

# Introducing Muang Hun textiles

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When the first pieces of Muang Hun textiles appeared, so little was known about them that stories were created to satisfy the thirst of the collectors who recognized their excellence and needed a culture to identify the textiles with. The Textile Museum publication "Textiles and the Tai Experience in Southeast Asia" featured one of the most extraordinary designs seen in the Muang Hun tube-skirts on their cover and identified it as "Hun people *phaa sin* (skirt)." The true identity of the weavers of these amazing pieces has been difficult to trace.

Muang Hun is a very small town in the province of Oudomxai, northern Laos and is currently a dust bowl with the passing traffic going from the Mekong River trading point at Pak Beng to Muang Xai in the heart of the province. On each side of the town there are small villages where the old lifestyle can still be witnessed. The old town itself was destroyed during the revolution (1975) as the population were thought to be rightist and were consequently resettled in Luang Prabang. The area was bombed and deserted for over ten years. After the war, many returned and rebuilt the town and surrounding villages. Knowledge of their ancient beliefs and customs was lost in the upheaval and today only a few of the elderly that survived can identify the textiles that have now become world famous.

The most decorative textiles themselves are not seen in Muang Hun today, only the everyday red silk *sin nak* which is still woven and worn in the area. In the past, the striking tapestry designs, so unusual for this part of the world, were not worn by the people of Muang Hun themselves. These textiles were woven for sale to the Khmu people living in the surrounding hills. It is not surprising then to find that the tapestry designs do not have names and more often than not, were woven only once. However at least five of the "connecting keys design" tube-skirts (as seen on the cover of the Textile Museum book) are known to exist, with slightly differing patterns, and were probably woven by the same weaver or weavers in a close vicinity. The tapestry designs themselves are so bold that they depart from the traditional framework commonly recognized as Tai, whereby the same structures and patterns are reinterpreted by the weavers without much variation.

The people of Muang Hun are from various ethnic groups, with the majority being Tai Lue and then the Tai Phuan. Both these groups weave textiles for sale to the Khmu people that live in the surrounding hills. The structure of the Muang Hun tube-skirts is essentially that of the Tai Lue, having two side-seams, a horizontally

orientated pattern when worn and a dark indigo hem piece added separately. However, the use of silk in the warp on some of the pieces is not common to the Tai Lue, who prefer cotton, whereas the Tai Phuan have great skills in silk weaving and use silk in their warps whenever silk is used in the weft. The Tai Phuan moved from Xiang Khoang in the northeast of Laos and although there is no record of their move to the Muang Hun area, it can be assumed that it occurred during one or more of the many upheavals that struck that province over the last 200 years. The Ho or Yunnan Muslims Chinese for example, invaded several times to raid the gold mines and pass through to other parts of Laos and Thailand. The Siamese reached Xiang Khoang in their retaliation of the Chao Anou invasion on Siamese territory in 1828 and Xiang Khoang was the worst hit area during the American-Vietnamese war, with over a ton of explosives dropped per capita of population.

In general the Tai Phuan adapted themselves to new locations very well and blended in by adopting the dress, traditions and language of the Tai peoples of each area. The case of the Tai Phuan of Muang Hun is a good example of this. The only traces of their Phuan origins is in their songs called *khup Phuan* and in their textile techniques such as using silk in the warp and complex supplementary wefts displaying Xiang Khoang motifs. The majority (and therefore the dominant) group in the area is the Tai Lue group that weave supplementary and tapestry designs into their textiles, but never seemed to make the pieces with the larger tapestry designs which the Tai Phuan wove for the Khmu for use in their spirit appeasing ceremonies. It is likely that the Khmu commissioned these pieces specifically for their own needs.

The Khmu belong to the Mon-Khmer linguistic group and are living in the hills throughout Laos. Their history of occupation of the area is longer than that of the Tai groups and it is obvious by their textile, ceramic and bead collections that they enjoyed a rich past, trading with areas as far away as villages in southern Nan province (in Thailand today). The Tai groups drove them to the hills when they occupied the more fertile valley areas. However, the Khmu were able to trade exotic raw materials such as ivory, gems, gold, hides, medicines and game to the lowland Tai, other hill-tribe groups, the Siamese and the Burmese in exchange for textiles, household items, tobacco and things they required for their shamanist rituals. Their elaborate spirit appeasing ceremonies, in particular the funeral ceremony, required many offerings such as bronze drums, textiles and ceramics. The textiles they preferred for these ceremonies were different to the clothes worn by the Tai and thus the evolution of the large tapestry designs woven in Muang Hun. Among the Khmu collections are tube-skirts with gold and silver yarns woven with horizontal supplementary banding and *tin chok* - discontinuous weft and brocaded hem pieces - they have collected from villages in areas that are in Thailand today. The Khmu have been textile collectors for centuries and closely guard their wealth by burying it or storing it in large ceramic jars or metal trunks. Among their treasures are the Muang

Hun tapestry tube-skirts and the silk weft ikat long cloths with the patola structure once used in the palaces of Laos, Ankor and Siam. The details of their use of the textile types have not yet been documented.

In order to visit the Khmu, days of walking through jungle and mountains are required. On arrival, visitors are expected to make offerings to their village spirits to prevent sickness and danger befalling the village. To have the privilege of viewing their textile horde one must make further offerings, in some cases as much as a buffalo or specific dated ancient coins from the Indochina period. To purchase a piece takes much time in the negotiations to decide the correct compensation to the owner for the loss. The Khmu are beginning to sell their sacred textiles for modern items and education for their children.

## The ritual textiles

### 1. *Sin phi*

There is one ancient textile type from Muang Hun that follows the structure of the well known funeral skirts from Xam Nua and is classic of the Xam Nua - Xiang Khoang shamanist style prior to this century. It is an ikat cloth with bands of red and indigo ikat separated by bands of supplementary weft. The Xiang Khoang pieces can be differentiated from the Xam Nua pieces by the use of continuous rather than discontinuous supplementary weft between the ikat bands. The pieces from Muang Hun are of the Xiang Khoang type and are called *sin phi* - which is a tube-skirt to be worn by spirit mediums for their annual healing ceremony and usually have a white waist-band. Many pieces were taken to Luang Phabang in the migration and never returned. The Tai Phuan adopted Buddhism in Luang Prabang and thus their shamanist textiles lost their significance and were often sold. The old people recall the ceremony of *liang phi ban* - a couple, both men, one dressed as a woman and one as a man, would lead the ceremony and send offerings to the spirits of the ancestors that protect the village. It was a three day event with restricted entry to and exit from the village during the proceedings. This ceremony is no longer performed in Muang Hun, but is well known among many other Tai groups with some differences in the details of activities. Other spirit appeasing ceremonies were kept by the Tai Phuan in the past but no-one can recall them in detail today except for scetchy descriptions of the *het moon het mung* ceremony in which the family heir looms were paraded in the village and everybody paid homage to their ancestors. The *het khuan* ceremony is still practiced and is seen in all the Tai groups in Laos. This is performed to call in the thirty-six souls and secure their residence in the body by tying white strings on the wrist at weddings, partings, reunions and general celebrations.

## 2. *Sin luang*

The dominant decorative technique in these pieces is tapestry weave with ikat banding and supplementary patterns in various combinations. The structure is that of the Tai Lue being sewn with two side-seams, a separate waist band in red cotton and a plain indigo hem piece. In Muang Hun however, this is further trimmed with white cotton and the design on the main body of the skirt is bordered at the hem by three wide bands of yellow silk which is a useful identification point for all Muang Hun tube-skirts. Many of the *sin luang* tube-skirts have not been woven to fit the average person. Some pieces are extra large, while others are tiny. It is obvious that these were not woven for wearing, but were laid out on alters at ceremonies or worn differently when used by a spirit medium. The pieces that are of normal tube-skirt size have patterns that are so bold that they were obviously not made for ordinary use. There are two main types, the black warp pieces and the red warp pieces. The black warp pieces are generally darker due to the large indigo-dyed cotton yarns in the warp (the people call indigo - "black") while the red silk warp pieces are brighter and often have more detailed patterns. In some cases a black silk warp has been used. The weavers interviewed made no comment or preference for the warp colour but it is likely that the silk warps were made only by the Tai Phuan weavers as the Tai Lue weavers do not like to use silk warps. However, Tai Phuan weavers are happy to use both silk or cotton warps.

## 3. *Pha pok long*

These are silk weft ikat or tapestry weave long cloths made in the patola structure with decorated borders and a central field of lattice and other patterns. These textiles were woven by the Tai Phuan to use as men's cloths worn in the *chongkraben* style, influenced by the court textiles in Laos, Ankor and Siam. A well known man or leader would then have had his coffin covered with such a cloth for burial. Later they were only used for covering their coffins and not buried or cremated (cremation became popular after changing to Buddhism) as they became too rare, the most rare being tapestry weave pieces which have bold zig-zag designs in the central field. The ikat pieces can be separated into two types, one with brighter colours, dominantly red, which were for wearing and burial while the dark brown/purple ones with almost undetectable designs were textiles used by the shamans in healing ceremonies. Many of these textile types were collected by the Khmu for their rituals. Some of the pieces have decorative points in the ikat at both ends, indicating they were woven originally for court use or were copied from court designs. Today a funeral textile called *pha ta kong* is used and has simple stripes and check designs in red, green and white silk.