

# NOTES ON THE THREAD-SQUARE IN THAILAND

by

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The thread-square is a smaller or larger cross of bamboo or wooden stick, around which are wound many coloured threads, so as to form a square. Occasionally there are also lozenge shaped, hexagonal or triangular thread-squares. Then there is also the so-called thread-star, made up of three sticks, around which is wound thread in a circular form.

The above description of thread-squares is from a letter dated 20th June 1963 in which Dr. Hans E. Kauffmann of Munich requested information on the thread-square in Thailand. In a subsequent letter, Dr. Kauffmann informed me that he was writing on the subject of thread-squares, and had already dealt with the thread-square in Western Further India.<sup>1</sup> He stated further that the thread-square and its kind, as known to him, was used in death rites in Further India among various Naga tribes of Western Burma, the Kachins of Upper Burma, the Lawas of Northwest Thailand and the Radhes and the Djarais in Vietnam. The reason for erecting or hanging the thread-square seemed to be as a protection against death spirits.

Dr. Kauffmann's description of the thread-square aroused my curiosity and I began to make enquiries. Unfortunately, these proved futile. But one man remembered once seeing the thing described by me in his younger days. He was passing a Buddhist temple during a festival and had a fleeting glimpse of a number of the objects hanging from the eaves of the preaching hall. Though the objects were new to him, they did not arouse any inordinate interest and he could not give me the name and locality of the *wat*. Probably though, it was somewhere in central Thailand, as my informant was a native of Nakhon Sawan. Later, another informant, a native of the province of Khon Kaen in the Northeast, told me that such an object was occasionally seen in his home province and was called *taleow sai-cho* (ตะเภาไสจ้อ).

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1) *Ethnologica* vol 82, 1960, pages 36-69 with illustrations (in German).

*Taleow* is a kind of plaited work made of strips of bamboo formed into a five-pointed or, infrequently, a seven-pointed star. It serves, in most instances, as a charm against evil spirits or as a symbol for certain practical purposes. Some 70 or more years ago the *taleow* was to be seen frequently in Bangkok and perhaps everywhere in Thailand and the neighbouring countries. In Chiangmai, the major centre in North Thailand, the *taleow* was used as a charm to prevent a dead person's spirit from molesting the inmates of a house where death had occurred. When the corpse was removed to an assigned place in the surrounding woodlands for cremation, someone in the house of the deceased would, as a precaution, place a *taleow* near the stairway to deter the return of the ghost-spirit of the deceased.

In Bangkok the *taleow* is called *chaleow* (เฉลว) and in my boyhood it was used not magically, but for practical purposes. A *chaleow* at or near a floating house or a boat advertised its sale—most people were then illiterate; a number of *chaleow* set up at intervals around a plot of vacant land warned against trespassing; and if around a rice field when the rice plants were forming ears, the *chaleow* warned owners of cattle to take care not to allow their animals into the field. In the old days most traffic in Bangkok and its environs was water-borne—through the numerous creeks and canals, and at important junctions there was a sort of octroi station or inland revenue station (ด่านภาษีภายใน) where taxes on certain commodities were collected from passing boats. Here, there was a large *chaleow* that signalled boats laden with certain products to stop for examination. There was also a big gong which was sounded to warn boats to stop. I remember a joke which most people of the older generation know: 'When paddling a boat leisurely why not make a stop at the station?' The answer—'I cannot, for I am ashamed of my bald head!' (พายเรืออย่างช้าๆ ทำไมไม่จอดท่าน จันจอดไม่ได้ด้วยอายหัวล้าน).

The only type of *chaleow* that still functions mystically is a small one (see figure 1), about an inch in diameter, which is placed on the banana-leaf cover of an earthen pot containing a traditional medicinal decoction. This *chaleow* warns people against removing the cover of the pot as the decoction has been blessed with certain

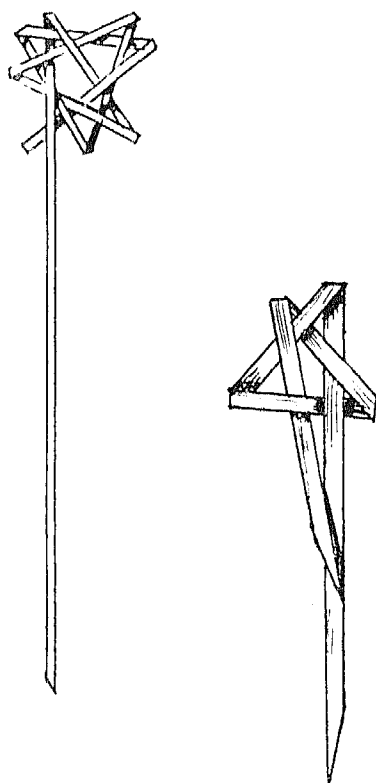


Figure 1  
*Chaleow*

magical words—the contents may be poured from a small opening provided in the banana-leaf cover. Such *chaleow* are commonly in the shape of a five-pointed, infrequently a seven-pointed, star. *Sai-cho* is a word found only in the dialect of the Thai of the Northeast and refers to a long, thin, pliable strip of bamboo wound spirally in a bamboo-woven platter where silkworms in their pupa stage are kept.

Though scarcely sufficient as data for study of the thread-square, information on *taleow sai-cho* served to arouse my interest further. At first I was misled, in a sense, by the word *taleow* which I equated with the thread-square. In fact, the *taleow sai-cho* is a kind of flag made of many pieces of thread-square strung together in a

pennant-like form. Early in 1963 my wife made a pilgrimage to *That Panom* (วัดพนม) a well-known shrine sacred to the people of both sides of the Mekong River in the province of Nakhon Panom in Northeast Thailand. I asked her to look for the *taleow sai-cho* and, if possible, to bring back one. And if any explanations were forthcoming, so much the better. Instead of the *taleow sai-cho* she brought back a very long flag which a priest of *Wat That Panom* presented to her in response to her enquiry. The priest explained that the flag was called *tung chai* (ธงชัย) or 'victory flag' and was used in connection with important festivals in the same manner as the *taleow sai-cho*. Certain villages preferred to use the 'victory flag' while others preferred the *taleow sai-cho*. They were one and the same in ritual.

A brief description of the 'victory flag' is not out of place. The one my wife brought back is of one piece, woven loosely with cotton thread of a yellowish-grey colour. The flag is 20 feet long and one foot wide. Thin slats of bamboo, alternately brown and yellow, are inserted cross-wise inside the woven fabric a foot apart. These act, no doubt, to moderate the flexibility of the flag. Between these bamboo slats are other thin slats, of bamboo of various lengths, also in brown or yellow, inserted so as to outline a *stupa-like* form against the background of the loosely woven fabric (see figure 2). Lengthwise through the centre of the flag and also along both edges, at intervals, are decorations of coloured shreds of paper terminated by festoons of coloured beads and tinsel. There is, apart from the flag, a thin piece of hardwood, 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  feet long and 3 inches wide, sawn into a crude human form with a slit in the middle of the head and a circular hole, an inch in circumference, in the middle of the torso. This is painted in a bluish colour. Another piece of hardwood is sawn roughly to resemble a bird's neck in an 'S' shape with a four-fold crest. The neck is protracted into a tenon at its lower end. Two smaller pieces of wood in the shape of closed wings, dyed yellow, are nailed either side the lower portion of the bird's neck just above the tenon. The neck, including the tenon, is painted brown; daubs of bluish colour serve for the eyes and emphasize the beak. The tenon is tightly inserted into the slit in the head of the human figure so that the bird is in an

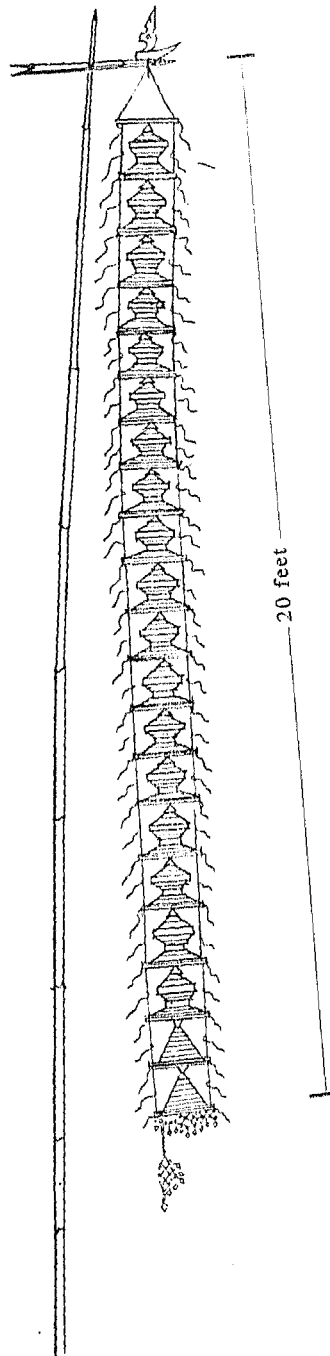


Figure 2  
*Tung chai* or 'Victory Flag'

upright position. The end of a very long bamboo pole is inserted in the hole in the middle of the human torso and the upper part of the 'victory flag' is tied by strings at two corners to the end of the tenon through a hole. The human figure, then, lies horizontally surmounted by the bird's neck when the flag is raised. Only one such flag is placed in front of a temple or a preaching hall during certain important Buddhist feasts or festivals. Should a smaller 'victory flag' be used, four or eight might be placed around the precincts of the temple or in the preaching hall at the four cardinal or eight principal points of the compass. Apparently, the use of one large flag only is due to the demands of both time and skill.

On the 30th April 1964 my wife went to the province of Khon Kaen to participate in an important Buddhist ceremony—the laying of the sacred boundary stones of a new *bot* or temple at *Wat Nong Waeng* (วัดหนองแวง). This time she succeeded in bringing back six actual *taleow sai-cho*. These were identical with the description of the thread-square as given by Dr. Kauffmann. Seven pieces of thread-square of different sizes were strung together in a pennant-form (see figure 3). Such a flag is called either *tung taleow sai-cho*—*taleow sai-cho* flag, or *tung yai*—web (particularly spider's) flag. We have noted that the *taleow sai-cho* and the *tung chai* or 'victory flag' are interchangeable in ritual: certain villages in the Northeast prefer the *taleow sai-cho*, others the 'victory flag'—though the latter is well-known and common as compared to the former. Why? The explanation offered was that it was a tradition passively observed from time immemorial.

It is well-known that in most cults of animistic and religious belief, flags, in one form or another, play a prominent part symbolically. In central Thailand, an oblong flag with a figure of a crocodile (occasionally a mermaid which, no doubt, proceeds from the crocodile) is used popularly during the presentation of Buddhist robes to the abbot of the *wat* when the rainy season comes to an end. A pair of crocodile flags head the procession to the *wat* and, after the ceremony, are planted in front of the entrance. The flags

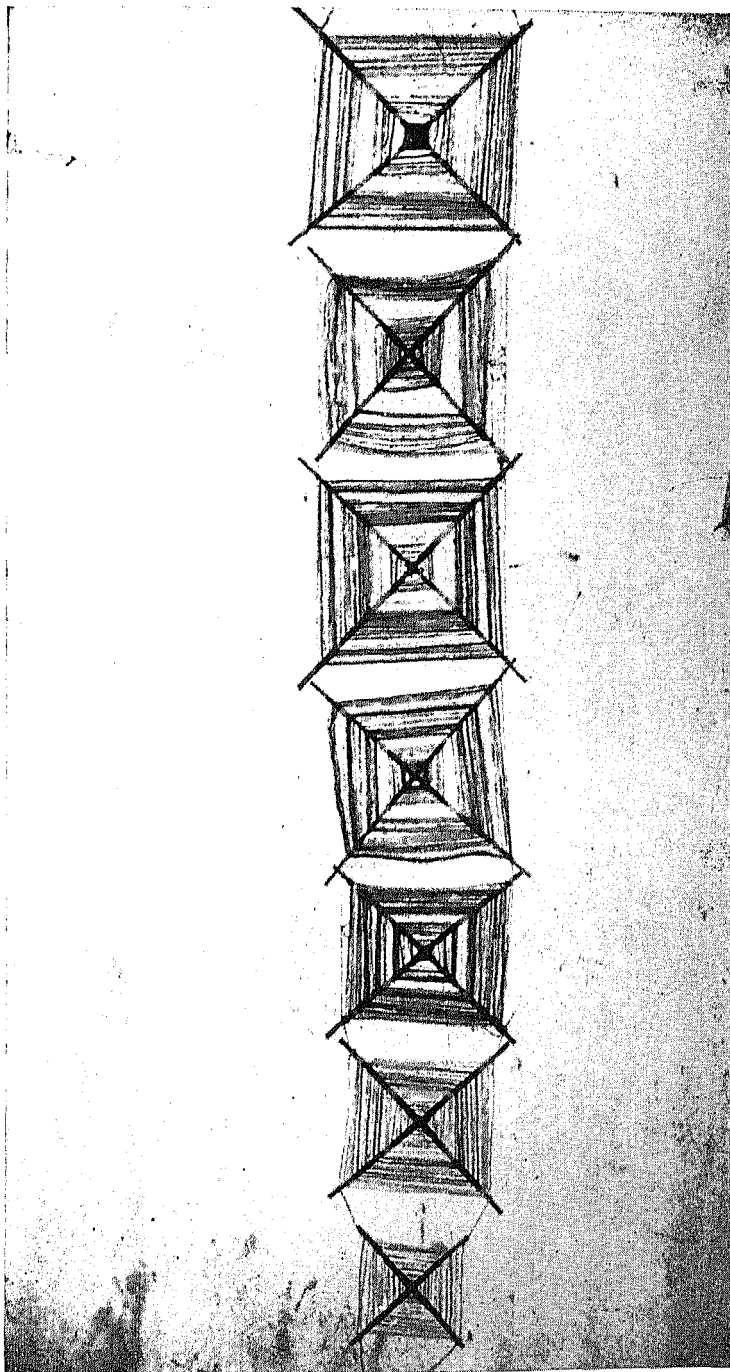


Figure 3 a  
*Taleow sai-cho* or 'Thread-Square Flag'

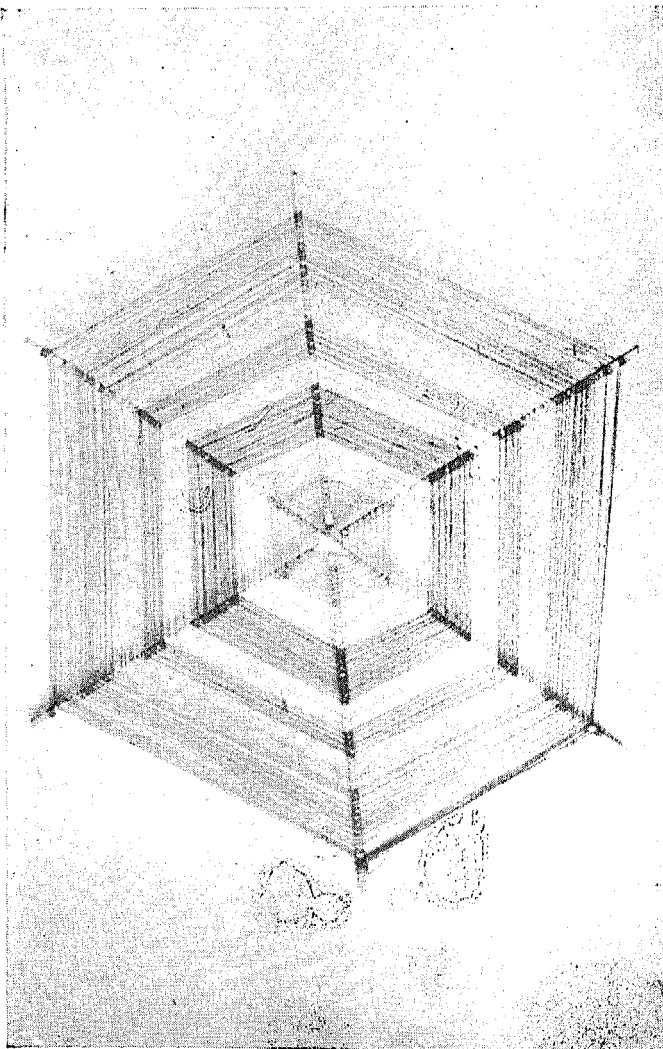


Figure 3 b  
*Taleow sai-cho* in hexagonal form



serve to indicate that the presentation of Buddhist robes to that *wat* has taken place. The reason for the crocodile flag is of the nature of a folk-tale and cannot be taken seriously. The crocodile flag is called in Thai *tong chorakhé* (ธงจระเข้)—*tung* in the North and Northeast dialects—*tong* or *tung* meaning flag, and *chorakhé* a crocodile. Occasionally this is corrupted into *chakhé* (จเข้) and *takhé* (ตะเข้) in common parlance. The old Thai word for crocodile was no doubt *ngüak* (เงือก) which is retained by the Shans and other Thai tribes. The Chinese, I believe, also used the word *ngüak* for crocodile. In Thailand the word *ngüak* has now a transferred meaning as mermaid or merman. As an old Thai literary word it means snake, especially the snake *naga* of Indian mythology. This Indian *naga* was called *ngüak ngu* (เงือกงู), that is, crocodile-snake, while a mermaid or merman was called *ngüak khon* (เงือกคน), that is, human crocodile. I am particularly interested in this crocodile flag and hope that the 'victory flag' and the *taleow sai-cho* ('spider web flag') may throw some light on it. However, I had best continue my story of the thread-square.

I recalled that in the north of Thailand, in Chiangmai for instance, there is a long flag not unlike the 'victory flag' of the Northeast, but, to my knowledge, made of a finished piece of cloth or sometimes from a sheet of coloured paper unlike the latter which is specially woven in one piece. The reason for the difference appears to be economic. This northern flag is called simply *tung*—'flag'. A friend<sup>2</sup> in Chiengrai replied to my request about *tung* saying that the flag I had described was to be found in Chiengrai. There were, in fact, two types. One was a specially woven one-piece flag called simply *tung*; the other was a thread-square and was called *tung yai mangmun* (ธงใยแมงมุม)—'spider's web flag', or simply *tung yai*—'web flag'. My informant thought that the latter might be the older, dating from before the spread of the art of weaving. He is probably correct. Both flags are used occasionally in Chiengrai during certain Buddhist feasts and festivals; the more popular, the 'web flag' being particularly common among the Thai Lüe (ลื้อ).

2) Khun Visit Udornkarn, late Governor of Chiengrai, the northernmost province of Thailand.

My informant stated further that enquiries among the older generation in Chiengrai, both cleric and laic, elicited no information other than that the practice of planting either type of flag was traditional.

Other commitments forced me to defer my study of the thread-square, and not until some two years later did I, by chance receive fresh information from one of my former students<sup>3</sup> — a native of the province of Petchabun (เพชรบูรณ์) which abutts the Northeast. During a conversation, I mentioned, incidently, the victory flag and the thread-square or *tung yai* flag. She seemed interested and I was led to show her the flags in my possession. She thereupon informed me that there were such flags in Petchabun. In fact, in girlhood, she had helped older folk to make such flags. Later, she sent me a note, the gist of which is that in the district of Lomsak (อำเภอหล่มสัก) in Petchabun Province, and also in Loei (จังหวัดเลย) a Northeastern Province abutting the district of Lomsak, the thread-square flag is called *tong yai* (ธงใย)—‘web’ flag, *tong hang* (ธงหาง)—‘tail’ flag, or *tong hang takhé*—‘crocodile tail’ flag. The description of this type of flag is essentially the same as that already given. Some days before an important event, for instance the Songkran Feast<sup>4</sup> or the Thet Mahachat Feast,<sup>5</sup> the lay manager of a village *wat* beats a big drum in the *wat* drum tower announcing the date of the coming festival and the name of the *wat* where it is to take place if there is more than one *wat* in the village. On hearing the announcement, villagers will begin collecting the necessary cotton or silk threads which most households use in weaving. The threads collected are then divided into lots and each lot is dyed a particular colour. A number of bamboo sticks for the ribs of the flag is also provided. There is no rule governing the size of a flag— a household may choose to make either a victory flag or a thread-square flag of any size, and these flags may be made at home or at the *wat* where the villagers will gather to help one another. Of course, there

3) Dr. Siddha Binitbhuvadol of the Ministry of Education.

4) See: ‘Songkran Feast’ *Thai Culture Series No 5*, National Culture Institute.

5) See: ‘Thet Mahachat’ *Burma Research Society, 50th Anniversary Publication* January 1963.

will be fun and jesting at this time, especially among the younger generation. When the flags are completed and the auspicious moment for the beginning of the festival arrives, there is some ceremony involved in hoisting them. However, my informant does not detail this ceremony. There are two kinds of flag posts: permanent and temporary. Permanent posts are of hard wood capped by a carved decorated figure of the Hindu mythological bird *hansa*—a kind of goose called in Thai *hong* (หงส์). Sometimes the *hansa* is sawn from a piece of wood and painted. The flag is raised by a pulley. Temporary posts are simply long bamboo poles. The *Meo*, a hill tribe in Petchabun Province, are reported to have had such a flag, though somewhat more crudely made and used when a birth or death occurred.<sup>6</sup>

In September 1966 my wife went to Chiangmai to attend a funeral ceremony. She returned with a *tung* and a bag. The *tung* was made from a piece of white cloth and had a decorative design in gold; the bag was similarly made (see figure 4). She told me that the *tung*, on a bamboo pole with the bag hanging alongside, was carried in front of the coffin from the house of the deceased to the ceremony ground. In the bag were a number of small parcels containing food and sweetmeats, wrapped in coconut leaves, to be used by the deceased during his journey to the land of the dead. After the coffin was placed on the funeral pyre, the *tung* with the bag was set on the ground nearby and subsequently burned at the site. No explanation of the *tung* could be elicited from informants save that it was traditional.

We may now form a general hypothesis: that the thread-square flag and the 'victory flag' are used functionally in ritual feasts and festivals among the Thai people in the North and Northeast and also in places in central Thailand where there are communities of people from these areas. Their only use in a birth or a death ceremony is by the hill tribe *Meo* in Petchabun—which instance requires verification, though general substantiation is supplied in Dr. Kauffmann's

6) Informants: Mrs. Thip Hatanasab, age 71 years and Mrs. Kimhvay Swangvororot, age 51 years. Both are natives of Amphur Lomsak, Petchabun Province.

letter. The Thai Lüe in Southern Yunnan and Northern Laos and the Shans of Upper Burma may have such a cult also. Why such flags are used is uncertain. As Dr. Kauffmann says, the thread-square and its kind are used by various ethnic groups in Burma and also in Vietnam which include the Tibetan-Burmese, the Mon-Khmer and the Indonesian or Austronesian groups, and possibly also the Thai. But where to get facts relating to these peoples?

Happily, I recalled that one of my former students, Dr. Banchob Bandhumedha, a linguist, had travelled extensively in the Shan States of Upper Burma and in Assam in search of data on the Thai language. Upon enquiry she informed me that she had seen a long flag in the Southern Shan States, but she could not give me any satisfactory information off-hand. Later, she brought me a note on Shan flags, written in English, which included a rough sketch of one of the flags—not unlike the 'victory flag'. The note was from one of her friends, a Phaké Shan gentleman named Ai Ney Ken (ไฉนเคน) of Nam Phakial Village, Naharkatia, Assam. The note:

There are two kinds of flags used in current times (1) Tang khon [see figure 5] (2) Nām.

1. Tang khon is bigger than nām in general. Tang khon is hoisted in the death ceremony (Burial ceremony==het som) and religious ceremony (het poy), but the nām is used for decoration in certain places where a religious ceremony is to be performed.

2. Tang khon used in the death ceremony: A function for a person who has died of natural causes is performed for seven days including the day of his death. In the evening of the 7th and last day of the function, the dead man's relatives end the function by hoisting as many flags as they can. This is a good gift so that the dead person may attain the Kingdom of God (Mong Phi) according to their belief. They offer many sorts of things (supposed to be necessary things to start a new house).

3. Description: For such a function they use white cloth to make the flag. There is no limit as to how long it will be. In general it is about 12 feet long and two feet wide. It is hoisted at the top of a long bamboo pole. It is believed that this is to support the soul of the deceased so that he may easily climb up to God's kingdom along with the result of the good deeds which his relatives have performed on his behalf. Thus they end the event.

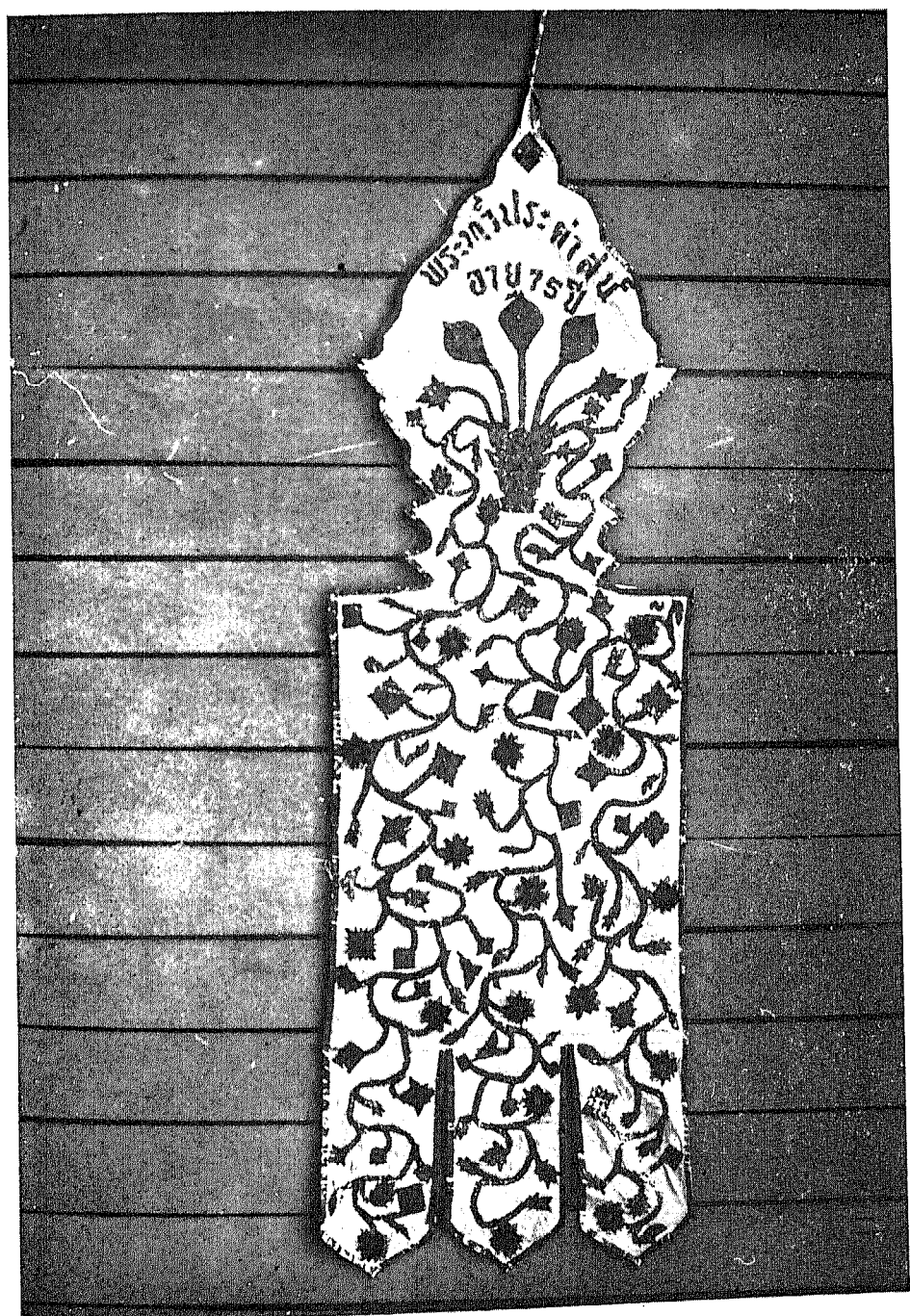


Figure 4 a  
Funeral *tung* from Chiangmai

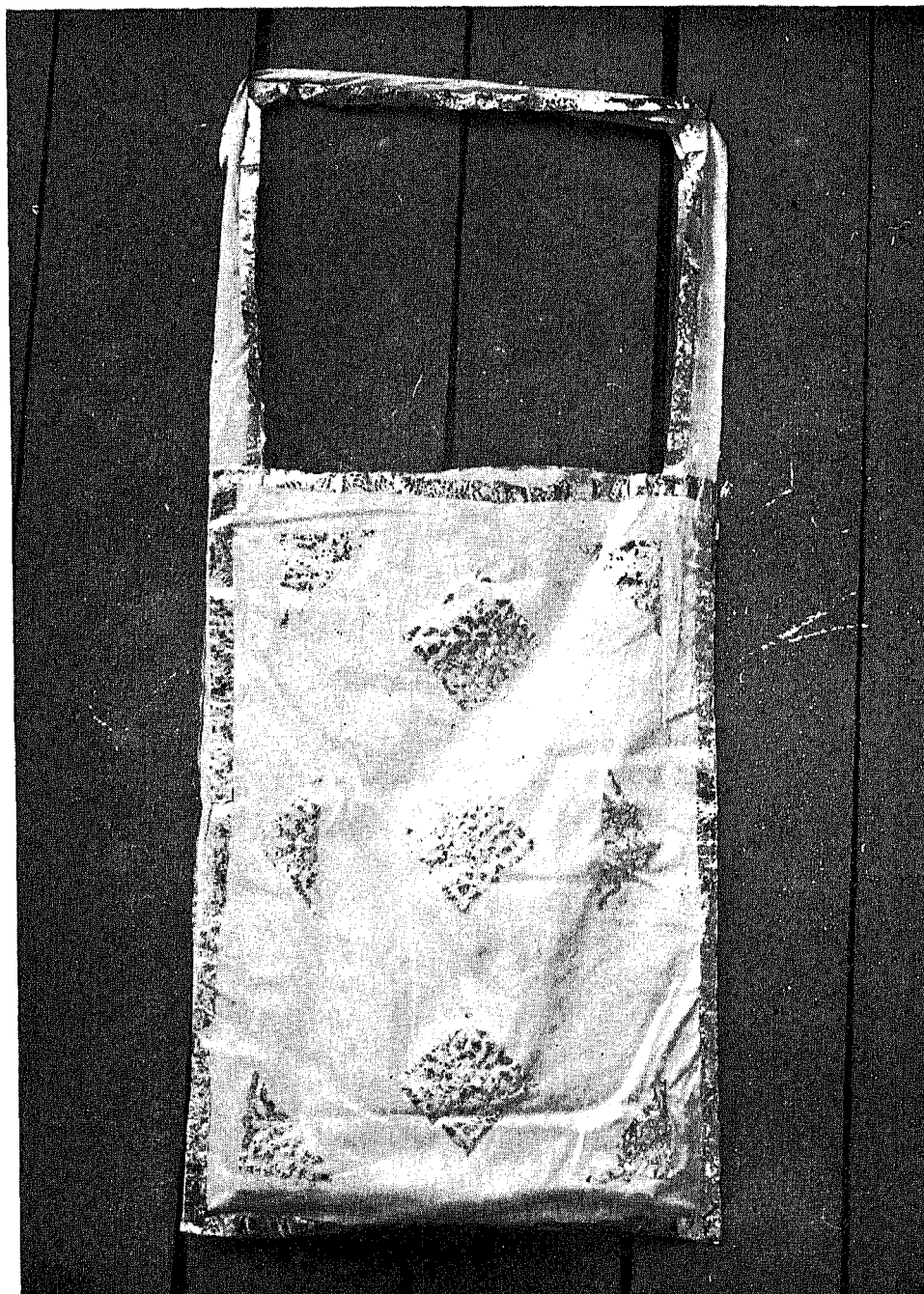


Figure 4 b  
Funeral bag from Chiangmai

Note the fabric of the flag. Instead of being specially woven like the 'victory flag' of Northeast Thailand, it is of a piece of finished cloth like the *tung* of Chiangmai.

In another note on the Shan flag or *tung* which Dr. Bandhumedha brought me, the description is exactly that of the 'victory flag' of Northeast Thailand, except that it is made from a piece of finished cloth and has a full figure of a bird instead of the head and neck only. The bird rests on the upper part of a bamboo pole, holding the flag in its beak. Above its back are three miniature umbrellas one upon the other. Both bird and flag rotate in the wind<sup>7</sup>. Ai Ney Ken kindly sent a sketch of this type of flag having a figure of a bird perched on a cross bar with a flag hung either side (see figure 6). Later, Shan Princess Cham Hom (เจ้าฉามหอม), daughter of Saopha of Hsienwi, sent a long note in reply to Dr. Banchob Bandhumedha's letter asking about various types of flags used ritually in the Shan States. The descriptions were, in the main, identical to those of Ai Ney Ken.

There is also another type of flag called *meng chalang*-‘centipede’, made of thin strips of bamboo patterned as in figure 7. Two *meng chalang* are placed either side of the entrance to a ceremonial ground and a banana plant is planted near each flag—not unlike what is done in Bangkok. There is also planted at each corner of the ceremonial ground a sort of ceremonial fence. This fence is called in Shan *yasamat*, a word obviously derived from the Pali *rajavate*, meaning ‘kings fence’ in its Burmese form. In Thailand such a fence is called *rachawat* (ราชวัติ). I will say something more about this later.

Apart from this note Dr. Bandhumedha also forwarded information on certain *taleow* of the Shan in Upper Burma which she had orally from U Chome (อุจ๋ม) of Mung Kung (เมืองคอง) in the Southern Shan States:

7) I am indebted to Kawin Ratanayan, a Buddhist priest of Hsienwi, Northern Shan States for this information.

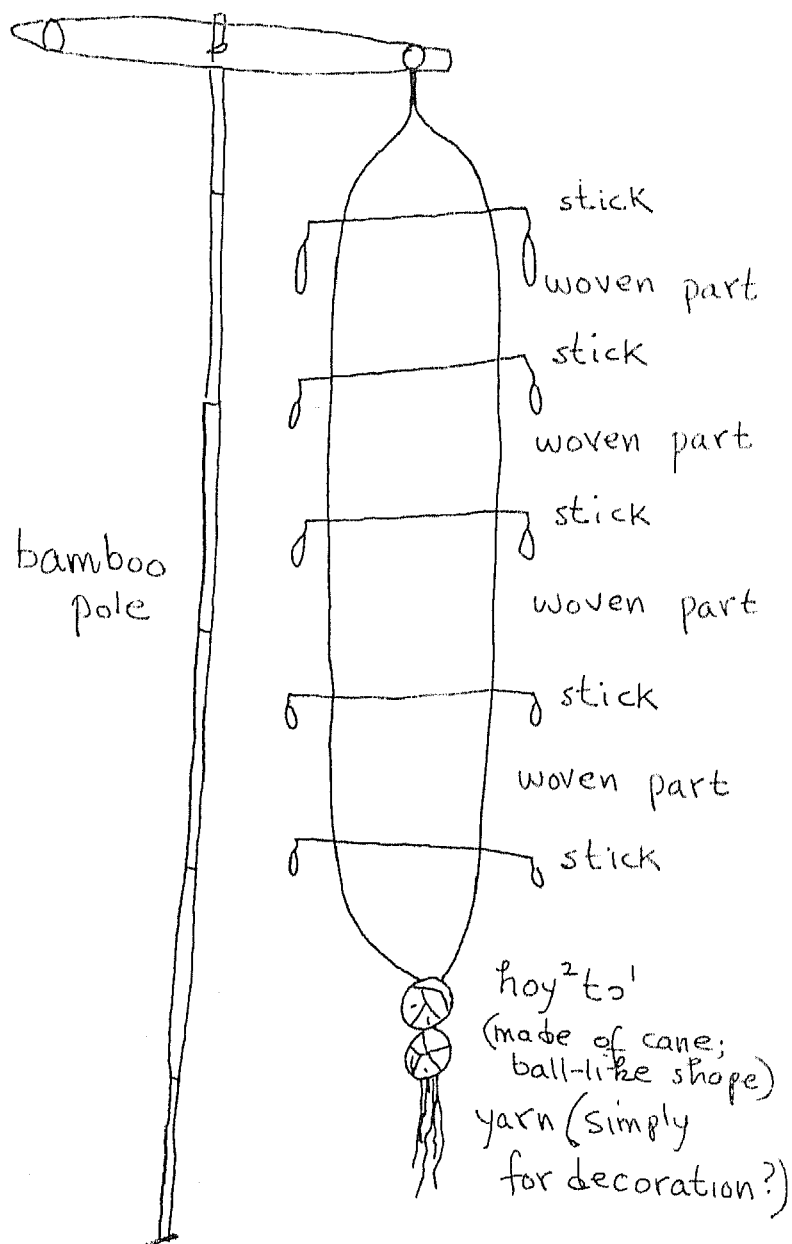


Figure 5  
Tang khon flag



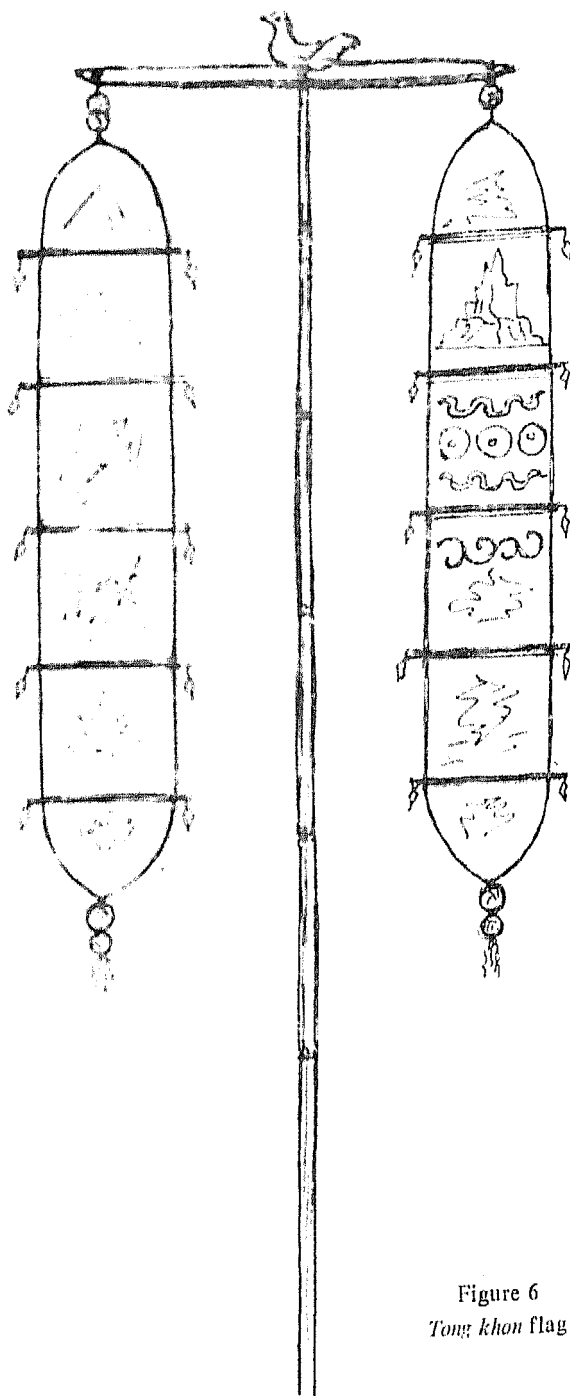


Figure 6  
*Tong khon flag*



From this I am inclined to believe that the *taleow*, the thread-square flag, the *tung chai* or 'victory flag', and perhaps the 'crocodile flag' of central Thailand spring from a common source in point of ritual function. Through development and re-interpretation they have diverged in form, but their function appears quite similar—primarily a charm, especially the *taleow* type, to avert ill or evil spirits and secure good fortune. To set up a *taleow* as soon as a corpse was removed from the house, as in northern Thailand, or to post a thread-square flag, as do the *Meo* in Petchabun Province, was to deter evil spirits. Obviously, the function of such flags is very like that of the 'victory flag' used by the Shans when death occurs in the house. The meaning, apparently from a common origin, has been elaborated: the dead dear one being helped in his ascent to the Kingdom of God by scaling the high bamboo pole of the 'victory flag'. This may be compared to that bamboo frame, of an oblong shape with three partitions, placed on the coffin of the deceased by people in Bangkok some fifty years ago. The frame represented a ladder to ease the way of the deceased in his ascent to one of the Buddhist heavens in order to meet the future Buddha or Messiah Sri Aryametrai. This popular belief has, obviously, a tinge of Mahayanism and probably also Lamaism.

The *taleow* is possibly the proto-type of magic squares and circles as well as the *rachawat* (ราชวาท) or 'king's fence' seen frequently in Bangkok at present in certain ritual ceremonies (see figure 8), but now, it appears to have lost its magical property and become merely a decorative device.

The planting, ritually, of a *taleow* was to the hill tribes and to those unsophisticated folk of by-gone days a taboo; a sign forbidding strangers from entering a certain place. Superstitious people in central Thailand even today would never dare to enter the precincts of a ground or house other than through the gate or door. In the North and Northeast of Thailand, I am told, any act forbidding strangers entry to an area guarded by a *taleow* is called *Yu Kam*

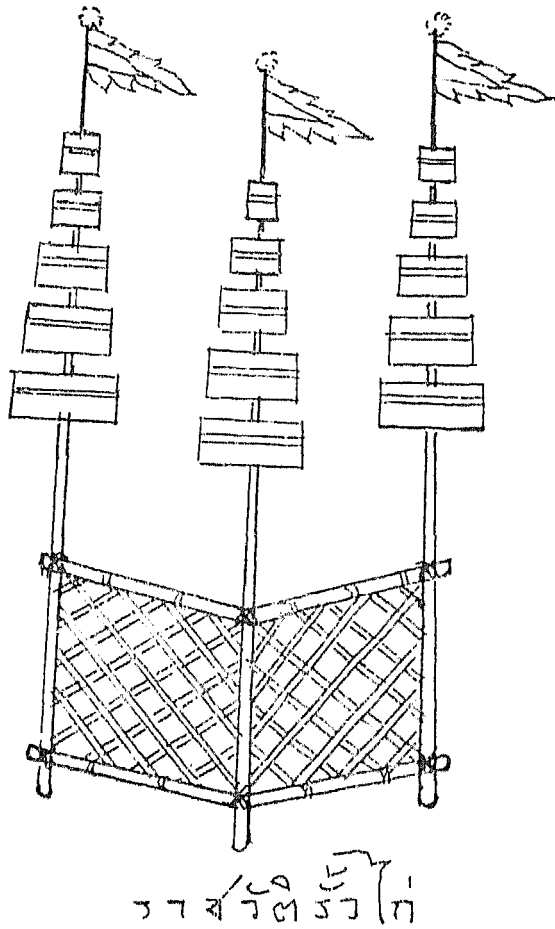


Figure 8  
Rajchawat or 'king's fence'

(စယုံကဝေ, possibly စယုံကံ) which means 'an act of sacred observance'. Perhaps, then, the *taleow* developed into a flag: firstly, the thread-square flag and then the 'victory flag', the latter receiving a new meaning as a flag insuring victory over foes—both visible and invisible. Hence the 'victory flag' is *ipso facto* an auspicious sign and is always to the forefront of religious and pseudo-religious undertakings.

The figure of the mythological goose *hansa* capping the 'victory flag' is to me most interesting. When I was a boy some 60 years ago,

there were in front of many of the temples in Bangkok high wooden posts surmounted by decorative figures of *hansa* planted singly or in pairs. The *hansa* was supposed to be the vehicle of Brahma, one of the Hindu triad. The figure of the *hansa* may be seen at present in the prow of one of the Royal Barges. As to the origin of planting a *hansa* post at the temple there is no authentic account. It is said that the *hansa* figure was a symbol of the Mon people whose kingdom, in its hey-day, was called Hansavadi (Hanthawaddi in Burmese) or the Hansa Kingdom, and that to erect a *hansa* post at the *wat* was to indicate the dependency of the Thai to the Hansavadi Kingdom. Perhaps, then, a dash of nationalistic consciousness has made the *hansa* post rather a rare sight. However, I am told that *hansa* posts are to be seen in various *wats* in Province Mae Hongson (จังหวัดแม่ฮ่องสอน) which abutts Burma and where the Shans and Karen tribes make up the bulk of the population. Sir George Scott in his book *The Burman, his life and notions* by 'Shwey Yoe' tells something of this *hansa* post in Burma: 'Both (Asoka pillar and *takun diang*) are erected by Buddhists for the purpose of gaining merit and displaying aloft pious wishes or extracts from the Law, and the surmounting goose for an essential figure of the abacus of several Asoka pillars'. The *hansa* figure has origins, then, in some of the famous Asoka pillars. Later, it was adopted by the Mon as their standard and spread to Burma and Thailand.

Before concluding these remarks on the thread-square I might note that the 'crocodile flag' has a relative in the 'dragon flag' of the Chinese and perhaps the *lung-ta* (?) flag of Tibet, which shows a figure made up of a mythological lion's body and a dragon's head. I have no reference relating to Tibet at hand, but I have no doubt that the dragon, both in the West and in China, the *makara* of classical India, and the *ngiak* or crocodile, have developed from one and the same pre-historic saurian reptile. In the art of Thailand there have been two types of conventional dragon's head. One is called a dragon with a crocodile's head. The banisters of stairways leading into the

temple of many of the *wats* in North Thailand were made in the shape of a crocodile with the Indian mythological *naga* or snake protruding from its mouth and rearing its seven-fold hooded head (see figure 9). In one instance I have seen, the banisters were made in the figure of a crocodile only; unfortunately, this temple is now submerged in the lake behind the Bhumipol Dam.

A comparative study of the thread-square and its kind involving Thailand, India, China, and, in particular Tibet, should reveal ethnological connections.

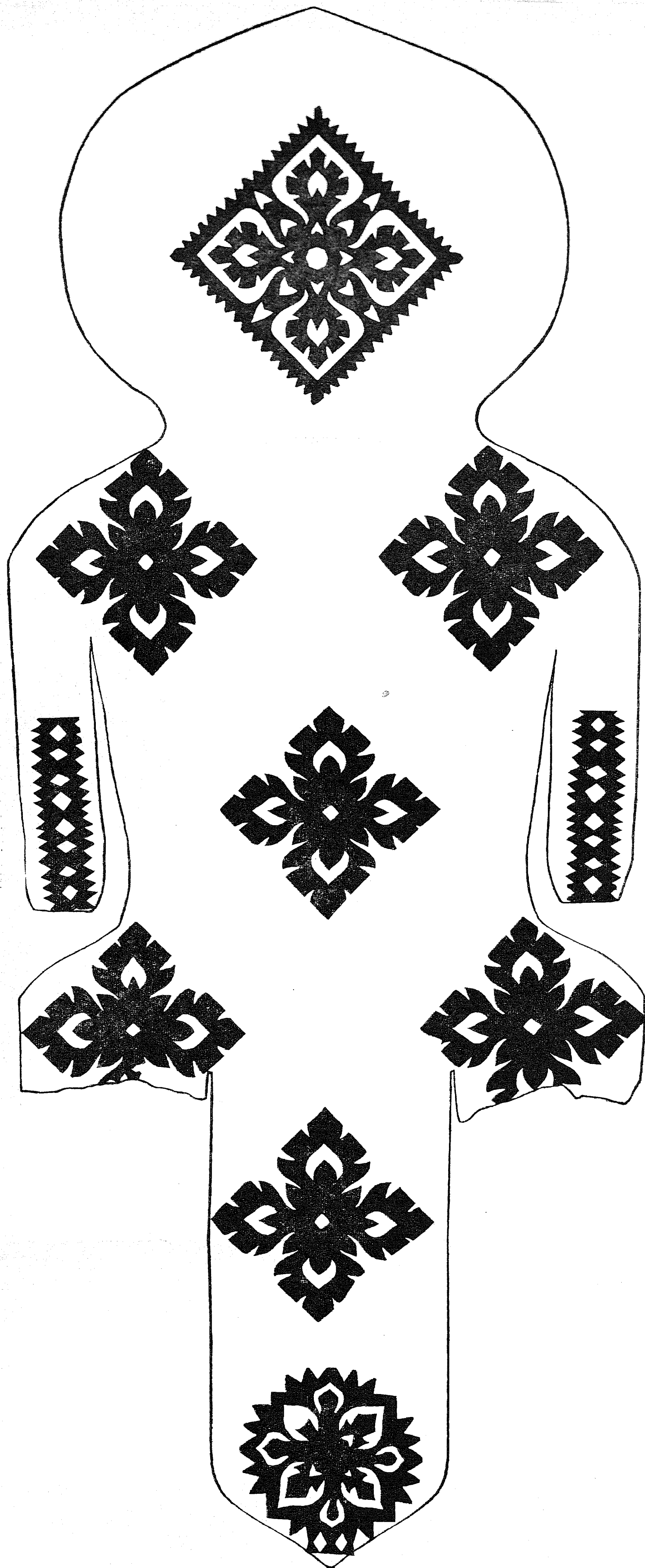


Figure 9

*Naga on stairway to Phra Dat Chaw Hae, Wat Phra Dat Chaw Hae  
Province Prae*







Funeral flag from Chiengrai used to herald procession to the crematorium.

