

SAWADDI

Asian Arts & Culture by the American Women's Club of Thailand

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HOL

The Art of Cambodian Textiles

Text and Photographs by Kathleen Forance Johnson

The ancient Khmer royal highway runs in a straight line from Angkor Wat (9th–15th century AD) in Cambodia to the related temples of Phimai in Thailand. In former days, trade routes by land and sea brought merchants, goods and cultural ideas from as far away as India and China into the area we now know as Cambodia. In addition, the mighty Mekong provided a system of riverine waterways over which local traffic could move. Luxury textiles and skilled craftsmen were among the products and people which found their way into the courts and villages of Cambodia.

But all of that prosperity has long since changed; the land and people have been reduced to physical and cultural poverty. “Following over thirty years of civil strife and decades of isolation, Cambodia is struggling to recapture its cultural and artistic heritage while the rest of the world has had little awareness of this rich and fast disappearing heritage. This situation is particularly critical with regard to the traditional textiles craft.” So says the flyer announcing the seminar held at the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap on December 12 and 13, 2003.

The Center and the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles (IKTT), headed by Mr. Kikuo Morimoto,



Mr. Morimoto and the Cambodian project elders pay respect to the deity and homage to the teacher in front of an old pidan during the opening ceremony of the conference.

The Center for Khmer Studies works to restore the devastated textile tradition and preserve remaining examples of historic textiles.



These intricate samples exemplify Cambodian hol textiles: whether floral or geometric designs or a combination of motifs, the complex network of tiny resist-dyed pattern areas were created by a hol artist working from memory as she tied and dyed the wefts and accomplished the weaving.



co-hosted the event. It was the first forum of its kind to deal exclusively with Cambodian textiles in their cultural and historic context. Funding came from the Hong Kong Textile Society and the Japan Foundation Asia Center. Scholars from the Center for Khmer Studies provided the historic orientation for the conference, and IKTT dealt with textiles. The goals of the Institute are to restore the devastated textile tradition, to preserve and promote careful study of remaining examples of historic textiles, to reproduce and reintroduce them into production, and to revive the cottage weaving industry by imparting traditional skills to young artisans. Providing income to poor villagers through sale of their products is another area where the Institute helps.

After years of disruptive war and

internal strife, there were few village artisans left who still knew how to weave—and fewer still who remembered how to raise silkworms. The art of tying and dyeing the beautiful *hol* (weft-resist) patterns so characteristic of fine Cambodian textiles was largely a thing of the past. The trees, which hosted the lac insects that produce the dyestuff needed to achieve the deep rich Cambodian red color, had long since been cut down or destroyed. The secrets of raising and using other useful dye plants such as indigo had also been lost.

Raising silkworms requires a peaceful atmosphere, a gentle steady hand and an unflinching supply of fresh mulberry leaves during the feeding cycle. The master weaver needs to sit down at the loom with a calm heart and a clear mind to create the finest textiles. Those favorable

conditions so long absent from the Cambodian countryside can now be found in the workshops of the eight-year-old Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles and in the network of cooperating villages around Siem Reap.

Two masters of the art of hol dyeing and weaving were interviewed during the final session of the conference, giving participants valuable insight into the history and production of these textiles. The last living court weaver was also to have participated but, tragically, he passed away just two months before the conference.

During the reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge, it was forbidden to weave the beautiful traditional hol textiles which had been used to create clothing and unique Khmer ceremonial cloths. Yet weavers secretly

During the reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge, it was forbidden to weave the beautiful traditional hol textiles.



Newly tied weft has been soaked in clean water in preparation for dyeing.

continued to produce them in remote villages, thereby risking their lives to preserve their cultural heritage.

Mr. Morimoto devoted years to searching—from one village to another—for people who still remembered the old skills. Piece by piece, person by person, he assembled a body of information and a group of people to help him replicate the old processes and patterns. The elders now teach their skills to the younger generation at the IKTT workshops.

The first step in producing hol fabrics is to wind the silk weft threads onto a frame stand, where the designer tightly ties off the areas of pattern she wants to remain undyed. This method is called resist dyeing. The tightly tied sections of yarn will resist taking on color during the dyeing process. After the yarn dries, it can be tied off in a different area and dyed to create another color area in the pattern.

The tied weft threads are removed from the frame, soaked in water and then immersed in a bath of dye prepared from one of the dye plants or other naturally available substances. Many dyestuffs are extracted from the leaves, bark, roots or fruit of various plants, while red is derived from the secretions of the lac insect. Indigo obtained from plants requires a period of fermentation to produce the famous deep blue. All of this preparation is time-consuming, but



Modern frames for tying the weft are used at the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles.



Some dyed wefts are hung out to dry.



A senior hol-tying master shows a partially tied hol weft on a traditional frame.

Weavers secretly continued to produce hol textiles in remote villages, thereby risking their lives to preserve their cultural heritage.



Dyestuffs may be extracted from leaves, bark, plant roots or fruit, creating many beautiful colors. Natural Cambodian silk is gold in color.



Hol weaving is in progress on a typical Cambodian loom. The weft threads have been wound on bobbins and carefully kept in the correct order on the weaver's bench.

the results are very pleasing, without the harsh overdyeing and excessively bright colors often seen with chemical dyes.

Several repeats of the tying and dyeing process in different colors, from lightest to darkest, are required to complete the entire pattern. The ties are finally snipped off, making sure that the threads remain in order. As colors build one on top of the other, the hues deepen and change. For example, a weft which has been dyed in yellow, red and blue will end up creating a deep reddish-brown background color.

The tie-dyed weft threads are wound onto bobbins to be carried by a tubular shuttle across the undyed warp threads. The bobbins must be kept in strict order and woven evenly for the pattern to be properly registered in the cloth. The tubular shuttle, made of plastic these days, is one of the oldest forms of shuttle, and in earlier times it would have been made of a hollow joint of smoothed bamboo.

The Cambodian loom is similar to most other types of loom common to Southeast Asia. It is characterized by an exceptionally long space on which to stretch the warp and a warp board anchored to the far end of the frame. Many of these warp boards are decoratively carved, and there are a number of beautiful pieces of antique weaving equipment on display in the second-story shop of the IKTT.

The *pidan*, a lively type of typically Cambodian ceremonial cloth, is one of the most valued of the hol-dyed textiles. Made of silk, it is the true test of the hol weaver's skill. The word *pidan* literally means *ceiling*, and the cloth was hung behind or above a sacred image in the shrine. It is a story cloth, a visual lesson of

The pidan, a lively type of Cambodian ceremonial cloth, is one of the most valued of the hol-dyed textiles.



A pidan ceremonial cloth shows an intricate pattern of white elephants and shrine motifs.

religious precepts which would have been expounded upon by the spiritual teachers to the faithful. It contains a rich lexicon of imagery tied to myth and legend, which alludes to values being inculcated into the devoted, but often illiterate, congregation.

These beautiful and elaborate temple hangings have not been woven in Cambodia for a number of years, but now there is an effort to revive their production. Gill Green from Australia spoke about the function and meaning of the pidan in one of her three excellent presentations.

Ms. Green discusses pidan and a number of other interesting aspects of Khmer textiles in her newly released book, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia; Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*. Her insights into textile elements found in the architectural carvings of Angkor Wat and contemporary Khmer temples are especially intriguing.

Another useful book available at the conference was a catalogue of the Cambodian textile exhibition Mr. Morimoto recently took to Japan. It includes many fine photos not only of textiles but also of beautiful traditional weaving and spinning implements. It also has a useful glossary of weaving terms in



Antique hol-tying stands often had decorative carving.



Above: Two master weavers provided insight into the history and production of hol textiles.

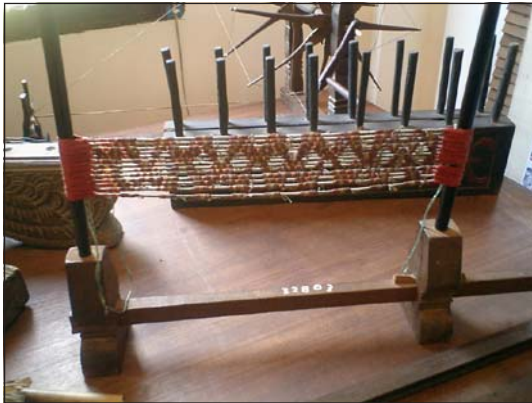
Below: Mr. Morimoto (center) has dedicated years to reviving the traditional textile industry.



A shrine motif is a characteristic pattern found on pidan textiles.



Elaborate temple hangings have not been woven in Cambodia for a number of years, but now there is an effort to revive their production.



Hol pattern tied with silk threads is placed on an adjustable frame.

The Weaving

... a weaver's-eye view of the dyed weft being woven through the plain-colored warp threads. Notice the three thin "sticks" above the cloth. This is the top view of the three frames called shafts that hold string leashes through which the warps are threaded. When the weaver presses on a treadle under the loom, the shafts are raised in the desired order, thereby raising the desired set of warp threads. In this case the warps are lifted in three alternating sets to produce a cloth structure called uneven, or two-by-one, twill. This means that the weft thread will pass over two warp threads and under one warp thread, which will create a barely visible diagonal line in the structure of the cloth while the pattern colors appear darker on one side and lighter on the other. This is a uniquely Cambodian effect seldom used in other areas of Southeast Asia.



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English, Japanese and Khmer.

If you are going to Angkor Wat and are interested in textiles, be sure to visit the Institute for Khmer Traditional Textiles. The workshop is housed on the ground floor of an old wooden building, and upstairs is a shop for the sale of the weaving cooperative products. Also located here are the research center and a small museum housing a collection of lovely antique weaving and spinning equipment. Well worth a visit. ❖

Kathleen Johnson has lived in Thailand for the past two and one-half years. She is the wife of the currently serving United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Thailand, H.E. Darryl Norman Johnson. After a thirty-year career as a teacher of art and art education in universities and international schools, Mrs. Johnson has brought her aesthetic interests and enthusiasm into the field of international diplomacy. Years of teaching in various countries sharpened her observational skills and nurtured her curiosity about the traditions and history of the arts in those places where she has lived. What started out as a casual interest in textiles and their production has now become a fully developed obsession.

Mrs. Johnson is a hand's-on textile designer and weaver who finds inspiration in the textile traditions she studies. She is the founder of the newly organized Thai Textile Society, hosted by the Jim Thompson Textile Museum and Art Center in Bangkok. She is also the motivating force behind the establishment of a new program which proposes to digitally record and document Thailand's handwoven textile information into a national database system.