



LANTEN

— THE *indigo* YAO

OF LAOS

By Tara Gufadhur

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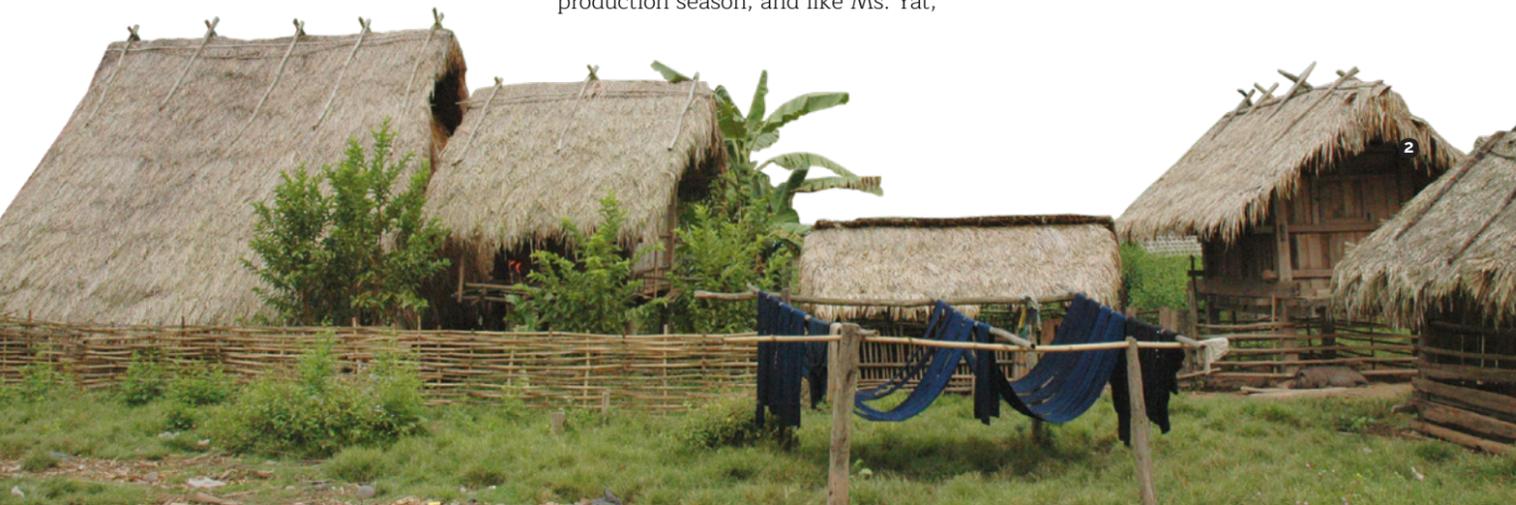
Ms. Yat, a petite 50-year old with wise, birdlike eyes, is showing me rolls upon rolls of heavy cotton cloth dyed a rich, deep blue. Dressed in a tunic and short trousers made of the same fabric, Ms. Yat tells me the cotton is farmed by her family next to their rice fields. Her sons help harvest the fluffy cotton boles, which are then spun, woven, and dyed by her – all by hand. I follow Ms. Yat to a nearby shed, where large vats of fermenting indigo plant dye hold more lengths of cloth. Her hands and nails, I notice, are stained the same blue. It is October, the start of the cotton production season, and like Ms. Yat,

many women in Nam Lue Village are weaving and dyeing their cloth and display the same stained hands.

Indigo is an integral part of the identity of the Yao Mun. In Laos, the Yao Mun are often known as Lanten, from *Landian* in Chinese, meaning “Indigo Yao.” Two centuries ago the Yao Mun emigrated to Laos from southern China and settled along small rivers. The Lao government bestowed Yao Mun communities the colloquial name of *Lao Huay*, meaning “Lao of the Streams”, and they now inhabit an estimated 33 villages in the far north of the country.

- 1. Lanten family in traditional dress
- 2. Lengths of indigo drying in Nam Lue
- 3. Lanten Bride
- 4. Lanten ordination with homemade altar

Photos: Kees Sprengers



THE ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF LAOS

Laos has a rich diversity of cultures, lifestyles and arts. Its 6.5 million inhabitants comprise 49 officially recognised ethnic groups in four language families. The majority Tai Lao people, from where the country derives its name, only make up 53% of the population, and primarily inhabit the lowland plains and riverbanks of southern and central Laos.

It’s easy to recognise Lanten communities, as most members of the community, even youth, still wear their traditional indigo cotton clothing. Like Ms. Yat, older women continue to wear their hair in the traditional updo, with a small centre parting and a bun anchored with a silver hairpin.

I have come to Nam Lue, in the heavily forested hills of Luang Namtha Province, to gather information on Lanten communities for a permanent exhibition at the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) in Luang Prabang. The Lanten practice an ancient form of Chinese Taoism blended with ancestor and spirit worship, which exerts a strong influence over many aspects of their lives. They dedicate a large amount of their time to religious activities and ceremonies that will confer material rewards in this life and celestial serenity in the afterlife. Their elaborate rituals require ceremonial books and paintings, seals and stamps, and masks and robes. In the past, priests and families used heirloom pieces, passed down from generation to generation. However, when faced with financial hardship, families often sell heirlooms to antique traders, forcing communities to make do with crude copies made from cardboard, cheap wood, and bamboo.

Back in her thatched roof home, Ms. Yat showed me her celestial crown, a breath-taking piece of jewellery which had been in her family for as long as she could remember. Composed of ornate hand-worked silver disks, pins, and chains, the crown is assembled on the head of a Yao Mun bride on her wedding day. Ms. Yat told me it was one of three left in the community.

“What do families do if they don’t have a crown?” I ask. “They borrow or rent them from others,” she explains. Ms. Yat, and many other community members interviewed, does not seem disturbed by the loss of these heirlooms. Simple substitutes are available, and the community bands together to share what they have. I buy several rolls of cotton fabric from her, and arrange to buy more crafts on a regular basis from the community. Buying village-made textiles and handicrafts helps Ms Yat and other Lanten families earn income and preserves the skill and heritage of the Indigo Yao. And, it may help lessen the pressure to sell rare cultural and ceremonial pieces.

To learn more about the ethnic cultures of Laos visit the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang.



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