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Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Lao Textiles

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This paper, based on research from my Master's thesis, examines contemporary Lao textiles within a context of tradition and change. I ask, how have contemporary Lao textiles changed in appearance and what might these transformations indicate to researchers? My paper specifically addresses textiles for sale in markets in the cities of Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Laos. Throughout this paper I will refer to two groups of textiles, "pre-commoditized" and contemporary. The label "pre-commoditized" refers to textiles produced before the introduction of mass tourism and external demand. By examining and comparing the physical attributes of both pre-commoditized and contemporary cloths, I will attempt to show that recent changes are part of an ongoing tradition. In exploring these changes, I will also show that innovation is an important component of Lao textiles and integral to the survival of tradition.

When I began this research three years ago, I had fallen in love with the beauty, intricacy, and diversity of Lao textiles. At that time, I felt there was a need for further understanding of the changes in contemporary Lao textiles. Little previous research has addressed this issue in any detail, with the exception of the work of Patricia Cheesman whose 1998 essay examines physical changes as a result of transformations in the use of Lao textiles. Cheesman concludes in her study that changes in the status or use of a textile should be an important consideration in understanding the appearance of contemporary Lao textiles. She also emphasizes the loss of the "sacred meaning" of motifs as a result of the strong influence of commercialization (Cheesman 1998).

My training as a textile artist and art historian provides me with a perspective that is valuable when applied to textile analysis. With a background in weaving and specific training in how to analyze and compare physical components on cloths, I set out to understand the characteristics of both pre-commoditized and contemporary Lao textiles. The study of material objects as representations of a culture results in an in-depth understanding of the members of a culture and of the culture itself. My study of Lao textiles is an analysis that focuses primarily on the textile objects with the understanding that physical properties reveal change. Thus the strength of this research lies in the analyses and comparison of over 100 pre-commoditized and contemporary textiles from museums and private collections in the United States.¹

¹ Collections represented in this study include: The Textile Museum, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Sage Collection at Arizona State University, the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at University of California, Berkeley, and the private collection of Jackie Butler-Diaz.

Trade, migration, and religion have been important influences on the development of Lao textiles over time and such influences can still be observed. As art objects, Lao textiles have had a long history of selectively absorbing and deflecting external influences. Competent Lao weavers incorporate elements from other groups' textiles into their own pieces for purposes that include a highly valued display of skill and knowledge (Gittinger and Lefferts 1992).

Textiles, like other art forms around the world, are frequently labeled as "traditional" by Western researchers and tourists. Such a label refers to the belief that textiles do not change over time. The label "traditional" also refers to the relative anonymity of textile producers. Misconceptions of the meaning of "tradition" result in the negative reactions many people have when change becomes more pronounced as a result of such influences as tourism and modernization. Rapid change is frequently presented as the loss of tradition, but does this accurately portray the whole story? The stability of tradition is an illusion. In fact, traditions are constantly adapting to the needs and wants of the person making them. A sizable amount of recent research in textiles and other art forms has worked to dispel the misconception that tradition is unchanging and the related misunderstanding that rapid change is destructive. In fact, the artist's ability to adapt and innovate is key to the survival of tradition, for tradition is not tied only to the past, but the present and the future (Glassie 1995).

Any detailed survey of pre-commoditized Lao textiles demonstrates the subtle variations within the cloths whose design and execution were dependent on the weaver's skill, level of interpretation and incorporation of external ideas, such as designs from neighboring groups. The role of the weaver to interpret designs and individualize her weavings exemplifies the necessary component of innovation in the survival of tradition. This fluidity of tradition has allowed Lao textiles to reflect changes in Lao society.

A post-war, "post socialist"² resurgence in Lao textiles is evident to all who travel in the country. Textiles can be seen everywhere, most specifically in tourist venues: for sale in the markets and in souvenir shops, and in the increasing number of higher end specialty shops, boutiques, and galleries. The prevalence of textiles in Laos attests to the strength of textiles as a primary art form within Lao culture (fig. 1, below).

² Grant Evans, in his book *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, chooses the term "post-socialist" to describe Laos after 1990, because while Laos is "economically and socially capitalist by almost any social scientific criteria," the Lao People's Revolutionary Party is still in power, the state name remains unchanged, as does the flag (1998, 1).



Figure 1. Textile for sale on display in the Morning Market, Vientiane. Photo, Rebecca Hall.

Changes in contemporary textiles are not specific to Laos. We see the same issues surface repeatedly throughout the world: the simplification of designs, the loss of natural materials and natural dyes, and the production of textiles, not for use within the home, but specifically for sale to tourists and others. Instead, following a line of thought established by a number of researchers in recent years, I submit that the Lao weaving tradition *might* have largely disappeared without these necessary changes.

Physical Characteristics of Lao Textiles

Since the 1980s, Lao textiles have become well known with collectors and researchers for their elaborate designs, mysterious and playful motifs, rich and beautiful colors, and the intricate weaving execution of techniques such as supplementary weft and ikat (Cheesman 1988). As a result of the specific qualities of Lao textiles, my study began with the identification and analysis of the following physical characteristics within each textile: motif, color, design, size, weave density, and fiber content of yarn.

Most pre-commoditized Lao textiles date from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. These textiles exist in a wide variety of styles, designs, and colors. In the past, Lao textiles served as group identifiers, and therefore not only varied from Lao group to Lao group, but from village to village. Some general statements can be made about pre-commoditized textiles in my study. Regardless of textile type, the pre-commoditized Lao textiles were composed of silk and/or cotton sometimes with metallic yarn as supplementary weft. All yarns were single-ply unless multiple colors were plied together for an intended shimmering effect. Colors were rich and derived from both plant and chemical sources. Predominant colors of the pre-commoditized textiles were indigo, red, white, yellow and green with highlights of other secondary colors. The execution of the textile designs was intricate, and although the textiles were drawing from the same aesthetics and references, each had its own unique characteristics and interpretations of design.

Contemporary Lao Textiles

As with pre-commoditized textiles, contemporary Lao textiles cannot be generalized into a single category. These cloths are created for multiple purposes and in a wide variety of facilities and from a variety of both natural and manufactured materials. They are also

produced within different contexts: from small, privately owned businesses, to government and non-government organizations setting up cooperatives in different villages, to individuals working independently within a village. Contemporary Lao textiles are being produced for sale in local markets to other Lao, and for sale to tourists and foreigners both within Laos and abroad (fig. 2). The textiles are also produced in villages for family and personal use. This last group was not a part of my study.

Carol Cassidy is one contemporary textile producer whose work has been influential on high-end Lao textiles. While she is certainly not the only designer in Laos who creates expensive, innovative contemporary designs derived from pre-commoditized Lao textiles, I mention her specifically because as an American she has received much international attention. Her textiles sell for high prices and are important because she has brought a Western design sense into Lao textile production.



Figure 2. High-end textile boutique, Luang Prabang. Photo, Rebecca Hall.

The influence of external demand, through tourism, local businesses, and individuals (such as Carol Cassidy) has created a significant amount of change; these changes have been transpiring faster than what was seen historically. As tourism in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century has increased in Laos, so has the demand for textiles. In turn, profit has become a motive for production, thus the number of textiles for sale has increased exponentially. Regard for symbolic meaning, as well as the exclusivity of designs, have been reduced to minor concerns for many weavers, or are no longer considered at all. Profit as a motivator for textile production is an important consideration to be taken in the examination of contemporary textiles, for it is a strong influence on production.

The process of change in ethnic arts as a result of commercialization can have multiple effects on the objects being produced. I will look at these effects from two perspectives: traditionalism and then innovation in contemporary Lao textiles. These two perspectives exemplify the simultaneous examination of the present and the past in Laos today.

Traditionalism

Traditionalism can be seen in many components of contemporary Lao textiles. I am defining the term “traditionalism” to mean either the duplication or incorporation of elements of pre-commoditized textiles. In other words, the traditional contemporary textiles resemble pre-commoditized pieces but are made specifically with the intention of sale to outsiders.

Traditionalism exists in designs, motifs and colors of some contemporary textiles. It can also be seen increasingly in the use of local silk and the return to natural dyes (fig. 3). The textiles that belong in this category may be as intricate as older cloths, but also potentially resemble pre-commoditized cloths without the complexity of the previous ones, and are often made from inexpensive materials.



Figure 3. Traditional contemporary Lao textile, collection of the author.

Traditionalism in motifs and designs of contemporary Lao textiles relates directly to those used on the older, pre-commoditized textiles. Contemporary textiles in this study that contained traditional motifs were most frequently those produced or supported by handicraft organizations or local businesses. Traditional contemporary textiles are derived from, and are possibly copies of previous pieces and frequently sell for high prices. These textiles pay an important part in contemporary production because they help the weavers to understand the complexity of older cloths.

Innovation

Innovation in the motifs and designs in contemporary Lao textiles are seen in all areas of the market. The hybridized textiles that blend motifs and designs from different ethnic groups throughout Laos are a good example of innovation, such as those of Phaeng Mai and Carol Cassidy and the textiles imitating their work, as well as the textiles produced by the other, equally important galleries in Vientiane.

Simplification can be seen as a form of innovation, a way to "reuse" pre-commoditized motifs in a new context. The enlargement and repetition of a single motif across a cloth is a common occurrence (fig. 4). This simplification of motifs and designs is often a consequence of the increasing production of souvenirs. Simplification can be a result of more than a way to cut costs, it can also be a design tool employed as a result of invention in the creation process (Niessen 1999). The motifs on contemporary Lao textiles have been subject to the simplification process, as it shortens the weaving time to create large, repetitive motifs and designs as seen in the two textiles on the screen. Minimalism, as seen in this textile purchased in a market in Vientiane, is also increasingly common.



Figure 4. Innovative design on a contemporary Lao textile, collection of the author.

In this study, use of color was also a characteristic that was important in understanding how textiles have been affected by change. Innovative use of color can be found across all categories of contemporary Lao textiles. The colors are a likely result of the producer's ability to experiment freely and also a consequence of outside influence. Examples of this are the pastels employed as the main color in many textiles, the increased use of black and brown, and the use of matching supplementary weft and ground fabric colors, such as the green on green textile in figure 5. Color use is an important innovative characteristic of contemporary Lao textiles.

Problems facing contemporary textiles

One significant issue to be discussed in any study of contemporary Lao textiles is that of standardization. The standardization that often accompanies external demand can imply mass production, in which numerous textile objects look identical, regardless of the fact that they are handwoven. Craft producers try to satisfy the tourist and export market by turning out inexpensive, quickly produced, handmade objects identifiable as souvenirs. The opposing trend is for the producer to realize the “value” placed on individualization by collectors, with the result being unique and one-of-a-kind objects (Cohen 1992). Within contemporary Lao textiles the dichotomy of standardization versus individualization is evident.



Figure 5 (left). Innovative color use on a contemporary Lao textile, collection of the author.

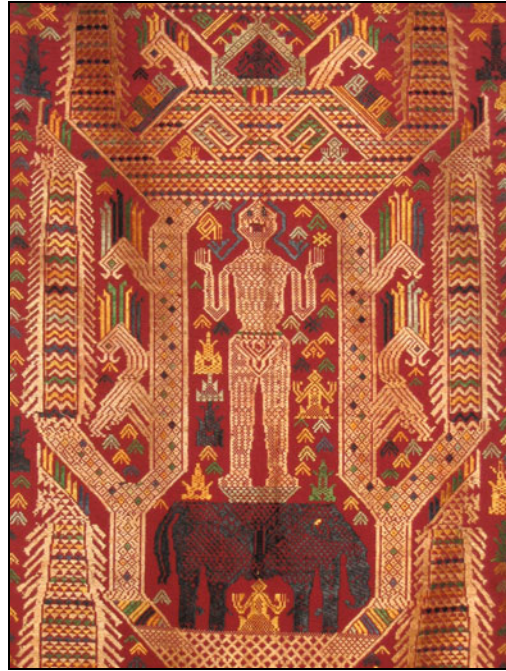


Figure 6 (right). New textile design from market in Luang Prabang, collection of the author.

The reasons for the dichotomous changes in contemporary Lao textiles described previously are varied, but generally result from the influence of rising external demand. This demand for Lao textiles emerges from multiple sources: textile collectors, museum curators, aid workers, general tourists, and merchants or retailers. The sponsorship of textile production by government and non-government agencies and local handicraft businesses and guilds has a direct effect on the appearance of a textile, its resemblance to pre-commoditized Lao textiles, and the amount of time and money invested in its creation.

Individualization is taking place in Laos. The individualization appears to be centered around private weaving businesses. The textiles produced by these shops adapt traditional textiles into new products and styles, perpetually generating new designs. As such, these businesses charge higher prices for their unique textiles that have higher standards placed on them than the average souvenir. As the individualized textiles generate income, they

are then increasingly imitated. The once individualized textiles become standardized as a result of the onslaught of cheap imitations.

Conclusion

Production of textiles for markets in Laos is constantly changing and will be interesting to watch in the future. When I first began this research three years ago, I traveled to Laos. I just returned this summer and was surprised to see new forms of textiles for sale in the markets that I had not seen before, the textile in fig. 6 is one example. More textile boutiques are opening and complex textiles are still being produced for sale in the markets in Vientiane and Luang Prabang. However, as textile production and demand increase, standardization has become even more of an issue (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Stacks of contemporary textiles waiting for sale, Morning Market, Vientiane.
Photo by Justin McInteer.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize my perspective, that recent changes in Lao textiles that coincide with increasing modernization and tourism are part of the ongoing process of tradition. Throughout time Lao weavers have adapted their textile production and designs to changing needs and circumstances. Instead of condemning rapid change or production for tourists, it is important to us as outsiders and researchers to understand the necessity of such textile production. In emphasizing the different changes happening simultaneously, we should be able to have an informed perspective on change. At the same time, it becomes equally important to take notice of the standardization that is occurring in the textiles produced for the tourist market. Endless duplication of cloths endangers the survival of Lao textiles as they have existed in the past because of the loss of innovation, which, as I have demonstrated, is key to the survival of tradition. Change is not necessarily bad and can lead to many new and exciting designs, but from my perspective this is a decisive time in the ongoing saga of Lao textiles.

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