



# Above the Fray: Traditional Hilltribe Art Newsletter

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## Welcome to Ban N-----: Treasured Secret of Houaphon

Nope. We won't give you the precise location of the "X" on our treasure map; advertising remote, precious enclaves of talent and beauty eventually tears the "Shangri-" away from the "La."

A day's visit of this village begins in the Houaphon Province's provincial capital, Xam Neua (population 35,000) where we rent a vehicle, driver, and for both purposes of business and pleasure, a translator. After a chatty hour on the twisty, paved one-lane "highway," we veer onto a dirt path, splash through a shallow river and then drive for another hour or more. The single-track dirt lane follows a windy creek up a narrow, sparsely populated valley. Finally the narrow valley opens up to a wider set of verdant rice fields and this 50-house village.



Weaver wearing her large shaman cloth.

We are fortunate that our 18-year-old translator's parents live in Ban N----- - his status as an translator and "tourist guide" grant him a certain standing in the community, and his personal knowledge and contacts open a window that is unique for westerners. Good travelers aren't bashful and we swing that window open, taking full advantage of his personal connections.



Weaver cutting a scarf off her loom for us.

We take the first half-hour of our visit to wander through the muddy village, greeting the women, children, and a few older men (the young men were in the rice fields). Maren had remembered to bring photos of the weavers holding their artwork taken from our previous visit, and we suddenly get caught in the center of a flurry of women and children trying to see each photo as we connect the face in the photo with the face in the crowd. We also offer photos to the weavers of some Eugene-locals who had purchased their individual pieces. Every photo seems particularly entertaining, and everyone laughs and chats. Needless to say, we have no difficulty getting them to pose with their healing cloths on this visit, and I trust that they are looking forward to our return next month, new photos in hand.

Ban N----- looks similar to other Tai Daeng villages. Houses sit on wood posts 4-5 feet above ground; the walls are made of woven bamboo slats and wooden boards and the house's interior are often divided by a curtain or flimsy bamboo panel into 2 or 3 rooms, allowing some privacy for sleeping. Each home has a pad of rock built into the floor, upon which the hearth is stoked and hot meals are prepared; if it is early morning or evening, smoke fills the upper rafters and finds its proper



Street scene in Ban N----- upon word of our arrival.

## "Above the Fray" Events:

### Asian Celebration

Booths 41/46

Saturday & Sunday, February 20, 21

10 AM - 6 PM

at Lane County Fairgrounds

Advanced Notice!

Mother's Day Weekend Sale of Silk

May 14, 15, 16

at Spencer Creek Grange

Private Showings Available by Appointment

Call 541-485-9386



**Weaver working on a new skirt with supplemental warp designs.**

vent. Under each home, in the cooler shade, sits at least one bed-sized loom, often next to a wooden ox-cart, a builders' stash of bamboo, or racks of drying corn. A woman more than likely sits on a wood bench flicking the loom's shuttle back and forth and tying off colors of silk threads as she creates a traditional healing cloth. A packed dirt track, about 20 feet wide, runs down the center of the village.

We admire the half-woven shawls set on the looms under the houses, share a drink or two with the family and friends of our translator, and, after paying respect to his parents, are led to a community room - the village's one building that is made of cement and not bamboo and wood. About two dozen weavers sit in a semi-circle in front of us, and in the center of the room are perhaps 60 healing cloths and other local textiles of all colors -

from light lavender and peach pastels to dark red and rich golds. In Laos, individual villages often focus on developing a certain talent and status regarding that talent. We have visited villages that specialize in knife-making, basket-weaving, or shaman-cloth weaving (see Newsletter #2 about our visit to a weaving village, Muang V---, that specialized in shaman cloths). Ban N-----, for generations, has specialized in healing cloths, and their beautiful and near-flawless work, a stack of which sits before us, is renown in Laos.



**Farmer returning home with his tools.**



**Weavers displaying their cloths for purchase.**

Choosing the best for **Above the Fray** is never an easy task, especially given the wide variety of designs and colors. If there were no rules we would buy most everything - not only for the beauty of the art, but also for the smiles and hearts of the artists in the room. However, business and budgets interfere, and we embark on our routine of deliberate inspection. Some textiles, indeed, are more "flaw-free" than others, and some have more sophisticated and thoughtful color and design-play. Some have cruder edges; a common flaw is too-tight a pull on one side of the warp that produces, when ceremoniously displayed as wall-art, a decidedly banana-shaped textile (making it, perhaps, a beautiful shawl, but cattywampus wall art...).

We are looking expressly for the woven silks that have an inner "glow" - the cloths that hold all the elements

together to create one precious unique expression that took generations to hone. From what we have seen as we visit other weaving villages and the major city markets in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, Laos' capital, (where the majority of the village-made cloths eventually end up through a chain of distributors), no village weaves more profound, precise, and "glowing"

healing cloths than Ban N-----. After two hours of comparing, selecting, gently bargaining, photographing (thank you, Zall!), laughing, and completing our business, we pick up our armload of purchases, say goodbye for the umpteenth time, and, under a now-threatening sky, clamber back in the vehicle.

We discovered in Ban N----- that one of their finest young weavers, of whom we had a picture from the previous year, had just married and had moved to an unmapped village a few kilometers up the track. A half-hour later we found ourselves under a tin roof, during a sudden downpour, sharing photos and chatting with the beautiful, now-married young weaver and her proud husband. This village did not do as much weaving, but did they have some baskets! Another "X" on the map....

We still juggle in our minds the juxtaposition of what appears to be a poor, humble mountain village creating, under each home like a foundation, the most jaw-droppingly complex and color-savvy woven silk art. The heart of these fine people is not in their assets or their access to goods and services. The heart is rather tied to culture and tradition, their beliefs and their families, the providence of a tough land and the talents created from their minds and fingers.



**Weaver shyly displaying her man/woman healing cloth (to the amusement of the village!).**



**Young weaver displaying the woman side of her man/woman healing cloth.**

## What are *Phaa Sabai* Healing Cloths?

Healing cloths, or in Lao “*phaa sabai*,” are - and here I quote from [www.hilltribeart.com](http://www.hilltribeart.com) - “used by both shaman and ordinary people, and use a combination of color and design for their powerful healing protection. These hand-woven, naturally-dyed silk shawls, usually woven with a bright-red background, have complex supplemental weft details woven on either end of the cloth, with a center area of a single, undecorated color... Healing cloths are used in healing ceremonies, and are also used in ceremony to foster a healthy future for the village or crops. They may be worn by the healer, or the ill person, or even laid in the garden depending on the unique traditions of that village and the type of healing that is being sought. Each ethnic group, sub-group, valley, and even individual villages often have unique styles of weaving and ritual to express their spiritual lives and needs; even individual weavers have input as to a healing cloths’ design elements and color.”

*Phaa sabai* take up to two months to weave, not including the time spent raising, harvesting, processing and dyeing the locally-grown silk. Additional photos (in color!) of *phaa sabai* and some of the weavers of Ban N----- can be found on our website gallery.

Weaver modeling her man/woman healing cloth.



## MAG Helps to Improve Lives

We shared a little of what we trust is our mutual pride the other day as we sent off a “decent-sized” check to Mines Advisory Group (MAG) representing our 3% of sales from the Thanksgiving Weekend sale, as well as some direct donations from generous Eugenians. The essential and humane task of clearing unexploded ordnance (UXOs) continues at a pace matched only by the world’s donations and the Lao government’s dedicated, but under-funded, effort to free its people of the leftover horrors of war.

Over 35 years after the bombing has stopped, some innocent Lao person - perhaps a farmer with a plow, or a child discovering a shiny round metal ball - is still killed every other day by old ordnance. Cluster bombs are the worse culprit, as some 30% of the 100,000,000 bomblets the US dropped on this nation still lie, live, in the fields and jungle that is their backyard.

There is only one way to make this land safe. Wherever people live, the soil must be screened by metal detectors and then the explosives carefully exposed and safely detonated. The UXOs are not only a direct threat to life and limb, but also hinders Laos’ ability to carve a new road, dig a village site for a new schoolhouse, or develop infrastructure for tourism or business, keeping these talented and capable people in continuous poverty.

Now, long after the political crisis has dissipated, we must make amends and help clear the land of our dangerous detritus. Your donation, whether directly through MAG ([www.maginternational.org](http://www.maginternational.org)) or through **Above the Fray**, helps Laos recover from its present crisis. And thank you, Oregon Senators Wyden and Merkley, for supporting the bill to eliminate cluster bomb munitions.

## [www.hilltribeart.com](http://www.hilltribeart.com): Up and Open

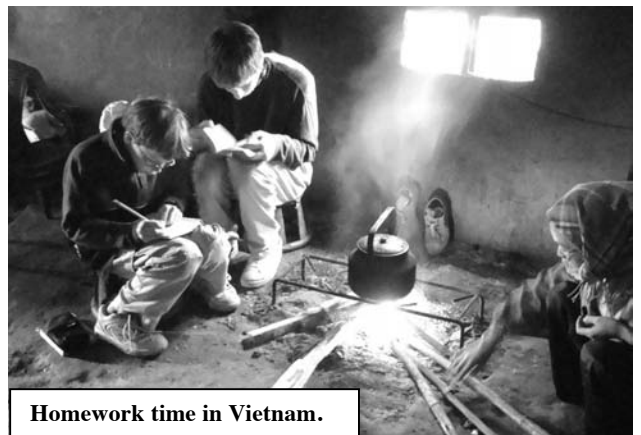
Our new **Above the Fray** gallery website is up and operational; we now have a “storefront.” At our website you will find information about the artists, earlier newsletters, and a healthy sample of the quality hilltribe artwork we offer arranged in 5 categories: silk textiles, bamboo and rattan baskets, spiritual art (including masks and shamanic art), jewelry, and tools & toys.

## Inescapable Homework (by Ari, age 16)

Each winter trip to Laos and Vietnam takes my brother and me out of school for several weeks. This sounds like every kids’ fantasy, but in addition to day-long bus trips, uncomfortable beds, and controversial cuisine, completing required school work has been challenging.

Since I entered South Eugene High School, the workload has grown exponentially and simply not doing the work is not a possibility. So I have had to actually communicate with my teachers to find suitable alternatives to being in the classroom. Inevitably, my teachers require that I do all missed homework and projects while I am traveling, and that I make up any missed exams upon return.

Often, while sitting on what might be a 10-hour bus ride, I would try to do my assigned reading. The buses there are not like the buses that you see tooling around town in Eugene. They are disproportionately large for the road, extremely rickety, have no shocks and a bumpy terrain to follow, and have more puking people on them than anyone wishes to imagine. I guess I’m fortunate in that I do not get queasy when reading in a vehicle, but it is difficult to concentrate on *To Kill a Mockingbird* when



Homework time in Vietnam.

the woman sitting next to me discretely vomits - for the fourth time - into a plastic bag and then leans over me to toss the bag out the window onto the shoulder. And while they call some of the roads “sealed,” the endlessly windy routes have potholes that effectively, and repeatedly, jar my butt a foot off the seat. By force of will I have learned to narrowly concentrate on text and blank out the chaos around me.

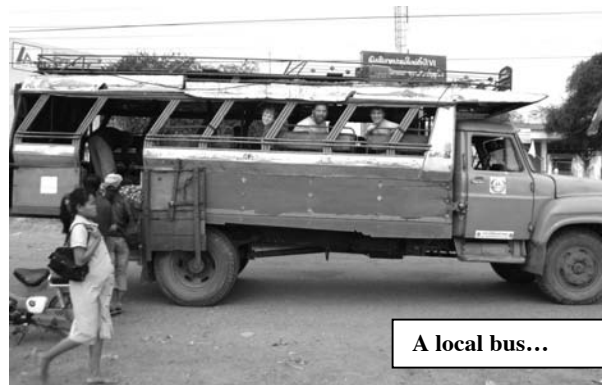
If I had a favorite time to do homework, it would be during a homestay. On the first night of a two-night trek near Sapa, Vietnam, we found ourselves in a dusty local home that was filled with more smoke than air and one of the kindest families that I have ever not been able to talk with. I sat down at their unlit, uneven wooden table, next to the family’s ten-year-old son, and began to chug away at my geometry. I



**Ari and his geometry buddy at a homestay near Sapa, Vietnam.**

hated proofs, so the assignment was taking a long time. However, the line drawings and English text of the photocopied text delighted the schoolboy who leaned closely over my shoulder slurping a 7-Up (such an odd combination of “primitive” and “modern”). Never again will I see someone so excited about geometry! He later showed me the reading and writing homework he had copied into his thin, stapled notebook. The burden of homework was our common bond.

Though the work was sometimes tedious and the conditions were... well... not horribly accommodating, I have always been able to finish and submit it all upon return (not that my mom and dad leave me any choice). My teachers may have been pleased I completed my work while away, but they have had no idea, until now, of what it really took.



**A local bus...**

## The First (and Last) Time I Try Bat (by Zall - age 13)



**Zall popping his first, and last, bite of bat into his mouth – see the batburger?**

Our family rule is that if you ever are offered a strange food, you have to try it once. You don’t have to eat it ever again, but you have to try it once. To complete this, you must chew and swallow the “food” (sometimes it’s hardly food) without puking. As you can imagine sometimes this leads to some pretty gnarly things...

It was in Xam Tai, a small town, and four hours from the city of Xam Neua when the opportunity presented itself. Mai, our translator and friend, looked up at us with a raised eyebrow and three small, dead fruit bats in her hands. “Are you sure?” she questioned with an edge of curiosity in her voice. The rules could not be broken, so we nodded slowly. You can never pass up a chance like this. If you didn’t eat it, thirty years from now you may regret passing up the only occasion to try bat. Mai turned and shrugged her shoulders. “I will prepare this for dinner.”

At five-thirty we walked to Mai’s family’s house. After an hour or so of playing Frisbee with her son, it was time for dinner. Two steaming plates came out from under the fire pit; one was a laap (a delicious traditional Laos dish of minced pork, banana leaf, lime, and spices), and the other was steamed, fresh greens. Then the third dish came out from the flames. No steam rose from this one. Mai put the dish

on the table and my stomach turned upside down. On the plate was a heaping patty of bat: meat, fur, bones, innards, and all. It looked like someone had put the animals in a giant blender. I welcome you to the reality of locally-prepared cooked bat.

I could tell my whole family had the same thoughts because the color drained from their faces. Mai took a fingerful of sticky rice and casually put a big hunk of the dead wad in her mouth, not noticing our obvious distrust of the pile in front of us. I had no choice. I’d be breaking our family code. I grabbed the biggest chunk of sticky rice I could and loaded some of the furry lump into the hole I’d created in the rice. To top it off, I put a pinch of ginger on top to cover the flavor. My plan worked... kind of.

I dropped the ball of ingredients into my mouth. I took a deep breath and bit down. My face distorted as I broke through god knows what part of the bat. The ginger covered up the flavor very well at first. Then the bat flavor kicked in. I could feel my face go white. The flavor was fetid - a strong, rancid gray flavor that overpowered my mouth, my nose, my brain. It swept through my body like a repulsive, vomitous perfume. My gag reflex triggered but I held in the “food.” I took one long shuddering breath and swallowed, choking on a rib bone. A wave of relief flooded my body. I quickly shoved more rice into my mouth and looked up at my parents and said with my eyes, “That’s definitely the last time I try bat.”



**Mai’s son enjoying his favorite chicken parts – the eyeballs and tongue.**