

Introduction by Peter Chin

Linda McIntosh gives us a very concise survey of silk weaving in Cambodia, looking at a period from the Angkorian times roughly between the 9th and 12th centuries, to today. Observations about the technical requirements of silk weaving, from cultivating raw materials, to harvesting them, to rendering materials into forms ready for weaving and dyeing, to the multi-phased process of weaving, reveals a process that is formidably labour-intensive and very consuming of those who make cloth. When we regard a handmade cloth, we might not realize the extent of the work and workmanship, moreover, the history and the place that these special cloths hold for a community or a society.

Cambodia is a place where we can observe the deleterious effects of war on the traditions of weaving, and also, the recovery and reclamation of these traditions since the 1990's. Ms McIntosh cites the outstanding example of Kikuo Morimoto, who is the founder and director of the Institute of Khmer Traditional Textiles, Project for Wisdom of the Forest. The second part of the name of his organization reveals something very important to which I am drawn in the context of creating *Woven*. Morimoto's devotion to and collaboration with Nature is the foundation which supports the community of weavers that he has created in the forest of the Siem Reap area of Cambodia. He has told me about the need for the cloths to be worn, to be handled, to be communed with. It makes the cloth happy he told me. When harvesting from Nature, we must ask for permission and thank the plant, or the silkworm. This participation in a world view that acknowledges the spirit of all things, or the possibility of even inanimate things to carry spirit, is something that we see here in Canada too in our own First Nations' traditional ways. This spirit is something that I share with Kikuo Morimoto, and something that has found an important place within *Woven*.

By Linda S. McIntosh, PhD

When imagining Cambodia, the great monument of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom come to mind. Reliefs of deities and portrayals of historical events decorate the walls of these grand edifices, and textiles envelop *apsaras* or angels carved into the stone walls. Rather than tailored garments, fabric of varying widths and lengths are folded and wrapped around the angels' bodies as clothing. Examples of weavings from the Angkor Period have not survived, and researchers conclude that the fabrics were imported from India and China and Cambodia did not produce silk textiles during this era.

However, the people of Cambodia developed a sophisticated silk weaving tradition. Families raised silkworms, and women spun the fibers from cocoons into threads. They also gathered materials from the environment to color the yarns before weaving them into fabric utilizing a variety of decorative techniques, including weft ikat.

Weft ikat is a resist-dye method where specific sections of the threads that will form the weft of a fabric (the threads that are interlaced into yarns set up on a frame or warp) are tied with a water resistant material. When the threads are dyed, liquid does not saturate the bound areas. The process may be repeated several times to add

different colors to the threads. Patterns appear when the dried and unbound threads are woven into the warp. The patterning is more vibrant on one side of the cloth since weft ikat textiles are woven in a 2:1 twill technique, a distinct, Cambodian textile trait.

This technique still decorates textiles worn as lower garments, hip wrappers or tubular skirts, and ritual items. For ceremonial occasions, both men and women wear hip wrappers several meters in length. The fabric may be folded and wrapped around the body in different manners to form pleated skirts or pantaloons. The example in the performance has a classical format: a large central field flanked by rows and columns. A lattice composes the centre field. In the end registers, pairs of birds surround religious offerings.

Cloth with pictorial images, often religious themes, adorns Buddhist temples as canopies above a Buddha image or as hangings. A textile that may be worn as a hip wrapper or hung as a ceremonial item is decorated with animals and small edifices. Peacocks, tigers, and other birds are separated by sculptures representing the tree of life offering and other designs.

The political instability of the 20th century laid waste to Cambodia's population, also leading to the near demise of sericulture in the country. In the 1990s, investigations in the country's state of weaving began. One Japanese specialist, Kikuo Morimoto, completed a survey on traditional textiles of Cambodia in 1995. Concerned about the vulnerable state of sericulture, natural dyeing, and handweaving in the country, Mr. Morimoto established the Institute of Khmer Traditional Textiles (IKTT) to preserve Cambodia's textile heritage.

Based in Siem Reap since 2000, IKTT utilizes natural dyes on local varieties of cotton and silk. Silk is hand-reeled. Instead of plastic, strips of dried banana plants are wrapped around sections of threads when applying weft ikat technique. Mechanization is not used in the processes. Women carry out each task of textile production, but men aid by creating the tools and tending the fields.

In 2002, Mr. Morimoto purchased a plot of land outside of town with the intent to establish a home for members of the institute and to have a place to grow cotton and dye plants as well as raise silkworms. The endeavor, "Project Wisdom from the Forest" has grown not only in size, but a village and a community have also emerged. By allowing the village to live in harmony with nature, Mr. Morimoto believes that Cambodian traditional textile production will survive. The community is self-sustaining, cultivating food for consumption.

Handweaving occurs in other parts of Cambodia, but chemical dyes often replace natural ones. Synthetic fibers substitute silk, an expensive commodity. The supply of Cambodian silk is lower than the demand, leading to the importation of silk. Due to the doubling of the price of imported silk the last five years, many independent producers have stopped weaving. The country's government realizes that action must be taken to preserve its cultural heritage, but the survival of Cambodian silk remains tenuous.