

HANDWOVEN HERITAGE**Isaan Textiles – An Undervalued Craft with a Potentially Lucrative Future**

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Isaan Textiles – An Undervalued Craft with a Potentially Lucrative Future

By Morrison Polkinghorne

Thailand is renowned for its lustrous silk, and some of the most complex and labour intensive designs and production processes hail from Isaan, the kingdom's remote northeastern province.

Indeed, on the world stage, Thai silk is a national icon. It is a luxury fabric that is gaining popularity on the cutting-edge international design scene as well as in more staid fashion.

In spite of the numerous challenges that have led to a steady decline in demand for handwoven textiles since the early 1960s, the social structure in rural villages enables skilled weaving to continue. Traditional Isaan textiles are still woven by villagers whose main occupation is agriculture, especially rice farming. Weaving fills the spare time between plantings and harvests, providing both supplementary income and a pastime.

Isaan women still weave fine silk fabrics to be presented as merit-making offerings or as ritual textiles to be worn to the temple or for formal and festive ceremonies such as weddings. The most humble weavings are of cotton, usually for *phaa khao maa* — the multi-purpose traditional long cloths featuring a chequered pattern inspired by rice fields.

The *phaa khao maa* is wrapped around the waist and tied at the front and worn in the traditional *jong-kraben* style. The excess fabric at the front is twisted or folded, passed between the legs and tucked into the waist at the back giving a look similar to culottes.

Although the *jong kraben* is no longer the standard attire for Thai men, in rural areas it is still widely used as a wrap-around for lounging about the home, for bathing, swimming or fishing.

Textile collectors, designers and decorators alike will find Isaan a veritable treasure trove. In the modern world, it is extremely hard to find textiles that are actually made by hand. Yet Isaan villagers stick with painstaking techniques that require many months preparing the threads, even before the laborious process of weaving is begun. The finished cloths remain rare examples of quality textiles still sold affordably — albeit not cheaply — due to continued local demand.

People who decorate their homes with damasks and brocades will find similar uses for Isaan textiles, especially in the West where the trend to decorate sumptuously is reawakening. Top Isaan fabrics can be viewed as fine art fit for hanging on the walls of the most prestigious

addresses. They can also be cut and sewn into, say, scatter pillows for the sofa, transforming a room into a fresh dimension.



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Diverse Cultural Threads

The villagers weave into their creations so much more than yarn. Traditional silks reflect Isaan culture. Motifs may read like a fairy tale, ancient saga or religious parable. Cloth can also tell stories about the people who created it, either literally through imagery or via the mode of weaving: thread quality, loom size, pattern repeats, tie-dyeing and even the origin of dyes.

Southeast Asia has much less written history than, say, Europe, so 'intangible heritage' — textiles, dances, rituals, crafts — provides anthropologists with an additional archive. It is also a reservoir of ideas from which new designs can spring.

Weaving Village Values

Tourists, too, glean insights into textiles by going to the source. Watching the weavers put their whole world into their textiles enriches appreciation both of the silk and of Isaan.

In Isaan weaving villages, you can readily see silk looms in the shade beneath stilt houses, or under a shelter of leaf and bamboo thatch. Location can indicate the level of craft — a master or family working from home, versus a small factory employing local labour. Both make silk that looks and feels smooth, however home weavers who twist their own yarn produce thicker fabric, with slubbier thread. Aficionados consider the slight natural imperfections an enhancement, and a proof of atelier production. Conversely, "factory" woven silk is still hand woven to the untrained eye, as factory looms only partially mechanise the process.

Expression of Place

Just as importantly, styles particular to one area become a tactile expression of place. As the places change, so does the design. Motifs, colours and usage of the cloth continuously evolve. Each region of Thailand has its signature textiles: loose weave cotton in the north; *batik* in the south; and royal designs in the central plains. Isaan has a particularly diverse fabric heritage, in which six genres stand out today.

• Mudmee

This shimmering fabric is distinguished by a traditional tie-and-dye technique called *mudmee* — the Thai version of *ikat*. Hence the name mudmee. "Mud" means to tie or bind, while "mee" refers to the silk strands. The alternating tying and dyeing process can take months. Once completed, this creates an intricately colourful pattern. The threads are then wound onto spools and woven onto a plain warp. These threads reveal the pre-existing pattern only in the weave.



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Mudmee is a subset of the resist dyeing technique. The concept of 'not being coloured' is implicit in the name and refers to any process which employs dye-resistant materials to prevent the penetration of dyes into selected areas of fabric or thread for the purposes of decorative patterning. *Ikat* and *batik* are both included in the resist technique category.

The resist technique most commonly used is the yarn-tying technique called *ikat*, known as mudmee in Thailand.

Source:
Some Splendid Crafts of The "SUPPORT" Foundation of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit of Thailand published by The Siam Society under Royal Patronage
ISBN 974-8298-29-9

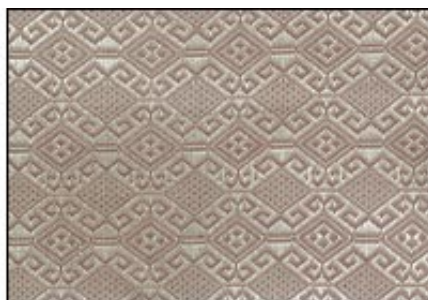


- Prae Wa and Phaa Khit**

Two techniques that use a continuous supplementary weft, resulting in a raised, almost embroidered look. *Phaa khit* is usually woven from cotton and *Prae wa* from silk. Despite similar designs, the different fibres ensure distinguishable fabrics.



Prae Wa
Image © TAT



Phaa Khit
Image © TAT



Phaa Sin
Image © TAT

- Phaa Sin and Phaa Muun**

Woven specifically for wear on special occasions, such as ordination into the monkhood, these typically display simple geometric patterns. *Pha muun* are heirloom pieces.

Historically, Isaan *phaa sin* tube or wrap-skirts comprised three parts: the *hua sin* upper segment; the main body, *tua sin*; and the ankle hem, *teen sin*. Aside from their varying levels of intricacy, the method allows for worn sections to be replaced.

- Brocade**

Thasawang Village near Surin makes some of the most elaborate, time-consuming silk brocade in Thailand. Here they reinterpret old techniques to a new, higher level, creating an ancient-looking silk brocade fit for royalty.

- Modern Fibres**

Isaan also produces cheaper textiles employing ethnic and traditional designs, but these are purely machine woven from man-made fibres like rayon. These have fine detail, but their glossy feel only faintly evokes silk — akin to brass versus gold.

Going To The Source

Shoppers in Bangkok or Chiang Mai may find Isaan silk on sale, but they will discover a wider range within Isaan itself. Specialty and OTOP shops in the larger cities like Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) and Ubon Ratchathani have excellent selections, but only in the numerous silk villages themselves can you experience the culture behind the cloth, prepared today as it was for hundreds of years.

The best location to source textiles are in villages around the main town. Each usually has a couple of dedicated shops. If you see looms operated by the villagers, ask to buy the fabrics there. Better yet, go to the weavers' houses and see where the weavings are made. Three award-winning Isaan villages particularly excel: Chonnabot, an hour's drive south of Khon Kaen; Pak Thong Chai, just outside Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat); and Baan Thasawang, about ten kilometres from Surin, famous for its annual elephant roundup.

Baan Thasawang

This village gained fame for its silk when the APEC conference in Bangkok in 2003 commissioned it to weave silk outfits for the final-day group photo of world leaders in Thai national dress. Thasawang wove intricate silk brocade especially for the event, with four workers in unison producing barely an inch of cloth each day.

Although Surin is known for Khmer-style fabric designs (typically, stripes, checks and also small patterned *mudmee* and uniquely dark hues), here in Thasawang Thai silk achieves its highest quality. The locals use a technique similar to weaving damasks from a French-style jacquard loom. However, this is done manually with a process that requires not just four people to operate, but a three-metre high loom, plus a one-metre pit to allow space for a worker jiggling the heddles. Even more daunting, each loom is exclusively to one design. To create a new pattern, you must actually build a new loom.

In Thasawang, it is not uncommon to hear stories of 16 weavers working four months to finish just two yards of exquisite fabric. However, actual timing can be even longer — depending on the harvest season!

Chonnabot and Pak Thong Chai

These villages excel in *mudmee*.

Isaan *mudmee* generally is of a much higher pattern repeat standard than elsewhere. Just as importantly, it is also dyed here in much more extensive colourations. (As a rule of thumb, small pattern repeats in *mudmee* are easier to weave than larger ones, simply because the previous tie dying is easier to compose.)

Patterns on *mudmee* vary widely — from geometric and diamond patterns, to single scenes of Buddhist lore, containing no repeat patterning at all. Mythical and local animals may appear as central motifs. Local fauna and flora also inspire today's weavers, with frogs, for example, representing fertility, and lore of the naga signifying prosperity. Surin, for example, is the elephant city of Thailand — famous for its annual pachyderm round-up, and consequently *mudmee* elephant designs are popular, but perhaps no less so than other motifs like dancing ladies, soldiers on horseback fighting a battle, or legends of the Buddha.

Likewise, younger weavers are generating new patterns. While most of these reflect little historical authenticity, they replace staid traditional patterns. Also particularly popular today is the idea incorporating ancient mural designs from temple walls into contemporary fabric. You are able to see traditions evolving: just as Thai traditional dance originated from shadow puppets, now textiles are depicting temple murals.

Consequently, woe to the buyer trying to decipher their meaning. As one learned expert commented, modern weavers "make up the meaning of each pattern... there are no fixed explanations and they don't care about the real meanings." Yet the techniques employed by both are authentic, and worthy of a museum or art gallery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

News Room sincerely thanks the Sofitel Raja Orchid Khon Kaen for the tremendous support and kind assistance in providing resources for this feature and for sponsoring



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accommodation.

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