

LITTLE THINGS MEAN A LOT: POTS AND CLOTH IN NORTHEAST THAILAND

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Abstract

Studies of Thai culture tend to focus on Buddhism and state; studies of Thai art tend to focus on art as defined in Euro-American terms. This research report, based on a decade of fieldwork with more under way, is intended as a thought-piece to address ways of ascertaining the lives of everyday people through everyday things. Our studies of weaving and pottery production in Northeast Thai villages have provided ways to understand not only technology and marketing but also such issues as the relationship of ethnicity to technology; gender roles; social hierarchy of production; and the artistic dimensions of traditional production wherein individuals engage in making more or less standardized products. Weaving used to be a requisite skill for almost every village woman; pottery-making takes place as a seasonal activity only in specific communities that have access to clay. Our current study shows, in particular, how systems of pottery-making technology sometimes align with, but sometimes cut across, conventional ethnic identities, and how earthenware production seems to have provided a portable occupation for displaced ethnic/social groups.

Introduction

Studies of Thai culture tend to focus on Buddhism and state, while studies of Thai art history tend to focus on art as defined in Euro-American terms. Our paper offers some alternative ways of addressing the lives and arts of everyday people through everyday things, using our studies of pots and cloth in Northeast Thailand over the past decade. This paper reflects a strategy designed to deal with the present moment among peoples for whom monumental architecture, sculpture, and painting no longer perpetuate regional styles but mirror national – or even international – models. This paper also reflects our conviction that examination of the details of local products such as cloth and pots brings to light realms

of artistic production, technological styles, and intricate meanings more truly reflective of the complexities of local cultures.

Our region-wide surveys have revealed unexpected ties, in the case of pots – or an equally surprising lack of relationships, in the case of cloth – to the commonly proposed historical ebb and flow of diverse ethnic groups within the region. Connections embodied in the construction of a pot or a length of cloth contradict concepts of ethnicity associated with more prominent monumental structures. In a region where Khmer political influence waned in the fourteenth century, leaving the great stone structures to crumble, we find Khmer patterns of technology hidden in the ongoing production of pots by Lao-speaking women. Through textiles and their use in ceremonies, we see the perpetuation of statements of meaning originating in Khmer usages, but now applied in northeast Thai-Lao Theravada Buddhist contexts.

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The area now known through political affiliation as Northeast Thailand occupies the Khorat plateau, an open but well-defined region bordered to the north and east by the Mekong River, to the south by the Dangrek escarpment overlooking Cambodia, and to the west by the Petchabun mountains leading to what is now called Central Thailand. This area, lying at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, has been appropriated by successive dominant cultures over the millennia, beginning with the Ban Chiang efflorescence and including the Dvaravati civilization and the Khmer empire. Khmer influence seemingly waned with the decline of Angkor, while, later, the populace of the Lao kingdoms spilled across the Mekong to occupy openland (Keyes 1976). Various Lao-speaking ethnic groups predominate in present-day Northeast Thailand, with smaller populations of Khmer and Suay living in the southern half of the plateau (Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave 1964 map).

Cloth

An intensive study of textiles, resulting from many years of work in the region, first gave rise to the questioning of received opinions. It became apparent that textiles highlighted and re-affirmed, in ways we had not been led to expect, the roles of women in producing and reproducing household, village, and Buddhist social structures (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992).

Focusing on textiles permits us to hypothesize that women exercise a controlling force on the trajectory of Theravada Buddhism. This occurs through their control of the production of cloth used to mark the transition of a young man first to the liminal status of 'serpenthoo' and then to monkhood (Lefferts 1994). This hypothesis contradicts the received opinion that men are the important figures in Theravada Buddhism. At minimum, textiles permit us to visualize a complementarity between women and men, resulting in a re-configuration of the role of Theravada Buddhism in daily Thai-Lao life. Using textiles, we can

begin to bring contemporary Thai women into Buddhist history. We can also describe women as well as men as active agents in Buddhism.

Focusing on textiles also initiated other questions. These concern technology, production, and ethnicity. First, we found that textile production is arguably the single most complex pre-industrial technology in Thai-Lao culture. Even rice cultivation on the Khorat Plateau may not have used as complex a set of tools and procedures as does textile production, ranging from yarn production and finishing to dyeing, weaving, and distribution. Moreover, all of these processes classified under the rubric of 'weaving' are women's work, whereas most aspects of rice production are shared by men and women.

Second, textile production requires years of focused study for a woman to become proficient. It was not unusual for elderly women to tell us that they had started weaving at age twelve under their mother's or a neighbor's supervision and had progressed in learning the repertory of techniques in order to become skilled in time for their marriage, at eighteen or so. Brides wove specially required textiles and presented them to their new in-laws. After raising their children, some especially adept women continued to perfect their techniques and learn new ones, becoming recognized as 'master' weavers. We have estimated that Thai-Lao weavers had access to more than thirty different methods for varying their weaving in order to produce different designs.

Third, the implications of weaving in terms of ethnicity and politics contradicted our expectations. It became apparent that the women we talked to were part of a regional distribution of yarn, designs, dyes, loom parts, and completed textiles stretching far beyond the Khorat Plateau or a single ethno-linguistic group. Silk from China and Tai Dam peoples; cotton from Laos and Thailand; prohibitions on silk production affecting some Theravada Buddhist women but not others; the widespread distribution

of the same design with different names or no name; the ability of weavers to execute the same design using different techniques; and the important role of fashion—all served to explode the myth that a textile could be associated with a certain people or even with a specific function.

Furthermore, there was every reason to suppose that these factors were at least as prominent several centuries ago, prior to the inroads of Western capitalism and industrially-produced yarns, dyes, and cloth, as they are today. In fact, the ease with which these outside materials were accepted



Figure 1. Master weaver Mae Nu at her loom, experimenting with a new pattern on one portion of the warp. Baan Hua Chang, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand (1990).

shows that weavers relished their increased ability to do more with more variety (Lefferts 1996).

The openness of textile production to external inputs confirms the conclusions of studies such as those of Katherine Bowie (1992) on Chiang Mai, and Lefferts on Northeast Thailand and Laos, which make

clear that production has always been a matter of 'state' concern. Textiles cannot be explained as only the products of women, based in some ethnic matrix, acting in seemingly isolated, subsistence-oriented households. Women weavers act in a complex environment of religion, politics, power, trade, and fashion. In this context art, in part, becomes a matter of politics and power.

Pots

Our discovery of the fluid movement of textile style across ethnic boundaries in present-day Northeast Thailand influenced our initial approach to the documentation of earthenware production in the same region. We did not anticipate that ethnicity would have appreciable impact on pot-making. We expected to find a more or less uniform technology in the fifty-odd earthenware sites scattered across the plateau and we planned simply to document it as we addressed differences related to other factors, such as gender. Instead, our major focus has become the ethnic specificity of pot-making technology and the way it enables us to trace the dynamic migration of one group of potters in particular. In this approach we fully acknowledge the inspiration of William Solheim's pioneering studies on the distribution of ceramic technologies in Asia (e.g. Solheim 1964).

Our model for technological style was Baan Maw (Pot Village) in Mahasarakham Province, close to the geographic center of Northeast Thailand and familiar to us because of its location near our base of operations for textile research. In Baan Maw, the potters, who are women, make earthenware water jars. They form a cylinder of clay, stand it upright on a short wooden post, and—in the most distinctive movement of their work—walk *around* the cylinder, sometimes forward, sometimes backward, to shape the rim first before they shape the body. Baan Maw potters then shape the round body of the pot using a paddle and anvil. They fire their pots in short, violent

bonfires that finish in less than an hour.

This distinctive technological style is associated with a division of labor and economic system which we have come to define as the industrial household.

While women produce pots, men collect clay, manage the firing, and market the pots, travelling up to fifty kilometers from Baan Maw. Baan Maw families typically have little or no rice land and depend almost entirely on pot-making for their income. Almost all Baan Maw households follow this pattern, leading to a single-occupation, industrialized settlement (Lefferts and Cort 1997).

The issue of ethnicity was thrust upon us as soon as we began visiting other pottery-producing villages for our survey. In the process of eliciting genealogies, we found

that the numerous other villages of potters who claimed a relationship to Baan Maw through recent migration or marriage also traced their ancestry ultimately to districts north of the old city of Khorat, in the southwest corner of the plateau. Moreover, all such potters identified themselves ethnically as Thai-Khorat, an ethnic category not significant in our textile studies.

Our survey made clear the numerical dominance of Thai-Khorat pot-making villages, but we also located a handful of communities of potters of other ethnicities, including Suay and Lao. In our visits to such communities, we typically found women potters operating as members of farming households, conducting occasional pot-making entirely by themselves as a part-



Figure 2. Thai-Khorat potter beginning to shape a water jar from a cylinder of clay, using a paddle and anvil and walking forward around the wooden post that serves as work table. Baan Talat, Nakhon Ratchasima Province, Thailand (1995).



Figure 3. Water-cooling jar with paddled neck decoration and smooth surface, made by Thai-Khorat potter, Baan Maw, Mahasarakham Province, Thailand (1994).



Figure 4. Suay potter holding two cooking pots with paddle-marked striations. Baan Cham Saming, Surin Province, Thailand (1994).

time, seasonal activity. These potters' technological styles differed in many details, including preparation of the clay, forming of the pot, and firing. Above all, the leisurely pace of production in such communities stood in striking contrast to the intense industriousness of Thai-Khorat potters.

These comparisons brought us back to the question of who the Thai-Khorat potters are and why they dominate this occupation in a region predominantly inhabited by Thai-Lao farmers. Khorat, once a major Khmer city in the Khorat plateau, is now called Nakhon Ratchasima, a Thai name meaning Royal Boundary Marker City, signifying its role as an outlier of the Siamese kingdoms of Ayutthaya and early Bangkok. Thai-Khorat people identify themselves as such because, even though they live among Thai-Lao on the Khorat Plateau, they are understood to be Khmer colonized by Central Thai.

When we expanded our search across present political borders, we found a

relationship in modern Cambodia for the Thai-Khorat potters' technology (Biagini and Mourer 1971; Cort, Lefferts and Mori, n.d.). We now see Thai-Khorat pot production as 'crypto-Khmer.' Fully six centuries after the Khmer Empire disintegrated, Thai-Khorat potters in northeast Thailand use production technology embodied in a transmitted pattern of behavior that is still recognizably Khmer. We have come to focus on this complex of motor skills, rather than on tools or the appearance of the finished pots, to distinguish among groups of potters. In particular, from our close observations of the activities of potters in differing ethnic groups, we realize it is not sufficient to describe pots simply as shaped with paddle and anvil, since any number of highly distinctive procedures may lead up to that process (Cort, Lefferts, and Reith 1997; Vandiver and Chia 1997).

The migration of Thai-Khorat potters to all corners of the Khorat plateau seems to go back at least to the beginning of the nineteenth century, as families of pot-makers left Khorat for Lao-populated areas further east and north, drawn by the opportunity for work if not pushed by famine, drought, flood, and the lack of sufficient farmland in the heavily populated districts north of Khorat City. Today, Thai-Khorat potters' communities serve all parts of the plateau; the Thai-Khorat style of water jar dominates in all markets. We have observed recent additions of 'Ban Chiang style' decoration to such water jars. Potters tell us that such pots sell for five baht (about US \$ 0.10 cents) more than non-decorated pots, a worthwhile difference in household economies depending entirely upon pot production. The few Thai-Lao potters who continue potting are at the fringes of the Thai-Khorat encroachment; because these households rely on more than one source of income, they do not see the loss of pot-making from their repertory as disastrous. The present dominance of Thai-Khorat pottery is a matter not of style or taste or ethnic preference, but of economics.

Conclusion

This paper shows that contexts of different artistic media appear to vary independently across what might be supposed to be readily identifiable ethno-linguistic groups. Cloth production depends on extremely well-trained women who manipulate complex technologies, readily adapt new designs to existing technologies, and are involved in meaningful structural statements. Textiles and their component technologies seem today to move freely across the landscape of people and cultures.

This differs from pot production and distribution, wherein we see the distribution of ethnicity coeval with distinctive technologies and, in the case of Thai-Khorat potters, an intensive division of labor requiring both men and women. This configuration has led us to wonder whether so-called Thai-Khorat ethnicity may be adopted by those people who take up pot-making as a survival strategy, together with constructed histories and possible fictive kinship, regardless of what ethnicity they might have claimed before (cf. Foster 1972).

Meanwhile, pots and cloth also vary in the meanings attributed to them within their cultural frameworks. Textiles are fundamental proxies whereby Thai-Lao women assert themselves in social and religious structures. Pots, by contrast, seem to be more simply 'things' – produced and used without great symbolic meaning or overt Buddhist context.

For neither pots nor cloth do we find simple correlations that support generally accepted statements of the co-terminal boundaries of material culture and ethnicity. Our research on the 'little things' of cloth and pots has involved us in questioning the idea that 'art' is not an easy gloss for cultural systems.

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