

## **The Creative Process of Developing Identity Through Native Textile Handicraft: The World Heritage Site of Luang Prabang**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Luang Prabang native textile is regarded as the city's principal cultural merchandise. In the past, aesthetic and refined weaving was intended as gifts to present to kings and aristocracies only. However, after Luang Prabang was declared a world heritage site, the city became a popular tourist attraction, and this raised the value of its cultural goods. Textile became an item precious to travellers, the most famous being the royal fabric or (*Pa-Tor-Raj*) of Luang Prabang's Royal Residence. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate patterns, identity and creative processes of the native textile industry of Luang Prabang, a World Heritage city of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The study uses the in-depth interview method to elicit information from well-known professional weavers and royal fabric weavers who have been producing textile since before the regime change. The results of the study revealed that the patterns of native textile could be classified into two main categories. The first was textile used in daily life, such as sarong, *Pa-Biang* (shawl used by women that wraps over one shoulder around the chest and back) and shawl (used by women to cover their shoulders), while the second category was textile used in religious ceremonies, such as *tung* (fabric hanging down a long piece of wood) and curtain material. The prominent motif used in weaving is a pattern inspired from ritual and traditional belief representing the great *naga* or serpent. Manufacturing procedure was developed from the surroundings and religious faith; these may be divided into three categories: 1) patterns derived from animals, such as the *naga*, mermaids, birds, lions and the *Morm*, mythological creature 2) patterns derived from flora, such as trees, vines, flowers and fruit 3) patterns based on people and folklore, such as virtue codes of morality and tradition.

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## INTRODUCTION

Luang Prabang welcomes visitors as an important tourist attraction of the region, providing advanced Buddhism sources from numerous monasteries, architectural identity inherited from France and art, culture and a lifestyle that cannot be changed by globalisation. These have fascinated people from around the world, who now travel to Luang Prabang city (Inthavong, 2003, p. 101) to the city to see and observe these attractions for themselves. The world heritage committee of the United Nations has declared that Luang Prabang is a World Heritage city (Thai-Laos Friendship Association, 2011, p. 58), stating that:

*Luang Prabang is a model of the cultural permanence which has a time-honoured custom, and it has been existing. Furthermore, it illustrates an achievement of the combination between tradition, architecture, community structure and 19th and 20th-century European influence. The characteristics of Luang Prabang's landscape show a great conservation, and also the outline of the significant procedures of perfect integrations between two civilisations.*

Presently, Luang Prabang is rated second among scenery towns of The Lao People's Democratic Republic and receives a huge number of visitors. Around 1,640,360 people visited the city in 2011, and providing it with an income of 296 million dollars. In 2013, the

city was voted a first-class remarkable tourist attraction by Wanderlust travel magazine.

Travellers visiting Luang Prabang, especially from the West, prefer its hand-made products. Luang Prabang's conservative cultural identity, which expresses its customs, beliefs and arts are indeed present in its handicraft, which is largely inspired by Lao folk wisdom and way of life. Much of its manufacturing tradition and handicraft is fed by ancient Lao stories, subsistence beliefs and long-lasting religions, especially Luang Prabang's native textile industry. Its elegant style and invaluable pattern refers to the origins of its cultural contexts. To the people of Luang Prabang, weaving is an important task for girls as it is part of clothing manufacture both for daily use and for worship, which is an important element of Lao life. According to Duangduen Boonyawong's article entitled 'The Laos' Woven Fabric: The Art of Life from Cradle to Grave' (Pragwatthanakun, 1993), in weaving culture, an exquisite pattern indicates the tradition and identity of the Lao people. Instruction in weaving skills is passed down from mother to daughter and has become a national legacy that should be preserved. Weaving also relates to the royal court because local weavers had to present their products to the king; meeting the royal demand for woven textile led to great care and effort poured into textile craftsmanship until the revolution in 1975. After the city was declared a World Heritage site in 1995, the weavers turned

their skill to the pressures of commercial demand, producing woven textile for tourist consumption.

The culture of weaving does not only reflect people's need for subsistence, but also the folk wisdom, beliefs, graciousness, values and creativity of the unknown weaver. Moreover, the woven fabric of Luang Prabang and The Lao People's Democratic Republic has an individual history and style that can be learnt from its pattern, especially in the case of *sarong* production that shows not only the development of the handicraft, but also the skill and mind of the weaver. Weaving also captures social status, worship rituals and historical events (Nanthavongdouangsy, 2006). Today, native textile is regarded as the most popular cultural souvenir of travellers because of its beauty and culture-derived patterns, which convey the character and lifestyle of the people of Luang Prabang.

This study sought to investigate the patterns, identity, creation process and development of native textile in the World Heritage city of Luang Prabang in The Lao People's Democratic Republic. It is believed that the individual patterns of Luang Prabang's textile can highlight the worth of the products as an item valued by visitors to the city as well as a source of local income for the city and the country as a whole.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out to investigate the patterns, identity, creation process and

development of native textile in Luang Prabang. The study took the approach of qualitative research.

### *Population and Sampling*

This study was a qualitative research work using the techniques of survey, observation, in-depth interview and key informant interview. The participants were weaving specialists who presented their products to the royal court, philosophers and local people from the native textile manufacturing areas in Luang Prabang. The purposive sampling was well-known native textile craftsmen from Luang Prabang.

### *Research Instrument*

This study took the form of qualitative research and used the structured interview and participant observation to collect information on native textile handicraft production in Luang Prabang with a focus on local fabric patterns, their identity and the creation process framework.

### *Data Collection and Data Analysis*

The researchers have cooperated with the other researchers from Souphanouvong University to coordinate the interviews. After that, the researchers conducted observations in order to obtain information for the descriptive analysis of native fabric patterns, identity and creation process.

## RESULTS

### *Patterns Used in native textile of Luang Prabang*

The results revealed that previously, Luang Prabang native textile production was undertaken to supply woven textile for two uses i.e. for daily use and for worship. The purpose today is commercial in accordance with modern economic pressures. After Luang Prabang was declared a World Heritage site in 1995, the number of travellers flocking into the city desiring to see Lan Chang arts and culture began increasing annually. Similarly, demand for local goods soared, especially demand for native textile, which quickly became an important cultural product and the best-seller souvenir of Luang Prabang. Native textile was no longer woven for daily use or worship only as people used the *sarong* as their everyday wear and others for traditional purposes; however, native textile was still given as a gift during weddings. A detailed look at the use of Luang Prabang fabric is given below.

**Daily use.** Daily use items that use woven fabric include the *sarong*, shawls, bedspreads, cleaning cloth and mosquito nets. In the past Luang Prabang folk only wove fabric for use by family, and so it was an entirely feminine task undertaken by women and girls. The skill and know-how was passed from mother to daughter, and it was necessary for young girls to learn and practise weaving. Girls who were orally taught would start weaving by age six or seven, producing work and patterns that grew in intricacy as they grew older and

became more knowledgeable and skillful in weaving. A long time ago, women were evaluated based on their skill in weaving; it was one of the more significant skills required from a girl ready to enter married life as she would be expected to produce clothes and fabric for her family's use.

**Use in worship.** The use of woven fabric in worship was a basis of Buddhist life in Luang Prabang. On Buddhist holy days, the people of Luang Prabang would rest from work and go to the temples to pray and listen to sermons. Woven fabric was used by Buddhist monks as seen in their vestments, yellow robes and bath robes while for other customs, it was used to produce *tung* (flag) cloth, fabric for covering scriptures, curtains and robes for monks. The old practice was for men to enter the monastery at a certain age to perform good deeds to honour their parents, this being the highest merit a man could attain; women would then be needed to weave fabric for use by the monks and others involved in religious ceremonies related to this practice.

### *Luang Prabang Native Textile Identity*

The identity of Luang Prabang's native textile weaving is inspired from the life around the community, and patterns are based on animal, plant and human life. The basic patterns are the square, triangle, ring, circle, hook, orange jessamine and key; each of these were prominent symbols that might be woven as the main motif of the entire fabric. Meticulous forms are woven at the bottom of *sarongs* without

the *cherng* (the border running along the lower part of the sarong using a pattern different from the rest of the fabric). The *jok* is a pattern that has two characteristics i.e. a geometric pattern and a serration form (*eia* in Lao). The colours of the special weft are normally yellow as the main background and white, black, red and orange as secondary themes. These characteristics are either created by the weavers or taken from their surroundings e.g. trees, flowers, canals, birds and other animals. The weavers may also take their inspiration from mythological creatures from the ancient tales of the Lao people that make up their oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation. Some patterns also come from stone inscriptions. The creatures commonly found as motifs are the *naga* (fabulous serpent), *shi-ho* (half lion half elephant) or *sriharaj* (the great lion king lion) and *hongsa* (fabulous swan). The *naga* is the most popular motif of the Lao Nhua (northern Lao) weavers. Some creatures believed to have existed at the time of the origins of the Lao people along the Mae Khong River and the Sa-kha River are also featured on the woven fabric. The many designs, such as the mythological creatures, complex geometry shapes and natural life, required different weaving techniques. According to weaving specialists, the ancient weaving techniques and the dying of cloth from natural colours are high-level skills. The complicated patterns are matched with compatible colours without damaging the fabric texture. The weaving

patterns that are inherited from previous generations are regarded as a valuable preservation of culture and tradition whose development can be continued to following generations. The patterns commonly used by fabric weavers can be divided into three categories: animals and creatures, nature and people and folk tales.

**Animals and creatures.** These patterns are inspired by animals and creatures that are found in everyday life, mythology, folk tales and religious beliefs. There are more than 30 popular patterns, some of which are inspired by beliefs related to the founding of Luang Prabang and to the great Mae Khong River that waters the land. These include the *naga* (Fig.1), which has many names depending on the period of history. In ancient Luang Prabang, it was called *Ngueang* and *Luang* which mean ‘giant serpent’ or ‘spiritual snake’. In the Buddhist Era, the creature obtained the name *naga*. Another pattern is the *shi-ho* or *sriharaj*, which is mostly woven as the border of *sarongs*. The *shi-ho* (Fig.2) originates from the folk tale entitled ‘*Sang-Sinchai*’, which is the story of a grateful man who could transform himself into many forms using magic; his powerful voice could destroy his enemies easily. This story has been used to teach children. *Shi-ho* is a half lion-half elephant; his body is that of a lion’s while he also has two tusks like those of an elephant. The *shi-ho* pattern is commonly found only on shawls, cloth for covering the shoulders and cloth for covering coffins. As the creature is highly regarded, the pattern would never

be found at the bottom of a *sarong*. The *chang* or elephant pattern (Fig.3) is a basic pattern on cloth to cover the chest and cleaning cloth. Other popular patterns are

the *nok* or bird pattern (Fig.4), the *hongsa* or swan, the *Hadsadee Ling* and the *Morm* (mythological creatures).

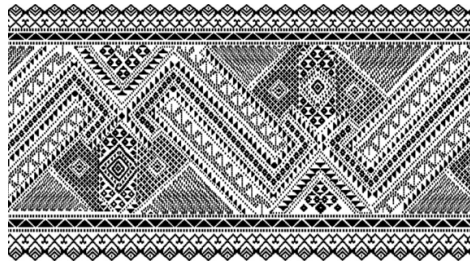


Fig.1: The naga, Torntaw, or twin-headed naga normally found as the border of Lao sarongs, cloth used to cover the chest and silk fabric for daily use.

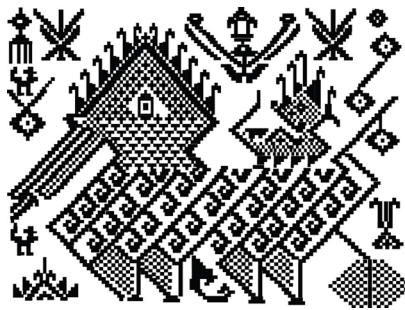


Fig.2: The popular shi-ho.



Fig.3: The popular chang or elephant motif.

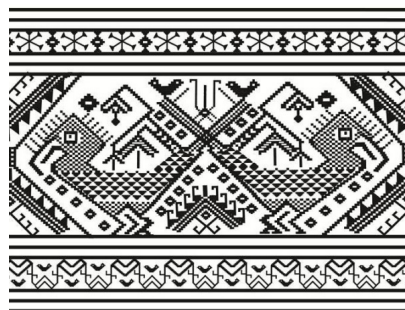


Fig.4: The nok or bird design.

**Nature.** Plants, trees, vines, flowers, fruits and other forms of natural life are also a prominent feature of Lao woven fabric. Luang Prabang is regarded as an agricultural society; therefore, plants feature greatly in its daily life, becoming obvious inspiration for its weaving patterns. The *bak tan* (Fig.5) takes its name from a local palm tree. Fabrics based on this pattern usually has a grain line

(including warps and wefts). Only one pattern is normally used for the entire fabric. Another common pattern is the *dok dao* (Fig.6); its name is derived from the bright stars in the night sky. Laotians refer to visible stars as *dok* and *duang* (classifiers for flowers in Lao). The pattern is woven using normal thread or silk thread that has completely different colours to imitate a star's radius.

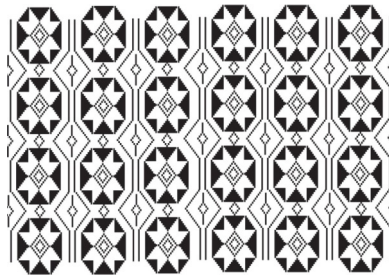


Fig.5: Khom-bak-tan, a floral pattern.

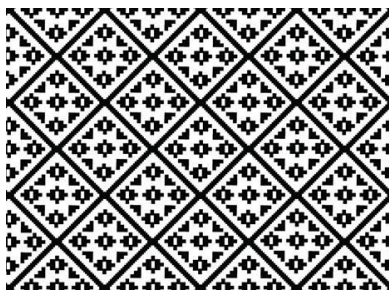


Fig.6: Dok dao, stars visible in the sky.

**People and folk tales.** Some patterns are based on characters from mythology and folk tales. For instance, the Chinese key pattern or *kha-jae* in Lao is woven as a regular pattern and takes the shape of ancient keys. The *kom* (lamp) pattern (Fig.8) uses a lot of intricate detail in one set. The lamp represents happiness,

brightness, social harmony and a good identity. The man or frog pattern (Fig.9) is an antique pattern representing rain and abundance. It is mostly used on Laos silk fabric and in other forms of art. There are also other patterns such as the *dhammas* (monk's seat when giving a sermon) and *prasard* (castle).

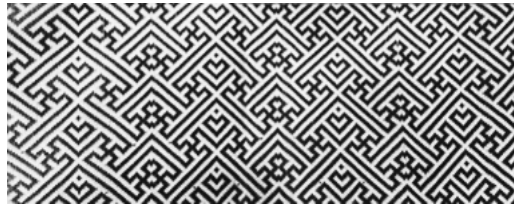


Fig.7: Kha-jae pattern.

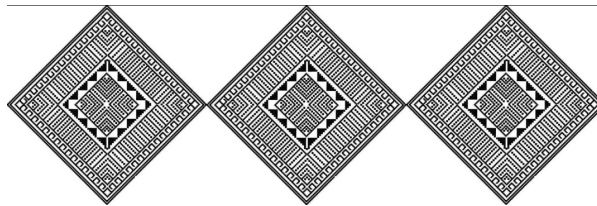


Fig.8: Khom pattern.

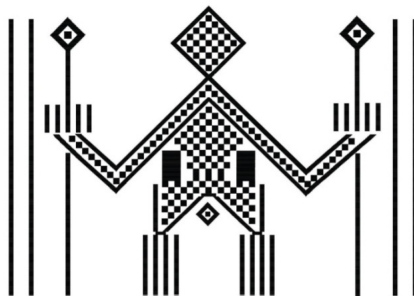


Fig.9: Khon (man) or kob (frog).

### *The Creation and Development Process of Luang Prabang Native Textile*

Weavers receive their knowledge from their ancestors and endeavour to hone their skills in weaving. Most of the patterns on hand-made woven fabric are inherited from former generations and are the result of generational craftsmanship and folk wisdom. The patterns conveying old ways of life are blended in life at present in Luang Prabang. They represent the intellectual property of the community, and can be improved on for present and future needs.

Woven fabric in the past used silk thread to create subtle colours. The complexity of the pattern depends on the weavers' experience, remembrances or creative thinking. The weavers may adapt or apply any patterns, colours, basic element of linking the fabric patterns or weaving punctiliousness in order to meet customers' requirements. Therefore, each period may produce a different fabric pattern. Luang Prabang weavers also apply patterns from beliefs, such as the *naga*; the *naga* was a creature that could determine abundance.



Another belief is seen in the *nam-lai* pattern (running water), which suggests a bond between the people of Luang Prabang and those living by the Mae Khong River and Khan River. These are what make the patterns fascinating. Today, there is support from the government and private sector to encourage the further development of the textile industry. Greater commercial demand results in greater textile product development and wider recognition for the products, the weavers and the nation. The progress of hand-made native textile is encouraging, especially during peak seasons. It is indeed a positive direction that Luang Prabang's native woven textile industry is growing in spite of mechanical textile production driven by heavy industry.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There were two reasons for producing Luang Prabang native textile in the past i.e. for daily use and for worship. Daily use products included garments for daily wear, the *sarong*, cloth for covering the chest and the shoulders, bedspreads and mosquito nets, while worship use fabric was used for covering scriptures, as *tung* (flag) fabric, for curtains and to make the suits of Buddhist monks including their robe, *sarong* and outer robe. Moreover, these purposes stemmed from the responsibility of men and women in the Buddhist society of Lao PDR. As time passed, the purpose of producing woven fabric also changed, and today, woven

fabric is mainly produced to satisfy commercial demand from Lao PDR's growing tourism industry. Two of most popular souvenirs that tourists take home with them from Lao PDR are the *sarong* and cloth used to cover the chest.

The strong identity of Luang Prabang native textile derives from its ancient cultural practices and beliefs, religion and mythology and folk tales. This identity takes three main expressions that are seen in the woven fabric: animal, natural and human life. Patterns based on animals are inspired by creatures from real life, mythology, folk tales and religious and spiritual beliefs. Nature patterns make use of trees, vines, flowers and fruit. Finally, patterns based on people and their lives come from mythology and folk tales and feature strong, individual depictions of the *naga*, *shi-ho*, *morm*, elephant, *kha-jae*, *dok dao*, *khon* and *kob*.

It is clear that most of the commonly occurring patterns are remembered or inspired from ancestors. However, the new generation of weavers are attempting to adapt or recast these patterns to suit present-day customer demand.

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made for the further development of Lao PDR's growing textile industry. Firstly, a database containing information on the history of Luang Prabang's native textile weaving culture should be established to provide travellers to the city with understanding of the culture of Luang Prabang's native textile craftsmanship.

Secondly, to nurture and sustain this ancient skill and to prevent it from disappearing altogether due to the pressures of commercialisation, the original individual forms and fabric patterns should be collected and documented. They can be displayed in a museum or show room for the viewing pleasure of anyone interested in Luang Prabang native textile handicraft, which is a valid aspect of the ancient city's identity.

Thirdly, the government should establish routes for the systematic teaching and training of new generations of weavers so that this ancient skill and knowledge, which represent a core feature of Lao identity, are not lost, and can continue to be passed down from generation to generation. As new generations seem to be showing less and less interest in this ancient skill, perhaps it can be introduced in schools where teachers skilled in the techniques and who are steeped in the

knowledge of this traditional cultural activity can teach young generations of Laotians this practical aspect of their cultural identity. Such a move will ensure that the skill of producing woven textile as an essential aspect of old Luang Prabang life is preserved for all time.

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