

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings

Textile Society of America

9-2014

Traditions, Tourists, Trends

Tracy P. Hudson

University College London, thnomad@yahoo.com

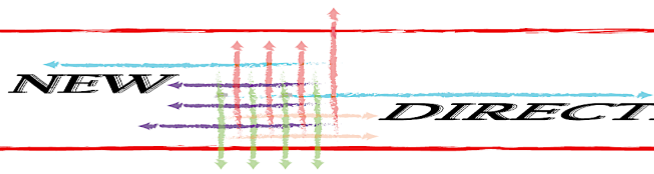
Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Art Practice Commons](#)

Hudson, Tracy P., "Traditions, Tourists, Trends" (2014). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 912.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/912>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



Traditions, Tourists, Trends

Tracy P. Hudson

That's rather abrupt, no subtitle. But obviously this is about textiles, and the interaction between these factors, which is too complex and multifaceted to encapsulate in an easy phrase. This paper begins with a series of questions and how they came up, and then looks at several different manifestations of this complex interaction in different parts of the world. It will end optimistically, with examples of success and an emphasis on the integrated quality of textile making, culture and identity.

It's important to know what we're talking about when we say 'traditions' or 'traditional textiles.' The term can be problematic, but I'm using it to refer to a continuous set of practices embedded within a culture, or the textiles that grow from that ecosystem: the interaction of people, materials and environment. The processes of this interaction, handed down over time, create a tradition. This is not to say that traditions are static. They are dynamic and evolving, but there is continuity - enough continuity to connect the textile tradition with a cultural sense of identity. This draws attention to the wider ecosystem of textile traditions, because they are defined not only by what they produce, or how, but more importantly *why*. Textiles are embodiments of a people's life. If they become merely commodities, the greater value is lost.

Luang Prabang, Laos provides an especially thought-provoking set of cultural interactions, as a growing tourist destination. For example, in a beautiful restaurant on a pond, there are musicians and dancers in the traditional dress of various tribal groups whose performances evoke village celebrations. In another part of town, a bar features hip hop dancing by young Lao men, and an 'ethnic' fashion show by young Lao women, featuring a collection of traditional garments owned by the bar.

Before going to Luang Prabang, I noticed that there were many advertised opportunities to "learn to weave." A visit to Vientiane several years ago had introduced me to the renaissance of traditional Lao weaving, through the efforts of various individuals and organizations, and in exploring Luang Prabang, it seemed that the identification of Lao culture with weaving was a prevailing agenda. This is what started me thinking of tourists and trends. The emphasis on "come to Laos - learn to weave" seemed to be a marketing trend for tourism, based in tradition. This made me wonder what the relationships between traditions, tourists, and trends are, and whether those relationships are dominated by tradition or tourism, and what effect that has on the 'product' being marketed.

"We can only make skirts"

I spent 6 weeks in Luang Prabang, doing an internship in conservation at Ock Pop Tok, working with their collection of traditional textiles. Ock Pop Tok is known to the TSA: in Lincoln in 2010, pieces from this collection were featured in an ikat exhibition, and Jo Smith, one of the founders, gave a talk. The TSA tour to Laos & Cambodia also visited Ock Pop Tok, going to the Living Crafts Centre (LCC) that I'll be talking about. The LCC has a weaving workshop, where silk weavers work 6 days a week on a wide range of traditional and modern designs. Dyeing is also done on site, with natural and aniline dyes, and tours and classes are offered to visitors. There is a shop, a cafe, and a guest house here, in addition to a gallery space and the storage of the textile collection.



Figure 1: Weavers at the Ock Pop Tok Living Crafts Centre, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. Images by author.

A conversation with Jen at the Ock Pop Tok shop gave me additional food for thought, when she expressed disappointment that no development projects had taken place in her home region of Pakse. She told me that they weave, but "only skirts," not scarves or wall hangings. In other words, the tradition of weaving is there, but they have not been trained to market their weaving to tourists. Weavers in Laos traditionally make clothing and ceremonial cloths, primarily tube skirts or *pha siin*, head cloths, shawls, shaman skirts, skirt borders, and other details of dress for their specific region and ethnic group. The skirts have been the primary format for development of designs and techniques, a type of template which showcases the techniques and styles of each region or sub-group. So if the weavers of a region or village are still weaving 'skirts', this implies that the tradition is intact. But for Jen, who worked at Ock Pop Tok and witnessed the transformative effect of developmental programs in cases such as the Katu of Salavan Province, being able to make skirts did not seem sufficient to modern-day sustainability. In Salavan, Ock Pop Tok and a Japanese organization known as JIGA both worked to develop Katu handwoven products, seen in Ock Pop Tok and the Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre in Luang Prabang: table runners, hangings and pillows, in addition to traditional skirts. Development teams assist weavers with design, color combinations, and marketing, providing a link to the wider marketplace and expanding possibilities for livelihood through weaving.



Figure 2: Pillows made from Katu woven cloth, at Ock Pop Tok. Image by author.

The question is, is Jen right in thinking that her region needs a development program? Is international marketing of handwoven goods necessary to the viability of the weaving? It sounded dissonant to me, that training people to make what foreigners want should be the way to keep a tradition alive, and that value in the global market is the only road to legitimacy.

Attention from development programs leads to increased visibility, which makes a certain tradition known above others. While I was in Laos, Katu weaving was definitely the hot thing, visible everywhere. And online, there is evidence that this tradition is the most visible. Laos has roughly 150 different ethnic groups, with 20 or more in the general vicinity of the Katu (Salavan and Champasak Provinces.) The Katu have been supported and promoted as artisans, but this doesn't mean that their work is the only traditional weaving in the area.



Figure 3: Different types of skirts or 'pha siin': Ikat shaman skirt with supplementary warp border, left; Silk and cotton skirts with supplementary warp and weft designs, right. Collection of Ock Pop Tok. Images by author.

In this sense, perhaps Jen is right - if her area had assistance from a development program, not only would they "learn to make scarves", but their traditional methods would become familiar beyond their immediate community. Familiarity breeds appreciation: people are more likely to gravitate toward something they know a bit about. This leads to a point I'd like to make about going beyond the superficial spending of money, and the potential for slightly deeper, more educated or sensitized consumers being a key to sustainable craft. Both consumer and producer need to be more grounded in the context and cultural background of the weaving tradition - as mentioned earlier, the WHY of the textile production.

How many scarves?

But the proliferation of scarves, in the night market of Luang Prabang as well as all the various handicraft shops, including Ock Pop Tok, still begs the question, is this preservation of cultural heritage & tradition? Looking at the full range of designs, from intricate supplementary weft weave to minimalist plainweave with textural elements, at what point along this spectrum does it become simply weaving as livelihood? People being paid to weave scarves to order rather than being supported in the continuation of their own traditional knowledge.

And how many scarves does the developed world need, anyway? Can the overseas luxury market really sustain the weavers of Laos?



Figure 4: Handwoven silk scarves for sale at Ock Pop Tok showroom, Luang Prabang, Lao PDR. Image by author.

Sue Jones made the same point when discussing the Bani Hamida Weaving Project at a textile conference in Amman, Jordan earlier this year, noting that people are only going to buy so many woven wool rugs. She emphasized the importance of understanding what is being preserved, what a project is trying to do, and being aware of the multiplicity of issues affecting the craft community.

Sustainable skill - "Craft has always been market-driven"

The initiatives of Judy Frater with Kala Raksha and Laila Tyabji with Dastkar, both in India, address such issues well. These are organizations which not only develop and market handicrafts, but also cultivate the involvement of the artisans in the process, and try to be responsive to specific issues faced by the communities.

India is distinctive because the size, cultural diversity and textile awareness of its population make for a completely different market than that of the generally 'global.' Indians across the social spectrum identify with traditional culture, and are savvy about textile quality. Organizations benefit more from tapping into this local market than from the attempt to sell to tourists, who are generally just as happy with mass-produced pretty things. Tyabji's presentation in Jordan about the work of Dastkar emphasized the need to educate consumers, so that they appreciate not only the skills involved in textile making, but the context and background of the traditional work, all of which adds value to handmade products. Craftspeople and consumers alike must be held to a high standard in order to elevate the market and ensure sustainability.

When Judy Frater was with Kala Raksha, she developed a program for involving artisans in design work, offering specific training in an educational format. The craftspeople are not merely handed a design to execute, developed by a design team that has analyzed the market. Kala Raksha artisans were given a taste of what this means, and were trained to think about colors, motifs, and design concepts, referring to historical textiles and books. Those trained in design became part of a Design Committee for their community of artisans, and worked within the group to develop new designs. The work was also priced by the artisans, in order to fairly represent the effort required. Having resigned from Kala Raksha in early 2014, Frater continues to focus on design education for artisans within a new institution, Somaiya Kala Vidya.

Tyabji also makes the point that craft is sustainable, and has always been a market-led activity. Textiles in particular, which function as dress and home furnishings, are always subject to fashion, even within a small subculture. She notes that women in Kutch can date embroideries due to changes in fashion, within their embroidery tradition. So traditional textiles already have a built-in capacity for fluctuation and response to market trends.

These examples of respecting and involving the artisan in marketing and design point to what Ed Franquemont was saying in his essay "The True Treasure of Andean Textiles." This article highlights cases in which Andean weavers saw what was happening in terms of valuation of textiles, and responded. In one case, Bolivian weavers noticed that 19th century Aymara weavings were fetching much higher prices than their own contemporary work, so they began to weave in the old style. The dealers were outraged by the "forgery," but as Franquemont says, it's an odd kind of forgery, if Bolivian weavers are hand-weaving Bolivian textiles and selling them as such. The relevant point here is that the skill and knowledge *to be able to do this* is the thing of value, much more than the physical textiles. Bolivian weavers were empowered by their own abilities, and were astute in weaving for the market they wished to target. The tendency of valuing old work over new is the problem, a prejudice that sources from European ideas that value resides in the past, that old things are to be revered due to their age. Franquemont asserts that the "true treasures" are the weavers themselves, because the *ability* to use simple tools such as spindles and backstrap looms to create an immense variety of high quality,

handwoven beauty is invaluable. The value of a given style of textile will fluctuate, but as long as weavers can respond to market fickleness, they can have the upper hand.

Congruent with the emphasis on skill is the importance of quality as a factor of sustainability. Most traditional cultures with exposure to tourism have experienced the tendency to create cheaper, quicker versions of their traditional craft in order to sell at a profit. But this is the trend that degrades the craft heritage, threatens the artisan's abilities, and devalues both the product and the consumer. This is where I would like to take an optimistic turn, highlighting the ways in which promotion of quality, skill, and knowledge improve the prospects for traditional textile making and even offer some redemption for the tourist.



Figure 5: Kiang weaves a discontinuous supplementary weft pattern requiring a high level of skill, at Ock Pop Tok Living Crafts Centre. Image by author.

The wider world advantage

An increase in skill and design capability leads to an increase in income (or the market value of the work,) and also to an increased ability to innovate. This is amplified by exposure to other textile traditions and the greater textile marketing scene. The more weavers themselves see what is going on elsewhere, the more they are able to compare, improve, and appreciate their own work. This is true of fine artists and traditional artisans alike. With textile traditions, there is the added benefit of strengthening the sense of identity - when a cultural group can self-identify in a positive way against a backdrop that shows their distinctiveness, the reasons for maintaining traditions become more clear, and pride in the work reflects pride in the culture.

This is an inherent part of a textile tradition in the first place, but because many groups have faced discrimination and political marginalization due to minority status within a larger homogenous, nationalized system, the web of pride in skill, making, and culturally distinctive textiles gets broken. In an article detailing an initiative among Dai weavers in Menglian County, Yunnan, China, the authors note that a successful project that enables weavers to support their families empowers the community and reinstates respect for elders' knowledge. They make the point that this is not achieved by giving weavers new skills, but sources from deep within "historical Dai culture" itself. The most important

resources for sustainable textile craft already exist in the hands and hearts of the people. As Tyabji says of her experience with Dastkar, "When skill exists, it takes very little to revitalize it."



Figure 6: Chinchero weavers at the Centre for Traditional Textiles of Cusco, Nilda Callañaupa Alvarez, center front. Image by Laverne Waddington.

The whole package

Nilda Callañaupa Alvarez and the Center for Traditional Textiles of Cusco that she founded are remarkable for many reasons, but primarily because Nilda's work has made CTTC ubiquitous: she travels the world demonstrating and promoting the work of Andean weavers at museums, handicraft fairs, and fiber art conferences. She has spoken at TSA symposia more than once, including in 2012. And the center itself, in Cusco, seems to have become a must-see stop for tourists. When researching for imagery or video footage online, nearly everything I come across from CTTC is posted by tourists or tour organizations. It's not just for textile people, and this is key. Rather than cramping their traditional style in order to make what they think people want, CTTC has *made what they're doing into what people want*. They present the whole cultural package, with demonstrations and explanations of natural dyeing, spinning, and weaving for visiting groups. And the center has become a community center where people enjoy working, so it is not a posed scene, but rather a place where artisans gather to do their work. The traditions sustained by this center are being lived there, not pre-packaged for tourist consumption. And yet, the tourists are coming, enjoying, and buying goods, feeling gratified by seeing the work in progress and the methods and materials in context. As with the Ock Pop Tok LCC In Laos, tourists like to gain a deeper view of the culture, and the presentation of traditional crafts shows that there is something to be learned from the local way of life.



Figure 7: A Dutch tourist and her Lao weaving teacher show off her finished piece at Ock Pop Tok LCC. Image by author

The weaving lessons at Ock Pop Tok have an appeal beyond textile practitioners: the woman in figure 7, from the Netherlands, said she had never done anything like this before. Another weaving student, from the US, came for two whole days to make her mother a scarf. She had thought about buying a gift, and then found out she could make one herself. Even though the situation is streamlined for minimal effort (weaving teachers weave as much of the scarf as necessary to ensure that it gets finished, and they manipulate the heddles and pattern sheds for the students,) a student/teacher relationship is set up briefly, and the visiting tourists are reliant on the Lao women's knowledge, which is an important dynamic in a place where tourists are in general wealthier and representative of some idealized modern global culture. Placing weavers not merely on display, but rather in instructive positions as with these classes and CTTC is a significant shift of power that reinforces the sense of identity connected with traditional textile crafts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are several points I'd like to emphasize:

Global marketing undoubtedly helps sustain certain textile traditions, but emphasis on context, cultural identity and quality as a thing to be preserved enables support of the fundamental reasons for the tradition, not just the manual skills.

Tradition with continuous growth is flexible, potentially innovative, and marketing should recognize and assist with this aspect.

Giving the tourist a chance to learn, to develop deeper appreciation: not simply buying but engaging with the community and the "why" of the textile making puts the focus on relationships and building understanding rather than simply feeding a consumer market. Craftspeople and consumers alike must be held to higher standard in order to elevate the market and ensure sustainability.

References:

- Franquemont, E.M. "The True Treasure of Andean Textiles." In *Traditional Textiles of the Andes: Life and Cloth in the Highlands, the Jeffrey Appleby Collection of Andean Textiles*, edited by Lynn A. Meisch, 28-37. San Francisco, New York: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Thames and Hudson, 1997.
- Frater, Judy. "Bhujodi to Bagalkot- Taking Artisan Design on the Road." In *Threads of Identity*. <http://threadsofidentity.wordpress.com/2014/03/24/bhujodi-to-bagalkot-taking-artisan-design-on-the-road/>, 2014.
- Jones, Susan. "Visibility and Invisibility - the Dilemmas Facing 'Traditional Craft' Workers in the Contemporary Context." Paper presented at the Traditional Textile Craft - An Intangible Cultural Heritage?, Amman, Jordan, 2014.
- Shuzhong, He, and Lyndel Prott. "Survival, Revival and Continuance: The Menglian Weaving Revival Project." *International Journal of Cultural Property* 20 (2013): 201-19.
- Suchitta, P. "Mental Template: The Case of the Tai Lao 'Pha Sin'." *Asian Folklore Studies* 48, no. 1 (1989): 95-105.
- Tyabji, Laila. "Threads & Voices - Traditional Craft in a Globalized World." In *Traditional Textile Craft - an Intangible Cultural Heritage?*, edited by Eva Andersson Strand. Amman, Jordan: The Jordan Museum and CTR, Copenhagen, 2014.
- Waddington, L. "Tinkuy De Tejedores 2010." In *Backstrap Weaving*. <http://backstrapweaving.wordpress.com/2010/11/12/backstrap-weaving-tinkuy-de-tejedores-2010/>: wordpress. Accessed 20 July 2014, 2010.