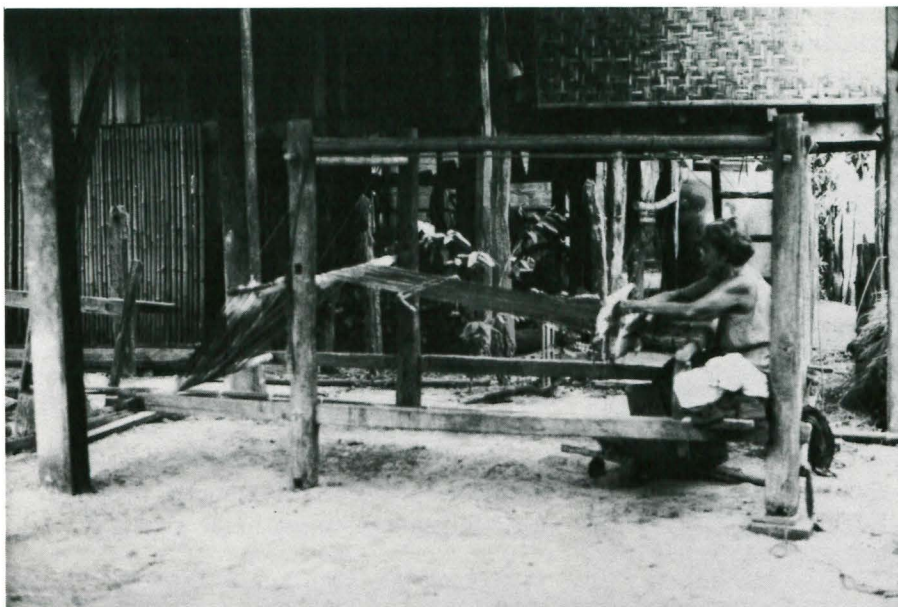


# Women's Textiles & Men's Crafts in Thai Culture



A woman weaves at a loom under her house in Baan Chaan Laan, Ubon Ratchathani Province.

Photo by H. Leedom Lefferts

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Under many houses in Thailand today, especially in the Northeast (Isaan), even in this era of ready-made clothing, stand looms. The values associated with the production and display of beautiful textiles pervade Thai culture.

As in all cultures, dressing a certain way signifies putting on a particular identity. The clothing worn by Thai men and women is related to gender, age, and locale. In villages, women usually wear the *phaa sin*, a tubular, wrap-around skirt; their upper garment is a loose T-shirt or blouse. But younger women today often wear the international style of jeans and shirts. When doing manual labor, women may don *phaa sin* or pants and long-sleeved shirts, often with a hat and headscarf to protect against sun and wind.

Men usually wear Euro-American-styled pants and shirts. However, in private – in villages and even in cosmopolitan Bangkok – men often wear the *phaa sarong*, a tubular, wrap-around skirt with a plaid design secured with a twisted knot in the male style. Women tie their *phaa sin* by making a flap and tucking this securely into the skirt's waistband.

Clothing in a culture as complex as that of the

Thai embodies styles from many historical and contemporary sources and signifies the variety of identities contemporary Thais adopt. Some outfits are ethnic, such as the indigo-dyed, striped *phaa sin* of the Lao Song of the western Central Plains. Other styles indicate an individual's occupation. Many large corporations, such as banks, require women and men to wear a uniform based on European design, which may vary according to the day of the week. Thai civil servants, including college professors, also have such uniforms. Most importantly, King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit, and other members of the royal family wear an array of uniforms and formal and informal dress based on European fashion.

The Thai "traditional" style of clothing has always been varied and subject to change. Royal dress has been influenced by the prevailing fashions of powerful trading partners. Indian textiles, for example, appear regularly in illustrations and descriptions by early European visitors. But styles can move in two directions. A delegation of Thai ambassadors to the French court in the 1600s brought such glamorous textiles to Paris that a new fashion began there.

Royal dress has also influenced the attire of Thai common people. M.R. Kukrit Pramoj's famous semifictional chronicle of *Four Reigns*,



covering the period from approximately 1870 to 1950, notes that the marriage of a princess from the northern kingdom of Chiang Mai to the Bangkok king influenced fashionable women to adopt the tubular *phaa sin*. Previously, the prevailing Bangkok style was the *phaa chong kraben*, in which the ends of the long hip wrapper are twisted together, tucked backwards between the legs, and folded between the wrapper and the small of the back. Today in Thailand, only elderly



*Bride and groom present cloth gifts to women relatives of the groom in Baan Hua Chang, Maha Sarakham Province. Photo by H. Leedom Lefferts*

rural women in Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) Province, members of the Thai Korat ethnic group, continue to wear *phaa chong kraben*.

M.R. Kukrit also notes that, at the beginning of World War II, the prime minister, Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram, promulgated several rules regarding attire. These included injunctions that shoes must be worn in cities, men must wear pants, women must let their hair grow (the prevailing Central Thai style was short hair), and, especially, women must wear hats. This code prescribed proper attire for a country aspiring to developed status. Appropriate dress publicized and personified his strategy for development.

Today, in a reversal of the reliance on foreign textiles, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has developed a program to preserve and encourage Thai home production. Her SUPPORT Foundation assists local weavers, while Her Majesty consciously influences fashion by publicly wearing locally produced fabrics and promoting the sale of these

textiles through the well-known Chitralada shops.

Textiles are important in Thai culture other than as dress. Before there were chemical paints to decorate houses, textiles were often used to beautify a structure for a ceremony. Colorfully patterned door curtains shielded rooms from inquiring glances. Cloth also can be used to tie something up, to properly and ceremonially "dress" it.

Thai textiles convey religious meanings in funerals and monastic ceremonies. Village weaving stops for a day when a death is announced; weaving indicates the continuation of life, interrupted at death. Banners, sometimes several meters long, memorialize deceased loved ones and may be flown on monastery grounds on the day when the Vessantara Jataka is read; the monastery simulates a luxurious palace to celebrate the life of the penultimate Buddha. Processed yarn and completed monks' robes may be donated to monks during a funeral, bringing merit to the deceased and to the mourners.

## TEXTILES AS WOMEN'S WORK

Textile production as women's work in Thai culture, as in most of Southeast Asia, creates a wealth of connotations. Weaving is a sign that a young woman is reaching adult status by gaining the ability to provide for the textile requirements of a household. Because women control the giving of textiles to monks, fathers, husbands, sons, and daughters, they actively participate in and in some sense control the establishment of localized Thai social systems.

At marriage, a bride normally presents gifts of cloth to her husband's mother, father, and other close relatives. In Northeast Thai villages, I have seen presentations of silk *phaa sin* and shoulder cloths and cotton pillows and stuffed mattresses. At elite weddings in Bangkok, a bride may present expensive Gucci towels. These presentations affirm women as providers and organizers of the Thai domestic scene.

The role of women in Thai culture extends much further than providing a properly managed home. When a son reaches age 20, he may become a monk for the three-month period of the Rains Retreat, from mid-July through mid-October. Young men who become monks say they do this for their parents, especially their mothers, to whom they can transfer merit made during this period. Three of the eight requisites which a young man must possess in order to enter the





monkhood involve a set of robes. While today these robes are usually bought in a market, they are still given formally by a mother to her son.

These examples show that textiles produced by women perpetuate the Thai social system by properly dressing household and family. Moreover, the presentation of textiles establishes the standing of those who embody important social values in Thai culture.

### MEN'S CRAFTS

In traditional Thai culture women's textiles complemented men's crafts. And as women's weaving production has dwindled because of the availability of factory-produced items and the possibility of wage employment outside of home and village, traditional men's crafts have declined for similar reasons. However, crafts are still important in certain contexts and illustrate the dynamic balance that existed between men and women in preindustrial Thai culture.

Men engaged in crafts that women usually did not, those related to wood and bamboo: building houses, carving statues and containers, producing gunpowder and making fireworks, and "weaving"

*A man in a silk phaa sarong and shoulder cloth presents alms to monks in Baan Dong Phong, Khon Kaen Province. Photo by H. Leedom Lefferts*

bamboo into baskets. Before marriage, young men and women often gave each other presents. Women usually gave gifts made of cloth. Men gave baskets and presented *kan maak*, wooden or lacquered footed trays in which a woman would keep material for chewing betel. Recently, a curio market in old betel nut boxes has emerged, but once in a while one finds an elderly woman saving a box that her husband gave her when they became engaged.

Several older village monasteries and many provincial cultural centers now collect and preserve wooden Buddha statues carved by monks in earlier days. These had often been discarded as new, glossy, mass-produced images became available, but increasingly, with the encouragement of the royal family and government, Thai rural people are becoming aware of the social value of their craft heritage.

Certain religious festivals conserve craft traditions that might otherwise have become lost. For

example, Bun Katin, the festival in the month following the end of the Rains Retreat during which new robes and other necessary goods are presented to monks, often requires the production of several kinds of baskets that appropriately contain these gifts. The New Year's Ceremony, in which a village renews itself and wards off misfortune, also may see the production of baskets to carry objects as gifts or for presentation to the monastery.

The production and use of textiles were major parts of women's economic and symbolic roles in premodern Thai culture. Textiles signified women's power to control a complex technology and to define others by presentation of the objects necessary in Thai society. In spite of the inroads made by factory-produced textiles, a number of expert weavers continue production. Some continue weaving to make money, others weave to have gifts to present at appropriate times, and still others produce beautiful cloth solely because

of the pleasure it affords them.

Complementarity between women's household organization and textile production and men's monkhood and craft production continues and appears fundamental to Thai gender construction. Each gender has its goals of providing for particular cultural and social necessities.

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