

# Fabricating National Identity: Textiles in Lao PDR

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Individuals and households use commodities to solve problems. Nation-states also use them to solve problems. But the choice of commodities selected to solve a problem may also reveal contradictions and paradoxes that states might prefer not to make visible. This paper examines how woven textiles are implicated in the problem of creating Lao national identity, drawing attention to three problems faced by the Lao state. First, there is the problem of creating "unity in diversity" among more than fifty ethnic groups, many without a tradition of weaving. Second, the royal centers must be obliterated as a source for inspiration in design and meaning, particularly with reference to sumptuary laws and traditional relations between textile-producing villages and royal centers. Considering the complex linkages among textiles, ethnicity, Buddhism, and the traditional royal centers, state ideology may well contradict textile-mediated messages. Third, recent state policies emphasizing market development encourage factory-based textiles, while tourist demand is entirely for handmade woven textiles.

My perspective on these issues emerges as much from the closet as the library. In 1968, 1988, 1994, and 1997 I visited Vientiane and brought home the best souvenirs my budget permitted. In 1968, these included pop-top cans of Beaujolais wine, long since consumed, and an expensive grey lace and peach satin brassiere from Paris. In 1988, I settled for a length of striped cotton fabric produced by a new textile cooperative, and a shiny gold and purple skirt length (*sin*) made of a synthetic Japanese fabric. And in 1994, in an expanding market-driven economy, I purchased an antique *sin* and a new *biang* (shoulder cloth) from the morning market in Vientiane, a difficult choice considering the quality and quantity of the handwoven textiles available for sale. These commodities are truly souvenirs, bringing back memories of a country at different stages of change, and reinforcing

Appadurai's argument about the need to resituate consumption in relation to time (1996). These particular souvenirs point to the persistence of French colonial marketing patterns, the socialist infatuation with textile cooperatives and European-style floor looms, and the re-emergence and re-contextualization of diverse techniques of textile production as they are gradually being detached from ethnicity and locality. The objects also say something about a number of deeper analytical issues which are made visible through an examination of textiles. These issues require consideration of the historical and cultural context of textile production in Lao PDR. Here, I provide a brief background to the textile traditions of Lao PDR, and then situate the textiles in pre-revolutionary contexts (feudal or royalist); colonial, nationalist, and socialist contexts; and market-driven development contexts.

## Background

Lao PDR is the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia, stretching along the Mekong River between Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, and China. It is a mountainous country, dependent primarily on growing glutinous rice on every usable piece of land. The population of approximately five million is growing rapidly (2.4% per year). Based on census data the Lao government officially recognizes 47 ethnic groups. Other Lao government classifications identify 68 different ethnic groups. U.N. agencies recognize 65. Linguists identify five major language groups in the country comprising hundreds of languages and dialects. The Pathet Lao ruling party developed a "natural classification" of ethnic groups built on ecological niches: (1) Lao Lum refers to the Tai-speaking lowlanders who grow rain-fed glutinous rice, and who make up about half the population; (2) Lao Theung or Lao Kang refers to the midlanders such as the Khmu and Lamet who grow upland glutinous rice; and (3) Lao Sung refers to highland groups such as the

Hmong and Yao who grow dry non-glutinous rice, corn and opium on upland slopes. In practice, Hmong stands for Lao Sung, Khmu for Lao Theung, and the many differences among the Lao Lum groups often disappear, as they consolidate their power as the dominant ruling group. Other classification systems stress language groups: the Lao/Tai language-speaking populations (67%), the Mon-Khmer-speaking populations (23%), Miao/Yao groups (7%), and Tibeto-Burman groups (3%). Ethnic classification is both complex and contested (cf. Rajah 1990).

The clearest markers of Lao national identity are both products of women's labor: baskets of steamed glutinous rice, and textiles in the form of the *sin* (tube skirt) with waist border (head) and hem border (foot), and the shoulder scarf (*biang*). Food and textiles form a complex which has survived war, migration, and resettlement to Vientiane, Paris, Toronto, Sydney, and Chicago. But these national representations are Lao Lum, and they mask extraordinary diversity in ethnic culinary and textile traditions.

Today, the country is about 23% urban: over half the city dwellers (more than 500,000) live in Vientiane, the rapidly growing capital. As a result of decades of military conflict, Lao PDR has one of the lowest levels of resource development in Asia. Its agricultural collectives failed, the transportation system is very poor, and households have low purchasing power (Than and Tan 1997). GNP was \$U.S. 320 in 1994. But Lao PDR is not resource poor, particularly in hydroelectric power, lumber, and in the diversity of peoples and cultural traditions it can draw on for solutions to complex social and economic problems.

The country is particularly rich in the domain of textiles; women of different ethnic groups produce an exceptional variety of woven, embroidered, appliqued, and otherwise decorated cloth. Women in Lao PDR display their ethnic identities through their clothing, with lowland Lao Lum women representing their localities more precisely in their distinctive woven skirt borders. Observations (from December, 1994, to February, 1995, and in October, 1997) in the markets of Vientiane and Luang Prabang revealed a wide range of textile products made using a variety of techniques: these include *matmi* or *ikat* (resist dye process); *chok* (discontinuous supplementary weft); *khit* (continuous supplementary weft); *yiab ko* (tapestry weft); *ta muk*

(continuous supplementary warp); and *makmai* (twisted weft yarn), among others. Natural dyes from products such as lac, indigo, saffron, and terra cotta produce rich shades of red, blue, yellow, orange, and many more colors. Chemical dyes and commercial thread have also been used for decades, although their use is increasing as demand for handwoven products increases.

While textiles figure prominently as markers of ethnic identity in Lao PDR, they also provide an important source of income, and strengthen gender identity by ensuring women's economic access and control of resources as a central determinant of women's power and autonomy (Ireson 1996). Textiles are important commodities, as households with resident women weavers will always have the capacity to earn cash. Men recognize this, and will take over household chores, including cooking, and even learn new skills such as collecting materials for natural dyes and preparing silk thread so that women can concentrate on weaving.

### Historical Discourses

"Refusing to reconstruct the past ends up reifying the present" (O'Connor 1995:988). Brief sketches of textiles in particular historical periods also reify the past. Chronology is deceptive, as textile-based connections to royalty, for example, persist through colonial, socialist, and capitalist/development discourses. Nevertheless, the sketches below are meant to capture some of the changing contexts of cloth production in Lao PDR.

### Pre-revolutionary Contexts

In the feudal regime, ethnic diversity served both ceremonial and wealth generation needs of the ruling elite. Villages provided tribute, often in the form of textiles, to princes and palaces. The royal courts of Luang Prabang, Champassak, and Vientiane played their part in maintaining textile arts. Royal families in Luang Prabang, for example, supported workshops in neighboring villages to produce court clothing and ceremonial textiles. The royal family supplied the silk and directed the colors and patterns used (Connors 1996:58). Tai Lue and Cham villages of "royal slaves" located close to Luang Prabang provided specialized silk weaving for the palace. Trankell argues that textiles produced for the court were always paid for, in cash or in kind (1993:17). Some silk was also provided to nearby Khmu villages for ritual use. By selling

their cotton cloth to Khmu, Tai Lue obtained cash to buy silk.

The Lao court at Luang Prabang was also able to commission weavers from all parts of the country to weave for the court using imported European yarns, along with gold and silver threads (Cheeseman 1988:44). Only a few weavers in certain villages were masters of the most complex techniques. Thus, expertise for producing the full range of weaving techniques was widely dispersed among different households, different villages, even different ethnic groups.

Both China and Vietnam participated in tribute exchanges of cloth with the royal court at Luang Prabang in the 1800s, including provision of homespun cloth, brocade, silk, and cotton cloth. The entourage from Luang Prabang received clothing "according to their rank," suggesting that imported textiles set standards for royal attire, including tailored Chinese and European style clothing (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992:21). In the late 1800s, Luang Prabang provided 250 pieces of homespun cloth every ten years as a tribute to China (McCarthy 1900:60).

Chinese brocade jackets and skirts were part of traditional royal dress until they were replaced for men with western style trousers and jackets under the French protectorate after 1893 (Dommer 1985:161). The exclusive rights to wear certain motifs and fabrics were awarded by the royal family to officials according to sumptuary laws that were probably less elaborate than those in Thailand and Cambodia. However, in contrast to Thailand and Cambodia, sumptuary rules in Luang Prabang, and possibly in other royal centers, had to incorporate textiles from neighboring ethnic groups with widely varied textile traditions

As in Thailand, however, sumptuary rules were set aside in ritual contexts, such as weddings which continue to recreate the costumes of royalty. In Luang Prabang, the royal family is gone, the nobility dispersed or killed, but brides still wear the brocade tops worn by princesses with elaborately embroidered collars, the width of which demonstrate the family's status (Connors 1996:40). Ironically, contemporary ritual clothing reflects the income of the socialist family, but derives its meaning from the royal style of the Lao court. "Whenever aristocratic lifestyles are threatened, patina acquires a double meaning, indexing both the special status of its owner and the owner's special relation-

ship to a way of life that is no longer available" (Appadurai 1996:76). In Lao PDR, claims to royal authority can result in being sentenced to a "seminar" for reeducation. People with royal connections must not bemoan the loss of a way of life, or take a nostalgic posture in the new Lao PDR. However, resettled Lao refugees can and do reinvent royal style rituals and textiles in their countries of resettlement, particularly in North America.

### **Colonial, Nationalist and Socialist Contexts**

Laos became a French protectorate in 1893. The constant threats and attacks from Vietnamese and Thai created the opportunity for the French to gain sovereignty over Laos. Opposition to colonial oppression unified diverse ethnic groups and helped construct a shared Lao national identity.

Throughout the colonial period, the French undermined the moral authority of Buddhism and did virtually nothing to develop industry, education, transportation or any other Lao institution. Vietnamese were appointed to many government posts in Laos. The French did, however, force a loose confederation of the three principalities of the nineteenth century: Vientiane (which became the French administrative center), Luang Prabang (where the king was allowed to keep his royal prerogatives), and Champassak (which was demoted to a province).

The Lao struggle for independence began after 1945, although Laos did not obtain complete independence from France until 1954, after prolonged fighting. During this time, the Pathet Lao set up a parallel provisional government and with the assistance of Ho Chi Minh's Vietnamese communist troops, extended their influence from two provinces to the whole country.

Between 1945 and 1975, war disrupted village life in most of the country. During this period, families and communities moved to different ecological zones, different parts of the country, even to caves to live as best they could. As men were drafted into the war effort or left to escape persecution, women continued subsistence farming. Two million tons of bombs dropped by U.S. military forces left many parts of the country devastated and deserted. Unexploded ordnance continues to make it dangerous to farm.

Families fleeing the fighting left looms and heirlooms behind. Weaving was almost abandoned during this period, in spite of the need for

self-sufficiency. Heirloom textiles were buried in jars or sold by family members who could reach Vientiane. Few textiles left the country during this period.

During the sixties and early seventies, factory-made cloth from Hong Kong and Japan replaced home-made cloth, except in the more remote villages. Even in areas around Luang Prabang which were noted for silk weaving, there were changes. One woman reported that silk raising ended in the 1960s when the government prohibited silk-making because it required boiling and killing silkworms (Ireson 1996:71), a Buddhist rationalization undoubtedly masking more complex political and economic imperatives.

Seven months after the governments of Saigon and Phnom Penh collapsed in April, 1975, the communist Pathet Lao took control of Laos and formed the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). About 400,000 upland and lowland Lao fled the country and became refugees, fearing persecution for their opposition to the Pathet Lao, for their support of the Royal Lao Government and/or the Americans, or escaping worsening economic conditions. After 1975, the urban markets for silk clothing shrank as foreigners left the country, and the royal court was dismantled. But demand for cheap, everyday clothing increased.

When trade links with the rest of Asia were cut off, women resumed their weaving for household use, barter, and—after economic liberalization in 1986—for cash sale. Weaving once again became a source of women's economic and social power. With minimal cash available for household purchases, cotton textiles were made at home for clothing, ritual use, and sale. Good weavers attracted good husbands, and young girls learned how to weave by age fifteen (Ireson 1996:69).

The relocation of communities during the war years placed ethnic groups in new relations with each other and traditional symbiotic relations across ethnic groups were disrupted. Ireson reports that some Lao weavers obtained cotton from Khmu women, producing finished cloth for the Khmu in return (1996:69). Similarly, Hmong women, known for their applique and embroidery, and who traditionally weave only hemp cloth, have been learning the more complex Lao weaving techniques in cotton because of their value in urban markets. This development has been driven more by women's need for self-sufficiency than by tourist demand. Local tex-

tile production has been considered part of the path to Lao socialist self-sufficiency.

The government encouraged weaving cooperatives, and with United Nations assistance, new weaving technology was introduced to develop a local cotton industry using European style upright floor looms. Western dress was discouraged by the government, and women began weaving and wearing the Lao *sin* again. Most Lao women on city streets and in rural communities wear hand-woven *sin* with T-shirts or blouses, even when riding bicycles or motorcycles. Even the military and civil service uniforms for women incorporate a khaki *sin* with a woven Lao Lum style border.

During this period, the Lao Women's Union (LWU) was transformed from a revolutionary women's group of soldiers' mothers to a mass organization initiating and implementing women's projects, including those based on textile production. The LWU is ideologically grounded in the three goods and two duties: a socialist woman must aspire to be a good citizen, good mother, and good wife, carrying out her duty to her society and to the development of the nation. Membership is granted and monitored based on appraisal of the woman as good, average, or weak in meeting these criteria (Trankell 1993:19,23). Socialist policies that helped Lao women, such as rural cooperatives and child care centers, were established, although many of these benefits have disappeared under economic liberalization.

### Market-driven Development (1986–present)

Following the Lao government's shift to the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in 1986, economic liberalization increased options for selling cash crops, decreased access to forest foods, and discouraged upland swidden cultivation. The availability of new markets further encouraged the return to hand weaving. In the region around Vientiane, a wide variety of cottons and silks began to be produced by different techniques, as families from distant parts of Lao PDR migrated to the capital to find work. They produced skirt lengths for sale to locals and to occasional visitors in the markets of Vientiane. Currently, many U.N. programs and NGOs encourage weaving projects as income-generating schemes. While not all have solved problems of marketing, they provide opportunities to upgrade antiquated weaving equipment and encourage young women to acquire new weaving skills.

Government policy still influences weaving. Relocated communities are given textile quotas and told to form weaving groups. Resettlement development plans use weaving as a resource base. To that end, the government brought in weavers from South Asia to “upgrade” the skills of weavers and enhance the marketability of Lao women’s textiles, an insult to accomplished Lao weavers. These development initiatives may well spoil the market for Lao weaving if they are not introduced with attention to preserving the creative freedom of weavers.

Weavers in south, central, and north Laos produce distinctive silks of fine quality from their own local silkworms. Recently, the Lao government with the help of the Japanese government has been giving new silkworms to villagers—particularly in the provinces of Xieng Khouang and Luang Prabang—in order to diversify silkworm production and improve the quality of silk (Connors 1996:14).

Every day, the morning market in Vientiane is filled with weaving and weavers from different ethnic groups. Women bring yarn, yardage, or finished *sins* and *biangs* to sell to shopkeepers. The buyer inspects the quality, establishes a mutually agreed upon price, and adds to her stock. Each booth has a slightly different selection, but most booths sell reasonably priced beautifully woven and embroidered skirt lengths of Japanese synthetic fibers (that take repeated washing more successfully than some local silks), alongside elaborately woven silks, products of three or more months work.

Some booths sell antique textiles. Few antique textiles have been cut up to make finished ready-to-wear clothes as in Thailand (cf. P.Van Esterik 1994), perhaps because the *sin* is still a valued item of everyday clothing, and because collectors and curators are still prepared to pay high prices for rare pieces. Many antique textiles are in excellent condition, as if they were kept as heirlooms during the war and not worn. The antique textile stores in Vientiane have boxes of almost identical textiles from all parts of Lao PDR (possibly not parted with willingly): blankets for the dead, heavy indigo blankets from Houa Phan province, Khmu striped blankets, huge *thung* (flags) for Buddhist temples, some made of heavy brocade and others of exceptionally fine quality silk. The store owners take only the damaged pieces to the morning market, selling the best from their stores to customers by appointment. One entrepreneur reported proudly that the Queen



1. Antique and new Lao textiles on display in a Vientiane tourist shop. Photo: P.Van Esterik

of Thailand purchased \$25,000 worth from her; collectors regularly buy seven to ten thousand dollars worth.

As antique textiles are emerging from storage to be collected and displayed, young weavers are reminded of the quality and variety of older heirloom pieces and encouraged to retain or regain the skills of the exceptional weaver. But these exemplars move on rapidly, as Thai and Japanese entrepreneurs purchase large collections for resale and for museums.

### Beyond Authenticity

Carol Cassidy’s Lao Textile Studio is located in a beautiful colonial house in Vientiane. Her products are made by professional Lao weavers who use her innovative techniques and designs to produce lux-

ury items for international customers, including embassies. The market for these unique pieces is primarily textile museums and high fashion (Ireson 1996:196). Ironically, just as Lao silk weaving is becoming recognized as exceptional, only outsiders can afford to buy the textiles. Most of Cassidy's thirty-five weavers come from silk-weaving villages in the northern provinces. However, the more experienced skilled weavers from Houa Phan province have also taught non-weaving Hmong to reproduce the new motifs to Cassidy's exacting standards in her factory-workshop.

Cassidy reproduces Lao designs using techniques she analyzed from antique Lao textiles purchased before they became so expensive. She combines techniques such as brocade and tapestry in the same piece, and also introduced a chevron pattern, reminiscent of Native American designs (Navajo). Often, she shifts motifs from shoulder cloths, for example, onto different forms—*sins* or wall hangings. Techniques such as interlocking tapestry used by the Tai Lue are now spreading to weavers from other ethnic groups after Cassidy reintroduced the technique. Elite Lao who denigrated Tai Lue and would never consider wearing their textiles now wear transformed Lue designs because Cassidy's use of Lue techniques has separated it out as a technical innovation. Now other weavers in Vientiane are borrowing her patterns. Recently she has faced a new difficulty. Since the catalogue from her exhibition at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York in 1995 was published, Lao and foreign customers are ordering specific pieces to be copied by other Lao weavers. The book is protected by copyright but are the products of a textile artist who is building on but going "beyond tradition" similarly protected? In response to criticisms that the designs could not be copyrighted but should belong to every Lao weaver, Cassidy has suggested that creative weavers should feel shame if they can no longer create innovative "traditional" Lao textiles and must copy her versions of Lao designs. The *Wall Street Journal* credits her with single-handedly reviving the ancient silk-weaving tradition in Laos (Sept. 7, 1995).

Cassidy sees Lao weaving changing rapidly as the ability to create new designs is separated from the technical skills of weaving. Some aspects of Lao weaving are deteriorating, she argues, because of the lack of creative ingenuity, as well as changes in raw materials, dyes, and other processing tech-

niques. Dyes are easily revived, as long as the natural products remain accessible and women transmit the processing knowledge to the next generation, but the loss of weaving techniques is more serious. She refers to the lack of creativity—a more serious loss—as a song without words, as she speaks of women's inability to articulate what designs mean. Perhaps the meanings of the designs were never articulated verbally. Cassidy is an American weaver, trained in Scandinavia, reviving authentic Lao woven designs—the woven heritage of the Lao nation. The weavers' "inability to articulate meaning" is perfectly understandable because the meanings of textiles are embedded in systems of difference and hierarchy that are the very characteristics that the Pathet Lao must submerge in order to create a socialist state—Buddhism, royal style, and ethnic distinctions.

### **Beyond Ethnicity**

Acknowledging ethnic diversity, even counting ethnic groups, is a political act. Minorities were not referred to in Lao government policy until a few years ago when it became acceptable to talk about them. Then they were relabelled as Lao—Lao Hmong, Lao Khmu, or, more likely, referred to by reference to other categories such as province, economic status, or subsistence pattern. Minorities are blamed for deforestation, opium production and addiction, and political insurrection. There is no acknowledgement of how different they really are from each other and from the newly created Lao national identity. Literacy for minorities is literacy in Lao, even when minorities speak languages from other language families and have no knowledge of spoken Lao.

With the abolition of the Lao monarchy in 1975, a new model of ethnic relations came into being. The explicit policy of the government of Lao PDR is to create national unity out of ethnic diversity. In 1995, a number of NGOs produced a calendar widely distributed in Vientiane. The cover featured a procession of men and women from a number of different ethnic groups playing instruments and dancing together, all wearing distinctive clothing. This is particularly noteworthy, since the midland Khmu and upland Hmong heading the procession beside the lowland Lao are now learning to weave Lao Lum textiles.

Part of the creation of an ideological nationalism is expressed by women weaving and wearing

the Lao *sin* and *biang*, and adopting a chignon hairstyle in order to look like the dominant Lao Lum. Lao Lum, the largest ethnic group—about 50% of the population—is being reconstructed as a new ethnic category that is broader than ethnicity, much like a political elite that harkens back to the royal models that the Pathet Lao overthrew.

Women's wearing of the Lao Lum *sin* as imposed by the Pathet Lao accomplished several things: first, it created an additional demand for traditional woven products—the *sin* and *biang*; second, it served to differentiate Lao women from Thai women in a most distinctive way; and third, it encouraged the mixing of textile traditions so that after 1975 it became progressively more difficult to match bounded locality-based ethnic groups to distinct textiles. Recent creations combine different weaving styles in one piece (Cheeseman 1988:44). Simultaneously, it makes Lao PDR an even more appealing tourist destination since women as the bearers of culture still wear exotic traditional dress.

In spite of the efforts of the Lao government to feature Lao textiles and dress as symbols of Lao national identity, Thai entrepreneurs are successfully coopting the revival of Lao textile traditions. Since most Lao live on the Thai side of the Mekong River, it is not surprising that there is a continuity of weaving traditions across the border. However, Lao textiles are being redefined by Thai as *Isan* (north-eastern Thai). Thai markets in Bangkok provide a wider choice of high-quality Lao weaving than can be found in Vientiane. In November, 1997, on my return from Lao PDR, I visited Naraiphand, a Bangkok handicrafts store, and saw, mixed among the more expensive Thai textiles, a substantial number of Lao *sin* and *biang* from Hoah Phan province. When I asked the salesperson if they were woven in Lao PDR, she reported that they were not Lao, but Lao/Isan and could therefore be called Thai. Textiles are destined to play a role in the boundary marking and appropriation of histories that have characterized the Thai-Lao border for centuries.

## Conclusions

While some analysts may agonize over matching chronology and textile designs with diffusion and ethnic migrations in mainland Southeast Asia, textile history is being made and remade in Laos. Time and textiles are interwoven in the streets of Vientiane, as boutiques and market vendors display antique Lao textiles brought from all corners of

the country, along with locally made *sins* that combine the stylistic markers from a number of different localities and ethnicities; placemats woven in dull colors on European floor looms; single examples of ritual clothing—a wedding suit from an upland household, a burial blanket from the northernmost province; and the work of foreign artists who reproduce the essence of Lao design elements and place them in new international markets requiring new interpretive frameworks. Beside these works of art are textiles probably woven by some of the same women, with the loose weave, bright colors, and large motifs favored by tourists. These textiles made from synthetic yarns are within the price range of textiles available in other craft markets of Southeast Asia. Tourists not concerned with the differences in quality try to bargain the price down to the equivalent of Thai machine-made cloth. The tourists “can't tell the difference,” the ultimate insult and dismissal of the skills of a Lao weaver. However, curators and collectors appreciate the difference and pay the higher prices for top-quality weaving. In the rush to learn new skills and market new items, many Lao weavers are choosing to work in silk rather than cotton, since the former takes almost the same time to weave but fetches a much higher price.

In the new Lao PDR, Khmu women from the Mon-Khmer-speaking “midlands” provide cotton for lowland Lao Lum weavers, and non-weaving, highland Hmong women repatriated into lowland areas beg to be trained in the weaving traditions of the lowland Tai Dam. Lao Lum women wear Tai Lue *sin* designs on fine silk wedding suits. Once isolated at their floor looms in villages separated by rushing rivers and forested mountains, Lao women now win international weaving contests.

Somehow the upheavals of recent history—colonialism, wars of liberation, the devastating American bombing, the flight of refugees and their subsequent repatriation—have failed to extinguish the myriad of distinctive textile traditions of Laos. Rather, globalization is transforming the meaning of textile commodities in intriguing ways, as this brief historical review has demonstrated.

As temples and palaces become socialist museums, and textiles as markers of ethnicity become catalogues of processing techniques and design elements for innovative entrepreneurs, the Lao textile landscape is changing rapidly. Refugee movements and subsequent repatriation have shuffled the eth-

nic mix, creating new neighbors and disrupting ethnic hierarchies that encouraged complementarity and interdependence under the feudal regime. Social relations established under colonialism, socialism, and capitalism are reflected in the meanings and practices associated with textile production and use. This observation is not an appeal for a nostalgic return to feudal relations, but merely an argument that the meaning of Lao textiles is still embedded in these relations, in spite of the homogenization of textile designs and the movement towards democratization of the relations between ethnic groups.

The extraordinary textiles produced by Lao women address problems for a number of very different audiences: Pathet Lao who seek unity in diversity for a new socialist state; Lao officials who are concerned that Lao women appear "traditional" and easily distinguishable from Thai women; tourists who seek authentic, elaborately decorated textile souvenirs; Thai entrepreneurs who are reinterpreting their Thai *Isan* heritage as Lao to increase the market for their diminishing supplies of authentic textiles; monasteries that hope to encourage Buddhist piety through donations of ritual textiles; and women who need to generate cash for household purchases. But as this paper suggests, the textiles themselves evoke meanings to their makers and wearers that are more paradoxical and contradictory than national policy acknowledges.

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