



*Commercialized Hmong (Meo) garments on sale at the Chatuchak Weekend Market, Bangkok. Hard economic facts have led to the stifling of creativity and innovation among the Hmong and the standardization of a greater volume of production for an expanding market.*  
Photography by Fred B. Werner.

# INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF FOLK CRAFTS— THE HMONG (MEO) OF THAILAND AND LAOS

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## Introduction

The commercialization of the folk crafts of the Fourth World people (Graburn ed., 1976), the usually small and remote tribes and ethnic groups in developing or even developed countries, has been frequently described in the ethnographic and anthropological literature. This literature, however, has dealt predominantly with the immediate factors affecting the processes of transformation of folk crafts as they become oriented towards an "external" public (Graburn, 1976b:8). It is by now well established that these processes are closely related to tourism in a wider sense. However, though the spontaneous arrival of ethnic tourists (Keyes and van den Berghe eds., 1984) in a tribal area may lead to the gradual commercialization of the local crafts (e.g. Elkan, 1958), such direct tourism seems to be responsible for only a fraction of the total volume of commercialized folk products. Much more important is what Aspelin (1977) termed "indirect tourism"—the sponsored production of folk crafts for a wider tourist market, through the intermediacy of a variety of external agents, such as patrons, traders, trading companies, missionaries, governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These agents initiate, encourage, and direct the production of crafts, and promote them on domestic or even international markets (see e.g. Graburn ed., 1976; *Ethnic Art*, 1982). Though the products may be eventually bought by tourists, the latter are not in direct contact with the producers themselves, and may be only dimly aware of their identity and culture.

The extensive literature on this variety of commercialization is primarily concerned with the kind of intermediaries, their policies and effects on the crafts. It does not usually pay much attention to the wider, political events and the sociopolitical context which affected the lives of ethnic and tribal groups in the first place, and thereby made them accessible to outside agents, and responsive to their demands

and initiatives. The political factor in the commercialization of folk crafts thus remains unexplicated, and its influence insufficiently understood.

In this paper I shall note the impact of the wider, particularly international political factors on the commercialization and transformation of the crafts of one ethnic group, the Hmong (Meo) in Thailand and Laos—the principal topic of study.

Specifically, I shall show the variety of ways in which the Second Indochina War and its repercussions upon Thailand and Laos affected the crafts of the Hmong. I shall show how the disturbance and eventual destruction of the "traditional" tribal life of the Hmong of Thailand, and especially of Laos, through insurgency, war and flight, wrought havoc in the Hmong economy, and made the Hmong accessible to the outer world and receptive to craft production for the market as an important supplementary source of livelihood. I shall describe the mechanisms which emerged as a consequence of the political events to guide the production of Hmong crafts, and to promote and market them. I shall point out the transformations which the Hmong textile crafts underwent under the impact of these developments and indicate the significance of the commercialized textiles themselves for the Hmong people—particularly for their "external identity," i.e. their identity in the eyes of the world into which they were precipitately catapulted by historical events over which they had no control.

Three principal periods can be distinguished in recent Hmong history; each of these had a particular impact on Hmong commercialized crafts:

- (1) The period of insurgency, war, and removal of the Hmong from their villages in Thailand and Laos and their resettlement or flight.
- (2) The period of the sojourn of the Hmong from Laos in refugee camps in Thailand.

- (3) The period of the resettlement of the Hmong from Laos in third countries, principally the United States.

First, however, I have to outline briefly the "base-line" situation of the Hmong and of their crafts in the period prior to their involvement with the Second Indochina War and its repercussions.

## The Hmong

The Hmong (called Miao by the Chinese and Meo by the Thais) are an ancient tribal group of uncertain origins, who have been traced by some authors through thousands of years of Chinese history (e.g. Savina, 1930). In recent centuries they inhabited the high altitudes of southern China and northern Thailand, Laos and Vietnam (see map in Lemoine, 1972a : 106). They were remote from the centers of political power, and lowland rulers maintained only a tenuous hold over them. Their independence of spirit and resistance to outside control led to occasional armed conflicts with lowland rulers. Nevertheless, during hundreds of years of contact and conflict with the Chinese, the Hmong acquired many elements of Chinese culture.

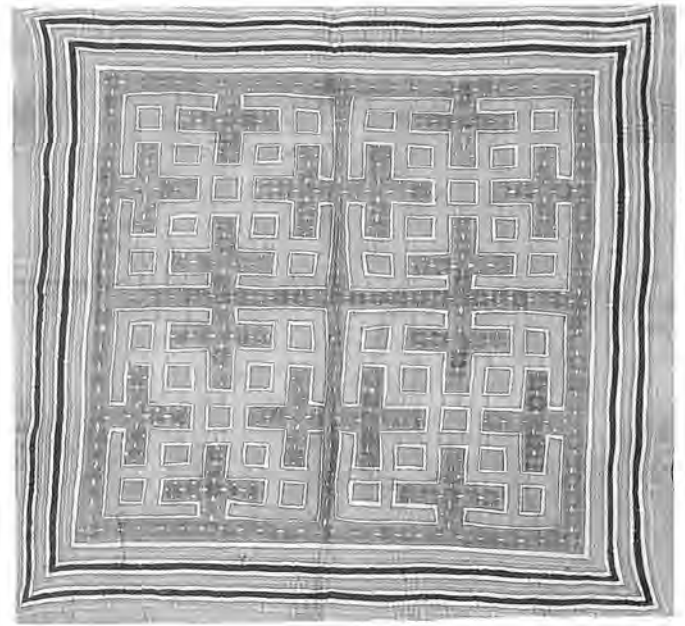
The Hmong are divided into about twelve exogamous clans; members of several clans usually reside in the same village (Lemoine, 1972b : 184-192). In recent times, the village constituted the largest political unit of Hmong society, although occasionally, particularly in periods of emergency and strife, Hmong leaders with an extensive following emerged.

The Hmong practiced shifting agriculture, based on swiddening (slash-and-burn) of primary jungle (Kunstadter et al., eds., 1978), and the planting of their staple product, brown mountain rice, as well as of vegetables, chili, and—in recent decades—opium (McCoy, 1972, Geddes, 1970). They exchanged opium and some other products with lowlanders, through itinerant traders.

The main concentration of the Hmong is in southern China, where their numbers reach approximately several millions. In Thailand (outside the refugee camps) they count more than 60,000 (Tasanapradit et al., 1986 : 4 ). Before the Communist takeover in Laos, their population there reached 300,000 (Yang Dao, 1988 : 3). Many of these, however, perished in the war or escaped to Thailand after the Communist takeover in 1975.

The Hmong are divided into several major subdivisions, most of whose names are derived from the colors of the woman's skirt. Two main subdivisions are the White Hmong and the Blue or Green Hmong (Lemoine, 1972b; Chindarsi, 1976; Geddes, 1976).<sup>2</sup>

The Hmong engaged in a wide variety of crafts, especially silver smithing and the production of embroidered, appliquéd and batiked textiles. Both men and women wore richly ornamented costumes (Bernatzik, 1947, passim; Le-



III. 1: Old Hmong square (*pa ndau*) from Laos (author's collection).

moine, 1972b : 114-21; Campbell et al., 1978, passim; Lewis and Lewis, 1984 : 100-133; Cohen, 1987). Square embroidered or appliquéd pieces, generally known as *pa ndau*, (more correctly spelled *paj ntaub*; see Dewhurst, 1983 : 15; Ill. 1) were used as gifts in rites of passage, such as births, marriages and funerals.

The relative isolation of the Hmong in their own world was rudely disturbed by the Second Indochina War and its repercussions, which came in the wake of earlier sporadic attempts of national and colonial governments to penetrate the highlands of continental Southeast Asia and impose their rule upon the tribal populations. While those earlier attempts still left Hmong society on the whole intact, the events of the Second Indochina War wrought drastic changes in the lives of many Hmong communities in Thailand, and completely transformed those of the Hmong of Laos. These developments, in turn, had a decisive impact on the commercialization and transformation of the Hmong textile crafts.

## The Inception : Insurgency and War

In the course of the 1950's the Thai government initiated the first sporadic steps intended to incorporate the hill tribe area of northern Thailand—heretofore virtually outside direct governmental control—into the Thai state. Three types of considerations purportedly induced the Thai authorities to make that effort: the alleged destruction of the forests by the swid-

dening agricultural techniques of the hill tribes; their production of opium; and considerations of national security, which became ever more paramount with the widening of the Indochina conflict (Marks, 1973; Hearn, 1974). In the process, attempts were made to impose various restrictive measures, often in a drastic manner, upon the tribal population.

By the 1960s the Hmong, who, living at the highest altitudes, were among the last hill people to be reached by the arms of government, accumulated sufficient grievances to be ready to offer armed resistance to governmental penetration (Hearn, 1974:40ff.). In 1967, with Chinese, and later Pathet Lao (and, by extension, Viet-Minh) assistance, a small-scale but fierce Hmong insurgency began in Nan Province of northern Thailand (Lindsay, 1969; Marks, 1973:932).

In the course of their initial, heavy-handed response to the insurgency, the Thai armed forces killed significant number of Hmong tribesmen, and napalmed or otherwise destroyed many Hmong villages (Lindsay, 1969:82). The government also intensified an earlier-conceived resettlement program, according to which tribal people were removed from sensitive highland areas and resettled in lowland villages, often composed of households arbitrarily assembled from several tribal groups. Thus thousands of Hmong and other tribal people in fact became internal refugees (Thomson, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c; Abrams, 1970; Charasdamrong, 1971; Bhanthumnavin, 1972; Hearn, 1974). It was in these areas threatened by the insurgency and in the Hmong resettlement villages that the commercialization and eventual transformation of Hmong textile crafts was initiated in Thailand. Later on, and independently of this process, commercialization also began in some other Hmong villages, such as Meo Poi Pui (Cohen, 1979 : 14-20), which were not involved in the insurgency. Some of these were exposed to the penetration of tourism. These, however will not be dealt with in this article.

As the Thai authorities realized that the use of brute force would neither overcome the insurgency nor safeguard the loyalty of the tribal people, activities intended to improve their welfare and gain their trust were initiated (Kerdphol, 1976, 1986). A crucial role in this process was played by the Border Patrol Police (BPP), a paramilitary organization combining security and civic functions (Lobe and Morell, 1978). In an effort to create supplementary sources of livelihood for the tribal people, the Border Crafts of Thailand (BCT) was founded by the BPP as early as in 1965. This enterprise, intended to collect and market tribal craft products, was designed to become part of a multi-pronged security effort in the tribal areas. From rather limited beginnings (Luche, 1969 : 5-7), the BCT eventually became one of the major channels through which the craft products of the resettled tribal people and particularly the Hmong and Mien (Yao) were commercialized. Several foreigners, especially Christian missionaries working with the resettled population, also contributed to the commercialization of the tribal crafts; some of these eventually played a major role in the establishment and direction of other non-profit enterprises and NGOs, through which Hmong tribal craft products are currently marketed.

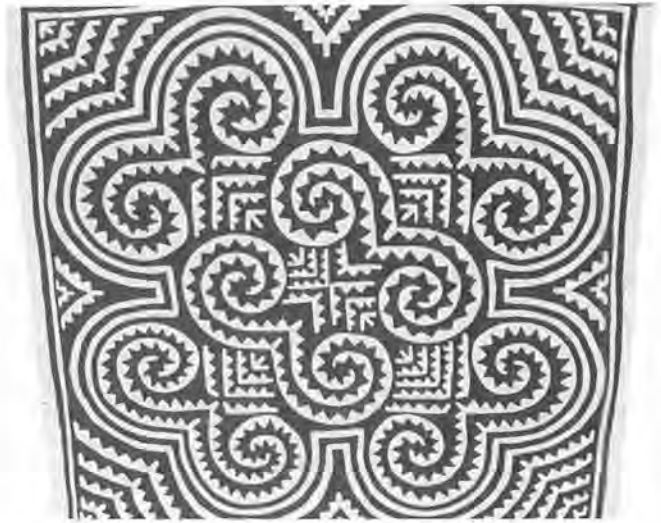
While sporadic commercialization of crafts took place in some original Hmong villages located in "sensitive" security areas, it was in the resettlement villages that it expanded in scope and grew in economic significance. Craft production constituted an important source of supplementary income in the first years of resettlement, when the traditional economy of the tribal people was seriously disrupted by their removal from the highlands, and had not yet adapted to the new circumstances. However, the development of a market for these products proved difficult. The promoters of commercialization attempted initially to sell to outsiders the clothes and jewelry which the Hmong produced and used themselves; these were purchased by a few foreigners, especially volunteers, residing in Thailand, but did not prove marketable in significant quantities. In the course of a trial-and-error process, products especially intended for the market were developed; these differed in a variety of ways from those in use by the Hmong themselves. Traditional tribal designs were simplified, so that their production would take less time than that of traditionally executed designs; new products, adapted to the foreigners' and, later on, tourists' demand for souvenirs and utilitarian objects were developed, such as small, embroidered, appliquéd and batiked "patches" and squares of varying sizes based on the original "*pa ndau*," which could be used as decorations on Western-type clothes or as wall-hangings. Material, colors and color combinations were gradually adapted to the tastes and demands of the external public, according to the feedback from the market reaching the marketing agents, and, through these, the producers (Cohen, 1983).

The market, however, remained limited for several years, since the Thai people themselves showed little if any interest in tribal products, and the marketing agencies were slow in developing export channels. Nevertheless, this initial period of commercialization is important in that in its course the prototype of many Hmong products and their designs were first developed; these were later on produced in much greater quantities in the refugee camps for the Hmongs from Laos.

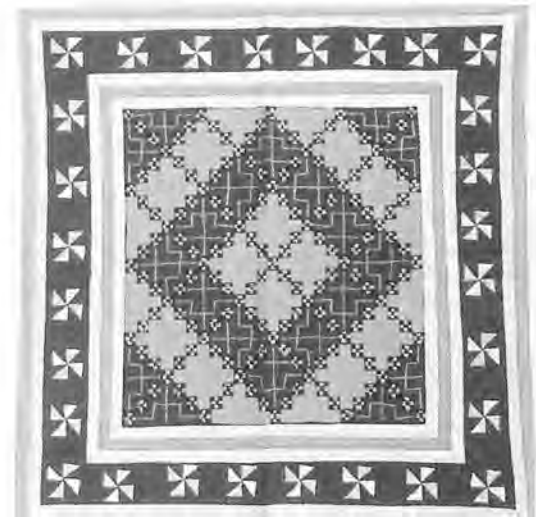
Approximately at the same time as the Hmong insurgency in Thailand, the Second Indochina War disturbed and eventually destroyed the accustomed way of life (Barney, 1967) of the Hmong in Laos (Vang, 1979; Yang Dao 1982). The Laotian Hmong initially sought to remain neutral and outside the Indochina conflict; they were, however, drawn into it through Pathet Lao and Viet Minh reprisals against those Hmong who collaborated with the French colonial authorities. In self-defense, part of the Hmong supported the French and later the Royal Lao government against the Communists. These Hmong began to be involved in fighting the Pathet Lao as early as in 1961 (Yang Dao, 1982 : 7-8; cf. also Chagnon and Rumpf, 1983); subsequently they found themselves aligned with the Americans, who succeeded the French in the direction of the war against communism. The CIA eventually organized and equipped a Hmong army, under the Hmong general Vang Pao. As the forces supported by the Americans in the course of the early 1970s gradually lost ground to the communist insurgents, the Hmong aligned with the Americans and their de-

pendents found themselves exposed to harsh Pathet Lao repercussions (Gunn, 1983 : 324-5). They subsequently escaped from the highlands into the as yet "safe" lower plains (Everingham and Burgess, 1973; Rank, 1973). Eventually, up to 150,000 Hmong (one half of the total Hmong population) were thus displaced and became internal refugees in Laos (Abrams, 1971; Everingham and Burgess, 1973 : 3). In their flight from the advancing Pathet Lao, many of these refugees eventually reached the capital Vientiane, whence they crossed the Mekong River into Thailand after the Communist takeover of Laos in 1975. Great numbers of Hmong also entered Thailand at other crossing points. Others, however, continued to resist the Pathet Lao even after the Communist takeover. Their rebellion was suppressed only by 1977/8 in a combined Pathet Lao and Vietnamese offensive, which involved "...the systematic destruction of villages and the massacre of the inhabitants" (Gunn, 1983 : 325). The Vietnamese were accused of seeking to "exterminate the Hmong completely" (ibid : 325; see also Pringle, 1979, and Yang Dao, 1982; 17), and apparently succeeded in that intention to no small degree. Many of the surviving Hmong fled into Thailand, often after a dangerous crossing of Laos from their mountain redoubts to the Mekong; a trickle continues to reach Thailand up to the present. Altogether, the number of Hmong refugees surpassed the 100,000 mark (Yang Dao, 1982 : 18). A small number of these continued to fight a guerrilla war against the Communist regime, departing on combat missions from the refugee camps on the Laotian border (Chauvet, 1984). Most of the refugees, however, settled down to a quiet and bleak existence in the refugee camps, hoping against hope that they would eventually be able to return to their homeland and highland villages. They were encouraged in this hope, and asked to stay in the refugee camps by Gen. Vang Pao (Sricharatchanya and Atkinson, 1979; Walker and Moffat, 1986 : 54). However, as time passed, a growing number of the Hmong refugees have asked to be resettled in third countries and particularly in the United States.

As in Thailand, the commercialization of the crafts of the Hmongs of Laos also began among those groups who were affected by the war. Individuals working with the Hmong, and in particular foreign missionaries, seeking to help the displaced tribal people, began to sell small quantities of Hmong textiles from Laos to friends and acquaintances in Bangkok. American military personnel stationed in Laos also occasionally purchased Hmong products as souvenirs to bring home. In Vientiane, Hmong hawkers used to sell their wares in front of hotels where foreigners were staying. All these, however, were apparently sporadic activities, involving only small quantities of products. As interest in Hmong crafts grew and the market expanded, an enterprising Laotian woman opened a workshop in the city, employing Hmong women, where Hmong textiles, already adapted to the demands of the external public, were produced. The workshop is said to have employed up to 100 women, but this may well be an exaggeration. The Laotian woman sold her wares not only locally, but also in Europe and Japan. After her flight to Thailand, she continued to supply Third World shops in those countries with hill tribe crafts.



III 2: Commercial Hmong square from refugee camp.



III 3: Commercial Hmong square from refugee camp (author's collection).

While the textiles of the internal Hmong refugees in Thailand were commercialized before those of the Laotian Hmong, the commercialization of the latter was the crucial event in the process of commercialization of Hmong textiles as a whole. Among the various Hmong commercialized products the most prominent place was taken by those developed from the square textile piece, or *pa ndau*, which has been primarily of ceremonial use in Hmong culture. Whereas other traditional Hmong textiles could not be easily adapted to the life-styles of a potential external Western public, the *pa ndau* proved a handy souvenir, which could be used as a hanging or tablecloth. Known as a "square," it came to be specifically produced for the market by the Hmong while they were still in Laos. In the massive expansion of Hmong textile production in the refugee camps in Thailand and later in the United States, the "squares" and patches of varying sizes and intended for



Ill. 4: Hmong woman embroidering in refugee camp Ban Vinai (1984).

different uses continued to be the most popular and well-known Hmong product (TTC, [1978]: 26-31, Camacrafts, [1984]; Cohen, 1983 : 29-30; Ill. 2-3).

## The Refugee Camps

As the Laotian refugees, among whom the Hmong constituted the principal group, crossed into Thailand, in one large wave in 1975 and in smaller waves ever since, they were settled in a string of refugee camps along the Thai-Laotian border (see map in Hafner, 1985 : 89). The Hmong were at first dispersed among six camps, but as the Thai authorities implemented their policy to consolidate the camps and reduce their number (ibid : 84-5), the Hmong were eventually concentrated

in one major camp, Ban Vinai in Loei province in northern Thailand (Dewhurst, 1985). The total number of refugees in this camp, by official count, fluctuated over the years between 40-45,000; the great majority were Hmong (Walker and Moffat, 1986 : 54). This number does not include a few thousand illegal refugees who were smuggled into the camp (Preechakul, 1987). The relatively constant size of the refugee population, however, belies the perpetual movement of individual refugees, as some are transferred to transit camps and eventually leave for resettlement in third countries, while others enter the camp.<sup>3</sup> Many, however, have been stuck in the camps for more than a decade, without a prospect of return to Laos or resettlement in a third country.

The basic necessities of the refugees are taken care of by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. Additional assis-

tance in the areas of education, health and welfare is provided by several international NGOs. While the refugees are formally confined to the camp, surveillance by the authorities is lenient; they are, however, not permitted to work outside the camp. In order to prevent refugees from enjoying a higher standard of living than the surrounding northern Thai villagers, salaries for those employed by the NGOs within the camps have been restricted by the Thai authorities to 300 baht (about US \$15.00) a month (Hafner, 1985).\*

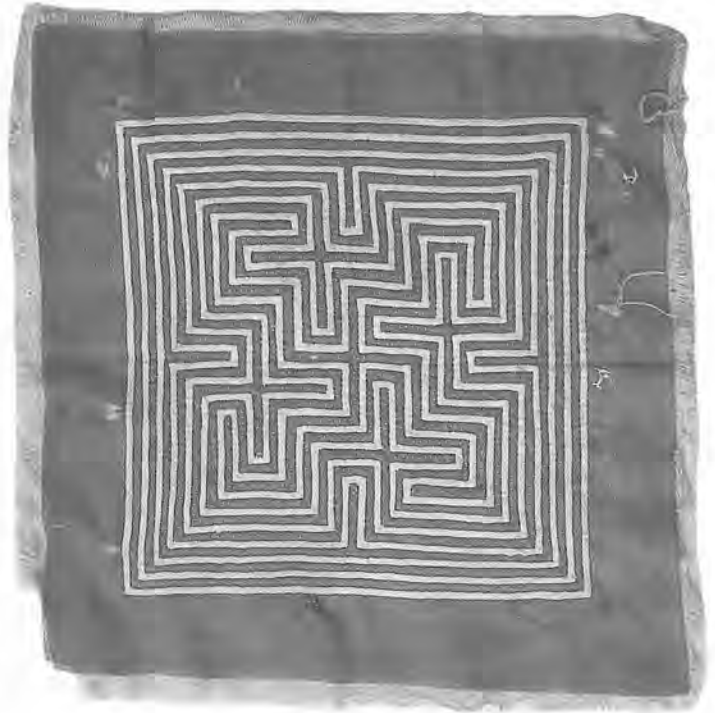
The rudimentary nature of the U.N. support and the limitations on employment enhance the importance of craft production as a significant source of supplementary income (Cohen, 1982; Ill. 4).

Even before the refugees were settled in orderly camps, foreign relief workers and local intermediaries—most of them themselves Hmongs from resettlement villages in Thailand—began to purchase and to market the refugees' craft products. As life in the camps became routinized in the late 1970's, several foreign religious and humanitarian NGOs started orderly projects intended to further the production and marketing of refugee crafts.<sup>4</sup> The primary target customers of the Hmong products were at first expatriates living in Thailand who were reached by means of the monthly Hill Tribes Sales on the premises of the International School in Bangkok. Later on, other outlets were developed, not only in Thailand, but also abroad. Export of refugee crafts through non-profit channels, particularly to Europe, gradually became the principal outlet of several NGOs which market the crafts.

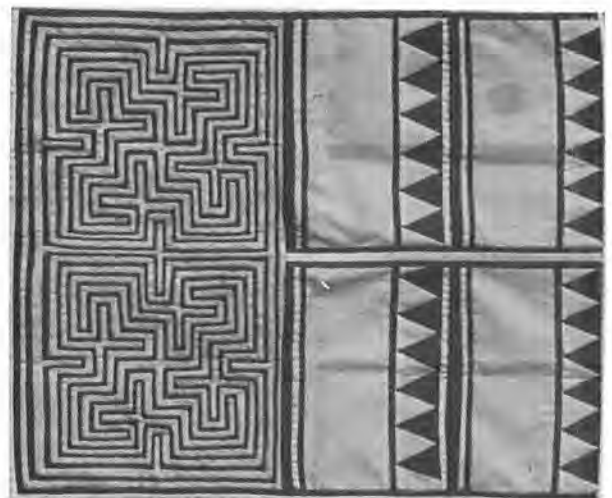
The NGOs faced several major policy dilemmas as they engaged in the promotion of Hmong crafts. Although there were important nuances in the manner in which each NGO sought to resolve these dilemmas, some major trends can be observed.

The first and most important dilemma related to the preservation of the Hmong material traditions vs. the marketability of their products. The primary interest, indeed *raison d'être*, of the NGOs was to promote the welfare of the refugees; since wholly authentic and unadulterated tribal products are not marketable in quantities, the NGOs had to compromise authenticity to achieve marketability. However, this was done selectively, so that, while the functions, forms, colors and materials were innovative, the designs and techniques of production used were on the whole preserved. This was achieved by letting the Hmong women choose their own designs on the commercial products, within the constraints set by the NGOs' production policy. With time, the NGOs developed the practice of handing, or selling, to the producers "kits" of materials, comprising cloth and threads in desired color-combinations, and receiving from them products ornamented with the women's "traditional" designs, chosen according to their own predilection and taste. It is indeed astonishing how persistently traditional designs penetrated the Hmong commercialized products (compare e.g. Ill. 5 and Ill. 6).

\* In October 1989 300 baht = about \$12. Ed.



Ill. 5: Old Hmong square (*pa ndau*) with meander design (author's collection).



Ill. 6: Commercial Hmong letter-holder with meander design (author's collection).



III. 7: Commercial Hmong embroidered runner, with motifs from traditional Hmong life (author's collection).



III. 8: Commercial Hmong embroidered runner with serial representation of shamanistic ritual (author's collection).

The preservation of the traditional designs in commercialized products, thus, metonymically, safeguarded their "authenticity" for the consumers (Cohen, 1988). However, while the NGOs helped to conserve, within the existing market constraints, the Hmong textile traditions, the Hmong spontaneously introduced their own innovations into the commercialized products. The most important of these is the emergence of representational motifs, which were unknown in the textiles of the Hmong prior to their flight to Thailand and confinement to the refugee camps.<sup>5</sup> While contact with news media, in particular illustrated books and magazines, and Chinese pattern books may have induced this radical innovation in Hmong designs, for our purposes its importance lies in its thematic. In addition to purely decorative representations of plants and animals, two themes stand out particularly in these products: the pictorial representation of Hmong customs and feasts prior to the war and the flight (III. 7-8), and the experiences of the war and the flight themselves (Cohen, forthcoming; cf. Withington, 1987 : III. 9-11). In an important sense, these Hmong textiles carried a message, through which the displaced Hmongs presented to the wide world outside the camps the glory and joys of their past, and the hardships and tragedy of their recent historical experiences (Cohen, forthcoming). The personalized character of these representational designs is accentuated by the fact that some of these products were signed by the producers—while, at least as long as they stayed in Thailand, the Hmong refugees never signed their ornamental designs. Some producers of textiles with representational motives even stated the place and date of their production (e.g. III. 12).

The second major dilemma faced by the NGOs marketing the refugees' products was that of quality vs. quantity. Lacking experience in business and seeking to help as many refugees as possible, individuals assisting the refugees and managers of the NGOs at first bought up whatever products they were offered, and sought to sell them to whoever would buy. They realized soon, however, that this purely altruistic approach left them with great quantities of unsold products. Following this realization, the problem of quality control became one of the chief concerns of the managers of the NGOs. Indeed, the relative success which the Hmong textiles enjoyed on the market is to a large extent attributable to the rigorous standards of quality which the managers imposed upon the producers. The NGOs in several camps also offered special courses for those Hmong women whose skills did not meet these standards. The producers whose products were rejected could always attempt to sell them to local intermediaries, at much reduced prices. Since, however, the market was able to absorb only limited quantities, and the women had virtually no alternative sources of income, most preferred to adhere to the standards demanded by the NGOs, and to put in more time and thus make more money. The NGOs on their part were careful not to set their standards too high so that they would become unattainable to most women. While some NGOs were more exacting in their demands than others, none concentrated on the production of masterpieces by the few top producers, to the detriment of the provision of employment to less skilled workers. Indeed, as the best workers gradually left





III. 9: Commercial Hmong batiked square with scene from the war in Laos (author's collection).

the camps for resettlement in third countries, the NGOs were gradually forced to compromise their standards. The products presently (1988) marketed by the largest of the long-established NGOs are of considerably lower quality than those marketed in the late 1970s.

The third dilemma faced by the NGOs is that of variety vs. standardization. The attractiveness of Hmong commercialized crafts largely depends on their rich variety. However, the conditions of the crafts market create pressures for standardization. The longer the chain of intermediaries between the producer and the ultimate consumers, the stronger these pressures tend to become. Once an NGO turns from the domestic to the export market to sell Hmong craft products, these pressures become decisive. Wholesale importers in Europe, the United States and Japan stipulate not only the precise sizes and forms of the products which they order, but also the colors, color combinations and even the designs. The tendency to standardization is further reinforced by the publication of catalogues listing and illustrating the NGOs' products (e.g. TTC, [1978], Camacrafts [1984]). Even though the illustrations were meant as mere examples, customers tend to order those designs which they see in the catalogue, to the detriment of variety and change. The principal NGO active in the camps in fact eventually formalized the range of Hmong designs which it offers, by numbering them serially, so that desired designs can be ordered simply by their number.



III 10: Commercial Hmong embroidered square, depicting flight from Laos over the Mekong River (author's collection).



While craft production for the market began in the refugee camps on a small scale in a haphazard, trial-and-error fashion, it gradually became a well-organized, large-scale industry. This achievement, however, though providing a large number of Hmong women with an important supplementary source of income and conserving some of the traditional Hmong designs, has also its more problematic aspects: it hampers creativity and change, takes away some of the spontaneous enjoyment of making handicrafts and leads to a petrification of this home industry, thereby also detracting from its inherent aesthetic interest. Indeed, perhaps paradoxically, while much of the production sold to local intermediaries is often inferior in quality to that marketed through the NGOs, this segment of the market is nevertheless more dynamic and innovative than that of the NGOs. This is true even for some products decorated with Hmong ornamental designs, but it is especially true for the products carrying representational designs, which are marketed almost wholly outside the NGO marketing channels.

## Resettlement in the United States

From the late 1970s onwards, the United States admitted growing numbers of Hmong refugees, resettling them in various localities and particularly in Minnesota, Michigan, California and Rhode Island (Catlin, 1981; Dunnigan, 1982; Downing and Olney, eds., 1982; Scott, 1982; Hendricks et al., eds., 1986). Altogether, more than 50,000 Hmong have by now immigrated to the U.S. (Crystal, 1983 :11) and large numbers of Hmong in Thai refugee camps are still waiting to be resettled there (Walker and Moffat, 1986 : 54).

The precipitate resettlement of a Southeast Asian highland tribal people from the restricted and sheltered life of refugee camps into the urban centers of a modern large-scale industrial society led to serious disorientation and culture shock, as they were in the words of one observer "transported into what seemed centuries away from their mountain homeland" (Thompson, 1986 : 46; cf. also Viviano, 1986 : 48). The most salient and dramatic manifestation of the distress experienced by the resettled Hmong is the still largely unexplained phenomenon of "sudden death in sleep" (Marshall, 1981; Lemoine and Mounge, 1983). The Hmong in the U.S. also suffered serious problems in the areas of integration and employment. For a mostly illiterate people, the learning of a new and unfamiliar language, English, presented serious difficulties, despite much effort to adapt its study to the Hmong context, in both the camps in Thailand and in the U.S. (cf. Downing and Olney, eds., 1982). Unable to find work, many Hmong fell back upon welfare, which, owing to state welfare regulations, was also not always readily forthcoming (Viviano, 1986 : 47); cf. also Desan, 1983 : 45; Freeman et al, 1985).

Under these circumstances, the Hmong textile products appeared to offer a promising source of support to the desti-

tute and often helpless new immigrants. Indeed, the American public "discovered" the Hmong textile crafts soon upon the refugees' arrival. Their unaccustomed designs and colors make them a popular item in bazaars and craft shops (Lacey, 1982, Hmong in U.S. 1984). With the help of volunteer American women, cooperative workshops for the production of Hmong textiles were established (Godfrey, 1982, Hmong in U.S., 1984; Barry, 1985; Donnelly, 1986). It was felt that the Hmong, unacquainted with the American market conditions so vastly different from those they experienced in the refugee camps in Thailand, needed assistance in the production, promotion and marketing of their products. As Americans recognized the uniqueness of Hmong culture, they also initiated projects to preserve the Hmong folkways (Project, 1985). Numerous exhibitions of Hmong commercialized textiles of both an academic and a commercial character were held, and catalogues and other publications on Hmong textiles in the U.S. proliferated (Textile Art, 1981; Flower Clothes, 1981; Finch, 1982; Henninger and Hoelterhoff, 1982; White 1982a and 1982b; Dewhurst and MacDowell, eds., 1983; Rush, 1983; Hmong-Americans, 1984). By all indications, the Hmong in America appeared in the early 1980's on the way to become a minority with a distinctive identity, thanks to their handicrafts, which were simultaneously also becoming an important source of their livelihood.

The Hmong on their part did not have to struggle much to adapt their products to the American market, since the commercialized textiles produced in the refugee camps had already been so adapted. Much of their production followed closely the designs introduced in the camps; indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish pieces produced in the camps from those produced in the U.S. Nevertheless, some interesting innovations, influenced by the American setting, can be observed. These can be described in terms of two opposing tendencies: growing Laotization on the one hand, and growing individuation on the other.

The Hmong are only one of several ethnic refugee groups from Laos resettled in the U.S. The others were lowland Laos and another hill tribe, the Mien. As is common in such situations, the Americans do not always distinguish between these groups, often labelling them collectively as "Laotian refugees" (e.g. Laotian Needlework, 1981; Barry, 1985). Apparently responding to this identification, some Hmong women began to integrate Laotian national symbols, especially the three-headed elephant, into their products (e.g. Dewhurst and MacDowell, 1983:57,71).

The second tendency, growing individuation, appears to be much stronger than that of Laotization. Freed from the restrictive control of the NGOs in the camps, and exposed to a highly competitive environment, the Hmong women proceeded to spectacularize their work significantly beyond what was common in the camps (see e.g. the illustrations of Hmong textiles produced in the U.S. in Dewhurst and MacDowell, eds., 1983). In the exhibition catalogues, items were listed under the name of their individual producers. The women also began to sign products with ornamental designs (ibid : 37,

47), rather like Western artists, a custom which does not exist in the refugee camps. Hmong commercial textiles appeared on the way to become art products, rather like Eskimo soapstone sculptures (Graburn, 1976).

However, the Hmong commercialized textiles in the U.S. failed to develop in the indicated direction, or to become a continuous and viable business proposition. For soon after production for the market began, serious difficulties arose, and put the whole enterprise into jeopardy. At the bottom of the crisis is the problem of prices and profits. In the sheltered environment of the refugee camps, the Hmong women could devote themselves to the production of labor-intensive textiles, often earning less than one US dollar a day. With minimal wages in the U.S. several dollars an hour, the production of textiles, which at the current prices often yielded about 30 cents an hour (Hmong in U.S. 1984), proved highly unprofitable. Many Hmong women therefore stopped producing for the market. Older women, who cannot find other employment, tended to remain in the field, while the younger ones turned to other occupations (*ibid.*). Exacerbating the problem is the fact that the refugees in the camps in Thailand continue to produce huge quantities of textiles, sending them for sale to their relatives in the U.S.; here they are often sold at lower prices than those fetched by the products made in the U.S. itself (*ibid.*). Some Hmong women have therefore found it more profitable to become intermediaries for refugee products rather than to produce crafts themselves. This predilection, indeed, provoked a serious conflict between the American volunteer advisers and the Hmong women in one of the major producers' cooperatives (Donnelly, 1984 :167), thus impeding the consolidation of the enterprise. It appears, therefore, that the chances of survival of the Hmong textile crafts on the American scene are slim indeed; without a concentrated effort at their preservation, which might involve subsidies from external sources, the Hmong textiles will either disappear or become a degenerate shadow of their earlier self—as did many folk craft products in other highly industrialized countries. The explosion of Hmong textiles on the world scene, which initially received its impetus from the repercussions of the Second Indochina War, will thus eventually be extinguished by the hard economic facts facing those victims of that war who have been resettled in the modern West.

## Conclusions

Political events and folk crafts appear too remote from one another to serve as a topic for research, and hence their relationship has rarely, if ever, been made the subject of express consideration. And yet, a close relation appears to exist between them, at least in some significant instances: major political events on the international scene have frequently had drastic effects on hitherto cut-off and remote people, who have previously had little opportunity or motivation to sell their craft products on the wider national or international

market—indeed, they may have been completely unaware of the possibility of commercialization of their crafts. Once caught in the events, displaced or otherwise drawn into national and international struggles and wars, their economy transformed or shattered, their lifeways and customs in jeopardy, the traditional crafts of these people may well become an important, even if only subsidiary, means of livelihood and a vehicle of communication to the wider world, whose salience for the affected people has suddenly been significantly increased. In the process, however, their crafts also become transformed, the precise nature of the transformation depending on the channels through which their products are marketed.

The case of the Hmong, whether internal refugees in Thailand, refugees from Laos in Thailand, or resettled immigrants to the United States, illustrates the multiple effects of dramatic international political events on the transformation of folk crafts. Specifically, we have seen how the early efforts to help the displaced Thai and Laotian Hmong gave the first spontaneous, and often only tentative, impetus to the production of craft items, which could be marketed to an external public; how the intervention of NGOs enroute the development of the commercialized crafts along some major lines, which eventuated in the conservation of basic Hmong designs on marketable products, but also in a gradual stifling of creativity and innovation, and the standardization of an ever greater volume of production for an expanding market; and, eventually, how the apparent promise of a new flourishing of Hmong crafts in the U.S. was frustrated by the hard economic facts of the American market.

However, besides these major lines of developments, largely influenced by the policies of the NGOs, another, minor but significant process of spontaneous innovation took place: namely, the emergence of representational motifs on Hmong products. This process was more directly related to the tragedies of recent Hmong history than the transformation of the ornamental designs on other commercialized products.

In their representation of Hmong recent experience of war and flight, and in their idealized pictorial reconstruction of Hmong life in the periods preceding these events, the Hmong women expressed their anguish, longings and distress, and communicated them to the wide and unknown world into which they were precipitately catapulted (Withington, 1987; Cohen, forthcoming).

The particular development of Hmong textile crafts should be compared with similar developments in other parts of the world, where ethnic groups experienced major cataclysmic events in recent decades. The impact of such events on small and marginal ethnic groups is a subject which has recently been given growing attention by anthropologists.<sup>6</sup> However, the cultural expressions given to the events and experiences remain, up to now, practically unexplored. Here an important link could be established between the study of ethnic arts and crafts and research on precipitate social change among the people of the Fourth World.

## ENDNOTES

1. This paper summarizes one aspect of a longitudinal study of the commercialization of the crafts of the hill tribes of northern Thailand, conducted by the author mainly between 1977 and 1983; after that date, a yearly brief survey of new developments has been conducted, up till 1988. This study was supported by the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whose support is herewith gratefully acknowledged. For related papers see Cohen, 1982, 1983, 1987 and forthcoming.
2. Most authors translate the self-appellation of this subdivision, Hmong Njua, as "Blue Hmong." Lemoine (1972b), however, prefers "Green" Hmong (Hmong Vert). The confusion stems from the fact that there is no distinction between our blue and green in Hmong color classification (cf. *ibid.* : 116n).
3. For a description of Ban Vinai, see Hafner, 1985 : 87-91.
4. It is impossible within the confines of this paper to describe the activities of each of the several NGOs active in the camps, and the differences in their approach to the commercialization of tribal crafts; see Cohen, 1982, 1983 : 15.
5. On the stages of development of Hmong representational art, see Cohen, forthcoming.
6. See e.g. the two recent issues of the *Cultural Survival Quarterly* on Militarization and Indigenous Peoples (Militarization, 1987).

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