Textiles of the Phu Thai of Laos

by

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Abstract

This thesis documents the hand-woven textiles that the Phu Thai ethnic group living in Savannakhet Province, Laos, produce. The various stages of textile production and the uses of textiles in Phu Thai society, especially as identity markers, are also examined. Textiles of neighboring groups are also investigated to how knowledge of textile technology, types, and aesthetics are transferred between the Phu Thai and other ethnicities, specifically the Lao and Katang. The study's field research was primarily undertaken in Savannakhet Province, Laos, during 2004 with follow-up visits in 2005, 2006, and 2009. The research methods included participant and non-participant observation, informal interviewing, and analyses of textiles found in the field and in private collections.

The study concludes that the Phu Thai produce a wide range of textiles from a variety of materials, techniques, and designs. It also finds that Phu Thai weavers constantly alter their textiles to fit the demands of their culture, and the textiles embody changes this group has experienced over time. The Phu Thai have adapted their textiles throughout their history, including assimilation or domestication of materials and aesthetics into their textile repertoire or a domestication of foreign elements. The domestication of textiles has coincided with the inclusion of related foreign vocabulary into Phu Thai language.

Textiles continue to serve roles in present-day Phu Thai society, such as identity markers. As the Phu Thai negotiate their identity in the multi-ethnic nation of Laos, they manipulate textiles to represent their ethnic identity. External forces, such as tourism, economics, and media, also utilize Phu Thai textiles as distinctive identity markers, affecting production and the use of textiles. The commercial production of Phu Thai textiles allows for the continuation of this heritage while providing a source of income for Phu Thai households. Commercialization has allowed for innovations in production, merchandising and marketing, leading to increased creativity and improved quality of Phu Thai textiles.

Keywords: Textiles, Hand-woven Textile Production, Identity, Laos, Phu Thai, Savannakhet Province
To G-ma

Elizabeth L. McIntosh
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Chapter 1

Introduction

People, worldwide, manipulate textiles as clothing to symbolize group identity. Group affiliation remains strong despite trends of globalization and easy access to manufactured clothing made in homogenized styles. Individuals in post-industrial nations continue to choose materials, colours, motifs, and forms to represent belonging to a collective entity, such as people associated with a university wear garments in particular colours and adorned with emblems to connect them to the school. In the less industrialized country of Laos, many ethnicities, such as the Phu Thai, continue to produce hand-woven cloth for various purposes, including as symbols of ethnic identity.\(^1\) When inquiring about their heritage dress, Phu Thai women of Laos always reply, “\textit{sin mii seu lap la-euh},” and they are often observed wearing variations of this clothing for both everyday and special occasions.\(^2\) Besides women's clothing, traditional male attire

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\(^1\) The Phu Thai language is a member of the Tai Kadai ethno-linguistic family, and people who speak this language live in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. “Phu Thai” refers to this specific group while “Tai” refers to a sub-branch of this language family. Numerous groups compose this branch. “Thai” refers to a Tai group living in present-day Thailand and also represents the citizens of this country.

\(^2\) \textit{Sin mii seu lap la-euh} translates to a skirt (\textit{sin}) decorated with weft ikat technique (\textit{mii} or \textit{mat mii}) and a blouse (\textit{seu}) with patterning (\textit{la-euh}).
and other types of textiles, such as ceremonial and household items, constitute what they consider Phu Thai ethnic identity markers.

Map 1 Mainland Southeast Asia

![Map of Mainland Southeast Asia](http://www.reliefweb.int)

However, little is known about Phu Thai hand-woven textiles despite the growing textile research on various ethnic groups living in Laos. [Map 1] The hand-woven fabrics made in southern Laos have been overlooked in the literature concerning the textiles of Southeast Asia, and this omission includes Phu Thai weavings. Detailed information
about Phu Thai textiles is also absent in the research focusing on cloth produced by the various Tai groups living in mainland Southeast Asia. Thus, an examination of their hand-woven textiles and weaving technologies will contribute to the knowledge regarding the heritage textiles of Laos and, generally, Southeast Asia. The Phu Thai do not live in isolation but have co-existed with neighboring groups and have been exposed to foreign cultures via religious, political, and economic contacts since the initial establishment of their villages in the 16th century. Through these exchanges the Phu Thai have acquired foreign elements, such as technology, materials, and aesthetics, to add to their culture. The transfer of technology, materials, and aesthetics among groups may be better understood by looking at one group’s assimilation of foreign characteristics, and the Phu Thai ethnic minority group will be a case study.

This thesis documents the hand-woven textiles produced by the Phu Thai living in Laos, specifically Savannakhet Province. Several questions are addressed regarding Phu Thai textiles in this study. The questions include: What are the materials, processes, and stages of hand-woven textile production of the Phu Thai? What types of textiles do Phu Thai weavers produce, and which ones do they perceive to symbolize Phu Thai identity? How has been textile technology been transferred between the Phu Thai and their neighbors, mainly the Lao and Katang? How do hand-woven textiles and their roles as identity markers play a part in contemporary Phu Thai society?

The documentation of Phu Thai hand-woven textile production in the present-day setting of modern nation-states will provide insight on how identity of a small minority persists under the pressures of national and international identities. Institutions play roles in preserving both national and ethnic identities, and this research explores which entities,
if any, affect Phu Thai identity in the newly established nation of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, commonly known as Laos. The making and consumption of Phu Thai textiles are not confined to Phu Thai and neighboring groups’ settlements, but the fabrics’ consumption has expanded internationally through commercial sales. Marketing the ethnicity or “Phu Thai-ness” of the textiles has been an important innovation in expanding their consumption to a broader audience.

The Phu Thai belong to the Tai ethno-linguistic family, and members of this group manipulate the cloth they produce to distinguish themselves from related and unrelated groups. Textiles also allow for the expression of self, gender, age, and status among the Tai, including the Phu Thai (Lefferts, 1992b). The combination of colors, materials, techniques, motifs, designs, compositions, and form lead to the numerous variations that can be produced in one weaving, but Phu Thai women consistently create textiles that symbolize their identity. New dyes, yarns, and patterns are constantly incorporated along with old identifying markers, and the combinations of the new and old continue to symbolize Phu Thai-ness. Characteristics of identity are dynamic and constantly changing to meet individual and group needs, and the Phu Thai constantly manipulate fabrics to maintain their identities even as citizens of an emerging nation-state, Laos.

Textiles reveal information about a culture as they serve various roles in a society, and numerous researchers recognize the importance of textiles, especially in Southeast Asia (Fraser-Lu, 1988; Gittinger & Lefferts, 1992; Howard & Howard, 2002; Maxwell, 1990). Cloth in the form of clothing, household accessories, and ritual objects is functional by protecting the body from natural and supernatural elements, and fabrics are
symbolic, representing a wearer’s age, gender, rank, marital status, and group affiliation (Weiner & Schneider, 1989). Articles of dress and textiles central to gifts of exchange rituals reflect different aspects of a society’s hierarchical relationships, related to social and political organization. One example is Weiner’s (1989) study of the roles of cloth and power in matrilineal societies of Oceania, where women as producers of fiber mats possess crucial roles in the distribution of these objects in important rites of passage. Fraser and Fraser's 2005 publication addresses the use of particular blankets to symbolize prestige and elevated rank in Chin societies of Burma.

Appadurai’s edited volume (1986) demonstrates how objects are accounts of historic change. In his introduction, he discusses how things even as commodities reflect changes that a society has experienced over time. Textiles are included in his categories of objects, and several chapters in his book focus on this type of object. In this book, one study focuses on the role of hand-woven cloth, *khadi*, as a unifying factor in India’s fight for independence in the early 20th century (Bayly, 1986). Cloth has played multi-faceted roles in India’s population, and the imposition of imported British fabric by the colonial rulers led to resistance and the defiant consumption of hand-woven cloth by multi-ethnic India. In this situation, hand-woven fabric was one of the unifying factors among an ethnically diverse population in the fight for India’s independence.

Similar to Appadurai’s argument, Hoskins (1998) finds that specific objects are biographies of their owners and that the studies of things are ethnographies. Domestic objects are important archives of not only the owner but of the owner’s group affiliation (Hoskins, 1998, pp. 2, 8-9). One of her studies examines a royal snake shroud weaving, which Kodi men of Sumba, Indonesia, wear as a garment and its use as a shroud when its
The owner passes away. She argues that this particular textile represented the owner’s biography since it linked his notions of local beliefs of snakes and imported ones about royalty (1998, p. 84). The owner has traced his ancestral lineage through the shroud’s primary motif of a python snake that symbolizes royalty and reaffirms his own social status in society as a descendant of the local area’s royalty.

**Textiles and Identity in the 20th Century**

After the end of World War II societies were affected by rapid changes occurring in technology, including advancements in industrial textile production and transportation of manufactured goods internationally. Historically, previous contact through trade and religions had exposed societies to different cultures, leading to the assimilation of foreign cultural attributes by some groups (Maxwell, 1990). However, post-World War II market economies and fashion have forced products to change quickly in order to compete in the world market. Commercialization has reordered textiles’ potential since they are integral to ethnic, national, regional, and international fashions. Numerous studies have explored how traditional or pre-industrial arts have been manipulated to symbolize identity in the age of modern polities and international communication. Textiles have become “logos” of emerging nation-states (Anderson, 1991, p. 41). For example, national airline carriers’ employees wear uniforms fashioned out of heritage-style textiles or imitations, such as Thai Airways, Singapore Airlines, and Malaysia Airlines. The distinctive features of various groups’ hand-weavings allow countries to create identity markers that differentiate one nation from others. The formation of national identities and cohesion
was especially important to former colonies, such as Laos, since their foundation as independent states has been relatively recent, less than 100 years ago.

Often, a country’s elite selects particular types of hand-woven cloth to symbolize national identity. Howard (1998) and McIntosh (1998) examined the application of textiles produced by Tai subgroups to symbolize Thai national identity. The Thai royal family, especially HM Queen Sirikit, has promoted the production and consumption of hand-woven material. To honor the queen on various occasions, such as her 6th cycle or 72nd birthday in 1996, formal institutions highlighted hand-woven fabrics of Thailand in exhibitions, conferences, fashion lines, and publications. Although the monarchy has supported the handicraft production of non-Tai minority groups, the Thai elite has adopted the textiles of Tai subgroups as representations of the kingdom since the central Thai, or the political elite, have not woven cloth for centuries. Members of higher levels of Thai society have thus selected which fabrics symbolize Thai identity.

Several scholars have investigated hand-woven textiles and identity in the modern nation-states of insular Southeast Asia. Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah (2007) discusses how the silk fabrics, especially those with supplementary patterns woven with metallic threads (songket) of the Malay majority, symbolize Brunei national identity. The ethnic composition of Brunei’s population consists of non-Malay groups, but Malay weavings symbolize the ethnically diverse citizenry of this primarily Islamic Malay sultanate. The sultanate’s formal institutions encourage songket production through the establishment of weaving schools and manipulate this type cloth to represent rank in the court. Textiles play prominent roles in Brunei’s present-day ceremonies, such as the Investiture and
Royal Part March Ceremonies, and Malay *songket* fabrics are also institutionalized in government-sponsored museums, including the Brunei Museum (2007, pp. 53-61).

Another study considers how fabrics, similar to those used to symbolize Brunei national identity, maintain the collective identity of the Malay, who are a minority group in the poly-ethnic island nation of Indonesia. Rodgers, Summerfield, and Summerfield (2007) focus on contemporary production of Sumatran *songket* weavings and their application to symbolize the ethnic identity of Malays in Sumatra and that of Sumatran Malay immigrants living throughout the island state. Applying Hoskin’s “biography of objects” to the study of Sumatran *songket*, the authors analyze both antique and contemporary hand weavings to learn more about the Malay living in Sumatra (2007, pp. 84-131). They conclude that changes in materials, colors, motifs, design composition, form, and weaving techniques reflect historical and social change experienced by the Sumatran Malay. The changes are partly due to exposure to foreign elements, such as trade, and the weavers’ and consumers’ assimilations of these aspects. The authors also conclude that textiles embody historical change, following Appadurai’s argument mentioned above.

In their study Rodgers, Summerfield, and Summerfield emphasize the innovations that weavers and weaving business owners have introduced in their work to encourage present-day consumption. Replicas of antique weavings are produced, but innovations occur when the weaver, sometimes through the orders of the seller, composes designs in a manner she considers to represent the “traditional” (2007, pp. 66-67). Thus, a simple reproduction is not made. The researchers insist that commercialization has not caused a decline in skill and artistry but has demonstrated the resilience of the textile arts and
overall creativity. Due to changing market forces, the producers are incorporating new characteristics or altering old ones. In a nation whose slogan is “Unity in Diversity,” Sumatran *songket* weavings complement other contemporary heritage arts of Indonesia, such as Javanese batiks and Batak woodcarvings.

Similar to Indonesia’s population, Laos is ethnically diverse with 68 official groups and numerous subgroups. Traditional or “heritage” dress has played an important role in the creation of a national identity in the country since 1975. In the late 1970s, the socialist government banned elements of Western-style dress, especially among women (Ireson, 1996). It was unlawful for women to wear pants (and technically still is illegal), for example. The government has encouraged wearing traditional or heritage dress, mainly the clothing of the dominant majority, the Lao and related Tai groups, such as the Phu Thai. It first promoted the production of hand-woven cloth made into traditional attire, such as establishing a cotton fabric factory to create a supply of material that was not considered a prestige item, such as silk, and associated with the royalty. Local production was also necessary due to the embargoes imposed by Laos’ neighboring countries, leading to the prohibition of clothing importation and limiting the availability of factory-made items in the country.

Although the embargoes were lifted over 20 years ago, which facilitated regional trade and access to manufactured goods, the government has continued to support the use of hand-woven fabrics in heritage dress (Ireson, 1996; Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). Keyes (1991) and Van Esterik (1999) have taken brief looks at the Lao national government’s roles in the promotion of hand-woven textiles as symbols of Lao national identity. Both authors found that the promotion of a Lao or Tai style of dress was
problematic in a multi-ethnic population since it was an attempt by the government to homogenize its citizens. The identities of Laos’ numerous ethnic minorities remain strong and continue to be reflected in their attire. Not all of Laos’ citizens have replaced their traditional dress with a Lao national clothing style.

This study of the Phu Thai hand-woven textiles and identity in Laos may serve as an analysis of contemporary society in an emerging nation state. Like Indonesia, Laos is a multi-ethnic state promoting a national identity while acknowledging its diverse population. The Phu Thai are included in the Lao ethnic majority, but its members have maintained their group identity. This minority group may reflect their group affiliation in the production, use, and display of their hand-weavings perhaps in a similar manner as the coastal Malay minority group of Indonesia. By examining present-day production of Phu Thai textiles in Laos, forces that have led to transformations in these identity markers and how the Phu Thai manage to contain these forces may be revealed.

**Literature Review**

Textiles of cultures from insular Southeast Asia dominate the literature on Southeast Asia textiles. Gittinger (1979) completed a survey of Indonesian textiles in the 1970s, and other publications followed expanding on this survey by focusing on specific ethnic groups, such as the Iban (see Gavin, 1996, 2003, for examples). Interest in mainland Southeast Asian textiles developed later with the majority of the research emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fraser-Lu produced a survey covering both mainland and insular Southeast Asia in 1988. In regards to mainland Southeast Asian textiles, she focused on the hand-weavings of Burma and Thailand since these were the
countries where information was more accessible compared to the communist states of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the colonies that once composed French Indochina. Maxwell's volume on Southeast Asian cloth, first published in 1990, also concentrated on island Southeast Asian hand-weavings and the foreign influences on these cultural symbols. Naenna first wrote about Lao textiles in 1988; this book serves as an introduction and a general summary of hand-woven fabrics produced by various Tai groups residing in the country. However, Phu Thai fabrics are absent from this volume.

In the 1990s, the literature concentrating on the textiles produced by Tai ethnic groups expanded. Recognizing the importance of textiles in pan-Tai culture, Gittinger and Lefferts (1992) completed their seminal work on the roles of textiles in Tai society throughout mainland Southeast Asia to accompany a major exhibition on Tai textiles that went on display in Thailand, the United States, and Canada. In the same work Lefferts (1992a) discussed the roles of Tai textiles establishing that they define gender and identity, demarcate mundane and sacred space, and symbolize upward mobility and success, for example. During the same year Conway (1992) described the hand-weavings of Thailand, concentrating on the fabrics woven by members of Tai and also Khmer ethno-linguistic groups residing in this kingdom. More research in English, Thai, and Lao became available later in the decade (see Chanida, 1998; Douangdeuane, Bandit, & Chanthone 1995; Naenna, 1990; Songsak & Cheesman, 1996a; Songsak & Cheesman, 1996b, for examples).

Similar to Conway (1992), Songsak and Cheesman (1996b) studied textile traditions of Thailand, categorized by region. Cheesman (1997) and Douangdeuane, Bandit, and Chanthone (1995) centered their investigations on Lao textiles, or hand-
woven fabrics of Tai minorities mainly living in central and northern Laos. Weavings of these Tai ethnicities in Laos have sparked local and international interest because of their complexity and creativity. Exposure to these types of fabrics in the Lao national capital, Vientiane, has been fairly recent and was due to the socialist Pathet Lao takeover in 1975. The Pathet Lao headquarters were based in Hua Phan Province, or northeastern Laos, during the Second Indochina War, and members of the various Tai subgroups from this area followed their leaders to Vientiane, located in the former kingdom’s central region, when they gained control of governance after 1975. Fashions changed to favor the dress of the Tai groups originating from this region since they were connected to the victorious elite (Cheesman, 1997), and this acceptance encouraged the newcomers to weave their identity markers in their new homes.

Research on hand-woven textiles from other ethnic groups in other parts of Southeast Asia has grown steadily in the last ten years. Textiles of the minority groups of Burma have been the focus of Howard’s research (1999, 2005a, 2005b). Howard and Howard (2002a, 2002b, 2002c) have also completed exhaustive surveys of the fabrics and dress of ethnic groups residing in Vietnam. Focusing on another mainland Southeast Asian nation, Green (2003, 2008) has examined the textile traditions of Cambodia, mainly of the resist-dyed fabrics of Khmer and Cham cultures. Other researchers have investigated textile production of specific ethnic groups in both mainland and insular Southeast Asia (for example, see Fraser & Fraser, 2005, for their study of Chin textiles), and the effects of tourism on the production of Indonesian textiles has been of interest of some anthropologists (see Forshee, 2001).
Although the literature on the textiles of Laos has increased in the last ten years, this body of knowledge lacks information about the weaving traditions found in southern Laos. Both local and foreign researchers have neglected the cloth produced by Tai and non-Tai groups in this area. Thus, the investigations of the textiles originating from Laos have excluded Phu Thai hand-woven textiles. The Phu Thai are a member of the Tai ethno-linguistic family and closely related to the Lao, the dominant ethnic group of Laos, but their traditions have been overlooked in the majority of the literature.

An investigation of Phu Thai textile production will expand the knowledge of the history of textile production in Laos and Southeast Asia, including the transmission of technology, materials, and aesthetics in the region, providing more data on the exchange and assimilation of foreign elements by a society. The documentation of Phu Thai textiles will enable a better understanding of Phu Thai and Tai culture in Laos and neighboring countries and provide insight on how this ethnic minority has adjusted to historical and social changes that they have experienced, especially in the last twenty years. The Phu Thai have negotiated and continue to negotiate their identity in order to survive in modern day society.

**Phu Thai Textiles in Existing Literature**

Early documentation of the Phu Thai provides little information on their material culture. Nineteenth century travel accounts of Siam (present-day Thailand) and the French colony of Indochina (present-day countries of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) mention settlements of Phu Thai found on both banks of the Mekong River. Late 19th century travel accounts by Harmand (1997) and Aymonier (2000) list various Phu Thai
villages, stating that the settlers were primary agriculturists but also involved in regional trade that connected the coastal areas of Vietnam with Laos, Thailand, and Burma. As employees of the French government seeking new economic opportunities, these writers fail to describe the cultures they met during their journeys but focused on the trade items, such as cattle and forest products. However, Aymonier (2000, p. 92) states that the Phu Thai ethnic group is a “great family distinct from the Lao,” speaking a different language from the Lao. Harmand (1997) describes the neighboring non-Tai peoples as vassals of the Phu Thai.

In regards to textiles and weaving, both Aymonier and Harmand’s accounts describe Phu Thai women cultivating cotton and indigo along riverbanks, but lack any detailed descriptions of clothing or textiles, writing that the Phu Thai dressed similarly to the Lao. Aymonier (2000, p. 92) adds that Phu Thai women wear their chignon behind their head instead of on top as Lao women arrange their hair, but the former’s clothing was similar to the latter’s style. He also describes Phu Thai men’s dress as similar to Lao and Thai attire. In his description of the Phu Thai leader’s dress, Harmand (1997) bases his conclusion that Xepone was a vassal state of Annam since its Phu Thai ruler wore Vietnamese administrative attire, reflecting the political alliance between the two groups.

As mentioned earlier, previous textile studies have ignored examining the hand-woven textiles of the Phu Thai, but the ethnic group has been the subject of research in other fields. Anthropologists have primarily focused on other cultural aspects, such as the role of religious beliefs in Phu Thai society. Early 20th century works, such as those of Seidenfaden (1939, 1943, 1958), describe the Phu Thai as one of the Tai ethnic groups living in Thailand. In his survey of Tai groups he briefly outlines the history of Phu Thai
migration, their religious beliefs, and other cultural characteristics (1958, p. 112). Anthropologist Kirsch (1966, 1967) examines religious syncreticism and social hierarchy of the Phu Thai of Thailand. Kirsch (1967) does not address textiles or clothing specifically but mentions the processes of sericulture, cultivation of cotton, and weaving as secondary occupations of the Phu Thai.

Schliesinger’s surveys of Tai ethnic groups in Laos and Thailand (2001a, 2001b, 2003c) provide superficial descriptions of Phu Thai dress, often using embroidery rather than weaving to explain patterning on clothing. He states that the everyday clothing of Phu Thai women consists of a skirt called a *phaa sin*, a long-sleeved vest, and a turban while Phu Thai men’s daily dress includes a loincloth and a shirt (2001b, 2003c). Ceremonial attire is blue for both genders:

Men wear wide long trousers and a short-sleeved vest buttoned at the front, with fringes of red cloth at the hem in the front and the collar. A multi-colored waistcloth is knotted in the front above the blue vest. Women wear a knee-length plain blue skirt with a narrow, red waistband. The long-sleeved blue vest is fitted at the waist and had red fringe at the neck and at the sleeves. Their hair is worn in a chignon. White sash is worn as a shoulder cloth (Schliesinger 2001b, pp. 90-91).

Surveys on the textiles of Southeast Asia, in general, and specific countries, such as Thailand and Laos, ignore the weaving traditions of the Phu Thai people. Fraser-Lu (1988) and Maxwell (1990) investigate weaving traditions in both mainland and insular Southeast Asia. In the former’s publication, she describes technical aspects of textile production, including different types of dyes, looms, and techniques. Fraser-Lu continues with a brief sketch of the roles of textiles within society before categorizing textiles by country. In her section on Thailand, Phu Thai fabrics, mainly the resist-dyed skirts and intricate shoulder cloths, are described as distinctive items that symbolize the
Phu Thai’s ethnicity (Fraser-Lu, 1988, pp. 113-114). The textiles of Laos are confined to several pages in the chapter dedicated to Indochina in her volume. Fraser-Lu mentions that the Phu Thai belong to the same ethnic category as the Lao, but she fails to provide any information on their textiles (1988, p. 126).

Maxwell’s investigation of Southeast Asian textiles (1990) is also concerned with local traditions, but she examines internal and external factors that may have affected technology, materials, and aesthetics among the societies living in this region. By taking a comparative approach, Maxwell first explores indigenous characteristics before looking at the effects of other groups on Southeast Asian textiles. She argues that aspects of Indian, Chinese, Islamic, and Western cultures have been assimilated into the Southeast Asian textile repertoire for centuries. The region’s ethnic diversity of the populations that is reflected in their hand-woven fabrics does not allow for a detailed study of every specific group in her publication; thus, this region-based research is not comprehensive of all cultural traditions. Phu Thai textiles of southern Laos have not been a priority in the studies of Southeast Asian hand-woven cloth.

Images of Phu Thai fabrics appear in country-specific publications without any in-depth examination of this material culture. If Phu Thai textiles are presented in this literature, the examples originate from Thailand. For example, a detail of a Phu Thai fabric illustrates the cover of the book *Thai Textiles*, which is an example of a ceremonial shoulder cloth woven in Kalasin Province of Northeast Thailand (Conway, 1992). This survey does not provide details on the history of the Phu Thai and the changes that have occurred in the production of their hand-woven textiles. Conway describes the roles of textiles in lowland Thai society and also categorizes the kingdom’s textile traditions by
location, emphasizing the fabrics of central and northern Thailand and, thus, ignoring the Phu Thai weavings originating from the northeast region.

Songsak and Cheesman’s (1996b) publication on the textiles of Thailand provides examples of Phu Thai weaving created in Thailand. Like other textile surveys, descriptions of different types of textiles are categorized by geographical area rather than ethnicity in this work. In their chapter on textiles from northeast Thailand, cloth woven by Phu Thai weavers living in several provinces of this part of the kingdom are highlighted (1996b, pp. 77-95). Examples of men’s and women’s dress and ceremonial textiles are depicted in this section. This publication is the first to focus on the different types of Phu Thai weavings in the Southeast Asian textile literature. However, little information is provided about the items.

Gittinger and Lefferts’s Tai ethnic-centric volume (1992) concentrates on the functions of textiles in the pan-Tai cultures of mainland Southeast Asia. Their research found that textiles serve as identity markers of self, gifts of exchange, offerings, symbols of rank, and examples of tribute among the Tai. Traditional Tai society considers a woman’s weaving ability to be a reflection of her potential to be a patient and hardworking spouse, mother, and member of the community. Tai women occupy important roles as the providers of these items integral to society’s functioning. Textiles play vital roles in facilitating interactions in the group. For example, family members exchange hand-weavings during rites of passage, and laypeople offer fabrics to the Buddhist monkhood, or Sangha, to acquire merit. These interactions solidify relationships among members of society through their repetition, leading to an accumulation of collective memories.
In matters of the state, both imported and locally made hand-weavings were given to members of the court to symbolize rank, and rulers offered the highly coveted goods to weaker political entities as a reward for their allegiance. As a reflection of a kingdom’s status, these fabrics were given to other states, and the monarchs of Siam or present-day Thailand presented gifts of textiles and other luxuries to France and the United States, for example (Gittinger & Lefferts, 1992, pp. 143-175). Generally, the roles of textiles and associated rituals of other Tai groups exist in Phu Thai culture.

Gittinger and Lefferts’s publication includes several types of Phu Thai hand-woven fabric that were produced in Thailand, but it only examines the function of one textile type, a shawl that a bride wove to present to her future mother-in-law to be worn as a garment and to serve as a shroud when the elder passed away (1992, pp. 42-44). The authors consider this weaving and the other types that are illustrated in their research as distinctive identity markers of the Phu Thai (1992, pp. 42-44, 77, 108, 224-225, 240). However, examples of Phu Thai textiles woven in Laos are not included as examples in this study although other Tai weavings from Laos feature in their research. One reason for the absence may be that the Lao government prohibited access to the Phu Thai settlements of Laos during the time of their data collection since some areas were still closed to outsiders in 2004.

Howard and Howard (2002a, pp. 8-9) state in their investigation of Tai textiles and clothing originating from Vietnam that there are reports of Phu Thai settlements in the country, but it was difficult to verify this information since travel to these areas was restricted. In his unpublished manuscript on ikat technique in Southeast Asia, Howard (2006) briefly describes weft ikat decorated fabrics that the Phu Thai produce, stating that
the weavers favor bold designs primarily in indigo and white. Since the origin of the Southwestern Tai subgroups in present-day Dien Bien Phu, many Vietnam-centric studies focus on the history and material culture of the Black Tai and White Tai living in this region, overlooking the Phu Thai and other Tai groups living farther south.

Research focusing on the textiles repertoire of Laos also lacks any serious examination of Phu Thai hand-weavings. Cheesman (2004, also in the name of Naenna, 1988) concentrates on hand-woven cloth from different Tai groups living in northern Laos; thus, she excludes the Phu Thai from her inquiries since they inhabit central, southern Laos. She describes the different types of textiles made by the Lao, Phuan, Tai Neua, Tai Dam, Tai Daeng, and related groups. Her latest publication surveys different steps of textile production, natural dyes, and some Buddhist and shamanic rituals that have prominent roles for weavings (2004). Cheesman’s scholarship on the Lao, who belong the same subgroup as the Phu Thai, is sparse when compared to her findings on other Tai groups. Thus, she leaves room for future exploration.

Lao scholars primarily concentrate on the hand-weavings of the Lao and related Tai groups living in Vientiane, the national capital, and those found in northern Laos (Douangdeuane et al., 1995; Douangdeuane & Viengkham, 2001). The 1995 volume by Douangdeuane et al. concentrates on the Lao and related peoples and depicts the roles of textile production in Lao society. Some chapters illustrate the textiles of some non-Tai minorities inhabiting the country. Phu Thai textiles only appear in two photographs taken in 1994, illustrating a ceremony related to religious manuscripts (1995, pp. 37, 42). In this ritual, lay participants wear ceremonial attire, but there is no discussion of the cloth
composing their garments. Examples of Phu Thai textiles are absent from the publication’s catalog of textiles.

In the later countrywide textile survey, Douangdeuane (2001a, 2001b) primarily focuses on the history of textiles and references to fabrics in traditional literature while Viengkham (2001) explains the multiple steps associated with textile production, including different types of techniques. Other contributions to this publication include interpretations of numerous motifs (Kongthong, 2001) and discussion of the function of textiles in a religious setting (Dara, 2001). In other writings, Viengkham (2004, 2006) retells legends associated with textile motifs and describes the different types of skirts worn by Lao-Tai women.

Other scholars focus on the roles of women in regard to textile production in Laos, such as Ireson (1996) and Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black (2004). Both studies concentrate on gender roles, social change, and power of both Lao and non-Lao women during the time period of 1975-1995. The data regarding the Lao groups, such as descriptions of cultural attributes, may be applied to related ethnic groups, including the Phu Thai. However, neither publication mentions the Phu Thai specifically. The authors state that textile production in Laos has experienced commercialization, especially in the last 20 years. Government intervention in the early post-revolution period encouraged the establishment of co-operatives, and they write about one successful weaving co-operative. They also present several case studies of private businesses founded after the government’s adoption of a market economy in the mid-1980s.

Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black’s findings on commercial textile production in Vientiane is likely applicable to the Phu Thai’s output, such as the traditional familial and
patron-client relationship that resonates in the Vientiane-based commercial businesses (2004, p. 143). Their evaluation of the current state of textile production in Laos demonstrates that weavers can adapt to market change, creating products to meet the demands of the consumers. Hand-woven textile production continues to play roles in society despite the historical, economic, and social changes it experiences. This study aims to explore the effects of changes on the Phu Thai in relation to weaving and hand-made fabrics.

**Objectives**

The objective of this thesis is to document the hand-woven textiles of the Phu Thai of Savannakhet Province, Laos, and how these objects symbolize Phu Thai identity in the past and present. In order to better understand Phu Thai textiles, different stages of production, including materials, dyestuff and dye methods, preparation of the loom, and various weaving techniques are outlined. The types of textiles produced by the Phu Thai are studied with an assessment of their current state of production and if any were inspired by other cultures. The textiles of neighboring groups are also investigated to determine if the Phu Thai have transmitted weaving technology and textile styles to other peoples. Vocabulary related to textiles in Phu Thai and other languages will give insight if this exchange or transfer has occurred. This study also inquires as to how the Phu Thai maintain their group identity through the consumption and display of hand-woven fabrics in the newly established nation of Laos, especially in the last twenty years.

By conducting research in southern Laos, I focus on the geographical area of southern Laos, which has been overlooked in previous studies, both country-specific and
This thesis hopes to complement the previous works concerning the hand-weavings of other groups living in Laos and the region.

This study aims to provide a better understanding of the Phu Thai and how they have adapted to historical, economic, and social change. Appadurai (1986), Hoskins (1998), Maxwell (1990), and Rodgers, Summerfield, and Summerfield (2007) demonstrate that hand-woven cloth embodies changes experienced by members of society, and Gittinger and Lefferts (1992) specifically addressed the embodiment of Tai textiles. Similar to other groups living in Laos, the Phu Thai have been exposed to numerous changes, especially, since the Communist Revolution of 1975. The government of this new nation-state has worked actively to unite its citizens by devising new policies in order to create a sense of national identity in a multi-ethnic population, which has occurred in other Southeast Asian countries. Phu Thai identity has remained intact after initial governmental attempts of homogenization of its multi-ethnic citizenry, and presently this identity via textiles faces manipulation by external entities in order to promote Laos’ diversity. I also examine how hand-woven textile production persists despite experiencing changes and how the promotion of their Phu Thai-ness assists in the commercialization of Phu Thai fabrics and how their producers, women, have become successful entrepreneurs in the process, leading to their empowerment in a developing country.

**Research Methods**

Informal interviewing, participatory observation, and non-participatory observation are the primary research methods applied in this study. Examples of the
different types of textiles that have been and are currently produced by the Phu Thai living in Savannakhet Province, Laos, are also studied since objects embody information. As stated previously, fabrics reflect historic, economic, and social change and continue to reflect changes occurring among the Phu Thai today. Studying the textiles found in the field has been necessary in the categorization of different textile types. In order to verify the data, such as the name of a type of textile, obtained in the various village field sites by different informants, the same response was required a minimum of five times.

In order to become more attuned to the nuances of hand weaving, I spent one month living in a women’s vocational school in the Lao national capital of Vientiane to carry out various stages of textile production. Although my mother had taught me rudimentary weaving skills as a child, this experience enabled me to become more familiar with the physical and social rhythms of weaving. The vocational school’s director at that time was a Phu Thai from Savannakhet, and he introduced me to his relatives living in Champhone District of Savannakhet Province. His kin were this study’s first informants.

When visiting the different village sites in the eastern section of the province, a local interpreter accompanied me. In the western part, once a family member introduced me to their relatives in a village, I was welcome to travel solo to the sites, and upon arrival a member of the host family was my escort. It was outside the social norm to travel alone and to be in a village without a formal introduction was met with suspicion. However, after the interpreter or the host explained the purpose of my visit, I was welcome in the different village sites. Once I had established relationships with village
members, I was able to travel alone to the village sites but always contacting my host family within each village upon arrival.

My own ethnic background (Lao-American) assisted in my partial acceptance with the villagers since my mother is from Laos and ethnically Tai Sam Neua. I speak Lao and, although I cannot converse in Phu Thai, I can understand the language. The Lao I speak is the central or Vientiane dialect, differing from the Savannakhet one. The local interpreter assisted in the communication between the village informants and me if any problems arose. I primarily conducted the conversations directly with the informants, and the interpreter assisted when required. The interpreter thus served as my travelling companion in order to follow social norms.

In order to conduct research in eastern Savannakhet, the provincial tourism department provided a letter of introduction and approval stating the purpose of my visit to the eastern districts. I employed the interpreter/companion through this governmental unit. A representative from the Lao Women’s Union at the district level also served as a local guide, introducing me to weavers who became my informants. Villagers became guides, leading the way to various village sites located in remote areas not accessible by road, when necessary. I communicated directly with informants, occasionally requiring assistance to clarify questions or statements.

Field Research Setting

Field research for this study focused on the Phu Thai groups living in Savannakhet Province, Laos. The research area was divided into two main sections: western and eastern parts of the province. For western Savannakhet, field sites were in
In Champhone District, Phu Thai families of Don Daeng village and surrounding settlements continue to weave and were visited for this study. Lahanam of Songkhone District, renowned for its hand weavings, is actually a cluster of villages and became a main field research site. For the eastern section of the province, Vilabouly and Xepone Districts were the areas of investigation. Some of the villages are Phone Sa-at, Vang, Bung, Naa Sa-lau, Phak Nao, Angkham, and Khii Khang. [See Appendix C for village names and locations]

In order to investigate non-Phu Thai textiles, Lao villages were visited in Kaysone Phomvihane District, mainly Baan Phone Sim. Phine District was the main field area for Katang hand weavings, including the villages of Baan Vong Sa Kii and Baan Non Nyaang. The markets located in each district center were also important observation points. Visits to the national capital of Vientiane were necessary to obtain data on contemporary fashion and textiles. Vientiane was an important location to assess which textiles symbolize Lao national identity and how Phu Thai fabrics “fit” into the national scene. Related data gathered in other villages, provinces, and countries is not included in this study since it is beyond the parameters of this study. [See Appendix C]

The primary research was conducted in Laos during the year of 2004 with the exception of the rainy season during the months of July, August, and September. Many villagers focus on rice cultivation during the monsoon period and are less involved with textile production. During this break from fieldwork, I consolidated the field data. Follow-up trips were conducted during January-February and August 2005 with brief visits in 2006 and 2008.
Organization

This thesis consists of seven chapters followed by the photographs that illustrate the chapters. This first chapter gives the objective of this thesis: the study of Phu Thai textiles and identity in southern Laos. Textiles as identity markers and their other roles in society are briefly discussed before relating how objects, such as textiles, embody identity and historical change. Previous studies that center on objects as biographies and as social histories are given, describing how modern-day societies manipulate fabrics and identity to fit their needs. Other research is explored to give insight on how textiles are symbolize the identity of nation-states and how they do or do not represent minority identities within countries in Southeast Asia.

The literature review summarizes the history of Southeast Asian textile research before focusing on the writings concerning the Phu Thai ethnic group. These include historical travel accounts, country- and region-specific textile studies, pan-Tai textile research, and non-textile specific research. I lastly define the parameters of this study’s field research, outlining the place and time that the field research occurred and the research methods applied to reach the findings.

Chapter 2 provides a background on the Phu Thai ethnic group, including information about their history, language, religious beliefs, and customs. The Phu Thai are a distinct group whose ancestors settled in central, southern Laos in the 16th century. Their primary occupation is wet-rice agriculture, but they supplement this with the cultivation of other crops, fishing, raising cattle, gold panning, and trade. This ethnic minority of Laos is the most populous group residing in Savannakhet and Khammouane.
Provinces with a distinct language. In regards to the physical location of the Phu Thai, Savannakhet Province of Laos is the focus area for the field research, and, thus, the details in this chapter concentrate on this province. Specific, detailed information about other ethnic groups living near the Phu Thai in this province are also presented in Chapter 2, and their backgrounds and relationships with the Phu Thai are discussed in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 3, the steps related to textile production are documented. The chapter begins with descriptions of the cultivation of raw materials, such as cotton, silk, and natural dyestuff. An assessment of the current state of sericulture, cotton cultivation, and the availability of dye raw materials is given for Savannakhet Province since variations in these processes have occurred especially in the last 20-30 years. There is no single explanation of why changes have transpired, but several factors that have affected production are mentioned, such as the use of herbicides during Second French Indochina War and in commercial agriculture. The Phu Thai utilized and continue to incorporate imported materials, such as natural and synthetic fibers and dyestuff, into their weavings, and these are discussed. I also describe the different types of dyeing procedures that the Phu Thai apply to their yarns and the steps involved in preparing for weaving. These steps include spinning thread and warping the loom. An inventory of the different techniques utilized by the Phu Thai ends the chapter.

Chapter 4 is an inventory of Phu Thai textiles. The chapter begins with a description of women and men’s clothing accessories, and the qualifying factors that are perceived to make a fabric or garment distinctly Phu Thai. Motifs, design composition, and form are factors that symbolize Phu Thai-ness. This section provides information about foreign textile styles that have been assimilated into the Phu Thai repository of
composition and form. This process of assimilation or “domestication” allows the foreign-inspired textiles to be considered identity markers by the Phu Thai. Descriptions of household textiles follow, including how they play roles in an important rite of passage, marriage. The last section covers ceremonial cloth, mainly textiles offered to Buddhist temples. The production and use of ceremonial fabrics are becoming rare, and their documentation is important before they disappear from Phu Thai society. The state of production of various types of textiles is also evaluated since a decline or cessation of other textiles besides ritual weavings has occurred to a variety of factors, such as the consumption of manufactured cloth from the market replacing the need to produce hand-woven material or a decline in the occurrence of some rituals. Phu Thai textiles are categorized into two typologies: Western Savannakhet and Eastern Savannakhet.

The hand-woven fabrics of neighboring non-Phu Thai ethnic groups are the focus of Chapter 5. The research concentrates on the Katang, an ethnic group belonging to the Central Katuic sub-branch of the Khmer ethno-linguistic family. While general characteristics about this minority are provided in Chapter 2, more information regarding their relationships with the Phu Thai is found in this chapter. The textile inventory of the Katang given in this chapter may be applied to related kin groups living in eastern Savannakhet Province; however, a textile inventory for all of the Katuic subgroups has not been undertaken for this thesis. The Lao are briefly discussed, but since the majority of the Lao in Savannakhet have ceased to weave, data about Lao textile styles that have influenced the Phu Thai textile repertoire may be found in the previous chapter.

Chapter 6 addresses the state of contemporary textile production by the Phu Thai. The chapter begins with an outline of the major events that have affected the Phu Thai,
their textiles, and their identity in the last century. A case study of one Phu Thai private business is presented to analyze how this entity produces Phu Thai cloth on a commercial scale. The innovations this business have introduced to the production, merchandizing, and marketing of Phu Thai textiles are studied, demonstrating that Phu Thai identity is crucial to the sales of the venture’s products. The chapter also focuses on how other institutions, such as the government and the media, manipulate Phu Thai identity and hand-woven cloth, and indirectly preserve this minority’s identity. The assessment also looks at how the continuity of production, even commercial production, maintains this group identity and how women as entrepreneurs are empowered through the commercialization of cloth.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a summary of the research statement and findings. Past and present hand-woven Phu Thai textiles are analyzed to demonstrate how the weavings have changed. Despite changes in production, including the decline and near cessation of sericulture, hand-weavings continue to play vital roles in symbolizing Phu Thai ethnic identity. Cotton and indigo are cultivated throughout Savannakhet Province and transformed into finished products symbolizing Phu Thai identity. The Phu Thai have demonstrated through their textiles and language how foreign elements are readily assimilated and “domesticated” into their culture. The Lao have been the source for many of these domesticated characteristics. “Domestication” has also occurred in the transfer of weaving technology and textiles to other groups, such as the Katang. The Phu Thai first traded their textiles to the Katang before the technology was transferred to this group. Although the Katang produce textiles similar to
Phu Thai ones, they have also developed distinctive fabrics to symbolize their own identity.

Phu Thai textiles continue to play important roles in symbolizing ethnic group identity since the Lao Communist Revolution of 1975 and through this regime’s efforts to build a national identity among its citizens through ethnic homogenization policies. Phu Thai individuals continue to wear traditional or heritage attire to signify their group affiliation when participating in ceremonies despite easy access to other clothing styles. The textiles that they perceive to symbolize to Phu Thai-ness are not unique to them but also produced and consumed by other groups, but the Phu Thai and others consider certain textile types and style to represent the Phu Thai. This manipulation of cloth to reflect Phu Thai identity continues today. Members of the group put on Phu Thai textiles to attend village-based festivals, events held in the provincial capital of Savannakhet, and fairs organized in the Lao national capital, Vientiane. It is also possible that the Phu Thai living abroad in North America, the European Union, and Australia display their identity through the use of hand-woven fabrics. Hand-made textiles continue to be part of gift exchanges, although manufactured materials are available and have replaced some items in various rites, such as weddings.

The promotion of hand-woven textiles as identity markers is also seen in present-day production and marketing of Phu Thai fabrics. Commercial production today has led to an expansion of goods, including a myriad of household textiles, bedding, and tailored clothing composed of Phu Thai hand-woven cloth. These products are promoted as distinctive, healthy, and the results of centuries-old knowledge and that Phu Thai women have applied their traditional knowledge of weaving and natural dyes. Through the
innovations that are constantly being introduced into Phu Thai textile production, Phu Thai and non-Phu Thai customers now consume these products domestically and internationally through commercial production.

Formal institutions, including government agencies and the media, utilize Phu Thai textiles to authenticate the distinctiveness of Savannakhet province and the nation of Laos. Phu Thai textiles become backdrops for provincial meetings and press conferences. Local tourism agencies promote trips to visit authentic Phu Thai life with observations of weaving and natural dyeing.

Women, as the primary producers of hand-woven cloth, have played important roles in traditional society, and their roles have expanded to become entrepreneurs in the commercialization of hand weaving. As textile entrepreneurs, women can earn an income and provide for their families, which in some cases lead to their empowerment and social development. Women generally apply their earnings to improve their lives but also the lives of members of their family. They are able to buy medicine or pay for medical care, send their children to school, and purchase equipment to increase the household’s agricultural output from their earnings from the sales of hand-woven cloth. This continuity of the production and consumption of Phu Thai hand-woven cloth persists through the domestication of foreign elements into their textile repertoire, adaptations to changes in textile production, and the introduction of innovations to encourage commercial sales of Phu Thai cloth. Phu Thai identity manifested in their fabrics continues to embody historic, economic, and social change.
Chapter 2

Background

The Phu Thai live primarily in southern Laos and northeastern Thailand. They speak a Tai language that belongs to the Southwestern Tai language category of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family. Kirsch (1967) has written that the Phu Thai are a distinctive group based on three major factors. The first factor is that they speak a distinct Tai language, and the second factor focuses on the type of location of their settlements. The Phu Thai establish their villages at a higher elevation than the Lao, a closely related Tai subgroup. The last qualifier focuses on the Phu Thai’s self and group identification as a separate culture from the Lao or any other ethnic group. The present chapter gives a background on the Phu Thai and Savannakhet Province.

History

While the ultimate origins of all Southwestern speaking Tai people lie far to the north along the Yangtze River, their more immediate point of origin is in the southern part of Yunnan, China. Eberhard (1968) mentions early Chinese sources referring to a
group of Tai speaking people known as the Ai-Lao living in Yunnan, and this group is most likely the ancestors to the Lao and Phu Thai peoples. The Ai-Lao appear to be associated with Muang Ai, about which Howard and Howard (2002a, p. 71) state that the citadel seems to have been “located in southern Yunnan around the Red and Black rivers” and which was “founded some time around 110 BC.” The area occupied by the ancestors of the Lao-Phu Thai and other Southwestern Tai speaking ethnic groups in Yunnan was incorporated in the Nan Chau (Nanzhao) kingdom, which was founded in AD 732.

Howard and Howard (2002a, p. 74) mention the migration of Tai speaking peoples from Yunnan into adjacent parts of northwestern Vietnam in the 700s and 800s in relation to the expansion of the Nan Chau kingdom in this direction (including its invasion of lowland Vietnam in 862), but they do not specifically mention the Lao-Phu Thai in this regard. Perhaps as early as the 700s, Black Tai who had been living near the Red River moved to the west, crossed the Black River and, under the leadership of a man named Lang Chuong, founded what they called Muang Thaeng (this name later being changed to Muang Thanh) in the vicinity of present-day Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam (Howard and Howard 2002a, pp. 74, 133). Northwest Tai speaking Lue had already settled in this area in the 600s, establishing a citadel or *muang* known as Xam Mun.³ Black Tai and Lao legends describe the valley of Muang Thaeng as the location where Khun Borom (aka. Khun Bulom), the son of the Sky God, came to earth and fathered a number of sons who are credited as being the founders of several of the ruling clans of the Tai peoples.

³ A *muang* is an indigenous, Tai polity or a cluster of settlements/villages protected by a ruler. Small *muang* are part of larger *muang*, whose ruler is recognized as more powerful than the leaders of the smaller ones.
A Phu Thai origin myth states that their ancestors came from a place called Muang Naa Noi Oi Nuu (Kirsch 1967), which is another name for Muang Thaeng, according to the legend of Khun Bulom (Wajuppa, 2004). When the Lao-Phu Thai people arrived in the Muang Thaeng area is uncertain, but at present there are still around 10,000 Lao living in Vietnam in the vicinity of Muang Thanh (Muang Thaeng) as well as to the east along the Ma River in Son La Province, and to the north in the Binh Lu district of Lai Chau Province (Howard & Howard 2002a, p. 125). From the vicinity of Muang Thaeng, the Lao-Phu Thai migrated westward towards the Nam Ou or Ou River. Moving down the Nam Ou, they reached the Mekong River and thence proceeded to settle southward along the Mekong. The Phu Thai separated from the Lao and settled in central and southern region of present-day Laos some distance away from the Mekong River and at a higher elevation than the Lao (Kirsch, 1967). [Map 2]

The earliest Phu Thai *muang* were established in Laos’ present-day Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces. These early settlements include Kham-au Khamkhieo and Khammouane Khamkoet in Khammouane Province, and Muang Vang Angkham in Savannakhet Province. The source of the name of Angkham comes from another legend where the Angkham is a pot of gold that rises from the Xe Bang Hieng River (Jim Johnston, personal communication, March 2004). The name is appropriate as the area of Muang Vang Angkham is rich in gold and other minerals, such as silver and copper. Villagers still pan for gold in this river, and a mine has begun large-scale operations in the area to extract minerals (formerly Oxiana-Lan Xang Ltd, now Lan Xang Minerals Limited), including gold and copper.
Map 2  Muang Vang Angkham, the first Phu Thai Settlement in Savannakhet Province, Laos, in Relation to their Ancestors' Origin, Muang Thanh

Source: http://www.cia.gov/
The first recorded Lao settlement in Savannakhet Province, Ban Phone Sim, was founded in the late 1530s. The Lao of Savannakhet also believe that their ancestors originated from Muang Naa Noi Oi Nuu, same as the Phu Thai myth of origin. The Phu Thai muang were established at approximately the same time. Ban Phone Sim is located near the That Ing Hang monument, a religious site erected by the Mon-Khmer peoples of the Sikhottaboune kingdom, who had lived in the area prior to the arrival of the Lao and Phu Thai (Mayoury & Pheuiphanh, 2009; Savannakhet, n.d., p. 7). The Lao assimilated many aspects of Khmer civilization into their own, including religion (Buddhism), language (written and oral), governance, and dress (Evans, 2003, pp. 6-9; Keyes, 1977, p. 77). In this manner, the Khmer indirectly influenced the Phu Thai and other Tai groups in close contact with the Lao.

As the Phu Thai population grew, they established smaller muang radiating away from Muang Vang Angkham, but under the suzerainty or power of this older political center, and Muang Vang Angkham later split into two muang, Vang and Angkham. Similar to other Tai ruling clans, the sons of the rulers of Muang Vang Angkham established and became leaders of the smaller muang, such as Xepone, Sop Ek, Chiang Khan, Phine, Phong, Phalane, Xiang Home, and Phabang (Samai, 2002). [Map 3] Several of these smaller muang, such as Phalane, Phine, and Xepone, were situated near or along a historical trade route that began on the coast of the South China Sea and headed west through the Annamite Cordillera towards the Mekong River (Harmand, 1997, pp. 215-30; Seidenfaden, 1958, p. 112; Snit & Breazeale, 1988, pp. 1-2). There were three main routes from the South China Sea to inland Southeast Asia, starting at Vinh or Hue and going west across the Annamite Cordillera and following the rivers of
the Kadin, Bang Fai, and Bang Hieng. Thus, the routes cut through Phu Thai territory west of the Annamite Cordillera. The Phu Thai traded gold, cattle, and forest products along these routes.

Map 3 Major Phu Thai Settlements and Primary Research Areas in Savannakhet Province, Laos


The political struggles occurring in the region affected the power and relationships the Phu Thai muang had with their neighbors. The Lao ruler of the territory occupied by the present-day Savannakhet in 1767 was Chao Kinnaree (or Santhakinaree), who expanded his territory west of the Mekong, in the vicinity of present-day Mukdahan in Thailand (Samai, 200, pp. 5-7). When Siam defeated the Lao king of Vientiane, Mukdahan and Savannakhet became tributaries of Siam in 1778, but Chao Kinnaree (r. 1770-1804) continued to rule over this area (Samai, 2002, pp. 8-9). The Phu Thai also had to recognize the suzerainty of Siam via the Lao courts because the Phu Thai muang
had tributary relationships with the Lao kingdoms (as well as with the Vietnamese court in Hue). Political relationships were often cemented by marriages, especially among the Tai muang. For example, a Phu Thai princess was a consort to the last Lao king of Vientiane, Anuvong (r. 1804-1828), whose funeral reliquary, called Thaat Nang Lao, is located in present-day Vilabouly district of Savannakhet (Savannakhet, n. d., p. 37).

The expansionist policy of the early kings of the Chakri Dynasty of Siam resulted in continued warfare between Siam and the Lao and other Tai kingdoms. The political instability east of the Mekong River forced some Phu Thai and other Tai groups, such as the Tai Phuan from Muang Phuan and Tai Dam from Sipsong Chau Tai, and non-Tai groups, such as the So, to move across the Mekong into Siamese territory during the reigns of Siam’s Rama I (r. 1782-1809) and Rama III (r. 1824-51) (Snit & Breazeale, 1988 pp. 9-22). During the 1780s, the Lao kings of Vientiane and Luang Phabang submitted to Siam’s suzerainty, and the Phu Thai muang had vassal status under the Lao while still sending tribute to Annam (Snit & Breazeale 1988, p. 7). In 1827, Anuvong, the Lao king of Vientiane, attacked Siamese territory and the Siamese army retaliated, razing Vientiane and forcibly resettling its population to the Mekong’s right bank. What is known as the Mahaxai Resistance, which lasted from 1827 to 1835, was the Phu Thai response to the destruction of Vientiane (Snit & Breazeale, 1988, pp. 11-13). The Phu Thai resisted Siamese control but eventually the leader of the resistance conceded on the condition that he would continue to rule over the Phu Thai who were relocated in Siamese territory to the west of the Mekong River.

Considerable movement of the Phu Thai took place during the reign of Rama III when war erupted between the Siamese and the Vietnamese in the 1830s. Rama III’s
policy was to clear territory east of the Mekong River of any resources, including people, in order to prevent any aid to the Vietnamese during their potential invasion (Snit & Breazeale, 1988, p. 11). The Siamese army forcibly moved people and also encouraged local leaders to move populations to Siam. For example, the Phu Thai who at present live in Khemmarat district of Ubon Ratchathani Province and Senangnikhom district of Amnat Charoen Province, Thailand, are originally from Muang Xepone, Laos (Samai, 2002, p. 35). Today, Phu Thai peoples live in Mukdahan, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, and Kalasin Provinces in Thailand.

Some of those Phu Thai who moved during this period never reached Siam and settled in the western section of Savannakhet Province, Laos, or present-day Champhone and Songkhone districts. Lahanam village is one example where the name of the settlement translates to “waiting for the water” or waiting for the Xe Bang Hieng River to raise so that they could sail on it and across the Mekong River (Bounthong Nhotmankhong, personal communication, April 2004).

The autonomy of Muang Vang Angkham and smaller muang located closer to the Annamite Cordillera waned as their populations decreased and the Phu Thai population increased to the west near the Mekong River. However, the rulers maintained their relationships with Hue and the Lao principalities to balance the influence of these external powers. One French traveller reported that the leader of Xepone dressed in the mandarin style of Hue, which he viewed as a symbol of political affiliation between the Phu Thai and the Vietnamese (Harmand, 1997).

The kingdoms of Laos and its tributary Tai kingdoms east of the Mekong River came under French control in the 1890s. The French promoted the administrative status
of Muang Thaa Hae to that of a province and changed its name to Savannakhet, or land of gold and prosperity, in 1907 (Savannakhet, n.d., p. 8). Vietnamese bureaucrats moved to the city of Savannakhet to run the colonial administration. The French colonial administration appointed a Phu Thai leader from the village of Lahanam as magistrate of the Phu Thai in the western section of the province at this time (Songbandhit Nhotmankhong, personal communication, April 2004). A socialist regime has been governing Laos since 1975, and Savannakhet is important in contemporary Lao history as the birthplace of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic’s first premier and second president, Kaysone Phomvihane. Nouhak Phoumsavanh is another national leader originating from this provincial capital.

**Physical Geography**

Savannakhet Province is located in southern Laos and is 21,774 sq km in area (Savannakhet, n.d., 8). The province shares borders with Khammouane Province in the north, Salavan Province in the south, the Vietnamese provinces of Quang Tri and Quang Binh in the east, and the Thai province of Mukdahan in the west. The majority of the terrain is a plain until reaching the mountain chains in the eastern part of the province.

Large rivers form several of the provincial and national boundaries. The Mekong River forms the western boundary and the national boundary with Thailand. Parts of Xe Bang Fay River (239 km), its origin beginning in the Annamite Cordillera, and Xe Nou River form the border between Khammouane and Savannakhet provinces. The Xe Bang Hieng River (338 km) also begins in the Annamite Cordillera and empties into the Mekong River. [Photo 1] These rivers and smaller waterways are excellent sources for
fishing and modes of transportation, and they also provide rich, alluvial plains for agriculture. As of 2000, 70 percent of the province has remained forested, especially since the establishment of several protected areas (Chantavong, 2003, p. 44). [Map 4]

Map 4 Savannakhet Province Featuring Rivers, Provincial Borders, and National Biodiversity Conservation Areas

Two National Biodiversity Conservation Areas (NCBAs) encompass Phu Thai and other ethnic group settlements in Savannakhet Province. The Phou Xang Hae NBCA is located near Muang Vang Angkham, the first Phu Thai muang, and covers parts of five districts, mainly Vilabouly, Phalanxay, Phine, Xepone, and Atsapone. Many Phu Thai legends are associated with the rocky formations in this NBCA, including Nang Sipsong (the 12 sisters). The Lak Muang (muang or city pillar) of Vang is a mushroom-shaped rock formation found in the Phou Xang Hae mountain range, which is the home of elephants and other wild animals (Savannakhet, n.d., pp. 29-31). The Don Phou Vieng NBCA covers parts of three districts: Phine, Xepone, and Nong, which have Phu Thai
inhabitants in their populations. Remnants, such as artillery and unexploded ordinances, from the Second Indochina War prohibit expansion of settlements and agricultural production, which may have protected these protected areas from encroachment by human settlers.

Social and Political Geography

Savannakhet Province is divided into 15 districts: Kaysone Phomvihane (formerly Khanthabouly), Xonbouly, Champhone, Songkhone, Atsaphone, Phine, Vilabouly, Xepone, Phalanxay, Xayphouthong, Xaybouly, Outhoumphone, Atsaphangthong, Nong, and Thapangthong. As Laos’ most populous province, it contains approximately 824,000 inhabitants, according to the 2005 National Census by the State Statistical Centre. Savannakhet municipality, renamed Kaysone Phomvihane after the country’s first premier in 2006, has more than 125,000 inhabitants, designating it as the populous town in southern Laos.

The 1995 National Census lists the Phu Thai as one of the four major groups in Laos with a population of 500,000 (Chazee, 1999, p. 27). However, Chazee’s category includes other Tai groups with the Phu Thai; thus, his population figure is inaccurate. Schliesinger (2003a, p. 97) gives an estimate of 128,000 people as of 1993 while Gordon (2005) assesses the Phu Thai population of Laos at 154,400. The sum of the populations of the Phu Thai and Lao groups accounts for 75 percent of the province’s population. The Phu Thai are the majority group in Xepone, Phine, Vilabouly, Atsaphone, Atsaphangthong, Phalanxay, Xonbouly, Songkhone, and Champhone Districts (Department of Planning, 2000). The remaining 25 percent of the province’s population
primarily belong to people speaking languages belonging to the Katuic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family (see Chazee, 1999; Diffloth, 1984; Gordon, 2005; Schliesinger, 2003b). There are some accounts of Tai Lue and Tai Dam, or Black Tai, living in Savannakhet Province, but I was unable to locate them.

Several groups speaking languages belonging to the Katuic language sub-branch live mainly in the eastern portion of Savannakhet Province. These groups consist of the Bru, Katang, Kui (or Sui), Mankhong (or Makong), So, and Trii. The Katang (population estimate of 107,000), who speak a Central Katuic language of the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family, inhabit Xonbouly, Phine, Nong, and Thapangthong districts (Gordon, 2005). Researchers state that some of these groups are subgroups of one another, but there is no consensus. Gordon (2005) believes that the So and Mankhong (population of 102,000) compose the same group while the Trii are part of the Bru (69,000 population). However, members of these groups consider themselves distinct from each other (Schliesinger, 2003b). The Bru and Trii live in Vilabouly, Xepone, and Nong districts, and Mankhong villages are found in Xepone and Nong districts. Western Katuic speaking groups include the Kui (Sui), Trii, Eastern Bru, So, and Mankhong. [Map 5]
Religion

The Phu Thai are Theravada Buddhists like the Lao, who brought this sect of the religion to present-day Laos. Harmand (1997, pp. 215-30), who visited the Phu Thai in the late 1890s, commented that he found Phu Thai Buddhism not to be as developed as that of the Lao, concluding that the Phu Thai having only adopted the religion two hundred years earlier. Seidenfaden (1958: 112) noted that the Phu Thai, “are Buddhists, having wats and monks, but being superstitious they make many sacrifices to the spirits...
and also venerate their ancestral spirits.” Despite such remarks, as I observed numerous
temples dotting the countryside and members of the community giving alms to monks
and making other offerings to the religious institution during my research, I conclude that
members of present-day Phu Thai society certainly are devout Theravada Buddhists.

The Khmer appear to have been the first to establish Mahayana Buddhism in what
is now Laos before the arrival of the Lao, and their rulers used the religion to reinforce
their political power (Evans, 2003, pp. 6-9; Keyes, 1977, pp. 68-70). Fa Ngum founded
Lan Xang, the first unified Lao kingdom. He legitimized his role as the leader of the Lao
by bringing a retinue of Khmer Buddhist monks and the revered Phabang Buddha image
from the Khmer kingdom of Angkor to Laos (Evans, 2003, p. 16). As the dominant
group in the area after the decline of the Khmer, the Lao spread Theravada Buddhism to
the Phu Thai and other Tai groups, such as the Tai Phuan. Today, Buddhist temples are
found throughout Phu Thai populated areas. [Photo 2] Laywomen gain merit by
providing food and textiles, including clothing and bedding, to the monks and the temple.
A man is expected to become a Buddhist monk once in his lifetime to be considered a
mature male fit for marriage. [Photo 3]

Similar to popular Buddhism practiced throughout Southeast Asia, the Buddhism
of the Phu Thai is syncretic, incorporating animistic beliefs, or local religion, with
Theravada Buddhism (Kirsch, 1967). Accordingly, animistic or shamanic rites are
practiced alongside Buddhist rituals. In the past, a shaman or sorcerer resided over
ceremonies to heal the ill and to honor ancestors and leaders, for example. The Tai
believe that each person possesses over thirty bodily spirits called khoun, and these must
be kept in balance for good health and prosperity (Lebar, 1964, pp. 44-46). The Phu Thai
rarely practice these shamanic rituals today, since the Lao socialist government, which views such rites as barbaric or uncivilized, discourages such practices. Many Phu Thai have ceased to adhere to the elaborate animistic rituals.

One ceremony that has been assimilated into Buddhist rites and that continues to be held on a regular basis is the Sou Khouan or Puk Khaen ceremony. Sou khouan is literally the appeasement of the spirits, mainly the participants’ spirits. In this ritual, an arrangement of banana leaves, flowers, and candles is placed on a tray along with offerings of food and alcohol. [Photo 4] Strands of hand-spun cotton are placed on the arrangement. A village elder or shaman conducts the ceremony, asking the spirits for prosperity, good luck, and health. [Photo 5] The threads are then tied around the participants’ wrists (puk khaen or tied around the arms). This rite takes place during weddings, Lunar New Year, and other events that cause a disruption to a person’s normal routine, such as travel. During the Lunar New Year, elders host the ceremony for younger family members and vice versa.

The Phu Thai also follow twelve major annual rituals that are similar to the Lao rituals (Schliesinger, 2001a). Of these twelve rituals, the Phu Thai especially celebrate the Lunar New Year (Pii Mai), Bun Phavet (retelling the Vessantara Jataka), Bun Bang Fai (Rocket Festival), Khao Phansa (the beginning of Buddhist Lent), and Auk Phansa (the end of Buddhist Lent) (see Lebar, 1964, pp. 56-58). The Phu Thai, along with other groups living in Savannakhet Province, pay annual homage to the That Ing Hang (a religious monument located northeast of Kaysone Phomvihane town) rather than the That Luang in Vientiane. [Photo 6] This festival to pay homage is held during the full moon
of the first lunar month and presently consists of parades, competitions, and fairs with entertainment and goods for sale.

The *Bun Phavet* and *Bun Bang Fai* festivals celebrated by the Phu Thai are of particular interest since hand-spun cotton and clothing figure in the celebrations. Similar to other Buddhist followers in the region, the Phu Thai villages often host a *Bun Phavet*, a Buddhist affair, along with the *Bun Bang Fai*, an animist rite. Members of the community re-enact one chapter of the *Phavet* (*Vessantara Jataka*), or the story of the penultimate life of the Buddha, which illustrates the previously exiled prince returning to his father’s kingdom in a procession of townspeople. [Photo 7] Joining the parade is a sculpture symbolizing the auspicious albino elephant that the prince had given away, or the act leading to his exile. The Phu Thai villages construct a replica of the elephant from cotton bolls or hand-spun cotton cloth to complement the re-enactment of this tale. [Photo 8]

The *Bun Phavet* generally attracts pious followers, often the older generation, and the *Bun Bang Fai* Rocket Festival involves merrymaking among the younger members of the communities. Villagers construct hand-made rockets to shoot into the sky, attracting the attention of the gods. [Photo 9] Occurring before the beginning of the rainy season, this festival intends to remind the gods to send the rains by launching rockets to wake them from their slumber. Participants act rowdy or in a drunken manner, which may be real or faked. Some carry phallic symbols and/or cross dress to unsettle the gods. [Photo 10, Photo 11] In Photo 11, the man on the right is wearing a woman’s skirt, *sin mii*, which the Phu Thai consider to be an archetypal symbol of Phu Thai identity. The cross dressing allows for the display of heirloom textiles, especially men’s traditional dress
since women adorn male attire that have been abandoned by the majority of Phu Thai men in the last 100 years. Phu Thai men have exchanged traditional clothing for an international or Western style of clothing since the early 20th century; thus, women cross-dress as men during festival times wearing textiles of male identity. [Photo 12]

### Language

The Phu Thai language is categorized as belonging to the Lao-Phu Thai sub-branch of Southwestern Tai languages. Similar to the Lao language, the Phu Thai language lacks the ‘ch’ and ‘r’ consonant sounds and contains the "ny" sound. Another distinguishing characteristic of the Tai languages spoken in Savannakhet Province is the switching of the “f” and “ph” (aspirated p) consonants between the Phu Thai and the Lao languages. The switching depends on the class of the consonant (Tai languages have three classes: low, middle, and high).

Differing from Lao, Phu Thai does not have some vowel diphthongs, such as “eu-a,” “i-a,” “ou-a,” and “ai” (Wilaiwaan, 1975 pp. 377-80). The “eu-a” sound becomes “eu” in Phu Thai, while “ou-a” is pronounced “au.” The “ai” vowel diphthong is similar to a “euh” sound, found in the Luang Phabang dialect of Lao. Phu Thai has six tones: mid-tone, low rising to high tone, glottalized short vowel high tone falling, mid-tone rising to high, mid-tone falling to low, and high tone (Wilaiwaan, 1975, p. 379-81). A listener hears lots of falling and rising tones in Phu Thai with less use of the low tone and mid-tone. Some Phu Thai vocabulary differs from Lao and is more similar to other Tai languages of the Chiang Saen sub-branch, such as Black Tai (Tai Dam). For example, *phou leuh*, or “who” in Phu Thai, is found in the Chiang Saen Tai languages of northeast
Laos and northwest Vietnam. *Si-leuh* is “where” in Phu Thai, while *ki-deuh* is “where” in these other Tai languages.

Table 1  Comparison of Black Tai, Lao, Phu Thai, and English Vocabulary without the tonal markers in Black Tai, Lao, and Phu Thai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Tai</th>
<th>Lao</th>
<th>Phu Thai</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keu</td>
<td>Meua</td>
<td>Meu</td>
<td>Return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Mee</td>
<td>Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jai</td>
<td>Jai</td>
<td>Jeuh</td>
<td>Heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sieng</td>
<td>Sieng</td>
<td>Seeng</td>
<td>Sound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eun</td>
<td>Piek</td>
<td>Peek</td>
<td>Wet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ngoua</td>
<td>Ngoua</td>
<td>Ngau</td>
<td>Cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoua</td>
<td>Phoua</td>
<td>Phau</td>
<td>Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phai</td>
<td>Phai</td>
<td>Phou-leuh</td>
<td>Who</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dua</td>
<td>Sai</td>
<td>Si-leuh</td>
<td>Where</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heung</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Heung</td>
<td>Long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phu Thai is an oral language and does not have a written script. The written script, *thaam*, of Lao Buddhism was introduced to the Phu Thai when they assimilated Buddhism as their religion (Evans, 2003). However, the written language was confined to the Buddhist temple and was exclusively for use by the monks (males) for religious teachings. When men disrobed and left the monkhood, these men held a special status in the community because of their former position and special knowledge. They could perform ceremonies, such as the *sou khouan* or *puk khaen*, mentioned earlier. Since the learning of the Buddhist written script was reserved for monks, women were excluded from this education. Women were unable to receive a formal education until the French
colonial administration was in place. However, the number of schools in rural areas was minimal. This lack of access to a basic education continues today where primary schools consist of three or four rooms, lacking electricity, water, and sanitary facilities.

**Social Structure**

The Phu Thai live mainly in rural settlements located near a water source, such as a stream or river, at higher elevations than the Lao (Kirsch, 1967). Similar to other Tai groups, Phu Thai agriculture focuses on wet-rice cultivation, with secondary farming of vegetables, cotton, tobacco, and indigo. In the past, Phu Thai men also supported their families by raising and trading cattle, fishing, and hunting wild game. Men also panned for gold in and around Muang Vang Angkham. Phu Thai women continue to supplement the household diet by gathering forest products where the nearby forests have not been destroyed. As stated earlier, several Phu Thai *muang* were situated along trans-regional trade routes, where they traded forest products, cattle, and gold for metal utensils, fine threads, and other goods (Harmand, 1997).

Phu Thai houses, like those of other Tai groups, are traditionally constructed from wood and are elevated on posts that are over two meters high (Schliesinger, 2003c, p. 99). [Photo 13] In the past, wooden posts were used, but concrete posts are a less expensive alternative today. Phu Thai houses traditionally had double or twin wood-shingled roofs, covering the structure’s two main areas. There is one large communal room with bedroom areas partitioned on one side of the room. The second section is the kitchen. A house has two staircases with one leading into the main house and the second into the kitchen, and there are balconies off the main room and kitchen. The space
underneath the house was generally made of packed earth and used to store farming and other equipment as well as serving as an area to escape the heat while completing tasks. The loom is placed either on the balcony or underneath the house.

Phu Thai households are nuclear, containing up to three generations and are patrilineal (Schliesinger, 2001b, p. 93). When a Phu Thai woman marries she worships her husband’s ancestors, but the process of separating her from her ancestor spirits once she is married is long and intricate (Seidenfaden, 1958, p. 112). The husband is the head of the household, but the wife is responsible for the household financial accounting. The Phu Thai also adhere to some matri-local traits, such as women may inherit property from their parents, and often the youngest daughter will inherit her parents’ land and house if she continues to live and care for them. The Phu Thai practice monogamy but divorce and remarriage are acceptable. In the past, men from the ruling clans were able to have more than one wife, but the French colonial administration outlawed polygamy.

For an engagement, informants told me that a representative from the groom’s family approaches the bride’s family with a proposal (see Lebar, 1964, pp. 54-55). Informants state that both parties agree on a bride price, usually consisting of an amount of gold and livestock, and the groom presents these items to the bride and her family along with a woven mat, a sleeping mattress, a sheet, and two pillows on the day of the engagement. Presently, money is also accepted as part of the bride price instead of livestock. The groom is expected to live with the bride’s family for three years after the wedding to compensate the family for the loss of the daughter. If he does not want to live with the bride’s family, he must pay an additional amount of money. On the wedding day, the wedding party goes to the temple for a blessing or invites the monks to the
bride’s house instead. Later, the party moves to the groom’s family’s home if they live nearby. The bride must offer a selection of textiles for her husband and members of her future family, including her in-laws and other relatives. Both parties agree to the number of items prior to the wedding. The bride and her relatives weave textiles for this purpose. A village elder conducts a *sou khouan* ceremony, which is followed by a feast.

The death of spouse requires a long mourning period, traditionally three years. The Phu Thai cremate the deceased. There is a designated mourning period at the deceased’s home before the body is cremated where monks are invited to chant and receive offerings in the name of the deceased. People come to pay their respects to the deceased and the surviving spouse, making offerings of money, flowers, incense, and candles. There is an artificial tree of life made from bamboo, and items that will be useful in the afterworld or heaven are hung on its branches. These items include cigarettes, matches or a lighter, clothing, a brush or comb, and so forth. A canopied bed or an area in the home that is sectioned off contains other items that are given to the deceased to ensure a prosperous life in the afterworld. On the day of cremation, there is a ceremony at a temple specializing in these rites.

The Phu Thai village serves as a socio-political, religious, and administrative unit and contains from 30 to 200 households. Political power, traditionally, is in the hands of a chief and village elders. Villages are then organized into territorial units called *muang*. In the past one ruler, the *chao muang* governed a *muang* with three subsidiary rulers, descendents from the ruling clan or clans (Keyes, 1977). Small *muang* are then organized into larger *muang*. *Muang* are semi-autonomous, generally only paying a tribute and tax to more powerful rulers who designated the amount and type of fee.
Presently, the political organization has altered in Laos, and *muang* have been converted into districts under provincial units. The Lao socialist government controls all levels of government, down to the village level, but the committee of elders and respected persons continues to exist to provide advice on local matters in the villages.

**Conclusion**

The Phu Thai group is a distinctive ethnic group primarily residing in present-day Savannakhet and neighboring province of Laos. They speak a language classified as part of the Lao-Phu Thai sub-branch of the Southwestern Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family. Their ancestors settled in Savannakhet Province in the 16th century, establishing an autonomous polity, Muang Vang Angkham, whose rulers had ties with neighboring kingdoms, mainly the Lao and the Vietnamese of Annam. One Phu Thai princess was a consort of the last prince of Vientiane in the early 19th century. The instability of the 19th century caused the Phu Thai population to spread into present-day northeast Thailand and western Savannakhet Province, changing the power dynamics of Muang Vang Angkham. Presently, Savannakhet is one of the most populated provinces in Laos, and the provincial capital is the largest city in southern Laos. The Phu Thai are the largest ethnic group in this province.

The Phu Thai are primarily agriculturalists, organizing their homes in a village setting. They practice Theravada Buddhism intermingled with local beliefs in spirits, mainly their ancestors, celebrating rituals based on both their Buddhist and spiritual beliefs. These monthly rites are similar to those practiced by the Lao, a related ethnic
group and the nation’s majority. Textiles play important parts in different rites of passages, such as engagements and weddings.

Other ethnic groups living in Savannakhet include the Lao and members of the Katuic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family. The Lao primarily live in western Savannakhet while the Katang and other Katuic minorities live in the province’s eastern section. The different peoples have historically interacted with each other through trade and political authority. There has been an exchange of weaving technology and textiles among the neighboring groups to be discussed in subsequent chapters.
Chapter 3

Textile Production of the Phu Thai

Phu Thai women are responsible for all aspects of textile production, excluding the construction of equipment. Their duties include cultivating cotton and dyestuffs, raising silkworms, spinning or reeling thread, dyeing, weaving, and sewing. The females of a household carry out these tasks related to textile production after finishing other daily work, such as cooking, cleaning, and gardening. Older women who are unable to work strenuously in the fields may devote more time to textile production while they care for their grandchildren and other young relatives in the home. [Photo 14] Young girls participate in different stages of textile production. For example, some begin ginning cotton at the age of six years old and spinning cotton thread at eight years old. [Photo 15] Generally, women devote time to textile production during the dry season after the rice harvest (November) and before the start of the rainy season (May).

Traditional Phu Thai society, similar to other Tai cultures, assesses a woman’s weaving skills as a reflection of her ability to care for a household. A highly skilled weaver possesses dedication and patience that may be applied to her role as a wife,
mother, and ideal member of society. A young woman not only has to master decorative techniques, but she must be able to spin or reel a uniform thread, mix a consistent and colorfast dye, and weave a flawless fabric, for example. The evaluation of a textile judges the fineness of the thread, designs, and the overall fabric. Other important criteria are the weaver’s creativity in selecting the motifs and colors, and also organizing the overall composition of a textile.

This chapter describes the various types and preparation of materials, equipment, and dyes utilized in Phu Thai textile production. In regards to materials, cotton, silk, and imported yarns are first discussed. The types of equipment utilized in Phu Thai weaving then are described. Later, natural dyes and the introduction of synthetic dyes into the Phu Thai textiles are outlined. The Phu Thai weavers apply different weaving techniques to their fabrics, and the section explaining these techniques concludes the chapter.

**Materials**

Members of the Southwestern Tai groups weave with cotton, silk, metal wrapped, and synthetic thread. Sericulture was probably first developed by the early ancestors of the Tai in China, and silk thread continues to be widely used among Tai speaking groups, although locally produced thread has been replaced by commercial silk or synthetic thread in many areas (Howard & Howard, 2001). Southwestern Tai groups have traditions of mainly using three types of cotton to produce thread: *Gossypium herbaceum*, *Gossypium arboreum* (also known as tree cotton), and *Gossypium hirsutum* (a brown colored cotton) (Howard & Howard, 2002, p. 14). *Gossypium arboreum* appears to have
been the original type of cotton used by Tai speaking groups, but it has largely been replaced by *Gossypium herbaceum*.

For the production of cotton thread (*da-euh pha-euh*), girls and women gather the cotton bolls (*dauk pha-eh*) at the beginning of the dry season once the rice has been harvested and allow them to dry in the sun. The cotton bolls are passed through a hand-cranked gin (*iit*) to remove the seeds (*kaen pha-euh*). The ginned cotton is then carded or fluffed with a bow-like devise (*koung*) to even out the texture. [Photo 16] After carding, the cotton is rolled into slender, straw-like cylinders (*laut*) that will be spun into thread. [Photo 17] Once the raw cotton is twisted into a thread (*khen*) from a spindle on the spinning wheel (*kong*), the thread is wound around a niddy noddy (*ma-euh pi*) to form skeins (*ja-euh*). [Photo 18, Photo 19] Before dyeing, the threads are washed and beaten against a hard surface, such as the ground. This process allows the dye to penetrate the fibers easily when they are submerged in a liquid. The weaver places a skein on an umbrella-like device (*laa*) to wind the thread onto large spools (*boke*). From a large bobbin, the thread is transferred to small ones (*laut*) that are then placed in shuttles (*lau*). [Photo 20]

When carried out, sericulture (*ling ma-euh*) is a labor-intensive process. The lifecycle of the silkworm or silk caterpillar (*naun*) is approximately 28 days (see Chaiya, n. d.). The moths (*Bombyx mori*) mate for six days and die after laying eggs. The weavers keep the eggs (*kha-euh ma-euh*) in round, woven bamboo trays (*kadong*) that are covered with a finely woven cloth to deter predators, such as flies and ants. Once the eggs hatch into caterpillars, the female members of the household begin to feed the caterpillars with finely chopped mulberry leaves (*ba-euh maun*) and clean the trays of
excrement several times a day. [Photo 21] The caterpillars eat for four or five days before becoming dormant to molt for twenty-four hours. They resume eating and molt another three times before they begin to spin their cocoons. As the caterpillars mature, they are fed less often and with less finely chopped leaves. The women must remove any sick caterpillars and keep the environment clean. The caterpillars that begin to spin their cocoons (hang ma-euh) are placed in another tray (so) that is divided into sections with thin pieces of bamboo or woven bamboo dome-shaped apparatuses. [Photo 22] Twenty-five grams of silkworm eggs equals approximately thirty-six thousand worms that eat one ton of mulberry leaves. Thus, the weavers must cultivate or gather the mulberry leaves to sustain sericulture, taking a significant portion of their daily schedules (Moeyes, 1993, p. 98).

A weaver has seven to ten days to reel a continuous thread from some of the cocoons before the pupae metamorphose into moths. [Photo 23] The remaining cocoons are undisturbed in order to continue their life cycle. The reeling process requires placing the cocoons in a pot of simmering water, whose temperature is regulated in order to successfully reel the silk filaments off each cocoon. A small pitchfork utensil picks up fibers from several cocoons and places them through a small wooden device (pi) fastened to the top of the pot. The weaver twists the silk into a thread that is then placed in a flat basket, such as the same one that the caterpillars were housed.

There are three grades of reeled silk. Weavers consider the exterior section of the cocoon as the lowest quality of silk (ma-euh tam), the midsection as mid-grade (ma-euh kang), and the innermost portion as the finest (ma-euh nyaunt) (Viengkham, 2003). A woman experienced with reeling is able to separate the different qualities of thread during
the reeling process, but others reel all three grades together (ma-euh lom). Submersion in a hot bath of a lye mixture (nam dong), usually made from ashes of burnt coconut shells and other debris, removes the sericin, making the silk soft and pliable. Similar to cotton thread production, skeins of silk thread are dyed and then wound into large spools (boke) or small bobbins (laut) for different stages of the weaving process.

The Phu Thai weave with both locally produced cotton and silk, as well as with threads purchased in the market including silk, rayon, polyester, and metallic threads. At present they no longer cultivate two types of cotton, *Gossypium arboretum* and *Gossypium hirsutum*, and grow only *Gossypium herbaceum* to spin into cotton thread. Cotton cultivation continues throughout the area of Phu Thai habitation from the villages near the Mekong River reaching east towards the Vietnam border. Sericulture has, however, reduced significantly over the last twenty to thirty years. The families living in the western section of Savannakhet Province have altogether ceased raising silkworms; in Muang Vang Angkham, or eastern Savannakhet, one informant stated that she continued to raise them, and others reported that sericulture continues in other villages in this area. All of the weavers over the age of forty-five stated they had raised silkworms in the past. The informants in Songkhone District blame the use of pesticides and fertilizers when commercial agriculture was introduced into the area, beginning in the mid-1980s, for the cessation of sericulture, stating that the caterpillars did not survive due to exposure to the chemicals and the completion of the irrigation canal in the district.

This explanation is one of the factors leading to the decline of sericulture, but there are other factors, such as the availability of machine-spun rayon once embargoes were lifted from socialist Laos. When the government introduced a market economy,
rural households began to focus on growing cash crops rather than devoting time to the laborious steps of sericulture. The loss of labor when adults became migrant workers in neighboring Thailand may have also affected sericulture. In eastern Savannakhet, the informants place blame on the political instability and environmental destruction caused by the Second Indochina War for less sericulture occurring in their villages. Villagers fled this area located near the Ho Chi Minh Trail where the United States military unloaded ordinances and herbicides during the war, making Savannakhet one of the most heavily bombed provinces of Laos (Wiseman, 2003). As stated in the previous paragraph, informants stated that raising silkworms continues in some settlements in remoter villages since these people have less access to markets and less available cash to purchase thread, thus, relying on self-sustaining practices. Several factors may have contributed to the decline of sericulture by the Phu Thai living in eastern Savannakhet, but one development project is presently promoting sericulture in the area.

Phu Thai weavers also utilize imported materials, including metallic threads, cotton, silk, rayon and polyester. Examples of heirloom textiles contain imported yarns, such as fine cotton from India, reflecting the presence of trade and commodities in the Phu Thai muang. The weavers have stated that they generally prefer the machine-spun thread purchased at the market since the thread is uniform in size and strong; thus, it is less likely to break while weaving. The fine thread produces a smooth textile, emulating high status textiles. Imported thread is often called Italian silk or French silk; it is not silk, but rayon or polyester. Most of the inexpensive “silk” thread available in the local markets originates from China and Vietnam. The brand names often contain the word “silk,” adding to the local confusion. [Photo 24] If imported silk thread actually appears
in the market it is low quality. Weavers call the polyester thread sold in the market is fake cotton (*pha-euh tolay*). The foreign vocabulary for the synthetic threads has not been incorporated in Phu Thai language.

**Equipment**

As they migrated from China into Southeast Asia, the Tai brought the technology of textile production with them. The Tai first wove with a back-strap loom and later with a hybrid back strap-frame loom, and some groups, such as the Nung, continue to use this type of loom in northeast Vietnam and southwest China (Gittinger & Lefferts, 1992; Howard & Howard, 2002, p. 16). The weaving of the groups belonging to the Southwestern Tai sub-family subsequently developed using a type of frame loom with a stationary beam. The Tai frame loom is found across Southeast Asia from northwest Vietnam into Laos, Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar).

Phu Thai men are responsible for constructing the loom and other equipment used in the different stages of textile production, following the gender roles found in other Tai societies. Men craft utensils from wood or bamboo, basketry, or metal. The equipment includes spinning wheels, shuttles, combs and beaters, shed sticks, cotton gins, and looms. Men from each household create these tools for the women, usually their wives. However, a highly skilled craftsman may specialize in creating a piece of equipment, such as combs, and sells these to others.

The Phu Thai weave on a frame loom similar to the frame loom (*kii, huuk*) used by weavers from other Southwestern Tai groups. [Photo 25] The upright loom is rectangular shaped with four vertical posts joined at the top by horizontal crossbeams,
creating a frame. Two additional horizontal beams are attached to the sides at about knee height. The posts that hold the cloth beam (ma-euh man phaa) are attached vertically to these side beams, and a flat board is positioned in front of these posts as the weaver’s seat (tang). The beater (feum) containing the reed or comb is suspended from ropes attached to a bamboo pole hung across the top of the loom with two principle heddles, which hang vertically. [Photo 26] The two main heddles (khao, khao lak) are threaded with alternating warp threads to create the two main sheds for weaving. These heddles are sometimes attached to pulleys above the warp. Two treadles (ma-euh tiin) are found below the warp, and each heddle is fastened to a treadle. When the weaver steps on a treadle, its heddle is lowered, separating alternating warp threads in order to create a shed. The weft is inserted into alternating sheds to create a fabric. Supplementary heddles (khao la-euh) are sometimes hung behind the principle heddles in order to create designs.

Combs (vii) are made in different sizes, depending on the width of the desired fabric and the density of threads. The teeth of the comb (lop) are carved from slivers of fine bamboo. The number of teeth varies per inch depending on the type of woven material. Rough, hand-spun cotton is woven with a comb with fewer teeth per inch or widely spaced teeth, and silk generally is woven with a finer comb having more teeth per inch or closely spaced teeth.

In order to set up the loom, large spools of threads are placed on poles at one end of the wooden warp frame (fu ma-euh), and then the threads are wound (khon khu) onto the frame. Once the weaver completes this step, she transfers the warp threads (thaang khu) to the loom where she inserts the threads into the heddles and beater’s comb. (sup
To save time, new warp threads may be tied to previously inserted ones and then pulled through the heddles and comb. The threads are then tied onto the cloth beam in the front of the loom. [Photo 27] She inserts two threads between each tooth of the comb while one thread goes into a single heddle loop. One end of the warp threads are fastened to the cloth beam (ma-euh mun phaa) in front of the seat, and the threads are then stretched around the back crossbeams of the loom before returning to the loom's frontside and tied in a slipknot (mat khu) above the weaver’s head around the upper crossbeam. The weaver releases the knot to relax the tension of the warp threads to roll the woven cloth (man phaa) onto the cloth beam when needed. To begin weaving (tam huuk), shuttles (laut) containing small bobbins of wound thread pass through the alternating warp sheds to create a plain-weave cloth.

Table 2  Textile Production Equipment Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Phu Thai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loom</td>
<td>Kii, Huuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton Gin</td>
<td>Iit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carding Bow</td>
<td>Koung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning Wheel</td>
<td>Kong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thread Winder</td>
<td>Laa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niddy Noddy</td>
<td>Ma-euh Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reeler</td>
<td>Pi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuttle</td>
<td>Lau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comb</td>
<td>Vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beater</td>
<td>Feum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heddle</td>
<td>Khao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth Beam</td>
<td>Ma-euh Mun Fa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treadle</td>
<td>Ma-euh Tiin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobbin</td>
<td>Laut, Phen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to color the yarns they have produced, weavers gather raw materials from the surrounding forest or from cultivated plants to make dyes. Different parts of plants are used for various recipes and include leaves, bark, heartwood, roots, and seeds. An exception is the use of the resin of an insect called stick lac (Laccifer lacca), which produces pink, red, and magenta colors. The colors of the natural dyes are affected by several factors, including the quality and quantity of the raw materials, the type of mordant used in the dye, the fiber, and the type of dyeing process (hot or cold) used to tint the threads (Moeyes, 1993). The natural environment of the dye ingredients, such as mineral content of soil and water, humidity, rainfall, and disease also affect the outcome of the dyes; thus, the colors of the dyes may differ even if the dye recipe does not differ from previous solutions of the same type of dye.

Phu Thai weavers solely use Indigofera tinctoria L. as the primary natural dye, omitting the use of other types of indigo. [Photo 28] The informants identify indigo-dyed clothing accessories as markers of their ethnicity.4 [Photo 29] Various shades of blue

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4 Although other members of Tai and non-Tai groups utilize indigo, the Phu Thai informants perceive indigo-dyed fabric as constituting some of their identity markers.
may be derived from an indigo dye bath, depending on its ingredients and the number of times a material is immersed in the liquid and allowed to dry. Numerous dippings produces are dark blue or black shade.

Indigo is cultivated alongside cotton near a water source during rainy season, occurring from the end of April until October, or coinciding with the cycle of growing rice. Concurring with the rice harvest at the beginning of the dry season, branches from the indigo bushes are cut, cleaned, and tied into bundles. The dyer/weaver submerges the bundles in a large vessel of liquid, which is a mixture of water and other ingredients such as lye, alcohol, and lime according to her own recipe. The bundles soak and ferment for a couple of days. [Photo 30] During this time period, she rotates the bundles so that bunches at the top go to the bottom of the pot. After the dyer removes the branches and other debris from the dye pots, she beats the liquid with a bamboo whisk or ladle for several hours to fold oxygen into the mixture until green-blue foam appears. [Photo 31, Photo 32] Then, the mixture is allowed to rest. Sometimes, other ingredients, such as rice alcohol or another acidic liquid, are added to the dye pot on the 3rd or 4th day, depending on the dyer’s recipe. The dye pot is either kept “alive” as a liquid dye, or it is drained of excess water and stored as a paste or dried as a cake. When using dye paste or cake, the material is reconstituted as a liquid in order to dye yarns (for additional information, see Cheesman, 2004, pp. 230-234). [Photo 33]

Informants believe that the liquid dye bath is alive or inhabited by a spirit, and each creator must carefully and lovingly attend to its wellbeing. They often place objects on top of a dye pot to deter malicious spirits from entering the dye. The skilled dyer detects if the concoction's spirit is hungry or sick, feeding the dye with the correct raw
material, such as additional rice alcohol or indigo paste, to improve its health. Otherwise, the dye will lose its effectiveness and not color threads. She also talks to the dye baths to prevent the indigo from feeling lonely, and they will also taste the dye to check its potency.

Indigo dyeing is a cold process, where heat is not required to fix the color in order to prevent dyed material from bleeding or fading. The ambient temperature affects whether the indigo dyeing is successful. Cool weather hinders the process, and indigo dyeing in the early morning is avoided if the weather is cool.

Skeins of yarn are submerged in the liquid dye bath, and then the dyer wrings the threads by hand before removing the threads from the pot in order to saturate the fibers with the dye. She continuously lifts the skeins out of the mixture, pulling and tugging the threads forcefully between her two hands before submerging them back into the dye. [Photo 34] These actions allow the dye to saturate the fibers. The liquid is a yellow-green color, and oxidation creates the change in color to blue. Thus, the threads’ exposure to air when they are removed from the pot causes the dye to adhere to the threads. The cotton is then hung to dry. The process of soaking and drying of the yarns occur until the dyer achieves the desired hue of indigo blue. Multiple dips are needed to get a dark blue, almost black color.

Before indigo dyeing begins, approximately one liter of liquid is removed from the jar and kept aside until the process is completed. Then this liquid is returned to the pot to restore the dye’s balance or to keep it “alive” and healthy. A dye bath may continue to successfully color threads for many years if its ingredients are replenished.
However, many dyers begin with a new batch each year if they do not require a “live” liquid year round.

Other colors created with the cold-dye bath method include grey or black from the seed of the ebony tree (*Diospyros mollis*). [Photo 35, Photo 36] Some dyers cultivate ebony trees to have easy access to fresh ebony seeds while others gather the seeds in the nearby forest. Different ingredients are added to the bath to create different hues of grey and black, and can even change the color of the ebony dye to brown, for example.

Other dyes use a hot method where the mixture is heated to a particular temperature for a set amount of time, depending on the dye type. For example, red dyes, derived from primarily stick lac and/or sappan wood (*Caesalpinia sappan* L.), use a hot process where the amount of time to create the dye ranges from two to 48 hours. [Photo 37] Several factors change the shade of red. Variations in the secondary ingredients, such as roselle or *maak jeep* (*Hibiscus sabdariffu* (Malvaceae)), change the color tone and affect colorfastness. [Photo 38] The length of time the threads are simmered in the liquid also influences the color. The lac dye made in the Phu Thai area produces a purplish red rather than a crimson red found in the north since the Phu Thai prefer to use stick lac that is approximately a year old (Vilayvan, 2005a, p. 33). Thus, the freshness of the lac also influences the color of the dye.

If a dyer/weaver intends to color a small section of thread, she paints the dye or dyes onto these parts rather than submerging all of the threads into the dye bath. This method is called *jaem sii* and is common during the ikat resist-dyeing process explained below. Yellow dye made from turmeric (*Curcuma longa* L.) is one color that a weaver usually paints onto the yarns. However, this dye is not colorfast since the threads have
not been boiled in the dye and will run if there is contact with water (Cheesman, 2004, p. 241).

The mordant, which prevents a dye from bleeding, alters the color, and the type of thread also affects the resulting color. Different types of mordants include alum, potash, salt, various minerals such as tin or iron, and acidic materials such as tamarind juice, vinegar, and rice alcohol. However, the mordant type affects the durability of the material. Some are harsh, such as iron, and erode the fibers, especially silk, over time.

Each dyer has individualized recipes lacking exact measurements. The knowledge of natural dyeing is orally transmitted among the females of a household and not shared with outsiders or non-kin members to keep the recipes secret. As stated in Chapter 2, the Phu Thai lack a written script so none of the dyer/weavers themselves has recorded their recipes, as stated by the informants. Relying on memory and an inexact measuring system, such as a handful or half a handful, leads to variations in the dyes. Some dyers test a dye by tasting it, but this method is inaccurate. Thus, consistency in color is difficult to maintain from the all of the variables involved in the processes of natural dyeing.

The Industrial Revolution spurred the development of synthetic dyes in Europe during the 19th century (Storey, 1978, p. 68). In 1856 William Henry Perkin discovered the first aniline or coal tar-based dye, purple, and other colors, such as magenta, orange, green, and blue, were made several years later (Storey 1978, pp. 73-74). Europe, especially Germany, dominated the manufacturing of synthetic dyestuffs until the end of World War I, and records indicate that these goods were in high demand in Japan and China at the beginning of the 20th century (Maxwell, 1990, p. 370; Morris & Travis,
The availability of synthetic dyes in mainland Southeast Asia most likely occurred during this period or soon afterwards. Creators of some Phu Thai heirloom textiles were fond of fuchsia and purple aniline dyes since colors are the most prevalent in textiles, especially those produced since the 1960s. These dyes are unstable, bleeding if the dyed material became wet. Higher quality dyes from Europe during the French colonial period and presently those made in Thailand have improved in color fastness and have expanded the color repertoire for those weavers with the funds to buy these goods. Pre-colored threads available in the markets eliminate the need to dye for some weavers, and this is one factor leading to the decline of natural dyeing and loss of indigenous knowledge.

The political instability caused by World War II and the Second Indochina War limited trade and access to raw materials. Living close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Phu Thai of Muang Vang Angkham and nearby settlements experienced bombing and attack during the Second Indochina War. The use of herbicide in the Second Indochina War destroyed many forest products, including natural dyestuffs. Informants stated that stick lac and vegetal matter are no longer available in the nearby forests, forcing many to turn to synthetic dyes. The cultivation of other materials, such as indigo and ebony, continues in many households, allowing for the transmittal of some indigenous knowledge to continue from one generation to the next.

Table 3  Natural Dyestuff (see Viengkham 2003: 34-38; Vilayvan 2005a: 40-41)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Latin Name</th>
<th>Phu Thai Name</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blue/ Black</td>
<td>Indigo</td>
<td>Indigofera tinctoria L.</td>
<td>Kham Noi</td>
<td>Leaf</td>
<td>Cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/ Pink/</td>
<td>Stick-Lac</td>
<td>Laccifer lacca</td>
<td>Khang</td>
<td>Resin</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>English Name</td>
<td>Latin Name</td>
<td>Phu Thai Name</td>
<td>Material</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>(Shellac)</td>
<td>Coccus lacca</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Sappan Wood</td>
<td>Caesalpinia sappan</td>
<td>Ma-euh Fang</td>
<td>Heartwood</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td></td>
<td>Morinda citrifolia</td>
<td>Nyau</td>
<td>Root</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/ Brown</td>
<td>Betel Palm</td>
<td>Areca catechu</td>
<td>Maak Khau</td>
<td>Nut shell</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow/ Green/ Brown</td>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Mangifera Indica</td>
<td>Ton Mong Kaso</td>
<td>Bark</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow/ Green/ Orange</td>
<td>Silkworm Thorn</td>
<td>Cudriania javanensis</td>
<td>Khae</td>
<td>Heartwood</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Anatto</td>
<td>Bixa orellana</td>
<td>Satii</td>
<td>Seed</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Thitka, betel quid ingredient</td>
<td>Pentace burmanica</td>
<td>Sii Set</td>
<td>Bark</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown</td>
<td>Cambodian Jujube</td>
<td>Ziziphus Cambodiana</td>
<td>Nam Khong</td>
<td>Bark</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green/ Brown</td>
<td>Indian Trumpet Tree</td>
<td>Oroxyylum indicum</td>
<td>Lin Ma-euh</td>
<td>Bark</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey/ Black/ Brown</td>
<td>Thai Ebony</td>
<td>Diospyros mollis</td>
<td>Maak Keu</td>
<td>Seed</td>
<td>Cool/ Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow/ Green</td>
<td>Indian Almond or Singapore Almond</td>
<td>Terminalia catappa</td>
<td>Huu Kong</td>
<td>Leaf</td>
<td>Cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink/ Brown</td>
<td>Coconut palm</td>
<td>Cocos nucifera</td>
<td>Maak Phao</td>
<td>Shell</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink/ Grey/ Khaki</td>
<td>Teak</td>
<td>Tectona grandis</td>
<td>Ma-euh Sak</td>
<td>Leaf</td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Turmeric</td>
<td>Curcuma longa</td>
<td>Khimin</td>
<td>Root</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Jackfruit</td>
<td>Artocarpus integrifolia</td>
<td>Maak mii</td>
<td>Bark</td>
<td>Hot</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Techniques

Phu Thai weavers employ different techniques to create textile patterns. One technique may be used per textile, or several are combined to create more complex designs. Most of the motifs are made from techniques manipulating the weft threads, but patterns are developed in the warp as well.

Informant weavers stated they began to weave during early adolescence, usually 11 to 13 years of age. A girl first learns plain- or tabby weave, creating a simple fabric. She must develop a rhythm of stepping on the treadles, throwing the shuttle side to side, and pushing the threads together with the beater to produce an evenly woven material. If her actions are inconsistent, the selvages or sides will not be uniform nor will the density of the fabric be consistent. Multi-colored stripes of warp and weft threads create a plaid or checked design, which requires some skill in the combination of colors and calculating the widths of each band of color. [Photo 39] Once a weaver is comfortable with plain weave technique, she learns others by observing more experienced weavers in her village. These weavers may be relatives, friends, or neighbors. She also examines other textiles to learn different motifs and learns to combine more than one technique in a weaving. Although I have seen five decorative techniques incorporated into a textile, in the Phu Thai examples I have rarely observed the combination of more than two.

Phu Thai society admires a weaver’s mastery of various supplementary techniques and considers a woman mature and ready for marriage once she masters discontinuous supplementary weft technique, described below. [Photo 40] A woman’s weaving ability is considered a reflection of her ability to carry out her roles as caretaker
of her husband and children and as a respectable member of society. Phu Thai women excel at supplementary techniques and are renowned throughout Laos and neighboring countries for the intricate designs they form using weft ikat technique.

**Supplementary Weft Techniques**

Phu Thai weavers employ two types of supplementary weft technique, continuous and discontinuous. This technique is the addition of threads woven along with the ground weft of the fabric, and these decorative yarns float on top and below the foundation of a ground warp and weft to form patterns (Viengkham 2003: 41-44). When the threads are not being used to create a design on the obverse they are woven to float and be visible on the textile’s reverse side. By definition, supplementary yarn is not crucial to the structure of the weaving since a shed of plain weave alternates with a shed of supplementary yarn so that the former becomes the ground fabric, securing the supplementary weft threads into the cloth.

To create supplementary weft patterning, the Phu Thai weavers I observed utilize a secondary heddle apparatus that hangs vertically behind the principle heddles. This long heddle is made out of string, and it stores pattern sticks (*ma-euh kep* or *ma-euh diu*). [Photo 41] Pattern sticks, made from bamboo or wood, are inserted horizontally into the heddle, and a stick corresponds to a section of a specific pattern. Each pattern stick is programmed to raise a specific set of warp threads when it is applied to create a shed in the warp. Supplementary weft threads (usually two) are passed through the space in the warp to form one line of the programmed pattern. Once the yarn has been inserted into the shed, the pattern stick is placed in the supplementary heddle on the side that is below
the warp, saving the pattern. The weaver must place the sticks consecutively into the heddle; otherwise, she loses the design. Once all of the sticks have been transferred to the other side of the warp, the pattern can be repeated in reverse, transferring each stick to insert into the heddle on the opposite side of the warp one at a time.

Patterning formed with supplementary weft techniques adorn upper and lower garments, bedding and other household textiles, and ceremonial textiles, such as temple banners. The designs created with supplementary threads may densely cover a material’s surface, which is considered an older and distinct Phu Thai textile trait. Other weavings are sparsely decorated with motifs made with the two types of supplementary weft technique, which the Phu Thai directly assimilated from Lao fabrics and indirectly from Indian textiles. Weavers living throughout Savannakhet Province, including Phu Thai, Lao, and Katang, utilize continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques.

**Continuous Supplementary Weft Technique**

Continuous supplementary weft technique (*kep, khit, khuit*) is the addition of decorative yarns that float above and below the ground weft from one side to the other (from selvage to selvage) in one row. [Photo 42] The secondary threads are not cut when not required to create patterns but is “continuous.” The supplementary yarns float on the weaving’s reverse side until they are allowed to float on the topside when the weaver decides to start a new section or row of patterning.

**Discontinuous Supplementary Weft Technique**

Similar to continuous supplementary weft technique, secondary yarns are inserted into a ground weft to form designs, but the threads are cut and tied off when a design has
been completed in discontinuous supplementary weft technique \((koh)\). This technique may involve one or more different colored threads to create supplementary patterning in one row. The different colored threads are not woven from selvage to selvage, but each yarn is confined, to one area to create a pattern before tied and cut when the pattern is completed. [Photo 43] The weaver inserts the discontinuous supplementary thread where she intends to begin a design. This complex method conserves materials and forms a lightweight fabric since the excess threads are not woven to “float” on the reverse side.

**Ikat Techniques**

Ikat is a resist dye technique where unwoven threads are bound tightly with a liquid-resistant material \((mat)\). When the threads are dyed, patterns are formed on the threads from the bound areas, thus, created prior to weaving the yarns into cloth (Battenfield, 1978, p. 11; Larsen & Hansen, 1976). [Photo 44] To form designs, the threads are allowed to dry after each submersion into a dye bath. If the binding is tight, the dye does not penetrate these sections. Then, the yarns are woven into fabric, and the designs appear on the finished product. [Photo 45] Phu Thai weavers utilize both warp and weft ikat techniques separately to create designs but do not combine the techniques to create double ikat designs in one fabric. Among the Phu Thai, ikat-patterned material is traditionally used only for the midsections of skirts.

**Warp Ikat Technique**

Phu Thai weavers employ warp ikat to form simple white dashes on the warp threads. Their use of warp ikat technique is similar to the warp ikat-patterned textiles of other Tai groups (Cheesman, 2004; Howard & Howard, 2002a; Viengkham, 2006). The
warp yarns are wound onto the warp frame like any other warp. A weaver binds small
sections of the warp with narrow strips of banana leaves or plastic string before the warp
threads are removed from the frame and placed in a dye bath. For warp ikat, the warp
threads are often dyed red with stick lac, leaving white dashes at the bound areas when
the warp is allowed to dry and the bindings have been removed. [Photo 46] The warp is
inserted into the heddles and comb and stretched onto the loom to begin weaving. The
Phu Thai weavers often combine warp ikat patterning with designs created with
supplementary warp technique, described below, but warp ikat patterning can be the sole
decoration of a textile.

Researchers consider warp ikat technique to be one of the oldest techniques used
in the weavings of Southeast Asia (Fraser-Lu, 1988, p. 42; Maxwell 1990, p. 75). Larsen
and Hansen (1976, p. 35) believe that the technique originated in southern China and
Southeast Asia, and its use spread with the migration of the ancestors of the present-day
inhabitants of both insular and mainland Southeast Asia. Similar to the warp ikat
decorated textiles of other Tai groups, Phu Thai informants state that they confined the
use of warp ikat to skirt midsections. However, the Phu Thai weavers in Savannakhet
Province have not included warp ikat in their current weavings although weavers from
other Tai groups living in Laos and Vietnam maintain this technique. Several weavers,
allover the age of fifty years old, still own examples they made over thirty years ago.

Weft Ikat Technique

In regards to weft ikat technique (mat mii) among the Tai, the Phu Thai of
Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand are associated with producing complex weft ikat patterning
(Howard & Howard 2002a, p. 21). In order to form the weft ikat designs, a weaver uses a special frame of two narrow poles (kang, hong mii) to wind threads (see Vilayvan, 2005b). [Photo 47] First, the width of the frame is adjusted to the desired width of the textile to be woven. Second, she winds a continuous thread onto the frame, creating bundles of thread, called lam, for each section of patterning. For example, if thirteen sections are required to create the pattern, then thirteen bundles are wound on the frame. The weaver continues to wrap the thread onto the frame until there is a sufficient amount of thread on the frame to weave the fabric often to complete several skirt midsections, depending on the length of the warp that the ikat yarns will be woven into. Since the pattern is repeated, each bundle contains numerous threads. The weaver must calculate how much material the combination of all the lam will make when woven. [Photo 48] She then divides this number into 160 centimeters, the length of material generally needed to make a tube skirt (Moeyes, 1993). However, the fabric may be 170, 180 or 200 cm long depending on the weaver’s preference for the width of one skirt midsection so these numbers may be substituted for 160 in order to create the desired length of material. The result of the equation is the number of times the pattern must be repeated. In the traditional measuring system, a weaver would have to estimate how many times the pattern is repeated to create two arms length of fabric (1 lah).

After the winding is complete, the weaver begins to bind sections of the threads with a water resistant material. She learns a special knot to secure the bindings. Once this step is finished, the bundles are secured with string to prevent tangling and transferred to a dye bath. Depending on the number of desired colors for the design, the

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5 In the past, banana leaf was utilized for binding but has been replaced with plastic.
threads are returned to the frame, and some of the ties are removed to expose un-dyed areas to subsequent dye baths. More binding may be added in order to protect dyed sections in the next dye bath. As described above, some dyes, such as a yellow one, are painted onto small sections, rather than submerging all of the threads into another dye bath. [Photo 49] After the threads have dried after dyeing, they are carefully wound into bobbins without confusing the order of these (see Vilayvan, 2005b). Otherwise, the design composition is lost.

The Phu Thai weave the ikat in four types of compositions (in a plain weave): mii lot, mii long, mii noi, and mii khan. The ikat pattern that is woven continuously without interruption is called mii lot. [Photo 50] For mii long each lam or section of pattern (generally, but not always, four woven threads) is separated by the insertion of solid-colored or plied weft yarns. [Photo 51] The informants consider mii long less complicated to weave because to complete a fabric for one skirt midsection contains fewer yarns decorated with weft ikat technique, requiring less concentration to align the designs. Both the mii long and mii lot weft ikat styles continue to be woven throughout Savannakhet Province. Both mii noi and mii khan contain rows of patterning alternating with bands composed of solid color or plied yarns. Mii noi style usually describes ikat patterning confined into narrow rows. Supplementary weft patterning, either continuous or discontinuous, sometimes separate the rows of ikat and the plain weaving, but there does not to be clear rules on the distinctions, according to the weavers.
Supplementary Warp Technique

Phu Thai weavers also create textile patterns with the supplementary warp technique (*muk*). [Photo 52] There has been discussion for the name of this technique due to the use of this name by researchers and weavers to describe more than one type of warp patterning. For this paper supplementary warp technique refers the manipulation of a second warp to form designs in a fabric. Thus, two warps are set up on the loom. [Photo 53] The second, or supplementary, warp is stretched either above or below the main warp towards the back of the loom at an angle (Cheesman, 2004, p. 251). For each unique section of a supplementary warp pattern, there is a one additional heddle. For example, a *muk* design with five unique parts needs five heddles. After the supplementary warp yarns are threaded through the secondary heddles, they are then inserted into the principle heddles and comb.

To insert one part of a supplementary warp pattern into a fabric, the weaver uses a metal (iron) hook hanging from the top of the loom to pick up one supplementary heddle. This action lifts a grouping of the secondary warp threads in line with the main warp, opening a shed. A weft thread is inserted into the shed. Similar to patterning created with supplementary weft technique, each part of a supplementary warp design is secured in the material by alternating supplementary yarns with sheds of ground weft or plain weave.

Phu Thai informants throughout Savannakhet Province have utilized this technique to decorate their hand-woven textiles. In western Savannakhet Province, especially Songkhone and Champhone districts, women over forty years old continue to
weave with this technique. However, a thirty-five year old informant in 2004 stated that she has used *muk* to decorate skirt material to give to her mother-in-law and daughters. Many women her age and younger were not observed applying this technique to their fabrics during the field research period. In the Muang Vang Angkham area of eastern Savannakhet, supplementary warp-decorated textiles exist, but the last ones were produced in the 30-40 years. No present production was observed here, contrasting with the western part of the province where women over 40 years of age continue to use supplementary warp technique.

Intricate designs formed by four or more heddles appear in heirloom textiles produced before World War II. Current production consists of simple abstract, geometric patterns. [Photo 54] The supplementary warp designs found on skirt material and other textiles today require only two or three heddles to form the patterning.

**Warp Pick Up Technique**

The Phu Thai also form patterning with warp threads using a technique called warp pick up (*nyok*). [Photo 55] For this technique, the warp threads are striped where a weaver chooses the width of the stripes and the number of colored threads to compose the warp. [Photo 56] To create warp pick-up designs, she attaches string loops to particular warp threads. Parallel loops are secured to small bamboo sticks. [Photo 57] In order to make one line of patterning one of the sticks is raised, often by another person, creating a shed to insert a weft yarn. [Photo 58] Thus, the raised warp threads create the design in a warp-faced weave or where the warp threads are more visible on the fabric’s surface. The informants consider this technique to be very old, and weavers of all ages learn this
technique throughout the province. Girls’ school uniforms require skirt border woven with this technique so Phu Thai weavers in their adolescence are observed creating textiles with warp pick-up patterning.

**Twill Technique**

Phu Thai weavers generally use twill technique (*la-euh khao*), also known as herringbone, to weave thick textiles that are worn as shawls (*phaa khao*), which are sometimes called blankets (*phaa hom*). [Photo 59] For twill technique, more than two principle heddles are used on one warp (Viengkham, 2001, p. 44). There has to be a minimum of three heddles to make a twill pattern, but it is possible to have more heddles. Also, the number of treadles correlates with the number of heddles. For example, a loom with four principle heddles needs four treadles to manipulate the warp threads. All of warp threads are not inserted into a corresponding string loop of each heddle, but only a combination of threads is placed into one heddle. Different combinations are inserted into the other heddles. When stepping on one treadle, the specified set of warp threads are rasied or lowered to open a shed for the insertion of a weft yarn. The use of a subsequent heddle produces a space composed from a different combination of warp threads.

Similar to supplementary warp technique, the use of twill technique appears in textiles that were woven over 20 years ago from the western section of Savannakhet Province, but none were found originating from the eastern part. This technique did not appear to be very popular with the weavers during the time period that the field research was conducted, but the weavers in western Savannakhet who were forty years of age and
older state that they still possess the skills to execute this technique and are able to return to weaving twill-patterned textiles if they desired to do so.

**Plied Thread Plain Weave**

To create a subtle pattern, weavers twist two different-colored threads together (*khen*) to form a plied yarn. To make plied thread, two skeins of different colored yarns are placed on a thread winder (*laa*). The threads are twisted together onto one spool. When woven the final product is a shimmering textile, symbolizing snake, mainly python, skin. [Photo 60] This plain-woven fabric may decorate men and women’s clothing, primarily lower garments. Examples of plied silk (*ma-euh khen*) and plied cotton (*pha-euh khen*) are found throughout the province. Heirloom and new examples of plied thread plain weave exist as women’s skirt waistbands and midsections. However, men’s garments composed of material woven with plied threads are confined to heirlooms. No new production of men’s textiles was observed.

### Table 4      Weaving and Related Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Phu Thai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To dye</td>
<td>Nyaum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To gin cotton</td>
<td>Iu Pha-euh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To card cotton</td>
<td>Thaap Pha-euh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To spin cotton thread</td>
<td>Khen Pha-euh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To reel silk</td>
<td>Sao Ma-euh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To weave cloth</td>
<td>Tam, Tam Huuk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To wind threads on warp frame</td>
<td>Khon Khu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To place warp threads on the loom</td>
<td>Seup Khu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warp</td>
<td>Thaang Khu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### English | Phu Thai
---|---
Weft | Thaang Tam
Continuous Supplementary Weft | Kep, Khit (or Khuit)
Discontinuous Supplementary Weft | Koh
Supplementary Warp | Muk
Weft Ikat | Mat Mii
Plied Thread | Khen
Twill | La-euh Khao
Warp Pick-up | Nyok
Pattern | Dauk, La-euh
Silk | Ma-euh
Cotton | Pha-euh
Thread | Da-euh
Indigo | Khaam
Cloth, Fabric | Phaa, Phae
To Sew | Nyip
To paint dyes onto cloth | Jaem Sii

## Conclusion

The Phu Thai utilize a variety of materials, dyestuffs, and techniques to form the patterns and compositions of their hand-weavings. Phu Thai females are responsible for all stages of textile production, except for the construction of equipment, such as looms. In the past, sericulture and indigo and cotton cultivation existed throughout Savannakhet Province. Sericulture has experienced demise in the province’s western section and has declined substantially in eastern Savannakhet since the 1970s. Factors affecting raising silkworms for the production of silk thread include the presence of herbicides from
warfare and commercial agriculture, the introduction of cheap synthetic yarns in the local market, and silk’s association with the abolished monarchy and the promotion of an egalitarian material, cotton, by the socialist rulers since the late 1970s (Ireson, 1996). Aid projects have promoted sericulture in eastern Savannakhet but the raising of silkworms continues on a small scale. The use of many natural dyes has also declined in recent years, but some weavers continue to use natural dyes. Indigo is integral to Phu Thai identity, and weavers throughout Savannakhet Province continue to apply produce this natural dye despite its laborious processing. Indigo and cotton cultivation continue to be widespread throughout the province, and these materials compose Phu Thai identity markers in the form of textiles and clothing.

Phu Thai hand-woven cloth is woven on a frame loom, using treadles and heddles to manipulate the warp and weft to make a myriad of designs with different techniques. Weft ikat technique is the main one used to form the motifs on women’s skirts, called sin mii, which are a primary identity marker of the Phu Thai. The variations of ikat are named mii long, mii lot, mii noi, and mii khan. The weavers use other techniques to decorate their fabrics, such continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft, supplementary warp, warp pick up, warp ikat, and twill. The weavers also decorate fabric with the use of plied yarns and different colored thread to form stripes. Weft ikat, continuous supplementary weft, discontinuous supplementary weft, and warp pick techniques are the most commonly applied to Phu Thai textiles throughout Savannakhet.

Supplementary warp and twill techniques do not appear to be applied in present-day textile production of eastern Savannakhet Province. No heirloom examples of twill have been found in this area; thus, Phu Thai weavers of the western part of the province
may have adopted this technique when they settled in this area. Heirloom, supplementary warp decorated textiles exist in eastern Phu Thai settlements, but this technique presently is not popular among the weavers in this area. In western Savannakhet, women over the age of 40 years old presently utilize this technique in some of their textiles. Warp ikat has not been applied to weavings for approximately thirty years throughout the province. It is possible for these less popular techniques to make a “comeback” and be applied to new weavings in the future, depending on the changing fashion trends of Phu Thai society and of the nation of Laos.

Table 5 Presence of techniques in Phu Thai, Lao, and Katang textiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Phu Thai</th>
<th>Lao</th>
<th>Katang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Supplementary Weft</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontinuous Supplementary Weft</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warp Ikat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weft Ikat</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Warp</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warp Pick-up</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twill</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plied Yarns</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decorative Embroidery</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabby Weave of checked and plaid</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phu Thai textiles function as male and female clothing, bedding and other household materials, and ceremonial items. Women, as the primary producers of cloth, weave fabric using a combination of materials, techniques, motifs, and styles that represent their ethnic identity. Relationships and identity are reaffirmed when these woven items are presented as gifts of exchange in familial situations, religious rites, and political alliances. For example, during the Lunar New Year, elders offer clothing to younger relatives and vice versa in sou khouan spirit appeasement ceremonies. After Buddhist Lent, Buddhist laypeople make merit, or accumulate good deeds, by providing robes, bedding, and other textiles to monks. The producers and consumers of Phu Thai textiles have adapted these malleable objects, including the assimilation or domestication of foreign elements, such as metallic threads, designs, and forms, into the textile repertoire. Sometimes, the use of techniques, materials, and cloth types are abandoned, but they may return depending on the creator and/or user. The changes occurring in Phu
Thai textiles reflect the changes that members of the Phu Thai have experienced over time.

Phu Thai textiles are named in various ways, such as by decorative technique, material, color, or design. They are also called by a combination of these characteristics, and a weaving may have more than one name since there are no strict rules in regards to naming textiles. For example, the technique may be the qualifying descriptor, such as a skirt (sin) whose midsection is decorated with supplementary warp patterning (muk), or sin muk. On the other hand, the function of a narrow textile (phae) designates its name. An example is the phae bing shoulder cloth, which is worn diagonally across the body, called bing in Phu Thai language.

The Phu Thai differentiate between a narrow cloth made of one panel of material and a wider cloth that is usually made from two pieces of fabric. The term phae refers to a single panelled cloth, such as the type of shoulder cloth called phae daam, and is usually no wider than 48 cm. They call a fabric made with two pieces sewn together along one side is called phaa, such as a two-paneled shawl called the phaa daam.

This chapter describes the different types of textiles produced by the Phu Thai in Savannakhet Province, Laos. Female clothing is outlined, indicating which articles are considered Phu Thai identity markers. Symbols of Phu Thai identity include various styles of clothing, motifs, and specific compositions for parts of the attire. A household items section follows the descriptions of the clothing, and the chapter concludes with a discussion regarding ceremonial fabrics. The status of production of the different textile types is assessed. I also divide Phu Thai textiles into two typologies: western and
eastern. Two distinctive sub-types exist in Phu Thai hand-woven textiles of this province.

**Clothing**

Women’s dress is generally more elaborate than men’s clothing. The ceremonial garments of both men and women consist of finer materials, such as silk and metallic threads, than day-to-day costume. It is unknown if both sexes have ever worn elaborately decorated head coverings or turbans that other Tai peoples wear. There is no evidence, either in archival photographs or from interviews, that this type of accessory was worn in the last one hundred years. Two archival photographs depicting the Phu Thai from the 1920s have subjects without head cloths so we know that this accessory was no longer in use by this period. The Phu Thai style of dress, including the absence of a turban-like head covering, is similar to the dress of the politically dominant Lao, who also belong to the same ethno-linguistic subgroup as the Phu Thai. Children’s traditional clothing is simply a smaller version of adult clothing. No special garments, such as hats or bibs, were made for children.

**Women’s Clothing**

Heritage dress of a Phu Thai woman consists of a skirt, blouse, and shawl or shoulder cloth. Informants identify Phu Thai woman’s dress as *sin mii seu lap la-euh*, or a tube skirt (*sin*) decorated with weft ikat (*mii*) and an indigo cotton blouse (*sue*) decorated with supplementary weft-patterned, red silk material (*lap la-euh*). The clothing for both everyday and ceremonial use differs in materials and design, but the structure
remains unaltered. Everyday clothing is composed of indigo-dyed cotton. It is not compulsory for the blouse to be adorned with patterning or other material. A woman may wear a type of checked sash, called *phae taa lo*, with her outfit, and the material may be worn around the waist or head. [Photo 61] This accessory also serves as a knapsack or as a towel, which is especially useful when working in the fields. (Men also utilize this textile in the same manner as women and will be discussed in the men’s clothing section.)

The materials composing special occasion clothing are costlier in the amount of time to produce and the amount of the material required to complete a garment and the materials themselves, such as silk or metallic threads. Silk threads are thinner; thus, more material is required to weave one silk textile compared to a cotton one, and an additional amount of time is also needed to weave it. Designs generally are more elaborate on ceremonial clothing, necessitating an additional investment of time in its production.

**Blouses**

A distinctive identity marker of Phu Thai women is the style of blouse that they wear, which they name *seu lap la-euh*. [Photo 62] This style of blouse is similar to blouses worn by other Tai women with its long-sleeves, round neck, and opening down the front and center. It differs from the blouses of other groups in its longer length, being fitted at the waist and slightly flaring at the bottom end. The ceremonial variation has a collar and its edges adorned with red silk that is sometimes decorated with supplementary weft patterning. In the past, silver coins were used as buttons along with string to fasten the blouse, enabling the wearer to store and display their wealth simultaneously. [Photo 63] Plastic buttons began to replace silver coins as the currency became rare, and the
buttons were novel items acquired in the market, which still signified the household’s wealth since they had to be purchased. Phu Thai women reserve the use of the *seu lap laeuh* for special occasions, and newer versions of this blouse are trimmed with plain, red cotton material that lacks the supplementary decoration.

For daily activities, an unadorned blouse made from indigo-dyed cotton completes the outfit. This type of blouse is not fitted at the waist but has straight side seams. The working blouse retains the long sleeves for protection from the sun. With the introduction of the sewing machine and tailored clothing, the indigo-dyed cotton blouse comes in a variety of forms. Different styles are available for purchase in the market. The long-sleeved blouse also serve as a jacket worn over another upper garment such as a T-shirt.

**Skirts**

The skirt, or sin, is structured with the following parts: the head (*ho*) or waistband; the body (*to*) or midsection; and the foot (*tiin*) or hem-piece. [Photo 64] Due to the limited width of hand-woven fabric, three or more pieces of such fabric are needed to create the desired skirt length (or height from waist to lower leg). The pieces of material are sewn together along the selvages to form a cloth 1.6 to 2 meters wide and around 1 meter in height. The fabric is folded in half and the ends are sewn together to form one side seam. Thus, the warp threads are worn horizontally. The tube-like garment is folded at one hip and secured with a sash or metallic belt around the waist. During the French colonial period (beginning in the late 19th century), and women began
to wear tailored skirts (*sin sanlet huup*) composed of the three main parts mentioned above (Viengkham, 2006).

Informants related that by having the skirt divided into different sections, they could replace the parts that wore out faster than the others, such as the waistband and border, without wasting the material composing the larger midsection. The waistband wore or stretched out from the constant tension of tucking it in tightly around the waist (*mat aeo*), and it often required readjustment, according to the women interviewed. I was told that “dirty” (*beum*) sections could also be removed, salvaging the rest of the garment for future use. For example, they said skirt borders naturally became soiled due to their proximity to the dusty or muddy ground. Women also used the waistband to wipe away spittle when chewing betel nut. Stained fabric was thus replaced easily and frequently.

**Waistbands**

The waistband (*ho*) is the least elaborately decorated part of the skirt but is one identifying marker for the Phu Thai. [Photo 65] Two pieces of cloth form a Phu Thai waistband. One waistband (*ho la-euh*) is a striped, red fabric, while the lower one (*ho khao*) is made from plain-woven, un-dyed cotton; however, sometimes the placement of the materials is reversed so that the white cloth is at the top. The *ho la-euh*’s warp and ground weft are red cotton, and sometimes the yarns are doubled if the weaver uses fine, imported thread. The weft stripes are combinations of white, indigo or black, orange, yellow, blue, or green yarns. This waistband may contain rows of continuous supplementary weft technique patterning. The supplementary designs are geometric, such as diamonds and octagons. Although cotton waistbands are typical, some examples
are woven with silk and, less often, silver or gold wrapped thread, indicating use for special occasions and/or ownership of a member from the upper classes. The informants described the combination of the striped, red waistband and the un-dyed cotton one as an identifying marker of their ethnicity, but the rules regarding the composition of dress are not strict, allowing the waistband to be made from a variety of materials, including cloth purchased from the market. Recent examples of this skirt section are made from only one fabric, such as striped cotton.

**Midsections**

The midsection or body of the skirt (to) contains the most variation in the number of techniques and designs that may be used in its composition. [Photo 66]  Weavers utilize all of the weaving techniques described in Chapter 3 to decorate this part whereas the number of techniques is limited when decorating the other sections of a skirt and other types of textiles. Weft and warp ikat designs have traditionally been confined to this part and not allowed to decorate any other type of textile.

Phu Thai informants state that skirts with weft ikat-decorated midsections are Phu Thai identity markers. For example, several weavers state that Weft ikat skirts are “original Phuthai,” or “sin mii maen Phu Thai dang deom,” or that they are “truly Phu Thai,” or “sin mii maen Phu Thai thae thae.” Phu Thai weavers create four types of skirts featuring weft ikat decoration, or sin mii. The primary color or dye for cotton skirts is indigo. Bound bundles of weft threads are submerged in an indigo dye bath before they are woven into cloth. This process reveals white or un-dyed (or the original color of the thread) section that will form patterns on a blue background once the yarns are woven
into fabric. Contrasting colors, such as red and yellow, are often painted onto the fabric (jaem sii) rather than immersing all of the threads into a liquid. The painting method conserves raw materials, or the dye, and the weaver’s time.

Unlike cotton garments, silk skirts decorated with weft ikat technique (sin mii ma-euh) are usually dyed several colors. Before the introduction of synthetic dyes, red and dark blue dominated the color schemes of these silk skirts. Often red sections are over-dyed with indigo to create a purple, almost black color. Accent colors include green and yellow as well as white from the un-dyed areas. In the twentieth century, aniline dyes replaced natural ones, and the majority of the heirloom sin mii ma-euh found in the village research sites contains aniline dyes. [Photo 67] The present application of weft ikat technique is confined to cotton or synthetic yarns.

The Phu Thai presently utilize mii long, mii lot, mii noi, and mii khan to decorate the skirt midsection. As described in the previous chapter, mii lot refers to weft ikat-decorated yarns that are woven continuously without any break in the pattern. Thus, all of the weft threads have weft ikat designs. In mii long, each section of the pattern alternates with an equal number of solid colored threads. In both of these types a completed motif (or row of completed designs) is repeated until the desired amount of material is woven, generally 1.6 to 2 meters. Mii long requires less weft threads decorated with weft ikat technique to complete material for one skirt due to the incorporation of solid-colored yarns.

Other variations of weft ikat-patterned skirts include the sin mii noi and sin mii khan. In both skirts, narrow rows of weft ikat motifs alternate with rows of solid-colored stripes, and plied thread. Sin mii noi contain all of the elements described in the last
sentence with narrow bands of ikat patterning. [Photo 68] The weft ikat bands of *sin mii khan* are wide. [Photo 69] In both of these types, the motifs in one row are completed before the bands of solid-colored or plied threads are inserted into the warp. Woven in cotton, silk, synthetic threads or combination of these materials, examples of all types of weft ikat-decorated skirts are woven by the Phu Thai living throughout Savannakhet Province.

The informants name skirts with midsections decorated with warp ikat patterning *sin thiu*. [Photo 70] As described in Chapter 3, the weavers apply warp ikat technique to create white dashes on a red silk warp. Threads decorated with warp ikat technique may alternate with indigo-dyed cotton threads to form a striped warp. The weft of these skirts is often indigo-dyed cotton. However, the Phu Thai weave examples of *sin thiu* composed completely of silk. Some examples contain supplementary warp patterning to create the *sin muk* described below. Presently, production of warp-ikat decorated fabric has ceased in Savannakhet Province, and the most recent examples found in the field research sites in eastern Savannakhet date back to the early 1970s. Other Tai groups also refer to this skirt as *sin siu* and *sin taalaan* (Cheesman, 2004).

As stated above, supplementary warp-decorated skirts are called *sin muk*. [Photo 71] Older versions of *sin muk* contain supplementary warp woven in silk thread. The foundation warp may either be silk or a combination of silk and cotton, but the weft is always cotton. Some examples have the patterning woven in cotton. Generally the color of the patterning contrasts with the ground fabric. Some weavers combine warp ikat and supplementary warp techniques into one fabric. [Photo 72] In recent years, this skirt style has become unpopular among young Phu Thai women, and production of *sin muk* has
stopped since the 1970s. However, *sin muk* woven completely in silk are now fashionable among the neighboring Lao, especially those presently living in urban areas (*sin muk* were also popular with members of the elite 50 years ago). Perhaps the Phu Thai will wear this type of skirt again since it is coming back into fashion in the power centers. However, it is uncertain whether they will begin to weave supplementary warp-patterned fabric or buy the material at the market.

The informants refer to skirt midsection that is woven with plied yarns, or a combination of plied and solid colored threads, as *sin ma-euh khan*. [Photo 73] The thread may be cotton, silk, or a synthetic fiber to create a fine and uniform fabric. While the Phu Thai call polyester and rayon fibers “foreign” silk, such as French or Italian silk, the origin of these materials is not as distant as these European nations. However, they come from within the region, including Thailand, Vietnam, and China. Use of skirts made with this material is reserved for ceremonial occasions. To add to the special nature of this skirt type, the weaver may attach a *tiin chok* skirt border, or a hem piece decorated with discontinuous supplementary weft technique called *chok* in Lao language (the Phu Thai call this technique *koh*). The incorporation of a foreign word into Phu Thai language reflects the “domestication” of language and textile types into the Phu Thai textile repertoire.

The Phu Thai have assimilated another skirt style and its name, *sin chok*, from the Lao. [Photo 74] The distinguishing marker of a *sin chok* is a midsection decorated with discontinuous supplementary weft patterning. Weavers from the Phu Thai and other Tai groups are observed today weaving and wearing *sin chok*, which emulate fabrics consumed by the former Lao royal family and other lower courts (although the monarchy
was abolished in 1975). The discontinuous supplementary weft patterning is not dense and is evenly distributed throughout the weaving. Members of the former Lao courts often wore imported textiles from India and China, and Lao and other Tai weavers incorporated the composition of designs found on these foreign fabrics into their own productions (Cheesman, 2004). Silk and metallic wrapped threads generally composed these imported commodities, and local weavers stated that they substituted other fibers for the costlier materials if they were not available. Phu Thai weavers throughout Savannakhet Province continue to weave this style, often using thread made of synthetic fibers, such as rayon and polyester.

**Borders**

Women choose from several skirt border types (*tiin*) to attach to the midsection. The oldest styles, *tiin hao* (white foot) or *tiin dauk* (patterned foot), contain primarily white patterning formed by warp threads floating on dark, weft threads. The technique applied to these border types, warp pick up technique, forms a warp-faced textile. The most common pattern of the *tiin hao* is white dashes. [Photo 75] The *tiin dauk* features other geometric patterns, such as diamond shapes that symbolize stars, *dao*, or sometimes the *maak tuum* or bael fruit. [Photo 76] Another variation of this warp-faced accessory is the *tiin thaung dam*, which has a black center. [Photo 77] These border styles constitute part of the national schoolgirls’ uniform, worn not only by Phu Thai girls but also by girls from all other ethnic groups attending school in Laos. Thus, Phu Thai weavers are not the sole producers of this border type.
More elaborately decorated hem-pieces have become very popular for both daily and ceremonial use. Both types of supplementary weft technique form the primary decoration of ceremonial borders presently. Similar to the *sin chok*, which is the skirt woven with some discontinuous supplementary weft designs, the *tiin chok* border-piece contains discontinuous supplementary weft patterning. [Photo 78] Continuous supplementary weft patterning defines the *tiin kep* border. [Photo 79] Some borders contain patterning created with both techniques. Weavers draw from a variety of materials to create these sections, such as cotton, silk, rayon, polyester, and metallic thread. The motifs are generally geometric, representing images from the natural environment, including the sandalwood flower (*dauk chan*) and stars (*dao*).

**Shoulder Cloths**

Phu Thai women wear a textile over the shoulder to signify an important occasion (men wear one as well; this is discussed below). The patterning is simple or dense, depending on the type of shoulder cloth. Weavers apply both supplementary weft techniques, continuous and discontinuous, to decorate this garment. To wear the accessory, a woman folds it once longitudinally and drapes it over one shoulder. From the shoulder, the material diagonally crosses the torso to meet at the opposite side’s hip. Another method of wearing the shoulder cloth involves draping one end over one shoulder and wrapping the material around the torso so that the opposite end drapes over the same shoulder from the back.

The dense patterns of the *phae daam* shoulder cloth distinguish it from other types. [Photo 80] Both continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques
decorate examples of the *phae daam*, but some contain only one of these techniques. The original colors of the *phae daam* include a red or magenta silk or red cotton warp with the ground weft primarily in the same color and material as the warp. The weft, however, contains weft stripes in white, green, purple, and, less often, orange silk. The patterning is placed in bands alternating with the weft stripes. The width of the design rows varies on some *phae daam*; for example, the band at the center of the weaving may be wider than the adjacent ones. The motifs are woven in the same colored silk as the stripes, but cotton may replace the silk yarn for some colors, such as red.

The motifs in each row differ, but eventually repeat, creating a mirror image of the design if the textile is folded in half horizontally. Common patterns are triangular shapes symbolizing roof gables with finials in the shape of the *naak* serpent deity. This image resembles Buddhist temple roofs. Two triangles may join together to create a diamond-shaped lantern, or *khoam*. Smaller motifs compose these larger ones and symbolize stars (*dao*), seeds (*kaen*), fern tendrils (*kut*), and flowers, including the sandalwood (*dauk chan*) and jasmine (*dauk kaew*) flowers. Angular, undulating lines signify the eel-like mythical creature, or *eu*. Other zigzag shapes represent flowering vines, such as the lotus, *dauk bau*.

Informants have indicated which pattern designates the *phae daam* shoulder wrap as a distinct Phu Thai identity marker. The weavers state that the fringe motif (*soi saa*), which is woven at both ends of the textile’s patterned section, is Phu Thai and must be present to make these garments “Phu Thai.” This motif is also found on other Phu Thai textiles, such as the *phaa daam* shawl discussed below. Other Tai groups incorporate the *soi saa* motif into their textiles and may consider it as a marker of their ethnic identity as
well, but the Phu Thai recognize it as being “Phu Thai” and use the motif to distinguish between Phu Thai and other types of shoulder cloths. Today, production of the *phae daam* occurs only in the eastern part of Savannakhet Province.

The weavers make one kind of shoulder cloth that was inspired by the Lao style of shoulder cloth (*phae biang* in Lao) as the *phae bing*. [Photo 81] The production of the *phae bing* type of shoulder wrap is present throughout Savannakhet Province. Its decoration is less dense when compared to the *phae daam*. Within the patterned rows, the motifs often are widely spaced so the background is visible. If the *soi saa* motif is woven into a phae bing, the weavers say that it also Phu Thai, “*tha phae mi la-euh soi saa si maen Phu Thai thae thae*.”

Continuous supplementary weft technique, discontinuous supplementary weft technique, or a combination of both may be utilized to decorate this kind of textile. Like the *sin chok* and *tiin chok*, the *phae bing*-style shoulder cloth emulates the Lao court textiles (Cheesman, 2004). Heirloom *phae bing* are composed of silk thread, sometimes with the inclusion of gold or silver wrapped yarns. The informants over the age of fifty state that the specifically created *phae bing* to wear at their own weddings. [Photo 82] After they married, they continue to wear the keepsake for other special occasions. Women state that a bride (*jao sao*) is supposed to dress as a princess (*jao naang*) on her wedding day, and this accessory helped to fulfil this aspiration.

The weavers in the western part of the province create one kind of shoulder cloth that could be described as a hybrid between the Lao style of shoulder cloth (*phae bing*) and the *phae daam*. [Photo 83] This garment’s composition requires plain-woven, solid-color sections that separate the supplementary weft design rows, which is in contrast to
the densely woven *phae daam*. The Phu Thai weavers add the *soi saa* motif to the patterning of these shoulder cloths that were inspired by foreign cultures to establish the weaving's Phu Thai-ness.

**Shawls**

In the dry or cool season, a Phu Thai woman drapes larger textiles around her upper body for warmth. This provides also an opportunity for her to display her weaving abilities to the community, especially if she is unmarried and seeking a suitor. The greater amount of leisure time during this time period gives more opportunity for socializing since villagers are not occupied tending rice fields. The *long kong* courting ritual centers on the production of cotton thread and occurs during this season. Women gather in a group to perform different stages of the making of cotton thread and other steps to prepare the loom, often wearing examples of their textile production. Men join them with music, song, and bantering. During this time, the male counterparts have the opportunity to observe the quality of the women’s work.

Two pieces of similarly patterned material, which are sewn together along one selvage or side, compose a shawl. The Phu Thai refer to shawls as *phaa* to distinguish that the textile is made from two pieces of fabric rather than one. When worn, the material may be folded longitudinally two or three times and worn over one shoulder for ceremonies, replacing the shoulder cloth. The garment is also worn unfolded and wrapped around both shoulders for warmth. [Photo 84] As stated earlier, this display allows for the assessment of a woman’s mastery of technique, motif and overall design composition, and selection and combination of colors.
The *phaa daam* shawl is a wider and longer version of the *phae daam* shoulder cloth. [Photo 85] The design composition, materials, and colors of both types of textiles are similar, but the *phaa daam* shawl contains the *soi saa* fringe motif only at one end. The application of discontinuous supplementary weft technique to produce large rows of patterning expands the repertoire of motifs a woman may incorporate in a weaving. In *phaa daam*, images of real and mythical animals, such as deer and the mythical deer-horse hybrid called *maum*, respectively, appear more frequently. Like the *phae daam* shoulder cloth, heirloom examples of this type of shawl are only found in the eastern section of Savannakhet Province. Production of the *phaa daam* has ceased in this area, and the most recent examples were woven 40-50 years ago. The Tai Phuan subgroup is the only other Tai peoples known to weave the *phaa daam* in Laos, but they call the textile *phaa kep* (Cheesman, 2004).

The weaving and use of other types of shawls continue throughout the province. One kind of wrap is the *phaa jong*, which contains supplementary warp patterning. [Photo 86] The *phaa jong* is composed of a red background (ground warp and weft) of either silk, cotton, or a combination of both types of thread. White, yellow, and occasionally green silk threads are used to create warp stripes and designs created with supplementary warp technique. Heirloom examples of *phaa jong* contain complex patterns of religious objects, such as the funeral reliquary that symbolizes Mt. Meru in Buddhist cosmology (*thaat*) and the serpent deity (*naak*). Newer versions have simpler decoration, which require two or three supplementary heddles to form geometric shapes. Phu Thai women wear this type of textile in the same fashion as other shawls. A woman also uses the *phaa jong* to carry a small child by wrapping it around the child and herself
and tying the ends together to form a sling. Women in their late thirties and older have the skills to weave phaa jong, and some continue to do so. However, younger women have abandoned using this accessory, leaving its use as a shawl to women over the age of 35. [Photo 87] Tai Phuan weavers also create the phaa jong, as well as their version of the phaa daam, while no other groups in Laos are known to do so (Cheesman, 2004).

Phaa khit shawls are another example of an upper body accessory reserved for special occasions. [Photo 88] The design structure of the phaa khit, or phaa khuit, is similar to the phae bing shoulder cloth, described above. In the two similarly woven panels, rows of supplementary weft patterning alternate with weft stripes and larger bands of red-plain weave. The ground warp and weft fibers are silk tinted with a dye made from stick lac to create a crimson red shade. In some examples, imported cotton replaces the silk yarns. The colors of the weft stripes and supplementary designs complement the red background. For approximately three-quarters of the phaa khit shawls, narrow rows of continuous supplementary weft are the primary decoration. In the remaining section there are several rows of discontinuous supplementary weft patterning, including a final row of fringe motif. Solid red tabby or plain weave composes the ends.

In the past Phu Thai women living throughout Savannakhet Province wore phaa khit in the manner described above for shawls. However, only heirloom textiles of phaa khit exist in western Savannakhet Province today since current production of this garment has ceased. In the Muang Vang Angkham region of eastern Savannakhet, one example has been produced in the last ten years. Families still possess heirlooms, only to be worn or displayed for ceremonies.
The Phu Thai consider the *phaa la-euh* (*phaa lai* in other Tai languages) to be a shawl reserved for ceremonial occasions, such as the *phaa daam* described earlier, despite their similarity to blankets of other Tai groups (Howard & Howard, 2001). The Phu Thai version differs from the similarly patterned textiles woven by most other Tai groups since it lacks a backing and frame of plain-woven cotton and is not padded with *ngiu*, or kapok (*Ceiba pentandara*). The shawl’s composition is primarily of two pieces of cloth sewn together along one side or selvage. The warp and ground weft threads of the center panels are un-dyed cotton. The “original” style of the Phu Thai *phaa la-euh* includes thick, indigo-dyed cotton patterning woven with continuous supplementary weft technique. [Photo 89] A Phu Thai weaver sews red cotton material around the edges of all four sides, creating a frame visible on the obverse and reverse sides. The *phaa la-euh*’s red border designates its use as a ceremonial accessory. Informant weavers state use this type of textile to demarcate auspicious space during a ritual or to give as an offering to spirits, members of the supernatural world, and to other participants in the rite, members of the natural world. The Phu Thai informants state specifically that this textile does not function as a blanket or door curtain.

The colors and texture of the *phaa la-euh* has altered with access to different raw materials found in the market. Fine, uniform polyester threads come in a variety of colors. These yarns have replaced the hand-spun cotton yarns used to form the background fabric and patterning. Newer versions contain pink, green, and a myriad of colors. The weavers favor the thinner polyester threads, citing that they are more durable than hand-spun cotton, and the diversity of synthetic yarns’ colors is refreshing. [Photo 90]
A variation of the *phaa la-euh* exists at least in one Phu Thai village in the vicinity of Muang Vang Angkham. (Other Phu Thai weavers likely produce this version, but I did not have the opportunity to see their examples.) This version has the same structure as the *phaa la-euh* described above, where two similarly woven textiles are joined along one side and framed with red cotton material. The design structure of variation’s center panels differs from the composition of the most-commonly woven *phaa la-euh* since only 3/4 of the shawl is decorated with designs formed by continuous supplementary weft technique. In the remaining quarter section (or bottom end), the continuous supplementary weft patterning meets several rows of discontinuous supplementary weft designs, followed by undecorated plain weave. [Photo 91] The informant stated she ceased using the two examples she made as a newlywed (in the early 1970s) and preserved the shawls as heirlooms to give to her daughters when she passes away. She informed me that merchants from Vientiane, the national capital, have commissioned her to make replicas, providing the raw materials of multi-colored polyester yarns.

The Phu Thai of western Savannakhet utilized twill technique to create a shawl-like garment, *phaa la-euh khao*. [Photo 92] This accessory has a striped, cotton warp and a weft composed of one color, excluding a stripe in a contrasting shade found near one end. The design consists of a diamond shape that requires four heddles to create the pattern. This garment is thus called a cloth woven with four heddles, *phaa sii khao*. Contemporary examples are presently not being produced, but women 45 years or older utilize ones they made in the mid-late 1970s. [Photo 93]
Men’s Clothing

Indigo-dyed cotton constitutes Phu Thai men’s clothing, especially before the adoption of an international style of dress. [see Photo 11] Absent of elaborate patterning or embellishment, Phu Thai men’s dress does not vary from the costume of other Tai men, which consists of a shirt and trousers (Howard & Howard, 2001). Men of some Tai groups wore narrow loincloths, but none of the Phu Thai elders I interviewed are able to recall the use of a loincloth by their ancestors. The main clothing accessory, the checked cotton textile or phae taa lo, serves as a sash, turban, towel, or carryall bag.

Shirts

The upper body garment for daily use is a short- or long-sleeved, collarless shirt (seu mau dam) with a round neck. Fabric ties fasten the shirt where it opens at the center of its frontside. A man’s shirt that is reserved to wear for special occasions retains the same structure of the everyday clothing article, but it is trimmed with red material piping along edges like a woman’s blouse, previously described. In the past, coins served as buttons, which have been replaced with plastic ones. A round collar may be attached to a ceremonial shirt.

Lower Garments

Wide-gusseted trousers (song) may be worn either short or long; long trousers are generally rolled up for working in the fields or fishing. The pants have a wide waist, which is folded and secured with a sash when worn. Lao-inspired lower garments include a tubular skirt, or salong, and hip wrapper, or phaa khen. Men continue to wear
the salong, which is composed of approximately 1.8 to 2 meters of plaid-patterned silk material, whose ends are sewn together to create a tubular garment with one side seam. [Photo 94, Photo 95]

A Phu Thai man with sufficient wealth or social standing wears phaa khen hip wrapper composed from three or more meters of silk. [Photo 96] The design of the phaa khen is subtle, consisting of a tabby or plain weave of solid-color and plied silk yarns. To wear the fabric, a man wraps it securely around his waist and then passed the ends between the legs in a complicated manner in order to create a pantaloon-like garment similar to the Indian dhoti. Some informants refer to this cloth as phaa haang, or a textile with tails. The wearer holds the tail ends of the garment, twirling them around while dancing at festivals.

Silk composes both the salong and phaa khen, elevating them to high commodity items reserved for special occasions. The production of a phaa khen consumes a large amount of silk, and not all Phu Thai households owned such a garment in the past. The value of the phaa khen increases when gold or silver threads are incorporated into the weaving of the textile. Village-based production of the phaa khen and salong has ceased throughout Savannakhet Province for approximately fifty and thirty years, respectively. However, material for cotton and silk salong is available in the local markets, and men presently may be observed wearing this type of garment while at leisure in the village.

Shoulder Cloths

Phu Thai men wear a textile draped over one shoulder, or a shoulder cloth, in a similar manner as Phu Thai women to signify a special occasion. Daily alms to the
Buddhist monks, attendance at Buddhist sermons, and participation in various rituals require wearing a shoulder cloth. An unmarried man’s mother creates this accessory for him, and when he marries his wife has the responsibility of providing this cloth for his use. Men’s shoulder cloths are narrower and shorter than women’s versions of this article of clothing.

Depending on a man’s, or if he is married his wife’s village locale, he wears a complexly decorated textile or plain-woven fabric. Production and use of the plaid, plain-woven shoulder cloth occurs throughout Savannakhet Province. Composed of silk, cotton, or a combination of both fibers, this type of shoulder cloth, *phae ling*, contains broad checks or a plaid pattern. [Photo 97] Silver and gold metallic threads are occasionally incorporated into the fabric, and today polyester and rayon may replace the other yarns. Generally, the *phae ling* is casually draped across one shoulder with the ends draping down the wearer’s front- and backsides. Informants state men may use the cloth in the Buddhist sermon hall to swat flies or mosquitoes away without killing them since it is considered a sin to kill a living being, especially on sacred grounds.

While Phu Thai men living throughout Savannakhet Province utilize the *phae ling*, men residing in the eastern section include the *phae daam* (described in the women’s shoulder cloth section) in their ceremonial clothing ensemble. Men wear the *phae daam* in a manner similar to women. The accessory is draped over one shoulder and diagonally crosses the torso at the opposite side of the body below the armpit near the waist. Village informants recall that some of their village elders wore the *phae daam* as a head wrap in the past, but the last recollection was at least fifty years ago. They stated that the *phae daam* was folded lengthwise thrice and wrapped around the forehead,
keeping the crown uncovered. An applicant to the Buddhist monkhood, or Sangha, placed the cloth in this manner during the first day of the rites of passage occurring over three days. During this ceremony and other special occasions, a man from a wealthy household, possessing many woven fabrics, wore two phae daam textiles, one for each shoulder in the manner mentioned above for one cloth. He may also incorporate the head covering with the shoulder cloths, require three phae daam-style textiles to complete his attire.

Shawls

Informants also recall some Phu Thai men wearing two examples of the phaa khit shawl, which is listed as a woman’s shawl in the previous section, in the same manner as phae daam shoulder cloth, or one over each shoulder and draped diagonally across the torso. However, this attire was discontinued over fifty years ago, according to the informants. In order to observe the dress styles of the recent past, attendance at the Rocket Festival (Bun Bang Fai) is required. This festival intends to attract the attention of the gods at the advent of the rainy season. One method of arousing the deities is for both men and women to cross-dress. Women wear the phaa khit shawls along with men’s heritage clothing, such as the phaa khen. Men replace their attire with women’s, primarily indigo-dyed cotton blouse and weft ikat-decorated skirts. [see Photo 11]

Household Textiles

Hand-woven textiles intended for domestic use continue to be woven in Phu Thai villages throughout Savannakhet Province. Females of a household specifically weave
hand-spun cotton into fabric for bedding. The bedding material is composed solely of un-dyed or indigo-dyed fibers for a solid-color plain weave. Alternatively, these are combined to create checked or plaid patterns. Occasionally, hand-spun yarns dyed in other colors, such as red, are incorporated into the bedding textiles. Numerous Tai groups also make this type of material for household textiles, especially bed linen (Cheesman, 2004; Howard & Howard 2002, p. 233, fig. 88). Mattresses (seu), sheets (phaa lop, phaa pu), and blankets (phaa hom) compose the bed linen. [Photo 98] Kapok serves as the cotton mattress stuffing, and is sometimes inserted in between the front and back parts of a blanket to provide additional warmth in cool weather.

In some households, women produce pillows (maun) for sleeping and cushions (maun nang) for sitting. In Phu Thai villages in eastern region of Savannakhet Province or Muang Vang Angkham, the pillow covers are more elaborate, decorated with supplementary weft patterning in silk and cotton threads. [Photo 99] Examples found in the province’s western section are covered with the same plaid-patterned material woven for other bedding accessories, such as blankets. [Photo 100] A single woman weaves pillow and cushion covers, which become part of her trousseau, prior to marriage. She prepares a minimum of two pillows for use; thus, there is one each for husband and wife. She saves the remaining covers to stuff into pillows when the family requires additional ones. [Photo 101] The number of covers is considered a reflection of the family’s wealth. A minimum of two is required for the husband and wife and symbolizes a poor household. Wealthy households own a dozen or more, which represent the family’s ability to host large parties. Factory-made goods are quickly replacing the hand-made
items, but production and use of the domestic textile items continues throughout the province. [Photo 102]

Phu Thai women of all ages continue to weave the all-purpose textile, *phae taa lo*. [Photo 103] As stated in the women and men’s clothing sections, this fabric functions as a belt, head scarf, rucksack, and baby carrier. As household accessories, other uses are as a towel, room divider, and curtain. Detailed in the “Textiles for Merit-Making” section below, this material serves religious purposes also.

Informants recalled making mosquito nets from un-dyed cotton (*sut*) in the past. Phu Thai mosquito nets were white (un-dyed cotton) like ones made by the Tai Phuan subgroup (Cheesman, 2004), but the weavers did not recall any adornment with supplementary designs. According to the informants, production of the mosquito nets ceased sixty years ago, or during the Second Indochina War.

The Phu Thai and Tai Phuan nets differ from those made by other Tai subgroups, which use indigo-dyed cotton to form their nets (Howard & Howard, 2002a). Presently, Phu Thai families purchase factory-made ones from the market. No heirloom (ones that are passed down from one generation to another) examples of household textiles exist in any of the Phu Thai villages visited during the field research period since domestic items are used and discarded when they need to be replaced with new ones.

**Textiles for Merit-Making**

In order to accumulate Buddhist merit, a Phu Thai woman weaves textiles to give to the temple. These donations include bedding material, such as mattresses, sheets, blankets, pillows, and cushions. She also earns merit by giving a partial or complete set
of monk’s robes (*si-vaun*). Other woven offerings, such as banners (*tung*) and palm-leaf manuscript wrappers (*phae hau khamphii*), are for use within the temple grounds.

The domestic textiles used by monks do not differ from household items of laypeople. [Photo 104] Women create the items offered to the Buddhist monks out of the same materials they weave for their own use. However, donated textiles must be new and never used before becoming an offering. The bedding accessories of Buddhist monks have the same names as those used by laypersons.

**Textiles for the Monks’ Personal Use**

In Savannakhet Province, Phu Thai weavers have ceased to construct the robes (*si-vaun*) composed of hand-woven material. Packaged sets of robes are readily available in the market. Thailand is the origin of these factory-made materials, which have been available since in the late 1980s, according to informants. Local hand-woven production of the robes most likely ceased in the late 1970s when the Socialist regime strictly prohibited religious institutions from accepting any donations, forcing them to be self-sufficient. Members of the *Sangha* had to provide for their basic needs, including nourishment. Some informants recalled donating hand-woven robes before the end of the Second Indochina War (1975).

**Manuscript Wrappers**

Phu Thai women, like women of other Tai ethnic groups, have discontinued the production of palm-leaf manuscript wrappers (*phae hau khamphii*). [Photo 105] Phu Thai wrappers are similar to those woven by other Tai groups, such as the Tai Phuan and
Tai Lue (Songsak, 2008). The primary raw material of heirloom examples is hand-spun cotton. The background is composed of un-dyed cotton yarns. For rigidity, flat bamboo slats are inserted into the weft sheds while the material is being woven, and the sticks alternate with sheds of the ground weft. Other styles contain designs formed with continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques. The supplementary cotton yarns are dyed with indigo for blue, ebony seeds for black, or sappan wood for red. The patterns are similar to those adorning laypeople’s clothing and include stars and vegetative and floral motifs.

None of the informants recalled making the manuscript wrappers. Presently, only heirloom examples exist in one known private collection. I did not observe their use within the temples, but it is possible that they exist since special permission is required to view the contents of manuscript cabinets and I did not ask to inspect the sacred spaces. Laypeople have also donated other types of textiles to function as manuscript covers and continue this practice today (Dara, 2001). Often, silk material that would usually be made into lower garments is given since the width of the cloth is sufficient to completely wrap a traditional book. A shoulder cloth is too narrow and a shawl is too wide. The sole requirement is that the fabric has never been worn or used. Silk material typically made for women and men’s lower garments serve as wrappers. Since there has been a sharp decline in sericulture in the Phu Thai households in the last twenty to thirty years, donors have replaced the silk fabrics with factory-made fabric available for sale at local markets.
Another type of textile Phu Thai women made specifically for use in the temple is the banner, or *tung*. [Photo 106] Banners are composed of narrow fabrics less than 48 cm wide, but which may be several meters long. Some examples are up to seven meters in length. Long ones are hung from poles within the temple grounds while short ones are displayed within the sermon and ordination halls. Some banners are attached directly to the long pole, while others are first fastened to a wood carving in the image of the *naak* serpent deity. The carving then hangs from the tip of the pole. However, the production and use of the wooden hangers are in decline. [Photo 107, Photo 108]

Like the manuscript wrappers, the hangings are composed of primarily un-dyed cotton. Another similarity is the inclusion of the bamboo slats in the weaving of the hangings. The strips provide rigidity but are also cut into patterns and strategically placed in sequential weft sheds to form a design, such as a funerary reliquary. [Photo 109] The bamboo strips are held in place with the insertion of cotton weft yarns. Wide, plain-woven sections may also separate the bamboo parts, depending on the weaver’s creativity. Multi-colored paper has replaced the bamboo in newer versions.

Some of the motifs adorning the tung banners differ from those decorating men and women’s clothing. The imagery includes religious iconography, such as Buddha images (*pha*), temple structures (*sim*), and funeral reliquaries (*thaat*). However, many of the designs are the same as those decorating other hand-woven textiles, such as the diamond-shaped lantern called *khoam*, the Naga serpent deity called *naak*, and various flora, including sandalwood flowers called *dauk chan*. Phu Thai women have ceased the
production of elaborately decorated banners, such as ones containing supplementary patternning or bamboo slats. Similar to robes, these items are available for purchase in the local markets and originate from Thailand, according to merchant informants.

Some weavers in the Muang Vang Angkham area create tung banners from the all-purpose textile, phae taa lo. One end of the fabric is stretched on a pole in order for the fabric to hang freely. The lower end is folded and sewn to create a point. This type of hanging generally is one to three meters long. Another variation of the banner is the tung phan haang, or a banner with one thousand tails referring to the Vessantara Jataka, the tale of the penultimate life of the Buddha. [Photo 110] A woman gathers small pieces of cloth with shredded edges. She then attaches the scraps onto a background fabric, creating a shag rug-like textile. A tung phan haang reaches one to two meter in length, and its end is also folded and sewn to create a point.

Buddhist law dictates the times when textiles may be offered to the Sangha. These occasions may be religious holidays, such as after the end of Buddhist Lent in the Bun Kathin Festival. Other permissible times are during an ordination and a funeral. Funerals are special merit-making occasions where the giving of textiles and other items acquires merit for the deceased, the donor, and others participating in the ritual. The banner is an example of a special textile allowing three parties to acquire merit. A donor orders a weaver to create a banner in honor of a third party, often a deceased relative. When the banner is presented to a temple, all three gain merit. For various Tai groups, banners are especially important in funerals since they symbolize ladders connecting the natural world with the heavens (Luu, Nguyen, Tran, Vi, & Vo, 2003; Naenna, 2005). The Phu Thai adhere to this belief too. The decrease in weaving various banners has not
affected merit-making processes since laypeople continue to donate hand-made and factory-made cloth that they purchase from other sources.

**Conclusion**

Hand-woven textiles have both functional and symbolic roles in Phu Thai society. They manipulate hand-woven material to produce attire, household accessories, and offerings to Buddhism. Cloth also has roles in ceremonies, often demarcating auspicious space and serving as gifts of exchange. Functional items, including clothing and household goods, are exchanged among members of the community in spirit appeasement, Lunar New Year, engagement, and wedding ceremonies. Laypeople also give cloth to Buddhist monks for their personal use and to use within the temple grounds.

Various types of textiles and motifs embody Phu Thai identity. Women’s clothing contains the most salient group identity markers, and informants name one outfit as the defining marker, the *sin mii seu lap la-euh*, a weft ikat-decorated skirt (*sin mii*) and an indigo cotton blouse with red trimmings (*seu lap la-euh*). Other Tai and non-Tai groups produce the same types of skirts and similar blouses, but Phu Thai informants, both men and women, recognize these garments as representing Phu Thai-ness, *Phu Thai thae thae* or *Phu Thai dang deom*. They also state that others symbols of Phu Thai identity are the *phae daam* shoulder cloth and the *phaa daam* shawl. Other textiles also consider the fringe (*soi saa*) motif to be an important identity marker for shoulder cloths and shawls.

Weavers have also incorporated foreign elements, such as materials, technology, and aesthetics, into their textile repertoire in a process of what I call domestication or
making these characteristics part of their own culture. The Phu Thai have assimilated elements of Lao textiles into their own, and the Phu Thai have influenced the textiles of the Katuic subgroups living in their vicinity, which is discussed in Chapter 5. These exchanges are reflected in the presence of borrowed vocabulary naming the foreign materials, technology, and designs.

When the field research was undertaken, the production of some types of textiles had already ceased in some Phu Thai settlements. Sometimes, production of a particular weaving had stopped altogether. Phu Thai weavers living throughout the province make similar fabrics, but differences in the types of textiles produced by those living in western and eastern Savannakhet exist. This has led to my development of a typology for Phu Thai textiles: Western Savannakhet and Eastern Savannakhet. [Map 6]

Map 6 Division of Western Savannakhet and Eastern Savannakhet Styles

The Eastern Savannakhet typology contains perhaps older textile styles since the first Phu Thai polities were founded in this area, two hundred years before the Phu Thai migration west. Textiles belonging to this category include the *phae daam* and *phaa daam*, which the Phu Thai consider as identity markers. Supplementary patterning covers the majority of the fabric’s surface in these weaving styles. Production of the *phaa daam* shawl has ceased, and a revival in their production for personal use appears unlikely. Weavers state that they would produce these distinctive textiles only if outside financial support could guarantee a market before they would begin any commercial production. Falling into the Eastern Savannakhet category is one style of *phaa la-euh* shawl. This style is not currently woven for household use, but weavers state that they would weave new ones for sale if they had orders.

The Western Savannakhet typology includes fabrics that are hybrids of Phu Thai and non-Phu Thai styles. One example is a shoulder cloth that combines characteristics of the Phu Thai *phae daam* and the Lao *phae biang* shoulder cloths. This hybridized type differs from the *phae bing* accessory inspired by the Lao style. The *phae daam* or *phaa daam* are not woven in western Savannakhet and have been replaced by the Lao style *phae bing* and the hybrid shoulder cloth. This category also includes blankets or shawls woven in a twill technique. As stated in the previous chapter, twill technique is not applied to Phu Thai fabrics in eastern Savannakhet but is only used to weave cloth in the western section. The textile repertoire of the Phu Thai in western Savannakhet has absorbed more foreign elements due to their proximity to the Lao who reside near the Mekong River.
Table 6  Distribution of Textile Types/Styles in Western and Eastern Savannakhet Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textile Type/Style</th>
<th>Western Type</th>
<th>Eastern Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seu Lap La-euh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Mii Long</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Mii Lot</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Mii Noi</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Mii Khan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Thiu</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Muk</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Ma-euh Khan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao-style Sin Chok</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho La-euh</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ho Khao</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiin Hao</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiin Dauk</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiin Thaung Dam</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiin Kep</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiin Chok</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phae Daam</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa Daam</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phae Bing with soi-saa motif</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao-style Phae Bing</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa Khit</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa Jong</td>
<td>Yes – simpler designs</td>
<td>Yes – complex designs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa La-euh Khao</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phae Taa Lo</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seu Mau Dam</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salong</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa Khen</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phae Ling</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phaa Hom - plaid</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maun</td>
<td>Yes – no patterns</td>
<td>Yes – patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile Type/Style</td>
<td>Western Type</td>
<td>Eastern Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seu</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tung</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phae Hau Khamphii</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 5

Textiles Of Neighboring Groups

Within Savannakhet Province of Laos, the Phu Thai are only one of several distinct ethnic groups. In this chapter I will explore the weaving and dress of two of these other groups, including how these relate to the weaving and dress of the Phu Thai. Members of other Tai and non-Tai ethnic groups inhabit areas near the Phu Thai settlements. In Savannakhet Province, a neighboring Tai group is the Lao who primarily live in the province’s western section. Non-Tai groups consisting of Katuic subgroups from the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic family, described briefly in Chapter 2, reside in the eastern part. Contact through migration, trade, and marital and political alliances has allowed for the exchange of material culture, such as textiles, and technology, including textile production, among the groups.

Lao weaving and clothing styles are found in the Phu Thai textile inventory, filtering to the neighboring Katuic subgroups. Members of the Katuic language branch have assimilated weaving technology from the Phu Thai, creating textiles similar in form and design to Phu Thai textiles but developing a distinct look to symbolize their group
identities. The exchange of technology and textile aesthetics has also led to the adoption of language terms associated with the domesticated foreign elements.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the ethnic groups living near the Phu Thai in Savannakhet Province, mainly the Lao and the Katang. As stated above, the Lao is the primary Tai group living in the vicinity of the Phu Thai, and both groups belong to the same Tai sub-branch. Field research has focused on the Katang minority from the central Katuic sub-branch since access to their villages was available at the time of research. Also, weavings from other Katuic subgroups are similar to the Katang’s textile heritage and generally may be applied to them. The Lao textile repertoire is described before completing an inventory of Katang weavings. A discussion of weaving technology, motifs, and design reflected in the fabrics and also in the vocabulary of the different groups follows.

The Non-Phu Thai Groups of Savannakhet Province

The Lao and the Phu Thai form the Lao-Phu Thai sub-branch of the Southwestern Tai branch, which is part of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family. Migration patterns of the ancestors of the Lao are similar to those of the Phu Thai’s ancestors. The Lao ancestors originally moved from present-day Dien Bien Phu of Vietnam, moving along the Ou and Mekong Rivers, and settling along the banks of the Mekong River. The Lao consider Prince Fa Ngum the ruler of the first Lao kingdom who unified the Lao muang polities in 1353 CE and designated Luang Phabang as the royal capital (Evans, 2003). Another former royal center is presently Laos’ national capital, Vientiane, and former Lao principalities include Champasak, located south of Savannakhet Province.
The arrival of the Lao in present-day Savannakhet Province occurred in the 16th century (see Chapter 2 on the Phu Thai). According to legend, the Lao first lived in Baan Phone Sim near the That Ing Hang Buddhist Monument, which is located approximately twelve kilometers from the provincial capital (Savannakhet, n.d.). Part of its population moved to the Mekong River bank, founding the village called Baan Thaa Hae in the first half of the 16th century. The Lao continue to reside in the province’s western part, especially along the Mekong River.

The non-Tai groups residing in eastern Savannakhet Province belong to the Katuic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer ethnic-linguistic family. The Katang compose the Central sub-branch of the Katuic line while the Bru and its subgroups, such as the So, Trii, and Mankhong (or Makong), make up the Eastern sub-branch (Schliesinger, 2003b, pp. xxvi, 114). Ancestors of these peoples migrated into mainland Southeast Asia prior to the arrival of the Tai ethnic groups (Gordon, 2005; Schliesinger 2003a, pp. 2-3).

Upon their arrival in central and southern Laos, the establishment of Lao and Phu Thai communities displaced the older Katuic villages, pushing their inhabitants into upland areas. One of these groups is the So. “So” translates as “elder brother” in So language, which may be considered an indication that they already lived in the region before the arrival of the Tai subgroups (Parkin, 1991, p. 84). A folktale offers a justification of the displacement of the original Katuic inhabitants. The story describes how the Phu Thai, the “younger brother,” beats the “elder brother,” the Katuic groups, in a contest (Kirsch, 1966, pp. 38-39). A deity tells a representative from each group to make a wish. The representative of the elder brother asks to be rich with luxurious clothing, and the opposing side, the Phu Thai, requests the ability to become wealthy by
possessing useful skills, such as weaving to create beautiful textiles that they would sell to their elder brothers. The latter reply wins the contest, and the god grants the younger brother, or the Phu Thai, the fertile, alluvial plains to farm paddy rice and knowledge of textile production, while banishing the elder brother to the forests without knowledge to weave cloth.

Both peaceful and non-peaceful interactions have occurred between the Phu Thai and Katuic sub-groups. Members of the Katuic sub-groups were occasionally captured and traded as slaves, and one French traveller referred to these non-Tai peoples as vassals of the Phu Thai (Harmand, 1997). Non-violent contact included trade for forest products and baskets in exchange for Phu Thai cloth and other goods. Through these interactions, the Bru, So, Trii, Mankhong, and Katang groups assimilated frame-loom weaving technology and dress styles of the dominant group, the Phu Thai. Another researcher supports this idea, stating that the majority of the Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic groups acquired frame-loom weaving technology, especially silk production, from the neighboring Tai (Howard, 2006).

Belonging to the same language sub-branch, the Lao and Phu Thai are similar culturally, but the Lao are more matrilineal. The description of Phu Thai social organization and religion in Chapter 2 also depicts the Lao’s. The dominant religious belief of both groups is Theravada Buddhism, or a syncretic system that combines older animist beliefs with Buddhism (Seidenfaden, 1958). The Phu Thai, however, are considered to follow more of the belief system honoring ancestors and other spirits. The Lao practice wet-rice cultivation and other agricultural activities, living in elevated wood or bamboos homes organized in a village system, akin to the Phu Thai.
Regarding the relationship between the Phu Thai and the Katuic sub-groups, the Phu Thai did not attempt to fully assimilate or were unsuccessful in their attempts to assimilate these peoples. The remote locations of these groups’ villages have prevented frequent contact with others, aiding in the preservation of their cultures, but these groups are considered less affluent than their Phu Thai neighbors. The Katang are dependent on shifting cultivation for agriculture, with fishing, hunting, and forest gathering to sustain their livelihoods.

Members of the Katang continue to speak their respective mother tongue. Males generally speak Phu Thai or Lao, necessary for trade relations, but nearly 100 percent of adult females are fluent only in their native language (Gordon, 2005). Katang language lacks a written script. A council of elders serves as the leadership of each village, and shamans conduct rituals that cure illnesses caused by spirit possession. The Katang uphold animist beliefs and taboos, holding numerous animal sacrifices to appease the spirits (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005, p. 59; Schliesinger, 2003b). Important festivals include New Year, Cha Nga, and an annual feast, Lapuep.

Katang culture follows strict rules regarding rites of passage. Taboo prohibits a birth occurring within a house. An expectant mother goes to the forest to have her child and may return after three days if both are healthy, but today an expecting father may construct a small dwelling for the birth as long as it is located outside the village (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005, p. 60). When a member of this group passes away, the corpse is buried rather than cremated.

Members of the Katang share some similarities with the Phu Thai. They reside in nuclear households in elevated homes composed of bamboo or wood. In the past,
extended families inhabited longhouses situated around a communal building. This type of village organization has ceased to exist. Gender roles also dictate the delegation of work. Men are responsible for ploughing, hunting, and carpentry. Women carry out household chores, gardening and gathering, and also weave cloth.

As stated earlier, their knowledge of frame-loom textile production originates from the Phu Thai. The time period in which the transfer of knowledge regarding sericulture and weaving technology is unknown, but members of these Katang in Savannakhet Province have been producing cloth for over one hundred years, according to the informants. Due to the complexity of their textile designs and the advanced skills needed to create such patterns, it is plausible that the transfer of technology occurred over a century ago. The assimilation of technology from the Phu Thai is evident in the textile and weaving vocabulary of the Katang. The Katang vocabulary for silk, silkworm, loom, and skirt originate from Phu Thai, but the word used for cotton, *kbaas*, is not Phu Thai or another Tai language and is the name for cotton in other related Katuic and Khmer languages. This perhaps is an indication that the Katang had knowledge of cotton cultivation prior to their contact with the Phu Thai since other members of Khmer language branch did during the 13th century CE (Zhao Daguan, 2007). The Katang may have traded raw cotton for clothing from the Phu Thai, similar to the relationships between the Khmu and Tai groups living in northern Laos before they began to weave on a frame loom (see Ireson, 1996, and Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004).

The Katang pronunciation of the loan words differs from the Phu Thai pronunciation due to the abundance of vowel diphthongs and lack of tones in the former’s language. This slight alteration in the pronunciation of adopted foreign vocabulary
reflects the domestication of language terms to accompany technology and material culture that has been assimilated by the Katang.

Table 7  Examples of Katang Weaving Vocabulary Originating from Phu Thai Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Phu Thai</th>
<th>Katang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silkworm</td>
<td>Naun</td>
<td>Naun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Mei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loom</td>
<td>Kii</td>
<td>Kii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skirt</td>
<td>Sin</td>
<td>Sein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth, Narrow</td>
<td>Phae</td>
<td>Pha-ae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth, Wide</td>
<td>Phaa</td>
<td>Pha-aa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Warp Technique</td>
<td>Muk</td>
<td>Muk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Supplementary Weft Technique</td>
<td>Kep</td>
<td>Kep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontinuous Supplementary Weft Technique</td>
<td>Koh</td>
<td>Koh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weft Ikat Technique</td>
<td>Mat Mii</td>
<td>Mat Mei</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Textiles of Non-Phu Thai Groups

The various steps of cultivating materials, such as cotton and silk, and weaving of the non-Phu Thai groups living in Savannakhet Province are not described in this chapter since detailed information on equipment, dyeing, and techniques, for example, is found in Chapter 3. Since the Katuic sub-groups acquired knowledge of frame-loom textile production from the Phu Thai, weavers from the various Katuic groups generally follow the same procedures that the Phu Thai weavers complete; thus, Chapter 3 serves as a reference for the steps of production of Katang weaving since it appears that the Phu Thai transferred technical and aesthetic knowledge to this group. However, variations that
have been found, such as in the weaving of supplementary warp technique, are described below in the Katang Textile Section.

**Lao Textiles**

Textile production of the Lao residing in Savannakhet Province has declined to the point that only a small minority of females living in rural settings continues to weave. The importance of commercial cropping has contributed to the decline of hand-woven textile production among the Lao in Savannakhet. The growth of the province’s urban area (the provincial capital of Savannakhet, or Kaysone Phomvihane District, the second most populated city of Laos) has led to opportunities for other types of work in the city. In a market economy, the necessity to earn an income requires many women to devote time to earn money with other occupations. Female informants state that they have the skills to weave but devote their time to more profitable activities. The availability of hand-woven material from other parts of the province and the country that is sold in the local markets provides an alternative source for the consumption of hand-made fabrics rather than having to weave the cloth on one’s own.

In the first Lao settlement of the province, Baan Phone Sim, two households, consisting of two women in their 70-80s and a female relative in her 40s, continue to cultivate cotton and indigo to produce cloth. (Sadly, on a follow-up visit in 2009, I received news that one of the elderly women had passed away in 2008.) They utilize the indigo-dyed cotton to make heritage-style garments. Other women weave with factory-spun yarns purchased in the market to create plaid and checked-pattern fabric. In the districts of Champhone and Songkhone, more Lao households continue to grow indigo
and cotton but on a smaller scale when compared to their Phu Thai neighbors of Lahanam village of Songkhone, for example. Residing in the western section of the province, the Lao have ceased sericulture like the Phu Thai living in this area.

**Clothing**

This section focuses on the clothing of the Lao living in Savannakhet Province rather than describing Lao textiles in general. As described in Chapter 4, Lao inspired textiles courts influenced some Phu Thai textiles and clothing. Textiles of the former, minor court of Savannakhet most likely resembled the fabrics found in the larger Lao courts of Champasak, Luang Phabang, and Vientiane (the influence of Vientiane ceased when the Thai, or Siamese, destroyed the principality in 1828). Possession of imported material, such as Indian and Chinese silks, symbolized affluence, and the designs and styles of these exotic fabrics were incorporated into local weavings if authentic examples were unobtainable. Village weavers substituted hand-spun cotton and hand-reeled silk for the fine, imported silk and gold and silver wrapped thread. Today, polyester and rayon, called *mai falang* or *mai itaalii*, have become the favored materials to produce Lao royalty-inspired fabrics. It is interesting to note that the weavers refer to the synthetic fibers as French silk, *mai falang*, and Italian silk, *mai itaalii*. They know that the yarns are not local materials but originate from another country. The weavers associate the yarns with a distant European nation, such as France or Italy, since the former Lao courts imported European silk threads. A European origin carries more prestige than one from a neighboring country, such as Vietnam. The weavers also name the synthetic fibers silk, or *mai* in Lao. If they recognize that materials as synthetic, they add *to-lay* as a descriptor (*mai to-lay*) rather than adopting the vocabulary words of rayon and polyester.
Women's Clothing

The everyday, heritage attire of Lao village women resembles that of the Phu Thai. [Photo 111] Long-sleeved, collar-less blouses (Lao: seu) are constructed of indigo-dyed, hand-spun fabric lacking any adornment. The Lao skirt (Lao: sin) resembles the composition of Phu Thai and other Tai groups’ composition: a waistband or head (Lao: houa); midsection or body (Lao: toua); and a border or foot (Lao: tiin). Lao informants did not designate a specific type of waistband to signify a group identity marker, and the material may be striped or solid-color. Regarding everyday clothing of the Lao in Savannakhet Province, skirts’ midsections and borders are like the variations made by the Phu Thai, described in Chapter 4. Lao weavers in Savannakhet favor the weft ikat technique to decorate the lower garment’s midsection. It is unknown if this is Phu Thai influence as some informants claim, or if the Lao produce weft ikat material like other groups living in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The use of supplementary warp and warp ikat techniques by the Lao does not appear in this province.

For special occasions, Lao women wear textiles made of what is considered more luxurious materials, such as silk and metallic thread. Lightweight silk material contains motifs woven with weft ikat and continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques. The use of the first technique is confined to skirt midsections and does not decorate the other parts of this lower garment or other textile types. Both supplementary weft techniques are utilized to adorn shoulder cloths, skirt waistbands, skirt midsections, and skirt borders. Often, rows of supplementary weft patterning alternate with bands of solid-color weaving to resemble Indian fabric.
**Upper Garments**

Ceremonial upper garments of Lao women living in central and southern Laos consist of a shoulder cloth and blouse. A long, narrow textile, or shoulder cloth (Lao: *phae biang*), is worn over the shirt, wrapped around the chest and draped over one shoulder. The shoulder cloth contains bands of continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning separated by plain weaving. The ends are densely decorated with motifs created with these two techniques. A variation that originates from the Luang Phabang court incorporates designs from Chinese damask silk into the center section of a shoulder cloth. For this garment style, weavers apply continuous supplementary weft technique to create a Chinese-inspired design in the center, flanked by rows of multi-colored Lao or Tai motifs to decorate the textile’s ends. [Photo 112, Photo 113] Discontinuous supplementary weft technique forms the local patterns.

In central and southern Laos, the blouse may be simple, with or without sleeves. None of the Phu Thai shawls for cool weather described in Chapter 4 have been observed in Lao households, indicating that the Lao have not produced or used these types of clothing for one hundred years or more or that they never made them. Examples have been found in areas south of Savannakhet, such as Attapeu Province, so it is likely that the Lao of Savannakhet also created or wore shawls in the distant past (Douangdeuane Bounyavong, personal communication, 2009).

**Lower Garments**

Lao women weave and/or wear variations of weft ikat-decorated skirts (Lao: *sin mii*), discontinuous supplementary weft decorated skirts (Lao: *sin chok*), and striped silk
skirts (Lao: *sin mai khan*) (described in Chapter 4, which describes Phu Thai textiles). For daily use, the garments are composed of cotton or a mixture of cotton and silk. For ceremonial skirts or lower garments worn for special events, silk and metallic wrapped threads are the favored materials. Lao weavers in Savannakhet do not weave *sin muk*, or skirts patterned with supplementary warp technique, that the Phu Thai make. Heirloom examples of traditional skirts exist within the Lao households, but the informants state the material was made elsewhere, such as Baan Saphai of Champasak Province, a well-known weaving village making court-style textiles. [Photo 114]

The Lao of Savannakhet also produce and/or utilize the various types of skirt borders woven by the Phu Thai to compose their lower garments. Borders composing skirts worn on special occasions are woven in silk and metallic threads, often in the same colors as the waistband and midsection in order to coordinate all parts of an outfit. Thus, all of the sections are woven during the one time period in order to use matching threads in the weaving process of each part. The Lao *tiin tii*, or *tiin hao* in Phu Thai, is woven with gold or silver metallic thread in order to resemble the skirt borders of the Luang Phabang court. [Photo 115] As stated in the previous chapter, Lao national school uniforms of girls of all ethnic groups include this type of border (but woven with cotton or synthetic yarns) so it continues to be utilized by women of all ages and ethnicities.

**Men’s Clothing**

Lao men’s heritage clothing for daily and special occasion use is similar to Phu Thai men’s attire described in the previous chapter. Traditional male dress for daily activities consists of a collarless shirt and baggy trousers made from indigo-dyed, hand-
spun cotton. While at leisure they replaced trousers with a tubular, plaid silk garment, or *salong*. Today, it is uncommon to see Lao men wearing traditional clothing for everyday use, replacing the garments with an international style of dress, but they continue to wear some heritage attire for rites and ceremonial occasions. Special rites, including alms giving, require male participants to don a shoulder cloth. A man may only add a shoulder cloth to his everyday clothing to designate his dress for special occasions, depending on the individual. Similar to *phae ling* worn by Phu Thai men, the Lao male shoulder cloth, *phae baat lai*, generally lacks any elaborate decoration and is composed of a plaid-patterned fabric.

Other Lao male ceremonial accessories include items associated with members of higher levels of society. The elite costume consists of a long-sleeved jacket, a shoulder cloth, and a lower garment consists of a silk fabric called *phaa yao* or *phaa khoei* (described in the previous chapter as the *phaa khen*). This length of silk is several meters long and approximately one meter wide. Lao men also wear the *salong* for special occasions in place of the *phaa yao*.

Lao women of Savannakhet ceased producing men’s special occasion, lower garments over sixty years ago, or before the end of World War II, according to informants. Silk yardage lacking the striped ends of the *phaa yao* has replaced this garment since the material may be worn in the same fashion as the *phaa yao*. Tailored versions are found in photography studios located in the urban areas, such as Kaysone Phomvihane District, specializing in weddings. Customers rent new examples of ceremonial clothing to wear in their wedding photographs, fulfilling a groom’s need to dress in princely attire for the occasion. *Salong* material, imported from Thailand, is
available for sale in the local market and allowing new examples to be consumed. Heirloom examples of both salong and phaa yao have been observed in Lao households in Savannakhet.

**Household Textiles**

Following gender roles in Tai societies, Lao women are responsible for the wellbeing and care of their families, including providing cloth for household use, such as bedding, room dividers or curtains, mosquito nets, towels, and multi-purpose fabric. Lao households have replaced many of these items with materials purchased at the local market. Lao weavers have only continued to weave solid-color, checked, or plaid-patterned fabric for domestic use. [Photo 116] Hand-spun cotton has been replaced with polyester from Thailand or other neighboring countries in many examples.

**Katang Textiles**

Rather than describing the textiles of all of the sub-groups of the Central and Eastern Katuic language subfamily, this study surveys the textiles of the Katang ethnic group belonging to the Central sub-branch since some of their villages were the most accessible during the field research. Members of the Eastern sub-branch (Bru, So, Trii, Mankhong) and the Katang produce similar types of weavings so the information on Katang textiles may be applied to these other groups. Travel restrictions enforced by the Lao government have prevented any length of time to be spent in Nong District where many members of the Eastern sub-branch reside. Field research on the Katang has been confined to Phine District.
Gender roles give the responsibility for all stages of textile production to Katang females. Males craft the equipment, but girls and women complete all other tasks related to reeling, spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Compared to Lao and Phu Thai men, Katang men devote more time decorating the wooden utensils with carving, stating that they want to make them beautiful (*ngaam*). Delicate designs adorn shuttles, for example. [Photo 117] Katang shuttles differ from the ones used by the Phu Thai and Lao since they are much larger. Some examples are over 48 cm long. [Photo 118]

The Katang situation regarding the cultivation of indigo and cotton parallels the Phu Thai (see Chapter 3). The women are able to sustain sericulture since Katang villages are located in forested areas with an abundance of mulberry trees. Mulberry leaves are the primary food source of silkworms so healthy trees are necessary to sustain the production of silk. The trees shading the village areas are large, indicating old ages. The existence of the long-established trees differs from the Phu Thai’s cultivation of mulberry short bushes that were pruned severely in order to stimulate the growth of new branches and leaves.

As stated earlier, Katang weavers apply the same techniques, with the exception of the twill technique that the Phu Thai in western Savannakhet use to adorn their textiles (described in Chapter 3). However, some variations exist in the Katang method of weaving supplementary warp and both supplementary weft techniques. Regarding supplementary warp technique Katang weavers also use an additional heddle for each line of patterning as do the Phu Thai. The supplementary heddles hang behind the primary ones from flexible bamboo planks placed across the top of the loom. [Photo 119] Rather than using an iron hook to raise a supplementary heddle, a Katang weaver steps on a
treadle connected to the additional heddle to lower the heddle in order to align the decorative warp threads with the principal warp. [Photo 120] Thus, the number of treadles equals the sum of number of heddles, both primary and secondary. This setup is similar to weaving twill technique, but twill textiles were not found in Katang villages, and Katang informants stated that didn’t use this technique.\(^6\) The Phu Thai method of weaving supplementary warp technique only requires two treadles, manipulating the main heddles only, relying on the hook to keep the other heddles raised when required.

Many Katang weavers apply another system of implementing continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques. This method places wooden sticks in the main warp rather than in a secondary vertical heddle. [Photo 121] The sticks are still used to form sheds for each section of a supplementary weft design by helping to lift a particular grouping of warp threads to form one line of a pattern. If the design composition is complex, the weaver requires an assistant to move each stick when forming the design. Only a few Katang weavers in Phine District of Savannakhet Province have transferred the pattern sticks to a supplementary vertical heddle apparatus that the Phu Thai favor. It is possible that they purchased the apparatus from Phu Thai weavers.

**Clothing**

The clothing heritage of Katang males and females resembles Phu Thai dress. The primary factors leading to similarities in the clothing originate from Katang historical interactions with the Phu Thai and include acquisition of cloth from the Phu Thai via

\(^6\) It is unsure if the weavers could understand what I was asking due to language limitations.
trade, Katang assimilation of weaving skills from the Phu Thai, and Phu Thai political and economical dominance over the Katang. In other Tai and non-Tai interactions, the Tai often provided cloth for their Austro-Asiatic neighbors (Howard & Howard, 2001; Ireson, 1996; Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). Prior to the exposure to the Phu Thai and other Tai groups, such as the Lao, Katang attire is likely to have included loincloths, sleeveless tunics, and tubular skirts, which are worn by members of similar linguistic groups, including the Katu (Viengkham 2001). The Katang adaptation of Phu Thai garments allows members of this group to form an identity distinct from other related groups to distance themselves from their dressed in cloth created on a back strap loom while becoming more closely associated to the dominant group, the Phu Thai. In order to acquire other types of textiles, informants state that even today weavers trade their hand-woven products for foreign goods at the local market. It will be of interest to observe over time if Katang weavers will begin to produce replicas of coveted textiles, which they now acquire from the market, on their own looms.

**Women’s Clothing**

Katang female heritage clothing consists of a long-sleeved blouse and a tubular skirt. [Photo 122] The inclusion of a shoulder cloth indicates that the wearer is participating in a special occasion. Their dress does not include an elaborate head covering, but women do wrap a multi-purpose cloth in a turban-like manner around their heads. Sometimes, women replace the hand-woven fabric with a terry cloth towel purchased in the local market.
**Blouses**

One type of blouse serves as upper body attire for both daily and ceremonial uses. Primarily composed of indigo-dyed, hand-spun cotton, the long-sleeved shirt may be collarless or have a round collar. [Photo 123] The garment opens down the front center, tapering slightly at the waist. The wearer embellishes the indigo blouse fabric with supplementary weft designs or embroidery imitating supplementary weft weave. She places the patterning at the bottom ends of the front- and backsides of the blouse. A narrow, woven or embroidered strip adorns the neckline and one or both sides of the front opening. In the past silver coins served as buttons and decoration, but plastic ones have replaced the currency. Colorful stitching sometimes adorns the seams and is applied to accentuate the waist.

Some blouses are lined with un-dyed, hand-spun cotton, which may contain an embroidered section placed at the backside’s lower end. [Photo 124] Many producers omit the un-dyed cotton lining for this upper garment so that the blouse’s adornment is visible on its obverse side. Katang women consider the blouse to be a Katang identity marker, and every adolescent girl is expected to complete one for her own use. Women, aged 20 years and older, wear the heritage style shirt for daily wear. Some younger females wear t-shirts and other factory-made garments for everyday attire, reserving the hand-made blouses for ceremonial occasions.

**Shoulder Cloths**

Similar to the dress of Phu Thai women, Katang females also affix a decorated shoulder cloth to their upper garments when participating in rituals or attending
ceremonial events. The most frequent occasion is during the “appeasing the spirits” ritual, which is like the Phu Thai *sou khouan* or *puk khaen* described in Chapter 2.⁷ All participants, male and female, must drape a folded cloth over one shoulder during the rite. Some wear two textiles so that one covers each shoulder with the ends crossing to form an “x” on both sides of the torso.

Katang weavers produce their own style of *phae daam* shoulder cloth, referring to it by the Phu Thai name but in their own pronunciation, *pha-ae da-aam*. [Photo 125] The bands of continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft motifs alternate with weft stripes and, sometimes, very narrow rows of continuous supplementary weft designs. The patterning often covers the fabric’s surface with little of the ground surface visible. A Katang female wears the shoulder cloth with her indigo-cotton blouse and either a *sein mii*, *sein muk*, or a Katang style-*sein koh* if the heirloom exists in the household. This specific dress is required for specific religious ceremonies since Katang informants designate this attire as group identity markers that their ancestors will recognize when participants in the natural world attempt to contact their kin living in the supernatural realm.

Some women also produce the Lao-style shoulder cloth, *phae bae-aang* (*phae bing* in Phu Thai). This sparsely, supplementary weft-decorated weaving often coordinates in design and color with a Lao-style skirt, or *sin chok*. Among some adolescent girls and young adult women, this style of dress is popular to wear at non-Katang special rites, such as the Phu Thai Lunar New Year Festival or the That Ing Hang Festival.

⁷ It is possible that the Katang assimilated this rite from the Phu Thai, but I did not address pursue this question in the present study.
The checked or plain-patterned textile, *pha-ae taa loo*, functions as a scarf, handkerchief, or shoulder cloth. Like the Phu Thai version, the patterning is a simple checked design of un-dyed and indigo-dyed cotton. For a plaid version, additional colors, such as red and yellow, are included in the weaving. Lengths of this material are joined to form larger pieces of fabric to serve as bedding discussed later in this chapter, allowing this cloth type to be versatile.

**Head Coverings or Turbans**

During the field research period, Katang females were not observed covering their heads with an elaborately decorated textile. None of the informants are able to recall wearing an ornate head cloth, decorated with embroidery or weaving techniques. Women over the age of forty years old do wear the multi-purpose, checked cloth (*pha-ae taa loo*) like a turban, however. [see Photo 122] A terry cloth towel often replaces the hand-woven fabric as a head covering.

**Skirts**

The Katang tubular skirt (Katang: *sein*), which is composed of the three main parts, resembles the Phu Thai *sin*. The waistband may consist of white (un-dyed) cotton fabric or a piece of striped, red material. [Photo 126] Some skirts possess two waistbands formed from both kinds of fabric. The Katang do not consider the waistband a Katang identity marker; thus, this part’s composition varies but is generally not made from valuable material, such as silk or an elaborately woven cloth. The midsection may be decorated with a variety of techniques, including weft ikat, supplementary warp, and both types of supplementary weft techniques. The weavers confine warp pick up technique to
the border. The application of continuous and or discontinuous supplementary weft techniques to sparsely decorate this skirt part has become more popular among the younger weavers (30 years old and less) in order to emulate Lao-style fabrics. Some explanations for wearing these textile types include being “modern,” or than sa-maei, and they were beautiful, ngaam. It also appears that they young adults with more exposure to the outside world through education wanted to be more similar to the elite, urban and political.

The Katang produce a distinctive skirt decorated with supplementary warp technique, or sein muk. [Photo 127] The supplementary warp patterning forms large bands in the midsection. Each band requires numerous supplementary heddles, sometimes eight or more, to complete a design. As stated earlier, a treadle is attached to each additional heddle in order to manipulate this supplementary equipment, contrasting with the Phu Thai use of a metal hook to move the supplementary heddles. A weaver uses brightly colored yarns to form the supplementary patterning on an indigo-dyed cotton background. Like the Phu Thai, the weavers refer to the supplementary warp motif by the number of extra heddles required to complete one row of designs. For example, the sein muk pa-aet needs eight supplementary heddles to create the design. [Photo 128] Worn for daily activities, the sein muk generally lacks a decorative border.

Like the Phu Thai, the weavers also restrict use of weft ikat technique (Katang: mat mei) to decorate skirt midsections. [Photo 129] When weaving a weft ikat-decorated fabric, they pattern the majority of the material’s surface with this technique rather than confining weft ikat designs into narrow rows like the Phu Thai-style sin mii noi and sin mii khan. Thus, Katang weavers create both the Phu Thai-style mii lot (weft ikat without
any breaks in the design) and mii long (each section of the pattern alternate with solid color weaving) but not the mii noi and mii khan that are woven by the Phu Thai. Katang weavers apply weft ikat technique to both silk and cotton threads. [Photo 130, Photo 131] The Katang use of this technique appears to be less restricted by linear aesthetics, allowing the creation of imaginative designs. [Photo 132] The use of warp ikat technique has not been observed in examples of Katang textiles found in the village sites. Thus, Katang weavers did not domesticate this particular skill from the Phu Thai.

The Katang apply discontinuous supplementary weft technique (koh) to decorate two styles of skirts. One style is distinctly woven by the Katang (and linguistically related groups in the vicinity) and can be considered a distinct Katang style. [Photo 133] A few weavers from the younger generations have assimilated another type applying koh, or the Lao style, directly from the Phu Thai and indirectly from the Lao. A solid color background dotted with small discontinuous supplementary weft patterning distinguishes the domesticated type.

Production of the Katang style discontinuous supplementary weft-decorated skirts (sein koh) has ceased in Phine District where the field research initially took place. [Photo 134] However, Mankhong weavers in neighboring Nong District continue to make this skirt; thus, it is possible that the Katang living in remoter areas still weave sein koh material, but the author did not have the opportunity to observe the production of this skirt type in the village setting. [Photo 135] In Katang-style sein koh, discontinuous supplementary weft technique is used to cover the majority of the weaving’s surface. The warp is usually a combination of indigo-dyed cotton and stick lac-dyed silk stripes. Indigo-dyed cotton forms the ground weft. Often, two of the ground weft yarns alternate
with two sheds of discontinuous supplementary weft woven with thick silk thread. The four threads form one section of a design row. The weaver incorporates the border section into this textile, weaving the midsection and hem in one fabric. [Photo 136] She changes the patterning on one side of the weaving to designate the border end. Later versions contain synthetic threads in their compositions.

Younger Katang weavers (aged in their 20s and younger) favor the Lao style of discontinuous supplementary weft-patterned skirts, described previously in the Phu Thai and Lao textile sections, which they call sein chok. [Photo 137] The skirt’s midsection consists of a sparsely decorated lightweight fabric, often woven in synthetic thread. The motifs formed with discontinuous supplementary weft technique are spaced widely apart on the textile’s surface. The skirt’s border, a separate piece of material, contains denser patterning formed with one or both types of supplementary weft technique, often in the same colors as the midsection in order to match.

The skirt borders woven by the Katang reflect the transmission of weaving styles directly from the Phu Thai and indirectly from the Lao. As described in the previous paragraphs, Katang weavers produce Lao-style borders usually to coordinate with Lao-style midsections that they have woven using the same or similar yarns to compose a sein chok skirt. They refer to these borders as tein chok (a hem piece decorated with discontinuous supplementary weft technique) and tein kep (a border with continuous supplementary weft patterning).

Some skirt types worn for daily attire sometimes lack a border section, such as the sein muk. The bottom edge of this skirt is absent of any decoration. Katang women’s ceremonial lower garment, or the sein koh, does not have a separate border, or a hem
piece made from a separate piece of fabric that is attached to the lower end of the midsection. While weaving discontinuous supplementary weft patterned material for this skirt style’s midsection, the weaver changes the designs at one selvage or side of the fabric to designate it as the bottom end. The border is, thus, integrated into the midsection.

Katang women also adorn their skirts with Phu Thai-style borders described in Chapter 4. The assimilation of these textiles is not unexpected since the Katang and related groups adopted other fabrics and the technology to weave from the Phu Thai. No distinct differences have been observed in Katang hem pieces when compared to Phu Thai borders. Distinctive characteristics of Katang lower garments are weaving the border section along with the midsection in one cloth or not having any border in the form of a separate hem piece.

_Men’s Clothing_

Around the beginning of the 20th century, men’s attire was composed of a loincloth and a head covering composed of indigo cotton cloth. One elder over 70 years old remembers when he was a child that his father wore a loincloth instead of pants and a dark indigo textile as a head covering, but the other village informants could not confirm this information. Katang males are likely to have used loincloths in the past since men’s heritage dress of neighboring minority groups, such as the Katu from the Western sub-branch of the Katuic ethno-linguistic sub-group, includes this item (Viengkham, 2001).

Katang men late adopted Phu Thai male attire since their clothing style resembles Phu Thai men’s dress, such as the form or cut. Simple, tailored garments of a long-
sleeved, collarless shirt with baggy trousers made from indigo-dyed, hand-spun cotton compose Katang men’s heritage clothing. Both garments are unadorned, lacking patterning or other types of embellishment. Traditionally, fabric ties fasten the shirt opening in the center of the front side, but plastic buttons have now replaced them. None of the informants could recall using or wearing silver coins for this purpose.

**Shoulder Cloths**

For ceremonies, men are required to wear a shoulder cloth, especially since men officiate at both religious and secular rituals. The elder or shaman wears two fabrics, one draped over each shoulder and diagonally crossing the body, while presiding over a rite. Other males emulate this look to display their household’s wealth or prestige. Smaller versions serve as head cloths. [Photo 138] The preferred textile is the *pha-ae da-aam* described above in the women’s clothing section and in Chapter 3 describing Phu Thai textiles. Katang men are observed more often than Phu Thai men wearing this elaborately decorated material. The Katang beliefs in spirits, especially from the natural environment, and adherence to taboos are perhaps explanations to why Katang men have not abandoned this garment, since the motifs are considered to have talismanic properties. As a Katang identity marker assimilated from the Phu Thai repertoire, a Katang woman must provide examples of this ceremonial cloth for her family members. The Katang *pha-ae da-aam* is another example of the domestication of foreign elements into a culture.
Household Textiles

The females of a Katang household are also responsible for weaving textiles for domestic purposes. These items include bedding, curtains, room dividers, towels, and hammock-like cribs. The weavers use un-dyed or indigo-dyed, hand-spun cotton to form the household textiles. The checked or plaid *pha-ae taa loo* also functions as a domestic item, forming bedding and towels, for example. Otherwise, bedding and towels lack patterning.

The Katang utilize a textile similar to the Phu Thai style *pha-aa la-euh* as curtains, doorway covers, room dividers, and hammock-like cribs. [Photo 139, Photo 140] Different uses of the Katang style *pha-aa la-euh* as household accessories have been observed throughout the villages, but they are not used as shawls as in the Phu Thai case. In these circumstances their use is more “domestic” rather than decorative or ritualistic. The woven motifs may possess talismanic meanings, but “their protection” is required on an everyday basis rather than stored and brought out for only special occasions.

The Katang version of the *pha-aa la-euh* differs from the Phu Thai since supplementary weft patterning does not cover the majority or the whole surface of the textile. The Katang type confines the designs to a large band at one of the accessory’s ends, leaving the middle and opposite end sections unadorned. The application of continuous supplementary weft technique or a combination of both continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques creates the patterning in the large band. This item is composed of two pieces of material joined together along one side, requiring the weaver to compose a long textile with patterned ends. The design composition is
replicated to create a mirror image on a vertical plane. When the weaving is complete, the fabric is cut in half and joined together along one side in the center, aligning the designs. If the textile is vertically folded in half, the patterning of each half should align to create a reflection. Decorative stitching embellishes the center seam and warp ends that are folded and hemmed to the reverse side. [Photo 141]

**Religious Textiles**

Due to the restrictive nature of Katang religion, I was unable to observe any major rituals, such as the annual ancestor veneration rite, since non-community members are forbidden to participate or even enter the village during a period of worship. Also, without the Lao government’s permission to reside in the Katang villages for any length of time I did not observe any funeral or wedding ceremonies. A subsequent visit to the Katang villages in 2008 allowed me to document an heirloom textile specifically used for funerals. The informants have been reluctant to reveal details of this ceremonial item’s use, except it served sometimes as a blanket and sometimes as a shroud or coffin cover. They state that this textile would have been buried along with the corpse, but, as production of this ceremonial weaving ceased, village members have been kept some as heirlooms to be used at other relatives’ funerals. A family member would remove the weaving from the corpse before the body was placed in its gravesite. A new example was woven since an older one was saved from the destruction in a grave. Since many of these textiles are presently appearing on the regional antiquities market for sale, it is

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8 This may due to communication problems, which are completely my fault. I do not speak Katang and did not have much time to spend with Katang informants in order to become more familiar or comfortable with me.
possible that their use has been abandoned altogether. Informants state that in the past this textile was also utilized as blanket or cover by the living.

This ceremonial textile is composed of a very long, narrow fabric more than seven meters long. [Photo 142] This textile type generally has a red silk and indigo cotton striped warp. One end contains discontinuous supplementary weft patterning woven on a red silk or cotton ground weft. The opposite end is patterned with supplementary warp technique in either white silk or cotton. The supplementary warp designs continue for two-thirds of the fabric, and then the supplementary weft decoration begins. However, before the supplementary weft patterning is woven the white supplementary warp threads are cut since they are no longer used in weaving the cloth. The inclusion of the white threads would not allow the red background of the supplementary weft patterning to be prominent. The yarns are cut, braided, and allowed to hang on the fabric’s reverse side, and the cutting of the warp threads is an unusual characteristic of this material. [Photo 143, Photo 144] This method of cutting unused warp yarns is not found on other textiles decorated with supplementary warp technique among the Katang, related Katuic or Khmer groups, the Phu Thai, or other Tai groups in Laos. The nearest known examples of cutting extra warp threads are found in some weavings of various Chin groups living in northwest Burma, also called Myanmar (Fraser & Fraser, 2005).

Once the weaving of the textile is complete, the weaver removes it from the loom, folds it in half, and proceeds to sew the textile together along its inner sides. This causes a triangular peak to form at the folded end. [Photo 145] If the weaver is highly skilled, each side of the cloth is a mirror reflection of the other. This goal is extremely difficult to achieve since the textile is woven over a long period of time, and the weaver must rely
on her memory regarding the spacing, size, and types of motifs found on one end in order to repeat the arrangement on the opposing side. The alignment also depends on how consistent she is in the weaving of the weft into the warp. For example, if her rhythm is light one some days and heavy on others, the density of the threads expands and contracts. While the weaver may accurately count the number of threads and their sequence, the irregularity will create different sized bands of motifs at the opposite ends.

Katang informants state that the pointed end designates the end, which the head would rest upon. Resting on top of the material, the excess material is folded over the feet to cover the topside of the body. The red end would cover the upper body.

Examples of this type of weaving have not been observed in Phu Thai villages, but other Tai groups living in northern Laos, and possibly Vietnam at one time, did produce and use a similar version (*phaa tuum*) (Cheesman, 2004). Vaguely similar Tai fabrics that are currently produced as shawls and blankets are shorter and do not contain the pointed end. The warp of the *phaa tuum* is zone-dyed, or partially dyed red while the rest remains white. A length of material is cut in half before sewn together along the inner side seams to create a straight edge at the cut end. Since the Katang assimilated all other textile types from the Phu Thai, this textile is a mystery since there is no memory of such production and heirlooms of similar textiles are not present in Phu Thai villages. Is it possible it originated from another Tai group? This textile requires further study.

**Conclusion**

Non-Phu Thai groups residing in Savannakhet Province produce hand-woven cloth on a frame loom, similar to the Phu Thai. These ethnicities include the closely
related Lao and members of the Katuic sub-branch of the Mon-Khmer language family. The Lao primarily live in western Savannakhet, and they have been the political majority in Laos since the 14th century. Several Lao textile styles have been incorporated into the Phu Thai fabric repertoire, especially the aesthetics of textiles that were consumed in the Lao courts. Many of the inspirations came from farther afield, such as India and China. Lao royalty, like other Southeast Asian courts, coveted imported luxurious textiles to consume and to symbolize their prestige and wealth (Maxwell, 1990). Local weavers incorporated metallic threads and the sparsely decorated compositions found in prestige textiles into their own weavings to produce similar fabrics.

When field research was conducted in Savannakhet, many Lao women had ceased weaving to carry out more profitable activities. In the Lao village of Ban Phone Sim, only three members of one household have continued to cultivate indigo and cotton for textile production, but, last year, one of these women passed away. Other Lao weavers utilize machine spun, synthetic fibers available in the market to weave multi-purpose material. This village’s proximity to the provincial capital’s market allows access to textiles and clothing originating from other parts of Laos and neighboring countries, mainly Thailand. Both hand-woven cloth and manufactured material are available for sale and have replaced the majority of the home-based production in the Lao villages of Savannakhet.

The hand-woven fabrics of one Katuic subgroup, the Katang, were examined for the field research portion of this study. Other groups produce similar textiles so the data gathered on the Katang can generally be applied to related minorities’ weavings. Time limitations and restrictions enforced by the government prohibited in-depth research with
these minorities. Further research of the textiles and their production of related groups is required to develop a deeper understanding of these ethnicities’ cultures.

Through contact with the Katang, the Phu Thai have transmitted frame loom weaving technology to this minority. Similar to the situation of related groups (see Howard & Howard, 2001), the Katang traded for cloth from the Phu Thai but acquired the skills to weave on a frame loom at least one hundred years ago. The assimilation of technology, textiles, and designs is reflected in the incorporation of Phu Thai vocabulary into their own language. The Katang domesticated Phu Thai textile styles and developed their own styles to symbolize their group identity. Their weavers produce skirts, shoulder cloths, and household accessories decorated with the same techniques as the Phu Thai. However, differences are found in some of the technology of these techniques. For example, the Katang utilize multiple treadles to manipulate the secondary heddles to create supplementary warp designs.

Katang textile identity markers include the woman’s blouse and a skirt decorated with discontinuous supplementary weft, or sein koh. These items are similar to Phu Thai examples, but the selection and composition of the motifs and colors, as well as the applied technique, allow for the creation of distinctly different fabrics. They also produce a ceremonial textile that has not been found among neighboring groups. A unique characteristic of this item is the cutting of the supplementary warp yarns when they are no longer required to make patterning in the fabric. The loose threads are braided and left on the reverse side, which is not found on any other weaving in Laos or neighboring countries. The hand-woven cloth production of the Katang and related groups needs further study for a better understanding of their textile repertoire.
Chapter 6

The Commercialization Of Phu Thai Textiles And Identity In Contemporary Society

This chapter introduces some of the external factors that have affected Phu Thai hand-woven textiles and their production. Changes in governance and education during the French colonial period, the political turmoil of the Indochina Wars, the Communist Revolution of 1975, and the victor’s formation of a Lao nation-state are major events impacting Phu Thai society and the development of hand-woven textile production. Although commercialization existed in Laos prior to the 1975 takeover, the socialist regime’s adoption of a market economy and eradication of trade barriers in the 1980s has accelerated the commercialization of hand-woven textile production.

This chapter begins with descriptions of some events affecting Phu Thai hand-woven textile production. A case study of one private business highlights the transformation of textile production. External institutions that influence Phu Thai textiles and identity are then examined before concluding with a discussion of women and weaving today.
The French Colonial Period (1890s – 1940s)

The French incorporation of Lao territory in their colony Indochina brought numerous changes to the people of present-day Savannakhet Province, including changing the name of the riverside settlement, Thaa Hae, to Savannakhet. The French imported a large number of Vietnamese into the provincial capital where they came to compose the majority of the colonial administration and also appointed members of the local communities in this area to govern the surrounding population, such as a Phu Thai magistrate (Stuart-Fox, 2006). The colonial bureaucracy utilized indigenous political systems but introduced new methods of governance and institutions, and a new elite emerged with the establishment of the colonial bureaucracy. Other opportunities introduced by the French included a secular education system. Local civil servants received training in Vietnam and France, and their children of the royalty and new upper class had the privilege to attend schools abroad and later in Laos once schools were founded in Vientiane and other cities (Evans, 2008). Members of society who were not connected with the Indochinese administration, such as villagers, were nonetheless exposed to the habits of the colonial elite when members of this level of society met with the local populace.

Secular Education System

The implementation of a secular education system in Laos by the French Colonial administration in the early 20th century allowed both boys and girls opportunities to attend school. In traditional Phu Thai society, like other Buddhist Tai cultures, females were excluded from receiving a formal education at the Buddhist temple, the center of
learning for males (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). Thus, religious education was, and continues to be, only available to boys as novices and men as monks. Primary and secondary schools were established in limited areas in the first quarter of the 20th century, such as in Savannakhet city and the Phu Thai settlement of Lahanam.

Since secondary schools were only located in large cities, the number of females reaching this level declined severely in comparison to primary school attendance since households generally did not allow their daughters to leave the home without the supervision of a relative (Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). The daughters, like the sons, of colonial bureaucratic elite families were privileged with these educational prospects since they could live with their relatives working in the urban areas. Although the formal education of women was limited during this time period, the compulsory education system has provided a foundation for future development.

Changes in Attire

One method of conforming, in general, is adopting the clothing styles of the elite. In French Indochina local, urban males exchanged traditional dress for a new French or international standard, which may be considered the unofficial uniform of the colonial administration (Douangdeuane et al., 1995, p. 7). Male attire included fitted trousers, button-down dress shirts, dinner jackets, ties, closed shoes, and other accessories. New fashions replaced old ones as soon as they were available at the tailor shops. New styles trickled to the outlying male populace, and men readily assimilated the different forms of dress worn by visiting officials into their own clothing repertoire.
Women’s clothing also experienced change with the introduction of tailoring and the mechanized sewing machine. The loose, rectangular tube-skirt was transformed into a form-fitting lower garment with the addition of darts and hooks in the waistband, but the fold of excess material on the front-side remained intact (Douangdeuane et al., 1995; Viengkham, 2006). [Photo 146] The skirt’s structure also retained all of its parts: waistband, midsection, and border. Sometimes, the length of a skirt or its sections, such as the midsection or skirt border, shortened or lengthened to mimic the latest fashions.

The blouse has undergone the most alterations, machine-sewn in various forms. There have been variations in the neckline and in the length of the sleeves, if there are any. Different modifications allow the upper garment to fasten in the front, back, or at the side with buttons or a zipper. In the provincial capital of Savannakhet, the blouse diverged from the indigo-blue to white and other colors.

Attendance in the secular education system requires a uniform for both sexes, including white tops and dark lower garments. The female student’s skirt is in the form of a tube skirt, or sin, with a solid color (usually indigo blue) midsection and the Phu Thai-style tiin hao border. Some Phu Thai girls exchange the solid blue midsection to weft ikat-decorated ones. Male students wore the baggy, pantaloon-like phaa khen or trousers with a long-sleeved shirt or jacket (Evans, 2008).

**Political Turmoil and the Communist Revolution: 1950 – 1975**

As briefly described in previous chapters, the political unrest of the French Indochina Wars brought instability to Laos and in Savannakhet Province, especially in the area of the older Phu Thai settlements. Sections of the Ho Chi Minh Trail located in
eastern Savannakhet were subject to aerial bombardments. Xepone was the site of the Lam Seun 719 (or Lam Son 719), a decisive battle in the Second French Indochina War where the Pathet Lao forces were victorious over the Southern Vietnamese army (Nolan, 1986). Both Phu Thai and non-Phu Thai groups fled the area, and Xepone town was completely obliterated.

The national coalition governments of the early 1970s brought stability to Laos, but the Communist Revolution in 1975 caused major changes to the lives of the country’s citizens. Some of the new regime’s policies included discouraging the use of silk, a prestige material associated with the abolished monarchy and elite classes. Trade embargoes with neighboring Thailand and China effectively pushed Laos to be self-sufficient, including in the production of cotton cloth (Ireson, 1996; Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). As the primary producers of hand-woven fabric, women continued to play important roles in providing material for domestic and commercial use for the country’s consumption.

In the mid-1980s, the socialist regime reversed its policy of self-sufficiency and promoted a market economy. The collapse of Soviet Union and the end of that nation’s aid to Laos encouraged the government to cooperate with its neighbors and open its borders to trade. These changes led to the growth of industry and the founding of garment factories. The export garment industry prospered since special concessions regarding importation into other countries allowed Lao products to compete on the international market. However, this industry has floundered in recent years due to restrictions in the quota-free regulations, and the government and private businesses sought alternatives for generating income (Banesaty, Khouanchay, & Bouavanh, n.d.).
The relaxation of the government’s socialist policies allowed the return of the use of prestige silk items among the populace. Numerous development projects, including some promoting natural dyeing and sericulture, emerged to improve the standard of living of the citizens of one of the least developed nations. Utilizing women’s weaving knowledge and skills, the natural dyeing and hand weaving projects focused on creating diverse and marketable merchandise. Private businesses sprung up focusing on the commercial production of hand-woven textiles, especially silk, whose status demanded higher prices compared to other materials, such as cotton.

In the late 1990s one Phu Thai couple, originally from Lahanam, Savannakhet, focused on the commercial production of Phu Thai hand-woven cloth to promote locally, regionally, and internationally. While some non-profit entities sold hand-spun cotton items, this couple was the first to make Phu Thai naturally dyed, hand-woven cotton fabric the focus of their private business, Lahasin. Promoting the products’ distinctive Phu Thai-ness became an important marketing strategy.

Lahasinh presently continues to be the sole, formalized distributor of Phu Thai textiles. The business venture sells their merchandise in formal, commercial settings of retail outlets and trade fairs. A case study of the Lahasin follows, describing the owners’ backgrounds, and the company’s history, products, marketing strategy, and the innovations that this company’s owners have introduced to Phu Thai textile production.

**Lahasinh - Case Study**

Mr. Bounthong and Mrs. Songbandith Nhotmankhong, a Phu Thai couple from Lahanam Village of Songkhone District, founded Lahasin, or Thonglahasin Co., Ltd in
the late 1990s. Both in their mid-40s, they are distantly related cousins. According to Mrs. Songbandith, her grandfather was the Phu Thai magistrate for the French colonial administration, bestowing him with an elevated status within the local community. This elevated status extends to members of his family, including later generations. This elevated status includes responsibility in caring for members of the community, and family members have become patrons of the villagers, or clients, as described in Chapter 2. This patron-client relationship has been applied to the business operations of Lahasinh where the clients (villagers) work and produce for the patrons (owners) who reciprocate by providing employment for the clients and serving as a reliable source of support in emergencies. The villagers are able to earn an income from work under the business owners and have expectations that their patrons will help them in cases of emergencies.

During the revolution (mid-1970s), Mr. Bounthong stated that he served in the Lao People’s Army, the military arm of the communist party, as a teenager. He recalled orders to enter merchant establishments and destroy anything resembling “decadent” capitalist characteristics. As an avid admirer of antiques and art, he was reluctant to destroy paintings and other objects. In order to salvage this cultural heritage, he was able to keep items that were damaged but not completely ruined. For example, by scratching off the image of a king in a painting, he had not disobeyed orders since he had erased the anti-communist or socialist elements from the artwork.

Although residing in Kaysone Phomvihane District of Savannakhet today, both husband and wife lived in Vientiane as children to attend school and still have relatives in the nation’s capital. By maintaining the familial connections both in the rural Phu Thai villages of Songkhone District and in the nation’s capital, the couple has been able to
build a successful hand-woven textile business. Production occurs primarily in the rural setting while major marketing and sales take place in urban centers, such as Vientiane and Luang Phabang. The business’ presence in these cities has opened doors to international sales in Europe, Australia, and Japan, for example.

Mrs. Songbandith stated she began this venture to improve the wellbeing of rural families by generating work that did not require leaving the village setting. The introduction of a market economy required many villagers to earn an income, and some turned to commercial cropping when they formerly relied on subsistence agriculture. Others left the rural setting for paid wages in urban areas, and the opening of the transnational borders led to an exodus of young adults to Thailand for more opportunities in earning an income. A whole generation has been absent from their households, leaving grandparents to raise the children in many villages.

With an interest in arts and culture, Mrs. Songbandith desired to preserve her (Phu Thai) cultural heritage. By establishing the commercial production of hand-woven textiles, she created jobs in the village setting, allowing women to earn a wage within the home. Since the majority of the Phu Thai of Savannakhet Province ceased raising silkworms in western Savannakhet but continued to cultivate cotton, Mrs. Songbandith concentrated on naturally dyed, hand-spun cotton textiles for the business venture.

Under Mrs. Songbandith’s management and supervision, women’s knowledge of weaving and natural dyeing is applied to create standardized products. Following the traditional gender roles, women continue to carry out all steps of textile production from raising the raw materials to weaving the fabric. Although some weavers, who are master indigo dyers, can complete the dyeing process, Mrs. Songbandith has centralized this
phase of production at a workshop located behind her home in the provincial capital for quality control. After the dyeing step has been completed the threads are returned to the villagers to weave into cloth according to her orders. Her cousin, living in the ancestral home in Lahanam, manages the weavers and production at the village level. The business owners regularly visit the village area to maintain their relationships with their employees, and they often sponsor important religious festivals, weddings, and funerals, to carry out their roles as patrons.

As stated above, the interactions between the employers and employees emulate the indigenous types of relationships of the Tai ethnic groups, which may be called feudal. There is a sense of mutual obligation among the weavers, or villagers, and the urban-based owners. The owners feel responsible for the wellbeing of the villagers, including providing opportunities to earn sufficient wages, and, thus, they constantly collect orders from customers in order to provide work and an income for current employees and must increase the sales in order to employ others.

Nhotmankhong Residence – Center of Operations and Sales

The Nhotmankhong home in Kaysone Phomvihane District is a contemporary brick/plaster residence. The living room, which also serves as a shop, is tastefully decorated with teak furniture, antique silver, and defiled art from Mr. Bounthong’s army days. Along one side of the house is a wooden structure intended to resemble a traditional Phu Thai home. The ground floor, where weaving traditionally would have occurred, is used today as the tailoring and finishing section of the company.
The business owners have arranged the interior of the wooden structure’s top floor with items that would be found in a traditional Phu Thai home. They have set up one large room in how they idealize a traditional dwelling should be clean without cobwebs, and minimal dust. This romantic notion of the traditional abode includes a collection of new and heirloom fabrics, cooking implements, antique furniture, and salvaged woodcarvings. The consolidation of a household’s contents into one area would not have occurred in an inhabited home. For example, the kitchen and sleeping quarters are separated in reality.

This nostalgic setting appeals to urban and foreign customers, invoking images of an imagined past. When organized groups visit, other traditional items are neatly displayed, and villagers, transported in from the countryside, play music and demonstrate different steps of cotton thread production. This is an example of creating an authentic setting (MacCannell, 1992).

Diversifying Designs, Color, and Merchandise

Mrs. Songbandith serves as the main designer of commercial textile production. In order to compete on the national and international markets, she has diversified the patterning of some of the newly produced, hand-woven fabrics by introducing innovations. Her primary resources for motifs are the weavers’ collective memories of patterns and examples found in her heirloom textiles collection. The designs are combined in numerous ways to create new styles. She states she must vary old designs to create new styles based on what she thinks will attract foreign customers. “New” weft ikat patterning includes changing the spacing of old motifs or eliminating some sections
of a traditional composition in order to simplify the pattern. Abstract designs of bold lines or blocks of color formed with weft ikat technique are not intricate but are very difficult to achieve with ikat technique. [Photo 147] The bold lines made from this technique signify the weaver’s advanced skills. Observers who understand the weft ikat technique process are the few who appreciate these designs’ “simplified” complexity, however.

One of Phu Thai women’s identity markers, the weft ikat-decorated skirt or sin mii, is an important type of the business’ merchandise. [Photo 148] The business produces the various types of weft ikat decorated skirt midsections, including mii lot, mii long, mii noi, and mii khan described in Chapter 4. Designs found on heirloom examples are reproduced, and new abstract patterns are introduced to create a modern look in a traditional form. The majority of the cloth is indigo-dyed cotton with the ikat patterning in white. However, in order to expand the product line, other colors have been incorporated into the composition, mainly in fabrics for the sin mii noi.

Besides the different types of midsections, Lahasinh also makes the other skirt sections for sale. Lahasinh’s production of traditional-style skirt borders concentrates on the tiin hao and tiin nyok dauk and avoids the Lao-style ones in order to focus on distinctive Phu Thai textiles. [Photo 149] The business also sells striped material to be used as the Phu Thai skirt waistband but often omits the lower waistband section composed of un-dyed cotton in their products. [Photo 150] This is an indication they do not intend to completely replicate the traditional skirt, but Mrs. Songbandith has introduced an innovation by modifying it. Customers, thus, may purchase a finished
garment made of material selected by Mrs. Songbandith, or they may compose a skirt from the sales outlets’ available merchandise.

Another heritage textile is recreated for sale, the phaa la-euh shawl. The business’ foreign clientele are the targeted consumers for this product. The contemporary version of this traditionally ceremonial accessory becomes an interior decoration, such as a wall hanging and a bed or table covering, stripping the object of its sacred qualities. The textile’s owner and function are altered in the arena of commercial production. High prices for this textile’s new versions are justified to the buyer due to its “rarity” and sacred use in a traditional setting of a Phu Thai village. As a genuine Phu Thai textile, the new owner may bring some of this distinctiveness into their homes.

The Lahasinh adaptation of a phae bing shoulder cloth is found in the reduction of patterning. In heirloom examples, rows of patterning alternate with bands of plain weave from one end of the weaving to the other. Their contemporary version confines the designs to the textile’s ends, leaving a large unadorned section in the center without decoration. This accessory now comes in different sizes. Some are narrow while others are wide and long, similar to the traditional two-panelled shawl but only composed of one piece of fabric.

An important innovation in contemporary Phu Thai textiles is color. Mrs. Songbandith continues to utilize the weavers’ indigenous knowledge of numerous natural dyes to create new shades of color after she has consulted with international natural dye specialists. She applies the latest dyes to an array of products. Variations of the checked and plaid all-purpose material, phae taa lo, now come in different combinations of color. Lahasinh’s phae bing shoulder cloth is composed in a range of colors not considered
traditional by Phu Thai weaver informants. For example, their version is woven in two shades of indigo. Bolts of naturally dyed fabric now come in a rainbow of colors, which the buyer can select to form into fashion or housing accessories. [Photo 151] By applying the natural colors in non-conforming ways, Mrs. Songbandith has expanded the business’ products.

Mrs. Songbandith also experiments with texture, incorporating thin and thick yarns into one fabric, breaking with the tradition of weaving with fine and uniform yarns. It is interesting to note that the Phu Thai weaver informants consider these new patterns and applications of color to be unattractive or in their words, “crazy” (baa). For example, yellow cotton material is perceived as ugly in their collective sense of beauty. They have traditionally confined the use of this color to accents or supplementary designs rather than being a material’s primary color.

The diversification of merchandise has been another innovation that Lahasinh has introduced in the production of Phu Thai textiles. Lahasinh sells tailored clothing and accessories for both genders, and contemporary household items are common products, such as wall hangings, table runners, towels, placemats, and napkins. [Photo 152] Traditional bedding material has transformed into pillows and cushions of different shapes and sizes, Japanese-style mattresses, and Western-style bedspreads. [Photo 153, Photo 154] Traditional or heritage-style and contemporary patterned cloth composes other types of new merchandise, expanding the product range and giving the customers additional choices in their consumption of Phu Thai fabrics. The company also sells bolts of fabric available in plaid or checked patterns, weft ikat patterns, and solid-colors.
Regarding clothing, the venture changes forms, styles, and colors in order to create merchandise that will appeal to today’s customers. In a world of commercial production, fashions change constantly in order for new items to appear on the market. While the international fashion world has had less effect on Lahasin products, the changes in fashion in the national scene, or in Vientiane, have influenced the expanding diversification of these goods and will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Point of Sales**

Lahasinh currently sells its products at their retail outlets in three locations in Laos: the Nhotmankhong residence in Savannakhet and stores in both Vientiane and Luang Phabang. Other sales include organized fairs held in Vientiane and international locations, such as Japan, Australia, and the European Union. The annual National Handicraft Festival held in November held in the national capital is an important venue for sales and recognition. In 2005 Lahasin won the fashion show competition at this event. This type of acknowledgment of Lahasin products raises the status of cotton where Lao silk dominates production and merchandise.

The efforts of these Phu Thai entrepreneurs have been recognized with international prizes. The honors include the APHADA-UNESCO Award for Authenticity (changed to Excellence in 2008) and two awards from the European Union in 2001 and 2002 and Japan in 2000. Some visiting professionals, such as Japanese artists and Australian fashion designers, have provided advice on product differentiation, but Mrs. Songbandith remains the primary designer. Without any formal training she has
successfully introduced Phu Thai textiles to the international scene of hand-woven textile production.

**Marketing Phu Thai-ness**

In order to promote the Phu Thai cotton textiles in the market, Lahasin h has concentrated on several innovations. Other weaving projects and private businesses in Vientiane and other provinces concentrate on silk, a prestige item associated with the former elite, such as the royalty, nobility, and rich merchants. Since silk is generally reserved for special occasions, silk companies demand higher prices for their products. The owners of Lahasinh have devised ways to raise the status of cotton, traditionally worn for daily attire or composing household accessories. First, the application of centuries old Phu Thai wisdom and the value of Phu Thai culture are stressed. Second, the natural and hand-made characteristics of Phu Thai cotton are important in raising the fabric’s importance in the eyes of the consumer.

The Lahasinh brochures and pamphlets focus on the distinctiveness of Phu Thai textiles and their manifestation of Phu Thai identity. [Photo 15 5] Phu Thai history and culture convey that Phu Thai textiles are authentic, and as the exclusive distributors of Phu Thai fabrics, one can learn more about the Phu Thai or acquire an example of this heritage by visiting their retail outlets. Observation of Phu Thai women’s work is available at the Savannakhet residences/dye workshop/retail shop, referred to as a Phu Thai culture center by the owners.

The photographs in their marketing materials depict villagers dyeing with indigo or completing other steps of the weaving process. [Photo 156] The images also contain
models wearing Lahasinh’s heritage clothing as well as contemporary dress. The diversification of the merchandise in the form of contemporary style bedding, for example, is also included in the imagery in order to attract a myriad of customers.

Textiles from Mrs. Songbandith’s private collection and Lahasinh’s product line have been highlighted in Lao magazines. The Vientiane-produced Sayo Lao: a Business and Travel Magazine, October 2007 issue, displayed Phu Thai textiles from Lahasinh in a fashion layout called, “Sensually Beautiful.” [Photo 157] Set in the lush garden of their Savannakhet residence, Lahasinh created an idealized traditional Phu Thai setting. The romanticized setting appeals to the viewers’ conception of the past. Heirloom textiles and commercially-produced fabrics are combined to compose the models’ dress symbolizing the Phu Thai, Katang, and their kin groups in the layouts.

This glossy, English-Lao bilingual magazine is distributed primarily in Vientiane, but some copies reach Luang Phabang, a favorite tourist destination. Tourists and wealthy residents of Laos are this publication’s target audience so by being featured in a high society publication the status of Phu Thai cotton may be raised. Lahasinh products have appeared in this magazine in more than one issue. Another glossy publication highlighting Phu Thai textiles of the Nhotmankhong’s company is the Savannakhet Investment and Tourism Magazine. As the sole hand-woven textile business in the province, Lahasinh monopolizes the fashion spreads of this magazine. The October 2007 issue of this periodical depicts the same scenario as the Vientiane based magazine mentioned above.

Another marketing innovation of Lahasinh is the promotion of the natural and hand-made features of the products. Marketed as organic, the cotton is described as
grown without the use of herbicides or other chemicals. Exclusive use of natural dyes is also an important factor since some cultures, such as Japanese, view natural fibers and dyes as healthy and nourishing. An article in the *Archives of Dermatology* reported how recent studies in Taiwan have found indigo to have medicinal properties, alleviating some skin ailments (Lin et al., 2008). The Lahasinh brochures repeatedly state, “naturally dyed textiles are good for health.” The business is sometimes called, “Laha: Healthy Textile.” [Photo 158] By accentuating the organic and healthy properties of the Phu Thai textiles, the owners aim to raise the status and value of cotton while simultaneously recognizing Phu Thai indigenous knowledge.

Lahasinh textiles have been featured in magazines and foreign television coverage abroad, which has increased awareness of Phu Thai textiles on an international level. In 2004 a French television crew visited Lahanam village to capture the daily life of the Phu Thai, including textile production, and a Japanese team came in the following year. For some of the filming the Nhotmankhong’s organized the villagers to demonstrate various steps of textile production with traditional music demonstrations similar to a long kong ceremony described in Chapter 4, setting another stage of Phu Thai authenticity. The owners state that the media exposure has led to increased sales.

**Textile, Identity, and Formal Institutions**

Governments have manipulated heritage textiles to manifest national identity. Studies regarding the use of cloth in the formation of national identity in Southeast Asia include Howard (1998) and McIntosh (1998) where both discuss the role of the Thai royalty in promoting hand-woven cloth in forming a Thai national identity. Other
research focuses on textiles and Brunei national identity (Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah, 2007). Also stated earlier, Anderson (1981, p. 41) refers to this process as “logoization of traditional cloth.” The logoization of traditional cloth has occurred in Laos. For example, images of hand-woven material grace the covers of reports although the contents do not involve textile production. In Savannakhet Province, textiles compose the background of press conferences, mainly held by government authorities in order to present the province as a distinctive place. The state actively supports the use of hand-woven cloth and heritage clothing in its organization of continues festivals. One example is the provincial government’s active role in the religious festival Bun That Ing Hang. This annual celebration has traditionally involved homage to the sacred monument, That Ing Hang, but present-day celebrations have incorporated beauty contests, parades, and other competitions. The state dictates that participants in the various activities wear standardized uniforms symbolizing membership to their ethnic identities. The focus of this ritual has changed to place importance on secular activities aimed in strengthening a collective memory of the past, present, and future.

Heritage textiles are also displayed and manipulated to maintain a collective identity in smaller, organized affairs throughout Laos, and the use of Phu Thai textiles from Savannakhet Province in local events is an excellent example. Government officials supervise village-based celebrations also help sustain group cohesion (often ethnic) in the communities. A committee often judges both old and new contests in the Bun Bang Fai Rocket Festival, for example. Old competitions include the strength of the contestants’ rockets and new ones involve clothing and performances. Wealthy community members continue their roles as patrons by sponsoring rockets to shoot into
the sky and win the contest. Patrons now organize their clients to participate in the parades, directing what their team members should wear and how they must dance. In Lahanam the Nhotmankhongs are the one of the largest sponsors. For Phu Thai patrons, traditional attire is compulsory and displaying Phu Thai identity is a key factor in winning. Their clients don a myriad of heirloom and contemporary-style clothing. Other groups in the village have followed their lead in the use of hand-woven textiles as part of their dress for the events. Phu Thai textiles continue to play roles in small and large-scale special occasions in contemporary society.

Hand-woven textiles have also played an important role in creating a Lao national identity, especially since the 1975 Revolution. In order to build a sense of nationalism, the current government of Laos has established institutions to unite its ethnically diverse population, which had experienced political instability for decades. In 1970, the Lao Liberation Front of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party conducted a study to classify the country’s (or kingdom’s at that time) diverse population and to devise a method of unifying the groups (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005, p. c). The results of this research grouped the 68 recognized ethnic groups into three categories: Lao Loum or Lowland Lao; Lao Thoeng or Midland Lao; and Lao Soung or Highland Lao (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005, pp. c-d). The use of specific ethnic group names was discouraged and was replaced with these three categories in order to develop a group “Lao” identity.

This classification, however, preserved the centuries-old prejudices and inequality among the ethnic groups. The Lao Loum category was composed of the dominant majority, the Lao, and their ethno-linguistic kin, such as the Phu Thai. Non-Tai groups
belonged to the other categories. Once the Party concluded that national unity was stable, its leaders ordered new research on the ethnic groups after concluding their three categories were unsuitable. In 2000 the Lao Front for the National Construction classified 49 recognized ethnic groups according to ethno-linguistic classifications, in an attempt to follow international standards (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005, pp. i-j). The Lao government currently encourages ethnic diversity, stating that all are equal citizens that work collectively to build the nation-state.

**Government Institutions**

Government and party entities have participated in creating a national identity, but their responsibilities also include income generation and social development for the nation and its citizens. The Lao Women’s Union (LWU), for example, focuses on improving the wellbeing of women and children by providing job training and developing projects that utilize their traditional skills, such as weaving. While the LWU hand-weaving projects have been successful in other provinces, the Savannakhet provincial branch was not operating any projects during the field research period. In the past, this organization sponsored a sericulture project in Xepone District but was not successful since the participants could not sell their silk yarns at competitive prices, according to informants.

The Ministry of Industry and its Department of Handicrafts have played a role in trying to transform home-based production into commercial production. Some of their activities involve the organization of fairs to sell handicrafts and other village-produced items, including the National Handicraft Festival held annually in Vientiane. Since
participation in this event requires organization and long-distance travel, individual weavers, such as many Phu Thai women, are unable to attend. During the field research period, the provincial branch of this department was exploring the idea of developing specific products according to sub-district, following Thailand’s “One Tambon One Product” campaign. In Savannakhet, “One District One Product” scheme is planning to develop Phu Thai textiles as one of the products, and the project is underway with support from the Japanese government, beginning in 2009.

**Savannakhet Tourism Department**

One government organization that has been successful in promoting Phu Thai culture and textiles is the Savannakhet Provincial Tourism Department. The Lao National Tourism Authority has received funding from the Asian Development Bank to promote eco- or community based tourism in Laos as a major income generator on micro- and macro-levels. The various projects located throughout the country focus on distinctive natural or cultural features of an area to attract visitors. A joint project between Savannakhet Provincial Tourism Department and SNV (Netherland Development Organization) promotes Phu Thai history and culture to attract visitors to the old Phu Thai settlements of Muang Vang Angkham. A brochure for one of their tours describes the area as “Cradle of Phu Thai Civilization; Muang Vang Angkham Origin of the Phu Thai.” [Photo 159] During the tour, visitors have the opportunity to view different stages of textile production and villagers wearing the finished product. They are also able to participate in traditional rituals, such as the *sou khouan* ceremony. Hand-woven textiles may be purchased as a token of their experience. Tourists purchasing one of the trips are, thus, supporting the preservation of Phu Thai culture. Hand weaving
becomes a highlight of the tours to the Phu Thai homeland, and Phu Thai textile’s roles as identity markers continue through an institution’s manipulation of culture to generate income while meeting the desires of its customers, the tourists.

Other Entities

Presently, national museums dedicated to Lao culture or Phu Thai culture are absent in Laos. The few existing government entities focus on the country’s royal past and the victories of recent history, the Socialist struggle of the 20th century. The Lao Women’s Union office in Vientiane displays textiles of various ethnic groups, but Phu Thai fabrics are not part of their exhibition. Private museums, located in Vientiane and Luang Phabang, dedicate their exhibits to non-Phu Thai fabrics. District authorities and private individuals express interest in displaying Phu Thai material culture in an institutionalized setting, but they do not have the means to implement their organized plan. The tourism project mentioned above has received funding and approval to construct a visitor’s center along Savannakhet’s main artery, Highway 9, and will contain a small display of Phu Thai artifacts, which will probably include examples of hand-weavings.

Formalized training programs or schools presently do not exist in Savannakhet to teach Phu Thai women the various stages of textile production. The continuation of this knowledge is transmitted via traditional, non-formal methods. As described in Chapter 3, girls and young women learn the steps through observation, participation, and instruction from their elder female relatives. The transfer of technology in this traditional format helps the younger generations maintain a connection to their Phu Thai identity by
learning the characteristics of Phu Thai textiles from other Phu Thai women. One exception to formalized training in Savannakhet is when Mrs. Songbandith of Lahasinh Company organizes natural dye workshops at her home to assist other projects. However, she continues to rely on familial and feudal village-based relationships to pass on weaving skills to younger generations who will be employed by her business in the future.

Lan Xang Minerals-Oxiana, formerly a Lao-Australian but now a Lao-Chinese joint-owned mining company in Xepone District, is another entity that currently supports naturally dyed textile and sericulture projects in the vicinity of the goldmine. Part of the business venture’s corporate social responsibility programs is the promotion of “eco-friendly” development. A brochure describes the aim of their weaving project, stating that the company supports, “use of locally available materials while preserving their (The Phu Thai) valuable traditional culture and also eradicating poverty” (Laha Pamphlet, n.d.). Phu Thai identity is clearly a marketing feature of selling the project’s textiles.

However, informants state that due to the goldmine’s remote location, the projects’ products are often given as gifts to this business venture’s guests rather than sold commercially. The company compensates the weavers for their products, but this relationship reflects the traditional patron-client one. In this scenario, the clients, or villagers, must rely solely on their patron to buy their textiles in order to earn income. It is not likely that the overseers of the goldmine feel responsible for the villagers in the same manner that the Nhotmankhongs do with their employees and distant relatives living in Lahanam. As of 2009, both the weavers and the goldmine owners recognize the
necessity to find other markets for the projects’ products and have contacted the provincial tourism department to assist them.

**Media**

While the media and the advanced technologies have had major impacts on the people of many nations, their influence on the Phu Thai and other groups living in Laos is less when compared to other countries. Listed as one of the least developed countries, the majority of Laos’ citizens lack access to electricity, basic healthcare, and transportation. An Asian Development Bank project has assisted in developing trade and communications by constructing almost 100 kilometers of roads in Xepone and Phine districts of Savannakhet. However, many inhabitants living in remote areas continue to rely on rivers and trails to travel between the village and local market.

Numerous villages in Savannakhet Province are without electricity and, thus, many villagers are not exposed to television. If the rural inhabitants have the opportunity to watch any programming the majority is from international stations, including Thailand, Vietnam, and China, since Laos has one national television station and one privately owned station. The influence of this media is less on the rural Phu Thai and other groups when compared to those living in urban areas with access to electricity and television.

Written material has developed slowly in Laos. Many of the government-controlled newspapers, printed in the nation’s capital, do not reach the outlying provinces. While the Savannakhet branch of the Ministry of Information and Culture has a small local paper, the circulation is limited. Other types of publications are minimal, and many members of society do not have access to the glossy color magazines produced
in Vientiane. The serials rarely reach Savannakhet, and most of the rural-based citizens cannot afford the costly products if they are available. Similar to television, written media has less influence on contemporary Phu Thai culture when compared to neighboring countries, such as Thailand.

External sources have influenced Phu Thai weavers and their products, but the method of exposure centers on the local marketplace. The town bazaar continues to be the focal point of small business transactions. Weavings made by other ethnic groups from all parts of Laos are traded in the local market, and Phu Thai weavers come into contact with different textile types and styles here. Women have been observed trading their hand-woven textiles for goods available in the market. They may trade their weavings for other types of cloth, salt, and medicine, for example.

Examples of fashions that are popular in the nation’s center trickle out to the peripheral areas via the trade hub. In Laos cigarette, telephone, and beer companies advertise their products in calendars, pinup posters, and packaging that feature models in new forms or styles of heritage dress. The source for the majority of the clothing is the numerous silk companies, but Phu Thai textiles from Lahasin have been featured in other products’ marketing campaigns (Songbandith, personal communication, 2004). Lacking other decor, walls of commercial businesses are plastered with the advertising products of these companies. People are exposed to changing fashions by viewing these still images of changing fashions adorning the walls of various shops. Advertisements dominate the media exposure of Laos’ citizens, including the Phu Thai.
Conclusion- Woman and Phu Thai Textiles Today

The transfer of the collective memory of Phu Thai textiles and their production continues by traditional channels, passing informally from one female generation to another. The functions of Phu Thai hand-woven material have expanded from individual and domestic uses to serve as commercial products. Textiles’ roles in ceremonies and gifts of exchange remain, and individual weavers still conduct small transactions to personally sell the fruits of their labor. Weavers trade with other members of their village or surrounding villages, and they send hand-woven cloth to traders in the town market in Savannakhet. The distribution of Phu Thai textiles has increased with the establishment of the development projects of the local goldmine but, especially, through the efforts of the Phu Thai-owned Lahasin company.

Although commercialization existed in Laos in the early-mid-twentieth century, the present government’s implementation of a market economy has necessitated the need to earn an income. Following traditional gender roles, Phu Thai women remain responsible for caring their family, such as providing food and clothing. The small percentage of females who received a higher education have opportunities to work white-collar jobs, such as in government offices, but the majority of the women who leave their birthplaces to become low-skill migrant laborers. By expanding the commercial exchange of Phu Thai textiles, rural Phu Thai women may rely on their traditional knowledge base to generate income. In the case of Lahanam, the women have become the primary income earners of their households. They are able to carry out their responsibilities as caregivers by purchasing goods in the market, including food and
medicine, or sending their children to school. Commercial sales not only ensure the continuation of hand-woven textile production but also contribute to women’s social development. In other cases studies examining women as entrepreneurs in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, income generation through the use of traditional skills has increased this gender’s wellbeing (Ardrey et al., 2006). The research Ireson (1996) and Ireson-Doolittle and Moreno-Black (2004) specifically focuses on women entrepreneurs in regards to different scenarios of hand-woven textile production. These studies concluded that commercial production has led to some empowerment among women in developing countries.

Phu Thai women also feel empowered through the sales of their hand-woven products. One informant earned enough money to buy a tractor, which would enable the male members of the household to potentially be more productive in agriculture. The tractor is also a status symbol, symbolizing the family’s wealth and the wife’s ability to contribute a substantial amount to the household income. This informant indicated feelings of pride and empowerment for this accomplishment. Although she is not head of the household, she often decides on important matters related to the family.

Phu Thai women who do not weave or have discontinued hand-woven textile production are able to play a part in sustaining commercial production by purchasing products from weavers. Small-scale sales of textiles have existed within Phu Thai society for centuries. In present-day society, commercial production has expanded the array of Phu Thai fabrics, allowing the continuation of the group identity through the purchase of hand-woven cloth through informal or institutionalized connections. The producer and seller may complete a sale directly or indirectly through a business such as Lahasinh. As
a member of the Phu Thai ethnic group, many women (and men) believe that identity markers such as Phu Thai textiles must be displayed to demonstrate their group membership.

Government entities have also facilitated the preservation of this ethnic group identity by promoting Phu Thai history and culture, especially textiles. The provincial tourism department organizes tours to the Phu Thai birthplace so visitors may participate in an authentic cultural experience. By controlling the organization of traditional festivals, such as the That Ing Hang and Bun Bang Fai festivals, the local authorities further solidify this collective identity by promoting the use of heritage cloth at these festivities. New events occurring during the festivals include beauty contests and other competitions that require wearing heritage dress.

The Lahasinlh naturally dyed, hand-woven textile business has played an important role in increasing awareness of Phu Thai textiles and increasing their status in a country where silk dominates as a prestige good. The business’ owners have introduced several innovations in production and marketing the Phu Thai hand-woven fabrics. Innovations in production include expanding the use of color and diversifying designs and merchandise. Marketing focuses on the Phu Thai-ness of the products. The hand-spun cotton’s natural and healthy characteristics are promoted to attract customers in another marketing innovation. Lahasinlh has successfully raised the status of Phu Thai cotton textiles, reflected in the recognition and awards they have received and their sales figures. As members of the Phu Thai group, they support the continuation of Phu Thai collective memory.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this thesis is to document hand-woven textiles of the Phu Thai ethnic group living in Savannakhet Province, Laos. As summarized in Chapter 1, regional, national, and ethnic-centric textile research has overlooked this group’s hand-woven heritage despite the growing number of textiles studies in Laos, its neighboring countries, and in other Southeast Asian nations. Little attention has been paid to Phu Thai textiles and their roles in Phu Thai society in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos). The examination of the stages of textile production, the textiles, and their uses as identity markers of the Phu Thai, enables a better understanding of hand-woven cloth originating from central, southern Laos since previous works have focused on textiles from central and northern Laos.

Several questions were addressed regarding Phu Thai textiles in this study. The questions include: What are the materials, processes, and stages of the hand-woven textile production of the Phu Thai? What types of textiles do Phu Thai weavers produce, and which ones do they consider to be group identity markers? How has been textile
technology been transferred between the Phu Thai and their neighbors, mainly the Lao and Katang? How do hand-woven textiles and their roles as identity markers play a part in contemporary Phu Thai society?

Similar to other Tai groups, the Phu Thai produce a range of textiles to serve as clothing, household accessories, and ceremonial items. Although they utilize the same types of materials and dyes and apply the same techniques and motifs that related groups do, they combine the shared elements in specific ways to create distinctive ethnic identity markers. [See Appendix D] This thesis categorizes the textiles of the Phu Thai of Laos into two typologies: Western Savannakhet and Eastern Savannakhet. Both categories contain the same textile types, but variations and difference do exist in the textiles made in different geographical locations. The Eastern Savannakhet category is characterized by densely woven decorative patterning. The Western type is classified as containing more hybridized types of textiles, or weavings combining elements of a foreign textile (in this case, Lao) with a Phu Thai example. The mixing or domestication reflects the historic changes the Phu Thai experienced when they moved to western Savannakhet during the political turmoil of the mid 19th century. The move west towards the Mekong River created more opportunities for contact with the Lao and other groups living near this major waterway.

The Eastern Savannakhet category contains several distinctive Phu Thai fabrics, including the phae daam shoulder cloth and phaa daam shawl, that are not found in the other typology, the western. Although other Tai groups produce similar weavings, the use and combination of color in these fabrics allow for the creation of an unusual fabric. As stated in chapter 4, the Phuan are the only other Tai group to possess similar types of
textiles and others living in neighboring Khammouane may do so, but further research is required to uncover the relationships leading to similar textiles being produced in remote locations.

The Western Savannakhet type houses more examples of hybridized and domesticated textiles than the eastern one. The partial or whole assimilation, or domestication, of foreign textile elements reflects an increase in contact with other cultures that the Phu Thai when they moved into western Savannakhet when compared to their kin residing in the long established villages in or near Muang Vang Angkham. One hybrid fabric is a shoulder cloth that combines both Lao and Phu Thai aesthetics, which is not found in eastern Savannakhet. The Western grouping also includes the presence of a technique and textile type missing from the other type. The absence of twill weave in the eastern Savannakhet grouping leads to my conclusion that it was introduced to the Phu Thai when they moved west, closer to the Mekong River, during the region’s political instability of the mid-19th century.

However, both typologies contain the same textile types that the Phu Thai consider distinctly Phu Thai, foreign fabrics that have wholly domesticated into the Phu Thai repertoire, and hybridized forms. One example is the phae bing (phae biang in Lao) shoulder cloth, which Phu Thai weavers in both eastern and western Savannakhet have assimilated into their textile inventories, but they have added the soi saa fringe motif, a symbol of Phu Thai-ness, into this accessory’s composition of designs.

The assimilation or domestication of different types of textiles is also reflected in the adoption of the foreign vocabulary into Phu Thai language. In the case of the phae bing, the Phu Thai kept the Lao name of this garment but pronounce it in their own
pronunciation. Other textiles and their names in other languages have also been domesticated, including some elements of men’s attire. The *salong* male tubular hip wrapper and its name have both been assimilated into Phu Thai culture. The Lao *phaa yao* but not its name, however, were incorporated into Phu Thai male dress, but the Phu Thai have given it a Phu Thai name, *phaa khen*. Thus, the textile has been domesticated but not the foreign vocabulary in this case.

Textiles continue to hold numerous roles in Phu Thai society, similar to their functions in pan-Tai society (see Cheesman, 2005; Gittinger & Lefferts, 1992; Howard & Howard, 2002, for examples). Males and females manipulate fabric as clothing, serving as markers of gender, marital status, social status, and village locale. Cloth is utilized as household accessories, such as bedding, ceremonial items, and as offerings given to Buddhist monks and temples. Participants exchange textiles in various rites, such as annual spirit appeasement ceremonies, engagement, and wedding ceremonies. These include articles of clothing or yardage that can be adapted to fit the receiver’s needs. Hand-woven fabrics function to solidify relationships among individuals in the community and membership in the group.

The Phu Thai also utilize textiles as identity markers. Members of this ethnicity actively apply Phu Thai fabrics to express their identity and to represent their culture. They identify textile types, colors, motifs, and design compositions as symbols of “Phu Thai-ness.” Informants, both male and female, repeatedly defined one type of woman’s outfit, the *sin mii seu lap la-euh*, as the archetypical Phu Thai marker. Other identity markers are found in a skirt’s waistband, specific motifs decorating a fabric, and combinations of colors. Specific textiles are also considered distinctive markers,
including various types of shawls and shoulder cloths, such as the phaa la-euh and phae daam, respectively.

Appadurai (1986) asserts that objects, even as commodities, embody historical and social changes experienced by a society, revealing that both tangible and intangible culture are not static but constantly redefined. I assert that textiles reflect historical, economic, and social changes that the Phu Thai ethnic group has faced over time. For example, the inclusion of imported materials into weavings reveals that Phu Thai settlements have been in the proximity of regional trade routes and that some group members participated in the trade of materials used in textile production. Gold and silver metallic wrapped threads originating from countries such as India and China appear in heirlooms dating to the beginning of the 20th century and earlier.

Informants recall purchasing synthetic dyes and imported goods in the 1960-70s to apply in their production of hand-woven fabrics, evident in the examples they have saved as keepsakes. These recollections indicate that perhaps synthetic dyes were not widely available in Phu Thai settlements until this time period and that the instability caused by the Second Indochina or Vietnam War had not completely cut off trade especially in Savannakhet Province, which contains part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a strategic route built and utilized by the communist forces.

The domestication of foreign aesthetics and textiles into Phu Thai textiles not only indicates trade or economic relations but also political ones. Influenced by the dress of politically dominant cultures, men’s attire has experienced the most change as reflected in the different textile types and clothing forms that the Phu Thai assimilated. For example, the salong and phaa khen described in Chapter 4 have been directly assimilated
from the Lao, who have governed along the Mekong River Basin of Laos for centuries (the Lao, in turn, did recognize the strength of others, such as the Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese, and French). However, the Lao were not the sole group with political hegemony over the Phu Thai, which is reflected in dress of a Phu Thai leader during the 19th century. One historical account from the 19th century also describes a Phu Thai ruler in Vietnamese mandarin dress, leading its author to conclude that the Phu Thai were vassals of Annam or present-day Vietnam (Harmand, 1997). When the French incorporated the kingdoms of Laos into its Indochina, its colonial administration introduced an international style of men’s clothing, which became an unofficial uniform of its bureaucrats and was readily adopted by other males. The domestication of foreign textiles and clothing, thus, reflects political ties with other groups, especially stronger ones, and historic events experienced by the Phu Thai.

The Lao courts had the most direct influence on Phu Thai textiles, and their royalty favored luxurious cloths of silk and gold originating from India and China, for example. Based on parallel situations in the Tai textile repertoire (see Cheesman, 2004; Maxwell, 1990) I conclude that since local weavers, such as the Phu Thai, did not have access to these commodities, they readily assimilated the design aesthetics of these imported goods into their own production. During the colonial period, the local (Lao) elite coveted French silk and metallic threads, incorporating these imported, prestigious materials into their textiles. Today Phu Thai weavers refer to synthetic yarns available at the markets as French or Italian, indicating that they are aware that these goods are from a foreign place and that they regard these materials, actually originating from Thailand, Vietnam, or China, as “superior” to locally made ones.
The transfer of technology, materials, and textiles from the Phu Thai to neighboring peoples is demonstrated in the hand-weavings of the Katang, a minority group belonging to the Mon-Khmer ethnolinguistic family residing in eastern Savannakhet. Similar to the situation between other Tai and non-Tai groups regarding the diffusion of textile technology (see Howard & Howard, 2002; Ireson, 1995), I conclude that the Katang acquired frame loom technology, sericulture, and cloth from the Phu Thai, which is also reflected in the presence of Phu Thai vocabulary in Katang language. Prior to learning how to weave on a frame loom, Katang traded for Phu Thai fabrics. Katang informants have stated that their female ancestors learned how to weave from the Phu Thai. Since intermarriage was not uncommon, one method of technology transfer is that some Katang women acquired frame loom weaving skills when they married Phu Thai men. Phu Thai female kin would have taught daughters of these marriages various steps of textile production.

The textiles the Katang produce reflect the domestication of a Phu Thai aesthetic. Traditional men and women’s clothing styles are similar to the Phu Thai’s, but the Katang have altered forms and designs to create distinctive identity markers symbolizing Katang ethnicity. They also produce weavings that are distinct from Phu Thai textiles. The textiles of the Katang and related Katuic groups warrant further study.

The transfer of materials, technology, designs, styles, and types of textiles between the Lao, Phu Thai, and Katang indicate that these groups did not live in isolation but interacted with each other, and this spread of people and knowledge represents their historic and social interactions. The ongoing contacts between these groups and other cultures have allowed weavers to selectively choose foreign characteristics to domesticate
into their own textile repertoire. The flexibility of identity markers in the form of cloth allows for the domestication. The changes found in hand-woven thus symbolize the historic, economic, and social changes that the groups have experienced over time.

Rodgers, Summerfield, and Summerfield’s 2005 publication on textiles and identity of the Malay of Sumatra, Indonesia, demonstrates how a minority group is able to sustain its identity through the hand-woven cloth they produce and consume in a time when national (Indonesian) and global identities dominate in modern society. The Malay demonstrate ethnic identity by wearing songket textiles, Indonesian identity by wearing batik of the Javanese or the Indonesian dominant majority, and international identity by wearing t-shirts and jeans. A parallel situation is found with the Phu Thai, a minority living in the nation of Laos. The Phu Thai have negotiated and maintained their group identity while adopting a national identity as a Lao citizen. Since the establishment of the Lao Democratic People's Republic (Laos) in 1975, the Lao national government has successfully built a national identity among its multi-ethnic population, including the Phu Thai, through its institutions’ implementation of policies.

The socialist regime has encouraged the use of traditional textiles by its multi-ethnic peoples, even forbidding Western styles of dress. Its policies promoted self-sufficiency in the 1970s until the mid-late 1980s, including the production of cloth. However, the regime discouraged the use of silk, a prestige material associated with the elite. Women, including the Phu Thai, throughout Laos were expected to provide textiles for their families but had to refrain from commercial enterprise (Ireson, 1996).

The liberalization of Lao government’s economic policies in the late 1980s encouraged a market economy, neighboring countries lifted embargoes, and interregional
commerce began. Some entrepreneurial women began to sell their weavings on a small-scale. International organizations introduced different types of development projects, including ones focusing on women’s traditional skills, such as weaving. Both the public and private sectors commercialized hand-woven textile production on a large-scale.

Many projects throughout the nation have focused on Lao silk, a distinctive product. The relaxing of national policies in the 1980s allowed for the return of the consumption of this prestige item, which commands high prices in the nation’s capital, Vientiane, and the former royal capital, Luang Phabang, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1995. Many private businesses provide naturally dyed silk products for the Lao and international communities. Lao silk is also promoted through tourism, and tourists are an expanding market for this commodity.

A Phu Thai-owned private business selling naturally dyed, hand-spun cotton textiles has emerged from Savannakhet to compete with the silk products. In order to promote the hand-woven cloth of this minority group in a multi-ethnic nation, the business markets the naturally dyed, hand-woven cloth as distinctively Phu Thai. The promotion of the products’ Phu Thai-ness and that they are cotton is unique in Laos where Lao hand-woven silk dominates the commercial market and funding for development projects. Lahasin has been able to demand competitive prices for their products although cotton is not associated with prestige or luxury. This Phu Thai business has been successful on the local, national, and international scenes, receiving recognition through awards and consistent sales.

The focus on the ethnic identity of these hand-woven fabrics is an interesting factor. The national government of Laos presently recognizes 68 official ethnicities
comprising a population of less than 7 million people (Department of Ethnic Affairs, 2005). As a newly emerging state in the 1970s, the socialist regime had to build a national identity in its poly-ethnic citizenry. Their policy first categorized the ethnicities into three main groups with names beginning with “Lao.” Similar to other nation-states, especially former colonies winning independence in the last century, heritage dress symbolizes Lao national identity, and the ruling party arbitrarily has chosen a Lao-Tai style as national identity markers, requiring members of non-Lao groups to wear this type of clothing when attending official functions or visiting a government office.

The selection of a dominant majority’s heritage cloth to represent a multi-ethnic nation has occurred in other Southeast Asia countries. Howard (1998) and McIntosh (1998) found that the Thai elite has selectively chosen which textiles, weaving of related Tai groups since the Siamese Thai ceased weaving centuries ago, symbolize Thai national identity. In Brunei, the sultanate utilizes weavings of the Malay majority, songket, to symbolize national identity although its population contains non-Malay groups (Norkhalbi Haji Wahsalfelah, 2007). The identity markers of the minority ethnicities are ignored in many situations.

After abolishing the use of its three Lao ethnic categories, the Lao government has recognized its multi-ethnic composition and began to utilize Laos’ ethnic diversity to demonstrate its distinctiveness. For example, national and local tourism authorities promote the diverse rural populations’ traditional lifestyles in a natural setting to attract tourists on an international scale. The opportunity to observe hand-woven textile production and heritage clothing are major selling points. Phu Thai textiles and their production have not escaped manipulation from these institutions.
The tourism department of Savannakhet with the assistance of various aid organizations utilizes Phu Thai culture to promote the province’s attractiveness in order to entice visitors to this distinct destination. Their tours arrive in villages composing the first established Phu Thai settlement, Muang Vang Angkham, referred to as, “the cradle of Phu Thai civilization,” in their brochures. Participants are able to take part in Phu Thai traditional lifestyle, observing hand-woven textile production and the use of hand-woven cloth as clothing, household accessories, and ceremonial items. They may purchase examples of Phu Thai identity markers to take home as souvenirs. The provincial department’s excursions also go to Katang villages where sericulture and other aspects of traditional textile production are carried out.

Phu Thai textiles are transformed into provincial symbols in the process of "logoization" (see Anderson, 1991, p. 41). Examples of the fabrics become backdrops for press conferences and photography layouts, and images of textiles and of different steps of textile production illustrate provincial government publications, including tourism brochures. Print media, mainly glossy color magazines catering to the elite Lao and international communities living in Vientiane, depict models wearing distinctive Phu Thai attire belonging to Lahasin, the sole Phu Thai textile business. The old examples are part of the business owners’ private collection, and the new ones are the business’ products. The photography layouts are arranged in an idealized setting of a Phu Thai home or village. The setting is romanticized, appealing to the creators' and customers' sense of nostalgia.

Lahasinh also applies similar images in their advertising materials to market their products. Naturally dyed, hand-spun cotton fabrics, especially indigo cloth, are presented
as distinctive, differing from the silk products from other parts of Laos. The owners of Lahasinh have also introduced other marketing innovations besides Phu Thai identity. The continuation of hand-woven textile production depends on women’s knowledge passed from one generation to the next. The business promotes the products as healthy items that improve the user’s wellbeing. This last marketing innovation is unusual since textiles are not ingested into the body but cover the skin. Lahasinh stressed that natural dyes are less toxic than synthetic materials, which may be absorbed through the skin. A recent study (Lin et al., 2008) indicates that indigo improves some skin conditions. Another marketing angle is the promotion of the use of natural dyes as protecting or conserving the natural environment.

Lahasinh’s owners have implemented other types of innovations in the production and merchandising of Phu Thai textiles. In the production of Phu Thai textiles, Mrs. Songbandith, one of the business’ owners, has revived the use of many natural dyes and increased the number of colors that are derived from natural materials. (Weavers in the village setting continue to dye with indigo and ebony but apply synthetic dyes to create other colors.) Another innovation is that Mrs. Songbandith has centralized the dyeing processes in a workshop she supervises to control the dyes' quality. Other innovations include altering traditional design compositions, such as minimizing the number of motifs or confining the patterning to the textile’s ends, in order to have the products appeal to a wider range of customers. Traditional techniques and methods of weaving have not changed, but Mrs. Songbandith experiments with the application of technique and texture of the raw materials.
The diversification of Phu Thai textile types is an innovation in merchandising. The textile company produces traditional textile types to sell to urban Phu Thai who do not weave but want to consume their group identity markers. Non-Phu Thai customers, residents of Laos and tourists, also buy these traditional style fabrics. These include clothing, household accessories, and ceremonial items. However, in order to increase sales, Lahasinh has increased the types of goods composed of Phu Thai hand-woven cloth. Clothing may be tailored into different styles or comes ready-made in a variety of sizes. Household items are in the form of Western and Japanese bedding, table settings, and interior decorations. It is important to note that new versions of the ceremonial textiles become bedcovers and wall hangings, stripping them of their traditional functions. Phu Thai textiles have been sold on a local and national scale, and sales have reached an international level. In the age of commercial production, fashions constantly change demanding new products to be available for consumption, and Lahasinh is meeting this challenge.

In conclude that commercial production of Phu Thai textiles has introduced innovations at different levels, resulting in increased creativity and not a decline in skill. Similar to the Malay population in Indonesia, the Phu Thai peoples are a minority group in the multi-ethnic state of Laos who continue to perceive hand-woven cloth as symbols of their group identity. The Phu Thai recognize the commercial products as representing Phu Thai-ness but still adhere to traditional forms of dress when having to wear ceremonial clothing. The majority of its members has not replaced indigo cotton upper garments for ones composed of red or yellow cotton even if the cotton is hand-spun and hand-woven by a Phu Thai, for example. The archetypical Phu Thai skirt continues to be
decorated with weft ikat technique, forming white patterning on an indigo cotton background. However, the group’s acceptance of the diversification of Phu Thai textiles with the introduction of commercial production reflects the flexibility of identity.

Phu Thai women are the primary producers of cloth, responsible for all stages of production from the cultivation of cotton and dye raw materials, preparation of the yarns, weaving, and finishing the cloth into sewn garments or other accessories. Traditional Phu Thai society has considered a woman’s skills to produce beautiful cloth to be an indicator of her potential as a good wife, mother, and member of society. A woman’s dedication to textile production reflects her ability to be the caretaker of the household by providing clothing and other basic necessities for her family. This group continues to hold a woman responsible for the wellbeing of her household in modern times; thus, a woman continues to provide textiles for her family, whether she weaves the items herself or finds another source for these goods.

Opportunities for Phu Thai women have been limited even in the last twenty years. Although the French colonial administration opened schools to girls in the early twentieth century, few have had the opportunity to attend or to complete many levels of education with the majority remaining in traditional roles of the households’ caretakers. The socialist government founded in 1975 stressed gender equality so that women were expected to contribute to the building of the nation as much as men. However, women still had to fulfil their familial responsibilities, and their daily workloads increased under the new government. When the government opened its border to trade and implemented a market economy in the late 1980s, Lao citizens, who primarily possessed rural, subsistence livelihoods, had to seek a source of income to have access to many services
and goods. Historically, women have traded surplus cloth on a small scale, but the necessity of an income has allowed Phu Thai women, as dyers and weavers, to initiate or increase commercial textile production. By adapting traditional skills to the commercial production of cloth, some Phu Thai women have earned money and continued to fulfill their roles as household caretakers by using their profits to maintain or improve the family members’ lives.

Previous studies on women as entrepreneurs in Laos have found that the ability to earn an income has provided them with some empowerment (Ardrey et al., 2006; Ireson, 1996; Ireson-Doolittle & Moreno-Black, 2004). The research has demonstrated that family members’ lives also change positively since women invest their earnings into their family. The same situation has occurred in Phu Thai society. Phu Thai women by selling the hand-woven fabric they produce have become the primary income earners in the household, leading to more respect within the family and the community. Although they do not become the head of the household, a Phu Thai textile entrepreneur may have a larger role in the household’s decisions, including more control over the family’s resources. Women use their earnings to buy household necessities, to pay for their children’s education, and to pay for medical care. One example of investing into the family is when a Phu Thai woman bought her husband a tractor so that he could increase his agricultural output, hopefully increasing his income.

The private business of Lahasin is has been more successful in the commercial production and sales of Phu Thai textiles compared to other ventures. One factor leading to its success may be the existence of the traditional hierarchical relationship existing between the Phu Thai owners and their employees and the sense of obligation between
the groups. Government and private development projects have not reached Lahasinh’s level of success for several possible reasons, such as a lack of commitment to find a market or the inability to develop products that would attract buyers. As a Phu Thai woman, Mrs. Songbandith is dedicated to preserving her group’s culture and improving the lives of its members, her extended kin. She is an excellent example of a successful, female entrepreneur in a developing country. From her acculturated background attending school in the national capital as a child and travelling world-wide to visit relatives who fled overseas after the socialist takeover of 1975, Mrs. Songbandith has developed a cosmopolitan taste enabling her to direct the creation of new types of Phu Thai textiles and merchandise. The weavers residing in rural Phu Thai villages would not have been able to introduce Lahasinh’s innovations or sell the results world-wide.

Other Phu Thai women are not producers of hand-woven cloth, but like Mrs. Songbandith, they can contribute to the continuation of production by purchasing and consuming Phu Thai textiles. Heritage clothing symbolizes their group affiliation, and the exchange of textiles as gifts reaffirms relationships among other members of the group. Girls and women continue to wear Phu Thai attire in the latest fashions. [Photo 160] Phu Thai men also preserve Phu Thai culture in the form of textiles in the same manner. Offerings of cloth are still made to Buddhist temples, and purchased cloth fulfils these obligations. Factory-made cloth has replaced hand-woven materials in some cases, but the giving of Phu Thai textiles continues.

Previous studies have overlooked the textiles of the Phu Thai ethnic groups living in Laos and in neighboring countries. By documenting this aspect of the Phu Thai’s material culture, the history of textile production and the transmission of materials,
technology, and aesthetics may be better understood. The examination of the textiles of other ethnic groups living in Southeast Asia, including Laos, is ongoing, and this thesis contributes to this growing body of knowledge. Materials, techniques, motifs, styles, textile types, and the related vocabulary all provide clues on the exchanges among different peoples. This study serves as an assessment of Phu Thai textiles produced in the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This study demonstrates that Phu Thai identity in the form of cloth is flexible, adapting to the needs of society. The Phu Thai have experienced changes throughout their existence, and I assert that the hand-woven textiles they produce embody these historic, economic, and social changes that Phu Thai society has experienced. This ethnic group has resisted previous efforts of homogenization by dominant groups and presently negotiate their identity facing manipulation by larger institutions.

Due to the relatively slow pace of development, members of the Phu Thai ethnic group have not faced the same pressures as their counterparts in neighboring countries. Exposure to television and print media is still limited in Laos, and most opportunities to see new fashions is from trips to the local markets where the majority of the displayed advertising material originating from Lao beer, cigarette, and telecommunications companies. However, the acceleration of international trade via a recently constructed regional highway following Savannakhet’s historic trade route will bring both positive and negative effects to the province’s citizenry. The documentation of the production of Phu Thai textiles has been important before heirloom textiles and perhaps hand-woven textile production disappear.
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Appendixes

Appendix A: Photos

Photo 1    Xe Bang Hieng River, Songkhone District, Savannakhet Province, Laos [McIntosh]
Photo 2  A sermon hall in a Buddhist temple, Phine District, Savannakhet Province [McIntosh]

Photo 3  Buddhist novices, Songkhone District, Savannakhet [McIntosh]
Photo 4  *Sou khouan* ceremony, Songkhone District, Savannakhet. The blue and white cloth on the ground is called a *phaa la-euh*. The red trim indicates the textile’s use for ceremonies. [McIntosh]

Photo 5  Male elder officiating over the *sou khouan* ceremony, Songkhone. He is wearing a *phae ling*, a Phu Thai man’s shoulder cloth. The rest of his attire is in an international style. [McIntosh]
Photo 6  *That Ing Hang* Monument, Kaysone Phomvihane District, Savannakhet [McIntosh]
Photo 7  Re-enactment of the *Vessantara Jataka*, Xepone District, Savannakhet. The novice symbolizes Prince Vessantara, *Phavet*, and he is returning to father’s or his kingdom. [McIntosh]

Photo 8  Replica of the auspicious albino elephant from the *Vessantara Jataka*, Songkhone. The sculpture is decorated with cotton bolls. [McIntosh]
Photo 9     The procession of the *Bun Bang Fai* Rocket Festival, Xepone  [McIntosh]

Photo 10    Phallic symbols from the *Bun Bang Fai* Rocket Festival, Songkhone [McIntosh]
Male cross-dressing during the *Bun Bang Fai* Rocket Festival, Songkhone. The man on the left is wearing heritage Phu Thai male attire, but the man on the right is dressed in women’s clothing. The skirt is one of the archetypical identity markers, the *sin mii*. He is wearing manufactured, international style clothing on his upper body. The phone and shoes are modern accessories. [McIntosh]
Women cross-dressing during the Bun Bang Fai Rocket Festival, Songkhone. Both women are wearing the *phaa yao* men’s lower garment. The woman on the left is wearing two *phaa ling*, men’s shoulder cloths, over the shoulders and diagonally across the torso. On the right, she is wearing *phaa khit*, shawls, on the upper body. The waist sash is a woman’s shoulder cloth. The rest of the clothing is newer, global attire. [McIntosh]
Photo 13  A wooden Phu Thai style house, Champhone District, Savannakhet [McIntosh]

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Hundreds of years ago, the Phu Thai people settled along the Bangsao River, in Savannakhet Province, in central Laos. Over the years, the Phu Thai people became famous for their hand-woven, natural indigo cotton fabrics. In addition to indigo, the Phu Thai use various other natural dyes along with organically grown cotton to produce beautiful cotton textiles. Unique in fine day and age, the Phu Thai fabrics are completely handmade from spinning the organic cotton to weaving the final material.

If you are interested in learning more about the Phu Thai people or obtaining some of their unique hand-woven fabrics, then please visit the Lahasinh Boutique, in Viengthone, Laos. As the sole distributor of Phu Thai fabrics, the Lahasinh Boutique is able to handle all of your needs for Phu Thai fabrics. In particular, the Lahasinh Boutique carries a wide collection of clothing, handbags, scarves and shawls as well as household and kitchen accessories produced from Phu Thai fabrics.

Photo 155 Lahasinh brochure promoting Phu Thai culture and knowledge [McIntosh]

Photo 156 Lahasinh brochure depicting Phu Thai in traditional clothing carrying out steps of production [McIntosh]

自然染は、色の美しさはもちろんのこと染め物の多くの中には、健康も兼ね備えています。あらゆる人の体を守り、健康にもとてもよいものです。
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Phu Thai females of different generations continue wearing Phu Thai identity markers, *sin mii*, in 2004, Songkhone. The young girl is wearing a modern ethnic identity marker, a blouse made from weft-ikat decorated cloth. [McIntosh]
Appendix B: Textile Samples

Textile Sample 1
Name: Sin Mii Long – Both Eastern and Western Savannakhet types
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Vang, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Khamla
Producer Age: 65 years old
Period Made: Midsection 1960s
Materials: Cotton
Dyes: Indigo and synthetic
Techniques: Weft ikat, warp pick up
Warp per sq. inch: 64
Size: Height 90 x Width 65 cm
The waistband is new, woven with a black cotton warp and striped weft in white, black, red, and green cotton (threads from market). The midsection is decorated with *mii long*. The primary pattern is the vine formed by the zigzag bodies of the *naak* serpent deity. Hooks, symbolizing the creatures’ heads, radiate off the zigzag forms. Small dashes form a guideline at the bottom end. The warp is black cotton with a weft of indigo-dyed handspun cotton.
Textile Sample 2
Name: Phae Daam – Eastern Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Angkham, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Bounmii
Producer Age: Deceased but would be around 80 years old
Period Made: 1940-50
Materials: Cotton and silk
Dyes: Sappan wood, *khe*, and synthetic (aniline)
Techniques: Continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft
Warp per sq. inch: 32
Size: Height 194 without fringe (210 with fringe) x Width 31 cm

The warp is red silk while the weft is red cotton. The main continuous supplementary weft pattern is the lantern. The lanterns are composed of floral motifs. The *soi saa* or fringe motif must be part of the design composition in order to be Phu Thai, according to informants. The continuous supplementary threads are in purple, yellow, white, and green silk. The discontinuous supplementary weft designs are undulating lines that can represent vines or the eua. Fuchsia is included in the colors. Some weavers call with flower a lotus. The fringe pattern is found on both ends. Braided fringe is attached to the warp ends.
Textile Sample 3
Name: Phae Daam – Eastern Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Angkham, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Bounmii
Producer Age: Deceased but would be around 80 years old
Period Made: 1940-50
Materials: Cotton and silk
Dyes: Sappan wood, khe, and synthetic (aniline)
Techniques: Continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft
Warp per sq. inch: 32
Size: Height 194 without fringe (210 with fringe) x Width 31 cm
The weaver utilizes discontinuous supplementary weft technique to form lanterns composed of smaller motifs, such as naak, stars, seeds, fern tendrils, etc. The soi saa or fringe motif must be part of the design composition in order to be Phu Thai, according to informants. Smaller rows are decorated with flowering vines and triangular house gables. The warp is pink silk with a red cotton ground weft. The supplementary patterning is in yellow, orange, purple, turquoise, and white silk. The fringe is attached to the ends. It is formed from braided silk in the colors mentioned above, excluding pink.
Textile Sample 4
Name: Phae Daam – Western Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Lahanam, Songkhone District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Vii
Producer Age: Deceased but would be around 80 years old
Period Made: 1940-50
Materials: Cotton, silk, and gold wrapped thread
Dyes: Sappan wood, khe,
Techniques: Continuous supplementary weft
Warp per sq. inch: 48
Size: Height 153 without fringe (165 with fringe) x Width 51 cm
The weaver meticulously wove the continuous supplementary weft patterning in light blue, light green, and white silk and silver metallic threads. The delicate designs also cover more of the ground surface, requiring more skill and patience to produce. The ground cotton weft and warp are naturally dyed with sappan wood. The weft stripes are in the same colors as the supplementary designs. The motifs include flowering vines or creepers, *naak* deity heads in the form of hooks or the interlocking key, stars, and fringe radiating from flowers. Originating from western Savannakhet, a mixture of Phu Thai, Lao, and Chinese aesthetics are found in the composition and choice of patterns. The supplementary designs cover the surface of the cloth in a Phu Thai manner and the *soi saa* motif is present. The alternation and systematic variation of the size of the bands of motifs is reminiscent of Lao shoulder cloths. The Chinese inspiration is found in application of the key design to form movement in pan-Tai motifs of naak serpent deity heads, sandalwood flower, and lanterns.
Textile Sample 5
Name: Phaa Daam – Eastern Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Boun, Xepone District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Thongkhoun
Producer Age: 70 years old
Period Made: 1950s
Materials: Cotton and silk
Dyes: Sappan wood, khe, and synthetic (aniline)
Techniques: Continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft
Warp per sq. inch: 32
Size: Height 96 x Width 96 cm
The shawl is made from two similarly woven textiles that are sewn together along one side to make a wider garment. The weaver was meticulous in measuring each row of patterning so that when she connected the two textiles the rows align. The warp and ground weft are in red cotton. The supplementary weft patterns are in crème, aniline purple, orange, and turquoise silk. Small designs of upright dashes or “I” shapes alternate in color in between larger rows of design. The large patterns are geometric shapes, mainly symbolizing flora. “X” shapes symbolize naak, which surround flowers and stepped squares. The other pattern found in the top section is a tilted lattice encasing flower buds. In the bottom section, the pattern changes slightly. There are two rows of the fringe or soi saa motif (see detail, white patterns). In between these rows are two rows of discontinuous supplementary weft patterning of the swimming eua or eel deity whose bodies form the triangular grave house gable. The largest band of patterning combines the main patterns in the top section. Interlocking naak form the titled lattice pattern. The lattice is composed of the flower buds. Within the diamonds formed by the intersecting naak bodies are lanterns, stepped squares, gourd seeds, and other smaller designs. The very bottom is undecorated leaving a plain red surface. The ends are hand sewn.

Like the phae daam, the Phu Thai perceive that the phaa daam shawl is distinctly Phu Thai. Only one other Tai group, Tai Phuan, weave similar textiles, according to Cheesman (2004). Both textile types have an orange-red ground. The warp may be cotton dyed with sappan wood to get this color, but sometimes the warp is silk dyed with stick lac. The ground weft is generally this orange-red cotton. Weft stripes and the supplementary patterning are primarily in silk. The Phu Thai favor white, yellow, purple, orange, and light turquoise/green. Change in colorways occurred when other materials became available. Metallic thread was the first import to be added to the shawls. Later, aniline dyes allowed for more colors to decorate the textiles.
Textile Sample 6  
Name: Phaa Daam – Eastern Savannakhet type  
Group: Phu Thai  
Origin: Baan Khii Khang, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet  
Producer: Mae Thao Bao  
Producer Age: 75 years old  
Period Made: 1940s  
Materials: Cotton and silk  
Dyes: Sappan wood, khe,  
Techniques: Continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft
Warp per sq. inch: 32  
Size: Height 120 x Width 92 cm

The shawl is made from two of pieces of material joined together so the patterning matches. This is very difficult to achieve. The warp is pink silk with a red cotton ground weft. There are weft stripes in white, purple, yellow, and light green silk. At the top end the continuous supplementary weft patterning is in the form of lanterns composed of different types of flowers. The bottom end also contains lanterns but made with discontinuous supplementary weft technique. Orange silk is incorporated into the designs. The large lanterns are composed of *naak* heads, stars, seeds, and floral motifs. These motifs include sandalwood flowers (*dauk chan*), water chestnuts (*maak chap*), and fern (*khau kut*) tendrils. The last row is decorated with floral offerings transforming into fringe.
Textile Sample 7
Name: Phaa Daam – Eastern Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Khii Khang, Vilabouly District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Bao
Producer Age: 75 years old
Period Made: 1940s
Materials: Cotton and silk
Dyes: Sappan wood, indigo, khe,
Techniques: Supplementary warp
Warp per sq. inch:
This shawl is made from two pieces of fabric. The warp is striped: red, white, yellow, green, and purple silk. Supplementary warp patterning decorates the light green stripes. The designs include dashes and funeral reliquaries or *thaat*. The weft is red cotton. Near the bottom end is yellow silk weft decorated with a braid of red and green cotton. The weft ends hang off to the sides. The only other recorded ethnic group that weaves a similar textile is the Tai Phuan. Thus, Phu Thai and Tai Phuan weavers are the only groups known to produce *phaa daam* and the *phaa jong*.
Textile Sample 8
Name: Phaa Khen – Eastern and Western Savannakhet type
Group: Phu Thai
Origin: Baan Lahanam, Songkhone District, Savannakhet
Producer: Mae Thao Song
Producer Age: 68 years old
Period Made: 1950s
Materials: Silk
Dyes: Indigo, stick lac
Techniques: Plied thread
Men wore voluminous hip wrappers for special occasions. Copious amounts of silk are required to weave this large fabric. This excess symbolizes the wealth of the owner. The garment has several names, especially after the plied threads or twisted thread (khen). It is also called phaa hang or a textile with tails. Men would twirl the ends while dancing during festivals, according to informants. The warp is indigo silk with a weft of plied light brown/indigo silk and white silk stripes near both ends. This textile type was assimilated directly from the Lao. However, the Lao name was not assimilated along with the textile but was given a Phu Thai name.
### Appendix C: Field Research Sites

![Map of Savannakhet Province](image)

#### Field Research Sites: Phu Thai Villages by District

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<td></td>
<td>Phone Sa-at 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vang 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Field Research Sites: Lao Villages by District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kaysone Phomvihane</th>
<th>Champhone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phone Sim 2</td>
<td>Nonglamchan 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thaat 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field Research Sites: Katang Villages by District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alao 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Yaang 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vong Sakii 15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Distinctive Markers of Phu Thai Textiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Indigo-dyed cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Long sleeves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Long bodice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flared waist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Opens front &amp; center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Trimmings in red cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fasteners: coins or plastic buttons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sin Mii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Striped waistband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Midsection decorated with any of 4 styles of weft ikat technique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cotton yarns (in past, silk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Indigo main dye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Patterning in white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secondary colors painted onto cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Border woven in warp pick up technique to be Phu Thai thae thae</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phae/Phaa Daam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Orange red background of a combination of silk and cotton warp/weft or cotton only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Continuous and discontinuous supplementary threads primarily in white, yellow, orange, purple, light turquoise or green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Patterning woven densely across fabric’s surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bands of patterning separated by stripes in same materials as patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Soi saa or fringe motif frame the ends of the overall design composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phaa Jong</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Orange red background of a combination of silk and cotton warp/weft or cotton only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supplementary warp patterning primarily in white, yellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secondary supplementary warp patterning in black, green</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Phaa La-euh</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Traditionally with a white background but now other colors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Composed of two pieces of material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unlined and no frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Continuous Supplementary patterning covers two panels of material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Piping in red cotton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One variation contains discontinuous supplementary weft patterning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>