

# SYMBOLISM IN TEXTILES

## AN INTER-CULTURAL EXPERIENCE

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Symbolism in textiles has been a subject of considerable interest and wide-ranging study by textile researchers, anthropologists, and textile designers in many countries (Gittings 1990, Desai 1989, Bernard 1988, Musee de l'Impression sur Etoffes, Mulhouse 1988). Symbolism can be seen in the colours of the textiles, or it may be implicit in the functions that textiles serve, as well as in their decorative patterns.

Through symbolism, each piece of textile can be studied and understood as a document. It may reveal certain cultural identification, reflect certain customs, beliefs, and values, and give some evidences of historical and cultural significance of a family or a community.

However, in today's world where social and economic changes are rapidly taking place, where cross-continent travels and migrations are a part of everyday occurrences, and where trans-national trades and communications are expanding their networks into every society on the globe, it may not be an easy task to try to look for specific cultural meanings and symbolism in textiles. Everywhere in the world, people's lifestyles are changing. Cultural values are being replaced by modern thinking. Traditional motifs and symbols, once closely associated with the family's or community's spiritual values, are now losing their links and their significance, particularly among the young generations.

Yet in spite of all the changes, it is heartening to find that traditional weaving has survived, or has been revived, in many countries in the world.

In Thailand, ethnic and home weaving once came close to disappearance. After the signing of the Sir John Bowring Treaty, Thailand entered an open market system and began to stress agricultural production for export, while importing an unlimited amount of foreign goods which were mass-produced and were cheaper than the locally hand-produced crafts.

In the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), the government's record showed an alarmingly high rate of increase in the import of foreign textiles, and the king decided to revive the traditional weaving industry, as well as to improve the quality of silk-rearing and silk-

weaving. A Japanese expert on silk-rearing was engaged by the king to study silk-breeding, silk-rearing and silk-weaving in the northeast of Thailand, and to help improve the business. The Japanese expert worked for 10 years in Thailand and made many reports to the government: His mission however was discontinued after the death of the Minister in-charge, and because the mill did not prove cost-effective (Thammasart University and Office of the National Commission: Seminar document in honour of the H.M. the Queen, April 1992).

In the present reign (Rama IX) Her Majesty Queen Sirikit has, for more than 20 years, taken a personal interest in promoting traditional income for peasant women. At the same time, she has also been promoting the appreciation and the everyday-use of traditionally hand-woven fabrics, both in Thailand and abroad. Through her SUPPORT Project, she has effectively helped save this village craft from extinction, trained weavers and expanded their networks all over the country, and promoted it into an industry on a certain level. Her leadership role in the promotion of traditional textiles has been internationally recognized (UNESCO's Director-General's speech at the Presentation of the Gold Borobudur Medal to Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, at Chiangmai University, January 1992).

Today, in spite of industrial growth, the production of traditional textiles in the rural villages in Thailand continues to flourish and play an important role in enriching the country's culture. More and more,

weavers are going back to the traditional methods of dying using natural herbs and products; they are also relearning the traditional motifs and symbols of their ancestors (Pa Saeng Da of Chomthong, Chiangmai and Pa Payou of Roi Et: National Artists honoured by ONCC, 1986, 1987, ONCC publications). On the other hand, textile researchers are finding that traditional Thai textiles embody a rich symbolism which is an area worthy of a serious and in-depth study.

## WEAVING: A SYMBOL OF WOMAN'S CULTURAL ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

In many societies, such as in China, India, Japan, and in some African countries, we find that there are both men and women weavers. But in Thailand, and in all Tai speaking communities, particularly in Laos and Sipsong Panna (in Yuannan, South of China), weaving is strictly the work of a woman.

Young girls in Thai villages, particularly in the north and the northeast, and in Laos, begin to weave simple textiles as soon as they are tall enough to sit comfortably at the loom. Before that they quietly learn by observing their mothers or their grandmothers. By the time they are able to weave their own clothes, mattress covers, pillows, sheets, and blankets, as well as ceremonial textiles such as temple banners and temple mats, they have reached the age of a full-grown woman. Weaving is therefore a symbol of womanhood. It is an important and recognized

activity in a woman's life. It is a woman's past-time as well as her duty. It is her character-training and her education, for she learns, through weaving, to be patient, self-disciplined, and orderly. She also learns the family's techniques and symbols, and all the customs and beliefs that have been passed on through the female members of her family and her community, and thus prepares herself for the role in cultural continuity and transmission. She also learns to create, drawing upon her the inspiration of her natural environment and from the outside world that she has contact with, and therefore weaving is her means of artistic and creative expression. Weaving is also her means of merit-making; thus a woman in the villages in the north, and the northeast of Thailand as well as in Laos and Sipsong Panna, spends a lot of her spare time weaving textiles to be offered to the monks and the temple in the annual religious ceremony (Field visits to Lanna villages, Laos, and Sipsong Panna, ONCC-Lanna Research on Lue Textiles, 1992).

## C OLOUR SYMBOLISM

Every member of the Thai society understands the Thai concept of colour symbolism. We never wear black to a wedding, because black is the colour of death and mourning. People wear white to go to temple on Buddhist Lent days because white is the colour associated with the purity of the mind and with religion.

If a girl wears pink on Monday, her

friend might tease her that, "Today is not yet Tuesday, why are you wearing pink?" King Chulalongkorn was born on a Tuesday and therefore Chulalongkorn University has adopted pink as the university colour.

In many pieces of Thai literature, we read about the significance of wearing or using the 'right' colour for an important occasion. Therefore, there is always a long description of the type of cloth and its colour, to be used, for example, when a prince is about to leave for an important battle, or when a lady dresses for her wedding. The colours used are carefully selected to ensure victory or good fortune for the wearers.

Sunthorn Phu, a great poet of the early Bangkok period wrote in "Swasdi-Raksa" about the traditional significance and association of different colours to be used for each day of the week; for Monday, use pale yellow; for Tuesday: pink; Wednesday: green; Thursday: orange, Friday: sky blue, Saturday: purple, and Sunday: red.

A person born on any day of the week would normally adopt the colour of the day as his or her colour, as already mentioned in the case of King Chulalongkorn. This concept of colour symbolism was probably adopted from India into the Thai society since ancient days together with some of the Hindu practices which have since been a part of the Thai way of life.

The rich colours used by village weavers in their textiles are extracted from herbs, bark, leaves, fruits and

other natural products which abound in the locality. For example, Lac (or Krang in Thai) is extracted to make red colour. Breadfruit wood gives brown colour. Turmeric is used for yellow colour. Ebony leaves and fruits give black colour. Tamarind bark and wood are used for maroon colour, etc.

The names given to different shades of colour again are inspired by the natural setting. For example, for the colour green, we have Guava-green, duck-head green; jasmin-stem green, young banana-leaf green. With the understanding of the different kinds of association for each colour, the symbolism of colour in Thai textiles can be better appreciated.

## T HE SYMBOLISM OF TEXTILES AS RITUALISTIC GIFTS

In the Thai custom, a piece of textile can be offered as a gift to symbolize a certain attitude, or to convey a certain message, or to express a certain feeling.

A woman is courted by a man. She wants to indicate to him that she loves him but cannot yet be with him. She sends him her shoulder cloth.

After an elopement, a daughter from a northeastern village brings home her husband to ask forgiveness from her parents. The couple make an offering consisting of a piece of cloth, candles and joss-sticks. If the offer is accepted, the couple are forgiven and taken in as members of the family.

At the end of a Buddhist Lent, all the women in a northern or a northeastern village gather together, and pool their labour in spinning cotton, making it into yarn, dyeing them in saffron yellow and weaving them into a long piece of cloth to be presented to the head monk at the village temple, all done within 24 hours in order to gain merit at the Krathin Merit Making season.

A Thai boxer, who has just won an international championship in a foreign country, is interviewed live on television and is watched by his fans in Thailand. He takes out a small piece of cloth which he keeps on his body. It is a cloth torn from his mother's old lower garment, a Pa Sin. It was a gift he has asked from his mother before his departure from Thailand, and he believes in its power to protect him.

At a Thai funeral, a piece of saffron cloth is laid in front of the coffin, with a white thread linking the cloth to the dead in the coffin. A monk comes and blesses the dead before picking up the cloth. It is the last merit-making rite performed by the dead before his body is cremated.

**M**OTIFS AND SYMBOLS: THEIR EVOLUTION AND MEANING

Thai traditional textiles are full of intricate and fascinating motifs and symbols. Some are very basic and simple, and are commonly found in other traditional crafts such as in basket weaving and in pottery. Other motifs are more complicated and

have evidently been developed from the more simple motifs. There are also some highly creative designs, with figurative symbols probably inspired by mythology and natural environment. Nevertheless, these symbols and motifs lead us into a secret world of the weavers which can very well traced back to ancient time.

The following analysis is presented to help one gain a quick understanding of some of the symbolism in Thai textiles.

1) Basic or proto-type motif

Some of the motifs and symbols commonly found in Thai traditional textiles are grouped below. They are similar to the motifs found in pre-historic pottery of the Ban Chiang Period (BC 4000-AD 200), and in some of the Dongson Period bronze drums.

1.1 Lines and dotted lines



Horizontal lines and dotted lines are very common among Thai Yuen and Thai Lu lower garments (Pa Sin). They are found in Chiangmai, Nan, Laos and Sipsong Panna (China). Vertical lines and dotted lines are common among the black Thai and Pu Thai, Thai Punan.

The stripes created by lines and dotted lines are also common in textiles of the Karen hilltribe in the north of Thailand, in India, China, Bhutan, Indonesia and the Philippines. It is seen in Ban Chiang pottery (Silpa Wathanatham Magazine, Ban Chiang Issue, 1987, p. 55)

1.2 Zigzag Motif



This motif is repeatedly seen as decorative ends of textiles in all parts of Thailand. It is also a common design in Laos, Sipsong Panna, in Indonesia, the Philippines and many other countries including the central Asian countries. It is seen in the pottery of the Ban Chiang Period (Department of Fine Arts, 1962). It is seen in ancient bronze drums found in Laos and Thailand. (National Museum, Vientiane and Nakorn Sri Thamarat).

1.3 Cross Motif



This is also a common motif in textiles from all parts of Thailand and in other countries. This motif also appears on many prehistoric potteries of the Banchiang area (Department of Fine Arts, 1963).

#### 1.4 Spiral and Hook Motifs



These two motifs occur in textiles from all regions in Thailand and in Asia and the Pacific. The spiral motif is very commonly seen on Banchiang pottery (Silpa Wattanatham, *ibid*, Charles Higham 1989, p. 80-81). The spiral motifs is also seen in the Iban textiles from Sarawak, and from Sumatra (Gittinges p. 89-97: p.215).

The spiral motif also appears in the Moari arts (Barron 1978), and in Persian and Afghanistani carpets (Hill & Bernerd and Mural, 1988).

The hook motif is also an important prototype motif for many folk arts in many various Asian countries including Thailand, Laos, Indonesia and the Philippines.

#### 2) Developed and Creative Design

From the simple motifs and symbols seen earlier, weavers in Thailand have been able to develop and create more sophisticated designs which

convey some meanings and appreciation to the trained eye.

#### 2.1 Agricultural and Natural Designs Developed From Lines and Dots

##### a) Rain Drops



(seen on Djok decorative ends of Pa Sin from Chiangmai and Srisachanalai and in northeastern Mudmee (Ikat) Pa Sin from Khonkhaen).

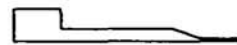
##### b) Flowing Water



(Djok from Chiangmai, Sukhothai)



(Djok from Nam Ang, Manadir)



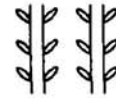
(Koh from Nan and Payao)

##### c) Grass Flower



(From northeastern Mudmee)

##### d) Bamboo Stem



(Mudmee from Surin)

##### e) Trees



(Mudmee from Sakol Nakorn)

#### 2.2 Design Developed From Zigzag Motif

##### (a) Mountain



(from Djok in the north)

##### (b) the coil of a great snake



(from Djok and Khit in the north)

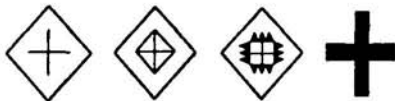
##### (c) The Sunrise



(from Djok and Khit in the north and northeast)

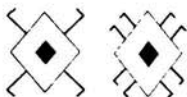
2.3 Cross and Diamonds Developed Into Various Symbols

a)



This symbol is interpreted as the sun, the stars or a lamp.

b)



This symbol has been interpreted as a spider, a crab or a scorpion.

c)



This symbol appears in brocades in the north and the south and is called a flower (Dok Kaew).

2.4 Designs Developed From the Spiral and Hook Motifs

a)



This symbol appears in the Northeastern Mudmee and in the Northeastern Djok and Khit in Nan, Uttaradit and Srisachanalai specially when appearing with dots which symbolize water or with

trees.

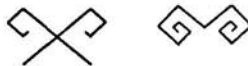


b)



This has been interpreted as two birds or two swans drinking from the same water. It appears repeatedly in Djoks from Sukhothai and from Chiangmai and Rajburi.

c)



This has been interpreted as a frog.

3. Stylized Figuration Designs

In Thai and in Thai-Lao textiles, we find a great deal of intricately stylized and complicated figuration designs with Kochasinghs (elephant and lion combined), with Hongsa (swan) Naga (snake), and frog/human figures. These have been rooted in folk legends and mythology. Many of these mythological figures appear not only in textiles, but also in decorative designs on the temple roofs, temple staircase as well as in temple mural paintings.

a) Naga or Great Water Snake. Naga appears repeatedly in textiles of the Thai, Tai, and Tai Lao people. It

appears also in Khmer textiles.

The snake design is also seen in some rare pieces of Banchiang pottery (Banchiang National Museum's Collection, Udon Thane).

Dr. Sumeth Junsai (Naga, 1988) theorized that the snake or naga is a symbol of the earlier civilization which is the foundation of the cultures of many countries in Asia, particularly of Southeast Asia and East Asia.

We also find the snake (or dragon) symbol in China, Vietnam, Bhutan, and Professor Cam Trong, of the Vietnam Institute of Ethnography Centre (Lecture at Chulalongkorn University, July 1991) believes that the snake is a pre-Buddhist symbol worshipped by the Tai-speaking groups in Vietnam as an ancestor symbol.

In Nakorn Panom Province, in the northeast of Thailand, people still believe that there is a kingdom of Naga at the bed of the Maekhong River, and every year during the Lai Rua Fai Festival, the naga will come up old play with fire balls. Many villagers testified that they have seen the fireballs along the river on Festival Night, and recently the incident was reported on Thai television.

In Hindu and Buddhist mythologies, Naga plays a very important role. We see many stone carvings in the Khmer style in the northeast of Thailand depicting Vishnu sleeping on Naga, and we have a famous Buddha image in the position of the Buddha sitting on the coil of Naga,

with the Naga's heads protecting him. Naga also figures importantly on the roof and staircases of Buddhist temples in Thailand and in Laos. One of the royal barges of the Bangkok kings feature Naga with many heads (Ananta Nagaraj).

#### b) Hongsa Or Bird (Swan)

As common as the naga, the hongsa figure is seen in the Thai, Lao, and Sipsong Panna textiles. Professor Cam Trong of Vietnam (ibid) believes a bird or a swan is another ancestor symbol worshipped by the Tai groups living in

Vietnam. He believes the bird or the swan is the symbol of the matriarch line of the Tai family, whereas the snake is the symbol of patriach line.

In China, a bird or a sphinx are also important symbols often seen together with the dragon or the snake. The dragon is a symbol of masculine strength and power, while the sphinx is a symbol of feminine grace and beauty (Sumitre Pittipat's personal note from China, 1986).

In Thailand as well as in Laos the symbols of snake and bird sometimes

appear near each other on the same textile and sometimes on the same roof of a temple.

## CONCLUSION

Although the social and cultural contexts in Thailand have greatly changed, it is still possible to study and understand the meaning of symbolism in traditional textiles, if one tries to look for their meanings.