



LAO FUNERAL TEXTILES AND THE JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

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Peoples of Tai background have lived in the mountain folds of northeastern Laos for centuries. While their religious traditions reflect Theravāda Buddhism, the Tai of the region have historically derived their well being in the world from shamanic practices. The ritual agents of shamanism help alleviate the difficulties of sickness and death with healing and funeral rituals. The original healing shaman is said to have been a female (mae mot) who helped establish her brother as a healer (maw mon) at the beginning of time (Fig 1).



Fig 1

Female healers are said to be more powerful than male because, instead of using aggressive displays of power, the female has a “sweet tongue.” Her soft, persuasive approach ensures the banishing of negative forces and the enticing of positive ones into the community. In spite of the fact that nowadays there are more male healers than female, the Tai of northeastern Laos believe that tapping the ritual powers of both male and female together is the most successful way to respond to suffering.

Death affords the most powerful experience of suffering and, to ease its trauma, people turn to a colleague of the healer, the maw pii or funeral shaman. Unlike the experience of sickness that can be reversed by healers, death’s power is so strong only a special male practitioner can respond – by installing the deceased spirit (pii) in a heavenly village.



Fig. 2 shows the maw pii Tong Pet staring down evil spirits who threaten the power (and life) of the funeral shaman. His fan is enlivened with magic and, during the ritual, he will stomp his feet, shout aggressively at evil spirits, surround himself with a protective wall of power, and control the spirits by forceful movements of his fan.

Fig 2

Both types of shamans transform the traumatic situations they respond to by going on a ritual journey, often symbolized by the bird (Fig. 3).



Fig 3

The healing shaman “travels” to a far distant, often “risky,” spot – e.g., the woods or the other side of the mountain – to recover a lost soul taken, or wandered away, from the sick person. The recovery of this soul (kwan), one of a group housed in the body, re-completes the collection of kwan and renders the sick person healthy again.

The journey of the funeral shaman, however, goes over greater distance, takes a longer time, and is far more dangerous. At the time of death, chaos ensues: the fabric of the community is now ripped apart, and the deceased’s collection of kwan become un-joined. The funeral ritual serves both to integrate the community together again, and to establish some of the kwan in the house as domestic spirits (pii), in the cemetery as spirits (pii) of the past lineage, and in the heavenly village as spirits (pii) of the future lineage.

The funeral shaman’s journey is to (1) collect those kwan going to heaven, (2)

bring them to the deceased’s house to be fed and entertained, and (3) guide them on the journey across the earth, through the atmosphere, and across the heavenly landscape to the lineage village. The journey begins in the deceased’s home, moves along northeastern Lao Routes 13, 7, 6 and 6A (Fig. 4) then goes by boat along a river until it gets to a designated spot and from here proceeds up an “air road” to heaven.



Fig 4

Once in heaven, it moves through various areas, hard and easy to traverse, until the entourage stops at the lineage village, where permission is sought and given for the new ancestral spirit to enter and live. This journey accomplishes the transformation of the main kwan of the person into an ancestral spirit (pii).

To make the funeral work in separating the dead from the living and restoring the living community, there must be textiles in use. Special cloths are made, using discontinuous supplementary weft (chok) technique, whose designs reflect what's happening at the funeral ritual and give guidance to the process. To announce a death, a pole is set outside the deceased's house and hung with a banner below a wooden bird (tung) (Figs. 5, 6). Ordinarily, shamanic banners are heavily imbued with figures of animals, plants, and humans, but some groups like the Tai Daeng, weave banners with thin stripes. No one knows what the ancestral pii look like, though they probably resemble the deceased. Most figures in funeral banners represent the shaman but some, like the "humans" in Fig. 5 bottom fold right, may well be pii. Ordinarily, however, without "canonical" figural representations of pii, weavers render the ancestors freely and creatively.



Fig 5



Fig 6

Funeral clothing expresses the experience of death. The style of the tube skirt in Fig. 7 specifically designates a funeral sin, as it's an "upside-down" rendering of images, marking the turbulence and disorder of death in a community. Again, in Fig. 8, the body of the tube skirt shows roof designs of burial houses in the cemetery, and Fig. 9 shows a funeral coat worn by a daughter-in-law at her mother-in-law's funeral. The surface of this coat has alternating sections of plain and chok material, and its piecing is significant because it parallels the use of rag strips on the rattle cloth (Fig. 1) and hat of healing shamans (Fig. 10). Here "torn" pieces of cloth suggest the confusion and disquiet of sickness, much like the "upside-down" rendering of images on funeral tube-skirts.



The power of the funeral ritual is activated by a trained maw pii (or maw dtai) going into trance, using his breath to facilitate the ritual, and controlling his own spirits as they operate from within his mind. Both healing and funeral shamans have two spirits: an altar spirit who lives on an altar near the shaman's bed, and a ritual power spirit who resides in special levels of heaven. The two are particular to the individual shaman and have to be honored frequently so they will continue serving him. At the beginning of the ritual, the altar spirit visits the heavenly spirit and brings it to earth. Together with the altar and its implements, the shaman's training and breath control, and the use of sacred cloth, the shaman's two spirits make the ritual "performative."

Central to the performative power of the ritual are non-infused textiles. When properly displayed, "magic" altar cloths, coffin covers, and banners are transformative: transformative because they carry representational figures, and powerful because these figures emerge from the imaginations of weavers. Women know what to weave because they sit at rituals (Fig. 11) and listen to narratives of the journey, and then weave what the shamans describe. Thus, a canon emerges of images that can "do" things in the ritual.



The funeral journey begins with a death. The shaman, often in a Hawaiian shirt (Fig. 12) gathers the souls of the deceased at the latter's home and, in trance, prepares for their dispersal. Once the deceased's kwan have arrived, the shaman wears a green silk coat (Fig. 13) and invites the deceased to enjoy food and entertainment. When the shaman (e.g., his ritual power spirit) is ready to guide the deceased to heaven, he wears a red silk coat and then adds a band of white ritual cloth around his waist and head (Fig. 14, 15) – to signify the “bird-ness” of the shaman's journey. When the journey becomes difficult, the shaman will put on an extra power skirt (Fig. 16) and use his sword to repel dangerous beings.



The designs on the textiles mark the journey. For traveling, the deceased is accompanied by ancestors who come down from heaven to form the funeral entourage. The designs in funeral cloths focus primarily on vehicles for the journey. A bird for traveling the “air road” can be bought by the deceased’s relatives if they are wealthy, otherwise the entourage must walk (Fig. 17). Vehicles for the shaman, who always rides, include the *luang*, a W-shaped serpent with two square heads and, more commonly, the elephant. Both Figs. 17 and 18 are from a funeral banner and show the specific kind of elephant needed: one with clawed bird feet, indicating he is able to fly, perhaps with wings. An elephant with flat lion feet, standing firmly on the ground, is used when protection is needed, as in the door curtain of Fig. 19. Figs. 20 and 21 show the altar cloth of the funeral shaman Kamaa: here bird-footed elephants carry the shaman, and a boat appears to take the entourage on a river before “lift-off” through the air to heaven. Finally, in heaven, the entourage will traverse a place of wild animals and, for its protection, a special funeral cloth (Fig. 22) is laid out. This is a relatively new style of textile and the animals on it reflect a more usual, current, version, one made of paper cutouts on red velvet cloth (Fig. 23).





Thus, funeral textiles, with proper designs, fully imbued with mon magic, used by trained shamans who chant words of the narrative journey will transform: that is, they will restore the rupture in the community and make sure the deceased is established in his heavenly village.

*All research for this essay took place during annual research stays (2006-20013) in Sam Nuea, Sam Tai, Muang Vaen, and Ban Hat San areas in Hua Phan province and in the urban villages outside of Vientiane, Laos. The textiles discussed here come from these areas, and the people interviewed from these areas consistently self-identified as being of Tai Daeng background. Peter Whittlesey served as my guide and his wife Bai Sayouvin Whittlesey, of Tai Daeng heritage, was my translator. I am immensely grateful to both of them, and to the weavers and shamans who spent long hours going over the details of their traditions. Funding for this research came primarily from Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut.

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