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Points of view

A Short Story of Visual Anthropology

Traditional Funeral in an Isaan Village

Text by Paolo Giovannini
Photographs and editing by Manfredo Spillmann

Abstract. The Isaan region, populous and poor area in the North East of Thailand, has thousands of small villages where ways of life and cultural traditions not yet polluted by contact with modernity still live and survive. In one of his long stays in the Isaan, the author of the text is fortunate to be able to participate as a friend and almost as a relative in a traditional funeral ceremony in a village a few dozen kilometers from Udon Thani. The co-author of this work, Manfredo Spillmann, formerly a freelance photographer in Switzerland, is in fact married to the lady's niece whose funeral was celebrated, and therefore fully introduced into the reality of the village. The following story comes out from the encounter of two curiosities, one more professional, the other more visual. Written in first person, it would like to convey to the reader not only the description of an event, but also the emotions that this experience has produced in them. Followed for three days, the funeral has revealed aspects of great interest, especially looking at religious rituals but also to everyday life, and at the interweaving of Buddhism and animism so typical of the most peripheral areas of North East Thailand.

Keywords. Visual anthropology, Isaan village, Thailand, traditional funeral, participant observation.

PREFACE

Between chance and necessity, Paolo Giovannini, curious intellectual, and Manfredo Spillmann, unusual intellectual, lived more than simply followed the funeral of a woman who in her life had exercised - driven by her own charismatic nature - a kind of informal power over the people of a remote village of Isaan, in the deep heart of northeast Thailand. Our

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meeting has led to this work, a text between the literary and (perhaps) the anthropological, accompanied by the imaginative rhythm of Manfredo's splendid photos. Our ambition, however, is that this material separation between text and photographs can be lost in the perception of the reader. As it was for us participants/spectators, so we hope that this little experience is lived rather than just read by those who may wish to know our work. We would like it to be a way to emotionally enter into those circles of rich social and cultural marginality and of ancient magical and religious traditions that still lurk in the interstices of a threatening and intrusive modernity.

FIRST DAY

We quickly drive along the three-lane highway that leads to Laos and, beyond, to China. Manfredo is driving his new car with ease - the old one drowned recently in the flooded streets of Udon Thani. An ambiance of security surrounds us, even with the frequent rapid overtaking. Manfredo is an intelligent man, with quick reactions and a rich memory: even if sometimes he appears to be absent, lost or dispersed in the shreds of memory. Inborn curiosity pushes him to discover, investigate and understand. This is his character not only in his job as a restaurateur, but also in the solitary hours spent on the computer, in a hidden corner of the restaurant's large kitchen. With his customers (and not only with them...) he discusses and argues becoming as well a victim of his own prejudices. As solid and unmoveable as is his body, he never gives way on his principles: which he defends with a hint of bitterness, as if there, in Udon, there, in Thailand, and beyond, in his European homelands, another world was possible and only human stupidity made it unattainable.

The funeral of Jum's grandmother, his Thai wife, awaits us in Ban Dung. On abandoning the freeway the landscape is one that speed previously prevented us from capturing. It is a green and peaceful plain spotted with rice fields, ponds, small woods and isolated tall palm trees. There are many scattered houses, crowded villages and hamlets.

Along the road that leads us to Ban Dung we pass by Khamchanot, a famous village full of spirits and tragedies, which the multitude of Thais passionate about mystery and fantasy know very well and besiege morbidly. A quick turn and we enter the Jum's village. It is the third day of the funeral; another three days will follow. Manfredo tells us that Jum's grandparents founded the village, which slowly grew and steadily reached a thousand inhabitants. Therefore, we were about to attend an important funeral because Jum's grandmother, the deceased, was a sort




of informal village chief, she exercised tacit authority over the people of the village, gave silent orders and advice, the sharp and charismatic glance which could approve or deny.

Symbolizing its dominance, the family home is at the centre of the village. Dirt roads weave away from there, crossing each other, isolating houses surrounded by plants, trees and flowers that hide and embellish poverty, and sometimes misery. The large house is overwhelmed with things and people. Throughout, groups of women of all ages prepare food and wash dishes, squatting around huge pots and primitive fires, in an incessant, almost choral movement, representing millennial scenes of everyday life.

By no means, fearful behind their apparent embarrassment, young and elderly women with their incredible faces, sculpted by fatigue and time, widen into those splendid Thai smiles of which neither age nor unfortunate ugliness can conceal their charm.

Manfredo is the *farang* of the village, the first European to reach this remote place of Isaan more than ten years ago. He commands indirect authority, as a member of the most important family in the village, and direct authority, as a *farang*, and because several times - as he will tell me – he has entered village life. Our friend Pa and I accompany him. Curiosity and welcome blend in the looks and laughs that meet us, faces raised up towards us, hands that continue their work, the thin and accurate cutting of papaya, the rhythmic crushing of spices in the mortar, the quick rinsing of dishes.

Crossing a large room covered with mats - a kind of waiting room - we enter the burial chamber. An imposing coffin with golden decorations (and refrigerated, Manfredo whispers to me) dominates the room, surrounded by piles of gifts, ritually left by visitors. There is a chaos of baskets of personal moments of her daily life, mixed in with the proffered gifts. All around are tiny Buddhist altars, bouquets of flowers, portraits of the king.

A quick nod from Manfredo and we leave the room (and the house) entering the narrow lanes of the village, accompanied by some mangy dogs and a colorful little group of children. Manfredo holds two of them by their hands – the smallest one calls him daddy and does not leave him for a moment.

Two young girls on the threshold of puberty observe us with shy curiosity. The darker one has a restless look

gazing from Manfredo to Pa to me. She is an orphan child, Manfredo tells us, who soon will join the multitude of bar girls of this poor region.

We skirt round the kindergarten, the school, and then a temple, passing an old barn for rice storage - until finally, a splendid pool translucent in the twilight of the day.

While walking, Manfredo tells me something about that world, which he loves and despises at the same time. With a hint of pride, he chats about the village, the works done or promoted over the years. "I brought a bit of civilization": he states as *farang*, who knows what is right and what is wrong: but with affection, as if the village were populated by his creatures, a little wild but which could prosper and grow. You can feel his affection just by observing how he holds the children's hands, small humans to protect and educate, from whom flows a love that you cannot fail to reciprocate.

Upon returning to the village we encounter an elegant and tall *katoy*, a severely short dress, but of an appropriate white colour for such an event, with such a serious composure that not even a hint of a smile escapes. A little surprised by the presence of a *katoy* in this peripheral Isaan village, I ask Manfredo if this is an isolated case. He replies that he knows of seven or eight of them in the village, but their numbers are probably higher.

In my mind, and with a rough calculation of the large number of villages in this region suggests an explanation of why Thailand will find a multitude of *katoy* crowding the innumerable places of the country, in the centres of sexual loisir as in less or more important workplaces. Manfredo advances an answer to my tacit question. Thailand is a matriarchal society, inhabited by women who are present and absent men, where the dominant models are mostly female, who often impose themselves on the male sex. Certainly, this is so, I think to myself, but it is also the result of a peaceful tolerance of diversity, which does not sanction but welcomes, which neither punishes nor cruelly marginalises. It is not the case in many areas of Italy and Europe, where homosexuals are often forced into exile to big cities, escaping the tangible and intangible sanctions of their small places of origin.

We return to the home, walking barefoot through the large outdoor room, dribbling small clusters of women sitting on mats, chatting and nibbling. They all turn to look at us, many smiling, others bursting into almost hysterical laughter, for the pleasure and surprise of seeing two *farang* (and moreover a stranger) along with them. There is an almost physical need for appropriation: the *farang* , especially the new one, must be looked at, touched, made their own. They want him in a photo with them all together, sitting among them, surrounded, embraced, almost seduced, lived as the reward of those among them that move faster and better. Manfredo panders to them, hoping to catch colorful folklore photos.

The women are all, or almost all dressed in black (black and white are the colours of mourning, this time a double mourning, due to the recent death of the beloved king Bhumibol Adulyadej). Many of them, as well as some of the few men present, are busy chewing and spitting a reddish substance. Manfredo explains that it is a kind of local drug, often used by the elderly people. At that moment, a woman stands up from the array of mats and comes to offer us a "dose". Intrigued, I try it among the amused approval of those present. Chewing is a bit tiring, the blend is woody, with who knows what other ingredients mixed with it: which mainly stimulates the production of a reddish saliva that you need to spit every few minutes. The woman quickly provides a small basket to spit into. I have the strong feeling that my participation in their almost ritual practice corresponds to a kind of ceremonial acceptance into the group of village elders. After a while she comes close to me, takes the small basket checking the amount of reddish water I produced, and – clearly satisfied – she addresses the commune of chewing women a striking nod of approval of my behaviour.

In the meantime, a colourful column of monks quietly enters the room. They soon begin to sing a ritual chant, with mysterious words that cross the thin walls of the mortuary chamber. Women and men, kneeling on the ground with their hands clasped, respond with words unknown to themselves (they are Sanskrit words, Manfredo whispers to me) intoning choral Buddhist mantras, in a synchronic collective movement towards the loss of one self.

The four monks required for the ceremony produce a kind of sacred fan (*talapat*), on which an inscription about the inevitability and the finality of death can be read. One of them, an old and burly monk, half hidden by the symbol of the Buddhist authority, initiates the ritual prayer, echoed by the songs and by the rhythmic verses of the villagers. It is nearly evening. A last ceremony closes the programme of the daily religious schedule with a succession of ritual chants started in turn by the senior monks, symbolising in this way the gradual transfer of the primacy.

Although well known, the diversity of the Eastern religious rituals when compared to the Western one still impresses. Here it is even more dramatic and with a strong internal variation. In Buddhist rituals, the collective aspect is dominant, as you can see in the emotional involvement resulting by the stunning repetition of whispered songs, either in the identical attitude of devotion expressed by their joined hands, or in the absolute synchronism of genuflections. The nature of the absolute mass consensus to Buddhism is also evident from this collective participation and appears so singular to the astute *farang*, accustomed to relationships and acquaintances differentiated from the religious experience - when this experience exists, and often it does not.

The rite ends. Women and men rise from the floor and hurry to the tables already partly set up. As on every day, the ritual phase is followed by a playful phase, a rich conviviality of material and symbolic meanings, a kind of common dinner where the reasons of solidarity and reciprocity are re-established, where everyone experiences the practice of giving, and where the common identity of the villagers is reaffirmed and its membership strengthened.

SECOND DAY

Today is the funeral day, when the course of Yai Lai's human and physical life will come to an end. It is the main day of this funeral week, when the tight gathering of the village people around her will become even more intense and compassionate. As happened in the closing hours of her life, when her almost dull eyes recorded the often-weeping faces of her daughters and of her closest friends. A sweet but even bitter departure, the perception of an unnatural and incomprehensible detachment from the things and from the people that in her long life had made the sufferings more acute and the pleasures more joyful.

Manfredo has a lot of things to do so we arrive in the village in the early morning. It is a warm and bright day, when even the dominant black of mourning appears like a spot of colour. Jum silently rules the situation, she appears and disappears in the crowded rooms of the house, whispering orders and suggesting solutions. She does it with lightness and seriousness, sometimes with the hint of a smile, other times relaxing into laughter; with a few nods she activates a continuous exchange of roles and favours among the women of the village. Her times and her presence accompany and mark the funeral times, when - as I had already observed the day before - moments of joyful participation follow moments of solemn silence, and when everything appears flowing in an almost festive mood.

Meanwhile, a small crowd comes back from the nearby temple, where - according to the ritual scheduled for the cremation day - the deceased's closest relatives have been religiously invested with the office of monks and nuns for a day.

They enter the innermost room, where on one side all the male relatives of the deceased, children and men of all ages, dressed in the traditional orange robes of Buddhist monks, with completely shaved heads, diligently play their part.

On another side of the room, girls and women of all ages kneeling on the floor wearing the white tunics of the nuns, participate in the common rituals. They do not have their heads shaved like the males, but strict rules protect them from impurities: they cannot be touched for any reason and nobody can pass in front of them when they are praying.

The ceremony ends, and the coffin begins its journey from the mortuary to the crematorium. As always happens when a final event that will be never repeated begins, a thin veil of anguish settles lightly on the faces of the spectators. The same feeling fell upon them today too as the heavy refrigerated box left: if you want, just an object laden with gilded decorations, which does not reveal anything of its contents, but of which everyone painfully feels the presence - a last presence.

Walking with burdened steps the porters load the coffin onto a specially equipped and festively decorated pick-up truck, which immediately leaves.

Just a few meters out of the village and here is the landscape of this sweet Thai plain that enters the people's souls, and regains the lost ground in this distressing moment in which Yai Lai forever abandoned the house of her lifetime. Thus, a mournful event turns into a joyful and colourful country festival. Preceded by the orange colours of the monks' robes and by the shining white of the "nuns for a day" cassocks, the hearse happily proceeds through the intense green of the rice paddies. It is followed by a multitude of colourful umbrellas, undoubtedly to protect from a scorching sun, but maybe more so to add new and cheerful splashes of colour to a Fellini-esque procession.

An imposing golden Buddha welcomes the procession at the entrance to the Wat housing the crematorium.






A tree-lined frame encloses the area: at its centre, a building that is identically repeated in thousands and thousands of Thai villages and is therefore part of a familiar landscape, which neither arouses fear nor repulsion. The procession takes place around the crematorium, getting ready for the ritual three laps. The deployment is traditional: firstly the monks followed by the nuns, lead the procession, to symbolise the primacy of religious power in the crucial phases of life and death.

Relatives and close friends stay around the funeral wagon, on the left the men, on the right the women (one has a portrait of Yai Lai under her arm): finally, the people of the village closer to her follow.

Beginning from the leading group of monks, a long belt of orange fabric unwinds tracing the procession, held up by the hands of many people. It passes to the group of nuns, changing colour to white, then goes straight up

onto the funeral car, as if to withhold the impatient soul of the deceased.

Now the procession moves circling three times around the crematorium. According to the Buddhist tradition, this ritual walk, from which little more than whispered songs and prayers rise, is like making a last appeal to Yai Lai's soul: wait, liberation is nigh.

Meanwhile, many of the villagers have positioned themselves under the large canopy on the right side of the area, to follow all the phases of the cremation protected from the sun. Chairs and faces are turned towards the right side of the oven, where everything is ready for the final act.

The white coffin slowly slips from its golden casing, and living men bring Yai Lai's dead body one last time to a provisional light.

Stripped of her coloured clothes, she receives the first fresh drops of water from the sacred hands of the monks. Then, green sprigs quickly pass from hand to hand, and all the people of the village become a blessing people. Jum, the pitiful nephew, from time to time wipes the face of her grandmother, until the coffin is closed and adorned with plants and flowers, patiently waiting for the terminal act.

Finally, the closing ceremonies before the cremation begins. We attend a long passage of time between public and private, between religious and secular. Ritual songs, speeches, prayers and meditation silences, gifts for the monks, offers for the family, follow one another.






People now besiege the small crematorium, their attention returning to a coffin enriched with flowers and plants. The monks are still at the centre of the scene: they intone prayers, receive gifts, symbolically lead the homage to the deceased.

In this country, where the religious experience is so all encompassing, this monastic caste - whose members live

on charity and handouts, dress in minimal orange robes, walk barefoot or in simple shoes - has an enormous, widespread and capillary power, practiced even in the most remote villages and in the poorest shacks. The monks enjoy small privileges, often religiously sanctioned, which however become gradually greater as they pass to the powerful monastic elites. Here too, in this peripheral Isaan village, the relationship of the monks' caste with power and local potentates is evident, as is clear the spiritual source of this power, which has its fundamental legitimacy in the vast people of the poor. Here, in Ban Yan Song, we have witnessed, and we are witnessing, a sort of miniaturised representation of this reality, which not by chance takes place on that crucial stage of life that is death. Everything derives from this problem, from the thousand ways in which people of the whole world tried to manage and to exorcise that incomprehensible passage into the dark and into the nothingness.

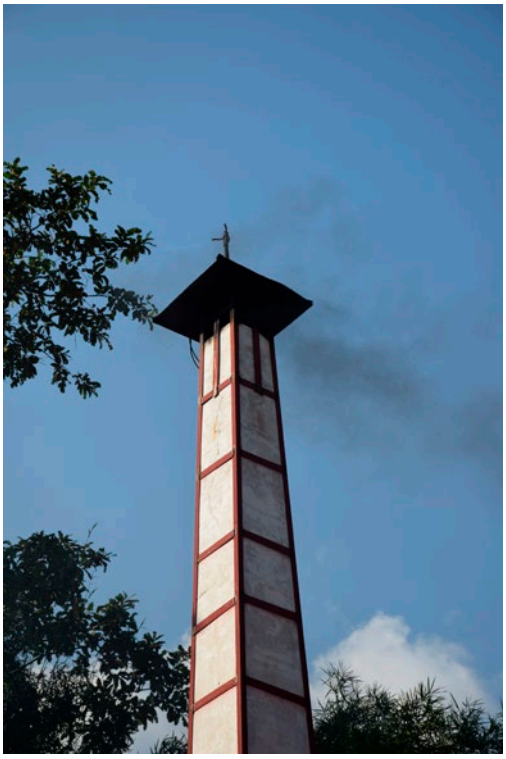
Gifts and prayers are over. Now the monks lay the sacred flowers entwined with sacred tree wood on the coffin lid. Behind them a long line of men and women wait to pay the same tribute.

After a while, the coffin is uncovered, and the white corollas of the sacred wooden flowers, a product of the village women and of their centuries-old wisdom, pitifully cover Yai Lai's body.

Now the passages between phases follow rapidly. It is a moment of great excitement, the oven voraciously awaits its prey, restless men talk loudly together. Petrol is poured onto the bed of coals and the coffin itself, where body and soul are still united. People look at these movements with a vague sense of profanation.

Finally, the inexorable cart transports everything into the smoke blackened hole of the oven.

Only the monk waits imperturbable to execute his task, because only his sacred hand can be responsible for lighting the destructive flame. He outstretches his arm with the lit fuse in one hand, a first time without success.



He tries again, with a slight movement of annoying commitment. He finally drops the lit fuse inside the oven, turning his back on an uncertain result. A layman dressed in black ends the task.

Now the flame finally quivers in a muffled macabre crackling, sketching the shape of a magic dragon (*man gon*). For a fleeting moment, you see it luxuriantly growing, and then the heavy iron door closes to people's eyes and hearts, leaving a body to consume privately its cremation.

Meanwhile, in perfect synchrony with the lighting of the crematory fire, a festive carnival explodes outside the building. Yai Lai's relatives and friends throw coloured paper flowers, each with a baht inside, towards hundreds of screaming children and youngsters with raised arms, frantically chasing as many flowers as possible. It is a sort of

ceremonial counterweight to the tragic harshness of cremation invented by an unknown guardian of ancient cults. Instantly, a psychological situation that was too deeply sunk engulfed into the drama of death and into the solitude of memory returns to balance.

At the same time, at a side of the square, just outside the crematorium, Yai Lai's clothes and personal objects, useless or unusable, burn almost joyfully. Once again, fire erases the traces of memory.

However, if you turn and look up towards the top of the chimney, you can see a trail, a dark dense smoke that soars who knows where, maybe just to the consciousness of memories.

THE DAY AFTER

A pale dawn rises to illuminate the last acts closing and concluding the long journey towards the transformation of oneself. Everything is calmer around the crematorium: a few people, close relatives and friends, some villagers, undertakers. There is a sense of what has transpired in the air, a shadow of sadness, a decline of the emotional tension that had been so high in the past two days.

Yesterday Yai Lai's soul flew away as soon as the first flames stirred on her body. An inanimate body, which in the night the fire had turned back into ashes and a few scattered bones. Only a black mass had challenged and won the destructive force of the fire, and it was there to witness the invincible power of evil, which had brought death into life and which now mockingly towered in front of amazed and almost frightened eyes.






The sacred and secure hands of the monks and the less certain hands of friends and relatives now gather the scattered remains of the body, a few poor bones that are testimony of the inadequacies when this extreme diminution of being comes to an end. In their elementary nature, those remains send a message that is an invite to re-dimension oneself. After death, whatever the greatness in life, the fundamental equality of man is re-established.

Just outside the crematorium, - with great simplicity and without particular ceremony - they proceed to wash

the bones that had been put into a net which acts as a filter, and repeatedly spray with water. Only towards the end does the washing appear to take on a ritual character, when some people, evidently closer to the deceased, take it in turns to sprinkle water onto the already cleansed bones: a gesture transcending from its apparent function, becoming in everyone's feelings a blessing gesture.

The closure of the urn, in front of the oven's gloomy mouth, is a moment of meditation and prayer, when the few witnesses address Yai Lai's remains a last sad and touching farewell. The anonymous presence of a few bones disappears forever too into the darkness of a cinerary urn that will never see daylight again. Thus, the emotion gives way to meditation, which the few still present seem to want to experience in solitude, in a detachment from others that is both physical and symbolic.

By the end of the day, there are now only the usual rituals of prayer, of giving and of conviviality. Then, a slow, sad walk towards the village cemetery, to lay down the urn and to offer unlikely food and drink to her ashes.

Behind the cemetery, a warm and yellowish sun seems to be in a hurry to take refuge in the cool shadows of the horizon. Even a solitary elderly monk, loaded with gifts, hastens his step as if he were fleeing from the scene of the funeral.

A young man remains, crouching on the ground, absorbed and almost in pain, with his head tilted slightly to one side and his hands joined in prayer: we do not know if the prayer is for the fugitive spirit of Yai Lai or for the setting sun whose return is never sure.