that there is no word



for this classification in Thai), but as four ong and eight khon. Similarly, if one were to say that a picture showed five people and one king, one could not describe this as a gathering of six people (as would be likely in English), but rather as one ong and five khon. In linguistic terms, royalty are not people as are you and I, but are merged with supernatural beings, including priests, the Buddha, and representations of him. In effect the Thai language presents a view different from textiles while yet maintaining a paradox; now royalty and gods are classified as on the same level as ong.

#### ELUCIDATION OF THE PARADOX:

Why do textiles and language seem to contradict each other? Why do royalty and the gods wear textiles with figurative designs and ornate weaving, in contrast to the Buddha, with whom they share linguistic definition?

I believe a possible answer can be discovered by examining textiles even more closely. Here I continue to follow Mus as he writes, in the article referred to earlier (1987:9), that Buddhist

art is the exact opposite of what, in our own art, is decorative. This art is totally in earnest, involved in what happens; it is itself a happening . . .

Let us take Thai textiles - their designs, the time spent on weaving them, their uses, and who uses them - "earnestly". Who are the other "people" who wear figurative dress? What is similar in what royalty, gods, and these people do?

These others are women. Women wear textiles with laay, with design. Women's textile designs are figured with references, either abstract or reasonably representational, of the things of this world.

Reconfiguring the paradox in this way poses the issue, might there be the possibility of seeing women, gods, and royalty in similar ways? Might these beings, who are usually seen at nearly opposite ends of the spectrum of merit, be involved in similar activities. Such a framework would place women, royalty, and gods in opposition to men and priests, but such a division might be worth exploring.

Royalty and women, fundamentally and respectively, are together responsible for establishing and providing for national and household/village social life: its organization, maintenance, and continuation. Women form the temporal continuity of Thai households: marriage takes place in the bride's parents' home; the expectation is that a couple will live a good portion if not all of their married life there. Most rice land is owned by and inherited through women. In short, if one extrapolates the social organization of one household onto the larger canvass of a village, one can see that a village is organized of continuing households of women between which men are passed in marriage (Lefferts 1974).



In consonance with their role in household and village social organization, women wear textiles that relate them to nature and reproduction. Furthermore, women produce the textiles used by all the different kinds of people and beings within the natural and supernatural systems; in so doing they reproduce all the different kinds of selves at the household level as well as those non-selves without which a Buddhist system could not operate, including royalty and priests.

On another level, royalty and gods perform activities, similar to women: they hold (I am purposely avoiding the weaving metaphor) this socio-cultural world - the Kingdom - and the supernatural worlds together. Kings and gods establish different kinds of people and beings so that each kind of world can operate. Thus, the king establishes the Kingdom's Constitution, appoints a prime minister and his cabinet under that Constitution; and, at times of stress, this king, who is a god living with laypeople, can even step into the political fray and declare a truce between warring factions. Similarly, the gods establish the beings and organization of all but the highest worlds (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982).

The activities of laywomen, royalty, and gods can be seen as quite different from the activities of laymen and priests. The textiles of these latter two categories of being show an orientation towards their more immediate karmic goals of renouncing self-hood. These two groups are peculiarly not involved in perpetuating this world. And, even though men, as householders and through politics, are involved in the regulation of daily behavior, this behavior is intimately validated by the opportunities made available by the two other kinds of being already mentioned: by royalty, in terms of the state, and by women, in terms of the household and village.

#### CONCLUSION:

The paradox of Thai textiles may be solved, not by slighting these items of material culture, but by seeing them as objects presenting a particular, important view of reality. Thai textiles participate in and may even be said to replicate both of the two Buddhist domains of law and politics, the one of renunciation (Buddhachakkra), the other of household, village, and state (annachakkra) (Tambiah 1976). Thai Buddhist textiles present a view of the direct way to salvation by codifying the status of priests vis-a-vis laypeople. However, by showing the kings as gods they also present an understanding of this world's social and political environment - of the state established by royalty - in which this renunciation takes place today. The textiles of royalty and gods are not only evidence of increased wealth and power, but also, and more importantly, increased merit. The elaboration of these textiles is thus precisely within the canon of Buddhist art. Their elaboration is a direct reflection of the power the people who wear them hold in this world through the merit they have gained.

Thus, Thai textiles are political and religious statements



at the same time as they are Buddhist art. Textiles associate women, the royalty, and gods operating in structures concerned with organizing, regulating, and perpetuating this and other worlds. These structures, and the textiles of the women, kings, and gods who form them, complement the worlds of men and priests, whose textiles depict these beings as closely oriented to the achievement of the soteriological goal of increasing merit. (Interestingly, placing Thai royal textiles in a worldly political context initiates the possibility of seeing them as participating in the pan-Southeast Asian textile world as presented by, e.g., Gittinger 1979.)

On a fundamental level I have attempted to demonstrate the power of the symbolic system of textiles in posing significant questions and, in a religio-cultural context, in indicating probable answers. We, as interpreters, and our audiences must take textiles as seriously as the cultures with which we work take them.

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