

# Before they are gone: Capturing and sharing the traditional methods of textile preservation in Thailand

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research project brings together scientifically trained textile conservators and local elders in an exchange of current and obsolete textile preservation practices. Textiles are an integral part of Thai culture and history, and yet weavers and older practitioners, along with traditional practices of textile care, are dying out. The methods and materials used in traditional textile preservation are part of the foundation of present-day textile conservation knowledge, providing a link to heritage and history. Moreover, the traditional knowledge provides possible innovations for today's conservators, as well as a sense of identity by recognizing these old and tried methods as part of Thai textile preservation history. The information is based on data gathered from 20 informants from rural and urban areas, as well as the royal court, regarding methods and materials used for storage, cleaning and stain removal, mold, insect, and rodent mitigation, as well as local customs and beliefs associated with textile care.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Textiles have long been an integral part of Thai culture. For centuries, raw materials have been cultivated, and cloths woven, constructed, traded, and preserved. Thai textiles vary by region and ethnic group, but have historically been prolific, cherished, and considered as signifiers of both identity and skill. In addition, such textiles are widely recognized as the physical manifestation of people's belief systems, aesthetics, traditions, and artistic talents. Some are created for daily use, either for rural life or court settings, while others are created for sacred or royal purposes. These distinctions, in turn, entail different methods of preservation and daily care. Inherent in the care of everyday and valuable textiles are traditional practices that utilized and, in some cases, continue to use, local materials and methods. However, with the increased commercialization of clothing, as well as technology and urbanization, age-old preservation practices are disappearing.

Enhanced knowledge of the application of traditional techniques of preservation is considered a keystone of the modern Thai textile conservator's professional legacy and education. Therefore, it is vitally important that these historical practices be documented and compiled before it is too late. A key objective of the comprehensive textile conservation center at the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles (QSMT) in Bangkok is to compile a thorough record of these traditional methods through outreach to village communities and palace staff. This knowledge base is not only a historical context for today's practicing conservators, but also provides a direct connection to their national and regional textile heritage.

The goal of this ongoing research is twofold. The first is to gather and analyze a representative sampling of extant information about traditional textile care methods before older practitioners and, in turn, their practices are lost. The second goal is to evaluate these methods and, when possible, incorporate their use with more modern methods. Some of the traditional methods and materials may present innovative and applicable conservation approaches, which are local, low cost, and appropriate to tropical climates and economic factors. Moreover, the integration of current scientific conservation methods with traditional practices will promote sustainability and innovation in the industry, while preserving a sense of local identity (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

Expert silk weavers from northeast Thailand are typical of the generation of women interviewed

**Figure 2**

Full-time weaver for a specialized project reviving 18th-century silk and metallic brocades for the court and dance. Baan ThaSawang, Surin

Ultimately, the plan is to analyze the chemical properties of certain traditional materials, compare their efficacy with current “western-taught” conservation practices, and apply the results to ongoing preservation practices. This research in progress is focused on Thailand, with the eventual goal of establishing a viable model for a broader ASEAN-wide survey.<sup>1</sup>

## METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The goal of the project is to identify, collect, document, and compile evidence and knowledge – physical, empirical, and anecdotal – of traditional methods and materials used in local textile preservation. The data is not categorized or gathered by fiber type, and includes silk, cotton, and synthetic cloth. The data is catalogued in eight categories, based on a customized questionnaire conducted through person-to-person oral interviews. The current data set is based on sample collecting, in-person interviews, photography, and short film clips with 18 people in rural villages, urban areas, and two women working in the royal court.

The eight data topics and groupings include the methods and materials of:

- insect mitigation
- rodent mitigation
- storage methods
- wet cleaning
- stain removal
- repairs
- general care or enhancement of textiles, such as pressing or perfuming (this information is gathered primarily from the court sources)
- anecdotal information on local beliefs, superstitions, and family practices.

The same set of eight questions was given to each interviewee. The order and manner of inquiry varied slightly between respondents, in order to create a level of comfort and trust.<sup>2</sup>

Local Thai names, generic English names, and Latin genus are provided along with photographic documentation where possible. These results are limited to 20 contributors and three regions, but continued research will expand to 50 contributors from four geographical regions of Thailand.<sup>3</sup>

## CASE STUDIES

Current data is limited to three geographic regions and climate zones: the central northeast, northeast, and central south Bangkok areas. Informants come from four rural villages, two categories of urban communities, the court, and private collectors. There are 20 informants: 16 female and 4 male, with an average age of 45–65 (Figure 2).

### Sites

- Phrae, an indigo-dyeing village in north-central Thailand where a local cultural center and a renewed sense of community identity and



Figure 3

Mrs. Chaang, 68, of the Karen tribe, shows her hand-woven blouse and skirt for special occasions. These pieces, stored inside out in a plastic bag, will be passed to her daughter. Phrae Province

increased income security have emerged from the revival of traditional methods and materials (7 informants).

- Buriram and Na Pho, two ikat-weaving villages in northeastern Thailand, close to the Cambodian border, where the elders actively weave and use traditional practices of textile preservation (7 informants).
- Galasin and Surin, two silk-weaving villages in northeastern Thailand, where the ancient techniques of brocade and discontinuous supplementary weft weaving are practiced (4 informants).
- Court-trained women in Bangkok, who teach and practice traditional royal embroidery and weaving (2 informants).
- One miscellaneous urban elder owning significant antique textile collections.

### OBSERVATIONS OF RURAL TEXTILE PRACTICES

In the rural areas, women are the primary creators and caretakers of regionally unique textiles. Weaving and other domestic skills and knowledge are passed from mothers and grandmothers to their daughters. All the rural women interviewed were weavers, and learned such skills from their elders, starting at the average age of 12. Five of the villages visited are under the patronage of Her Majesty, and have a secure and targeted market for their products. Most of the informants weave for sale and commerce, and are paid adequately. It can be either a part-time or full-time livelihood, and supplements family farming or management of a small provisions shop.

Given that the average age of informants and active weavers is 45–67, it is clear that many of the younger generation of women and men are choosing not to weave.<sup>4</sup> Most of the women interviewed are not conscious of their preservation practices or the legacies passed down to them. They appear to clean, store, and protect their cloths “out of habit,” sometimes using selective traditional methods and practices. However, they have also easily adopted more efficient methods, such as the prevalent use of today’s commercial cake soaps, such as Sunlight, and even washing machines<sup>5</sup> (Figure 3).

There is a clear distinction between the care of everyday cloths and special cloths. Everyday hand-woven cloths are cleaned with commercial soaps, hung on bars or in cupboards, and used until they wear out. Although the cleaning of special and silk cloths is infrequent, certain traditional treatment practices are still used. For example, 50% of the rural informants use some traditional material, such as the water used to rinse rice *naam sow kow*, to reduce bleeding of dyes as well as to rinse and clean textiles and the body. Twenty-five percent of informants use a crushed fruit or nut called *naamteng* which makes a soapy, saponin-like slurry for cleaning special textiles. *Biimee*, as well as a vine called *hua ling*, are other cleaners, and 80% of women use the water from old coconuts to rinse and soften the silks. More than 70% use coconut water as a rinse to remove the starches, which can cause the silk to degrade or “eat itself,” as the residual sericin will cause deterioration. Data on stain removal is limited to the application of lime paste (sometimes made of burned shells,

Table 1

Traditional materials and methods used in cleaning and stain removal in rural and urban areas

Type of fibers	Method	Material uses	Area
cotton	General cleaning	(1) wet cleaning in plain water (2) wet cleaning in ash water	Northern
	Stain removal	(1) Beat on rocks to remove the stain and use the ash of the outer skin of cockroach berry which produces detergent-like bubbles and can be used as shampoo (2) Use the soap nut; use the dry seed of the soap nut then squeeze and put into the water (3) the bark of "Kheenhon"	
Silk	General cleaning	(1) Cleaning by using shampoo (2) Soak in coconut water (3) Plain detergent (4) Cleaning by using "Hua ling" plant as a detergent (5) Turmeric soap (6) Silk detergent (Chemical)	Northeastern
	Stain removal	(1) Remove the stain with the "Nhamtang" fruit. The fruit is soapy. Then rinse again with water. Finally use old coconut water as softener (2) "Naam sow kow" water that is used to wash rice (and often used to clean face) is used as a rinse (3) "Poon kow" or lime paste. They use some kind of shell "hoie kaab," burn the shell then take the ash and make it into lime paste. Put this mixture on the bad stain to reduce or take out the stain (4) Use "bii mee" leaf and make a soap out of this for cleaning textiles (5) Use Sunlight soap	

called *pluaehoiekab*), which is used as a poultice. Two of the elderly master weavers used *Catunaregam tomentosa Tirveng* (Blume ex DC), or the dried seed of the nut *Sapindus emarginatus* Wall squeezed into the water. Often, silk tubular skirts are washed inside out, and stronger textiles are paddled while wet (Table 1).

Special cloths of both silk and cotton are stored using a variety of methods. The most common storage choices are a cupboard or a wooden box or chest, or sometimes a plastic bag, to protect the textile from light, insects, and rodents. The most common method of insect mitigation is the use of various herbs, which are placed around the storage area or in small cloth sacs in the storage space. Herbs include black and white pepper and crushed capsicum; camphor and vinegar are also used. In Buddhist culture, the termination of any sentient being is not practiced and, in addition, there are folk beliefs about certain vermin and rodents. For example, almost 50% of the village women believe that a cloth destroyed by rats will bring bad luck and misfortune. Such cloths are not kept or repaired, but disposed of or sold. By contrast, intact older cloths are sometimes placed beneath coconut and jackfruit trees to ensure a robust harvest<sup>6</sup> (Table 2).

## TEXTILES

BEFORE THEY ARE GONE: CAPTURING  
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OF TEXTILE PRESERVATION IN THAILAND

Figure 4

Mrs. Pranom Tapang, national artist, being interviewed at her home in Phrae. An expert weaver of intricate supplementary weft cloths, she strives to teach her dedication to heritage to others

Table 2

Traditional materials and methods of storage and pest and rodent mitigation in rural and urban areas

Type of fiber	Method	Material uses	Area
Cotton	Storage methods	(1) Hang clothes on a wooden stick, usually found in houses (2) Fold and put in a plastic bag (3) Fold and put in a basketry box (4) Fold and put in a wooden box (5) Fold and keep in a cupboard (6) Flat and put underneath the mattresses	Northern
	Insect mitigation	(1) Keep in a basketry box; the bamboo strips that form the box were pre-soaked in water infused with the "Kon tha" fruit which may protect the textiles from insects. (2) Place a bowl of vinegar in the cockroaches' pathway	
	Rodent mitigation	(1) Keep the clothes in a closed storage to protect from rodents	
Silk	Storage methods	(1) Fold and store in a teak wood box drawer that is built into the floor of the bed (2) Fold and put in the glazed or unglazed pottery jar (3) Fold and keep in a wooden or metal box that flattened with fabrics (4) Flat underneath the mattress. (5) Hang on a hanger and store in the cupboard. (6) Hang on an ordinary wooden hanger (usually found in home) (7) Store in terracotta black glazed pot (8) Fold and store in a clay pot with two lips at top, and weighted with sand to keep it closed (9) Keep in a bamboo cylinder, like a quiver, with a top. The bamboo is soaked in water to preserve it or smoked to protect it from insects. (10) Store in a jar of the type that is used for salted fermented fish 'paraa'	Northeastern
	Insect mitigation	(1) Put a bag of black pepper in the cupboard. (2) Put a bag of dried chilli pepper in the cupboard. (3) Put a bag of naphthalin in the cupboard (4) Put a bag of spices and herbs include camphor, dried chili and pepper in the storage space. (5) Place finely shredded tobacco in small sacs in the storage space.	
	Rodent mitigation	(1) Keep the clothes in a closed storage to protect from rodents.	

The most detailed historical data about rural preservation methods comes from a master weaver and two textile collectors and historians, who recognize the importance of preserving old textiles and local heritage (Figure 4). Their accounts, while only vestiges remembered from their childhood in the 1950s and 1960s, provide a small window into obsolete rural practices. Of particular interest are the rituals used to store and protect fine textiles for both ceremonial use and for cremation and the afterlife. One interviewee from the northeast region recalls practices of his grandmother that are typically Cambodian in character. Black glazed

**Figure 5**

Typical rice storage or pickled food container, made of lacquered bamboo and used for storage of fine textiles

**Figure 6**

Interactive display showcasing various methods of perfuming, washing, and cleaning court textiles. QSMT 2013

clay pots, clay jars made for fermented fish, and bamboo cylinders, like quivers for arrows are three traditional storage devices. The bamboo is soaked in water or smoked to “preserve it” and to repel insects (Figure 5). Sacred and special textiles were often stored in unglazed clay pots with a double lip and a heavy sand lid, which, in the case of funerary textiles, is sealed with beeswax. The funerary cloths themselves are torn in one corner to indicate to the heirs that they are designated for funeral and cremation. Textiles not so-marked can remain with the family or be given to the temple for manuscript covers and banners.<sup>7</sup>

### OBSERVATION OF COURT TEXTILE PRACTICES

The care of royal textiles has been the exclusive domain of the women of the inner courts. In addition to specialized cleaning methods, the court practices emphasized the textile’s appearance and presentation, which makes a comparison of royal and non-royal preservation practices problematic. Unlike rural practices that sought to extend a textile’s useful life, royal textile care focused on augmenting the sheen, aroma, color, sumptuousness, and allure of textiles. From our rural data set, it appears that no royal techniques, except for perfuming, were adopted by rural populations. (Some upper-class dignitaries and provincial royalty presumably adopted some of these court practices.)

Traditional Thai court textile practices reveal an extraordinary record of exotic plant materials and methods, evidence of extensive trade, and an obsession with beauty, although contemporary evidence of these practices and firsthand accounts are scarce. Primary sources for research include a few old palace records, sales information from the 19th-century royal textile trade, and photographs. Interviews with two elderly women who were trained in court techniques of perfuming, cleaning, and care provide a rare window into antiquated and obsolete practices, such as washing and ironing, glazing, pleating, and perfuming. These royal women occasionally carried out such activities themselves, but more often servants did the work under their direction.<sup>8</sup>

The data on court textile care was presented in an educational exhibition at the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in 2013, and included archival photos, samples of materials, explanations, and tools. A sampling of some procedures highlights the delicacy of the operations, in contrast to the methods employed on lay textiles (Figure 6). Several cleaning methods were used, depending on the textile’s fiber and use. Large silk brocade or painted cotton hip wrappers were commonly washed individually in boiling water scented with sweet Madagascar jasmine. Sticks or small paddles were used to agitate the textile and loosen the dirt. Fenugreek seeds were also added to the water before the textile was immersed, as their sticky mucilage stiffened the fabric. This mucilage coating created a glossy finish, which was buffed with cowrie shells, agate, glass bottles, or even small cannonballs until the textile was glazed with a shiny finish, a feature highly prized by the court.

Typically, the more delicate breast wrappers and shoulder cloths were less soiled and received only gentle soaking in clean water. Fragile gold



Figure 7

Samples of herbs and flowers aromatically tell the story of cleaning and preparing court textiles. QSMT 2013

Figure 8

Master brocade weaver shares her cleaning and storage techniques with QSMT conservator. Baan Kamphun, northeast Thailand

brocade, gold net, and gold-embroidered textiles that were worn as hip and breast wrappers or sashes were spread flat, soaked in coconut water, rinsed in clean water, and dried.

The custom of perfuming, while not technically a textile preservation technique, was a traditional court practice. The women of the Thai court were renowned for their skill as perfumers. Clothing was scented with fragrant smoke, fresh and dried flowers, or flower-scented water. Benzoin or gum benjamin, agarwood, *Myristica fragrans* (nutmeg), and musk from the Indian small civet were among the many different agents used. The perfumed cloths were stored in closed wooden boxes to preserve the fragrance. The wearer's favorite fresh flowers, such as *salapee*, Chinese rice flower, ylang-ylang, and jasmine, were often added to the box. Women of the Thai court also scented their textiles using traditional methods, such as burning aromatics and creating perfumed waters and oils that used both local ingredients and exotic imported ones. These practices have all but disappeared, along with the myriad of other court practices (Table 3, Figure 7).

Table 3

Traditional materials and methods used in royal court textile preservation and preparation

Type of fiber	Method	Material uses	Area	
Cotton, Silk	General cleaning	(1) Wet cleaning with plain water (2) Wet cleaning with herbal water made of madagascar jasmine, fenugreek seeds, cinnamon and pandan leaves	(1) Madagascar jasmine; <i>Stephanotis floribunda</i> ; Chalud (ชะลุด) (2) Fenugreek seed; <i>Trigonella foenum-graecum</i> ; Luksud (ลูกชัด) (3) Cinnamon; <i>Cinnamomum verum</i> ; Aobcheay (อบเชย) (4) Pandan; <i>Pandanus amaryllifolius</i> ; Baiteay (ใบเตย)	
	Stain removal	(1) Rubbing with cake soap	(1) Cake soap	
	Preparation	Pressing (1) Use pressing machine to pleat the shoulder cloth Glazing (1) use a money cowry shell to rub the textiles Perfuming (1) Put the textiles in the box filled with the smoke of a scented candle To make scented candles, use flower essences like jasmine flowers, bullet wood flowers, Salapee flowers, Ylang-ylang flowers, Champaca flowers, Bread flowers, Madagascar jasmine flowers, Pandan leaves	Money cowry; <i>Monetaria moneta</i> ; Hoybeah (หอยเปีย) (1) Jasmine; <i>Jasminum adenophyllum</i> ; Mali (มะลิ) (2) Bullet wood; <i>Mimusops elengi</i> L.; Pikul (พิกุล) (3) Salapee; <i>Mammea siamensis</i> Kosterm. (4) Ylang-ylang; <i>Cananga odorata</i> ; Kradangnga (กระดังงา) (5) Champaca; <i>Michelia champaca</i> Linn.; Champa (จำปา) (6) Bread flower; <i>Vallaris glabra</i> Ktze; Chommanard (ชมนาด) (7) Madagascar jasmine; <i>Stephanotis floribunda</i> ; Chalud (ชะลุด) (8) Pandan; <i>Pandanus amaryllifolius</i> ; Baiteay (ใบเตย)	Grand Palace, Bangkok
Brocade	General cleaning	Like the general cleaning of cotton and silk		
	Preparation	Pressing (1) Use pressing machine Perfuming the same as cotton and silk		

## CONCLUSION

The knowledge of traditional practitioners of both royal and village-based textile care in Thailand is rapidly disappearing. Today, few elders can recall methods and materials employed by their grandmothers, and their recollections are interwoven with spiritual beliefs and childhood experiences. In addition, there is little if any extant physical evidence of these practices. Without the systematic collection of these stories, practices, and customs, a rich and broad tradition of textile preservation techniques that could inform and benefit current and future generations will be lost forever (Figure 8).

Understanding how that knowledge has been transmitted in the past and how best to preserve and share it now as part of the cultural heritage is central to the mission of textile conservation. The data from this project, which includes the interview narratives, materials, and photographic records, begins to chronicle the unique practices of caring for textiles in Thailand. These traditional materials and methods serve as a historical foundation for ongoing textile conservation in Thailand. Evident from the data are the correlations between certain traditional cleaning materials, such as rice water or coconut water, and chemical characteristics of present-day cleaners. There is still much to gather and analyze; the ultimate goal is to quantify the information for present-day applications and disseminate the knowledge, so that the understanding of multiple solutions to textile care in this region is shared and used for the benefit of all. It is hoped that the research findings will encourage further studies, and possibly a reinvention of selected traditional techniques.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The expanded form of this project is under the management and funding of SEAMEO SPAFA Regional Centre for Archaeology and Fine Arts, and is part of the flagship program on Conservation in the Tropics. It is a follow-up to the 2012 workshop on Contrasting Textile Conservation Methods in Southeast Asia, held in Bangkok in collaboration with the QSMT. The expanded project includes collection of data on traditional methods and materials in textile preservation from all ASEAN countries, to encourage innovative studies in conservation, and a SEA databank. The project will culminate in a forum and publication, or a possible exhibit in 2014.
- <sup>2</sup> The questionnaire included name, age, gender, address, occupation, where skills came from, who taught skills from what age, methods and materials used now and in past for the eight categories. Local beliefs were commonly presented as part of textile knowledge and custom, and therefore added as a category to the data.
- <sup>3</sup> The QSMT research project will interview a minimum of 50 subjects from four geographic regions. This data will be a contribution to the SEAMEO SPAFA project on Traditional Methods of Textile Preservation 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> Younger women were not the target informants of this study. However, many older women interviewed commented that the younger generation is not interested in weaving or dyeing, or in the traditional work of sericulture.
- <sup>5</sup> An Orvus-like surfactant, sodium laurel sulfate, Kesorn brand, is sold by a major silk-weaving cooperative and silk shop in Na Pho, Buriram province. This indicates an awareness of marketers and sales people about best practices for cleaning.
- <sup>6</sup> The villages that specifically recounted this belief about rat-damaged textiles and fertility for trees were Baan HuaSaphan, Buriram, and Baan Pon, Kalasin.
- <sup>7</sup> Khun Weeratham, Baan Tha Sawang, Surin province.
- <sup>8</sup> See personal communications in References.

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