

Weaving is the main source of income for Taliang women living in Attapeu Province, Laos. Photo by Frank Proschan, Smithsonian Institution



TEXTILES ALONG THE MEKONG

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Women from uplands and lowlands along the Mekong River and its tributaries produce some of the world's most beautiful and technically sophisticated weaving. The interaction between weaver, loom, and yarn results in textiles that are artistic treasures suitable for daily life.

Many weavers from cultures of the Mekong region use back-tensioned looms: the weaver sits on the floor or ground, while her back, extended legs, and feet place tension on the warp for inserting the weft yarn into the shed. The upright loom came to Southeast Asia about 1,000 years ago when members of Tai cultures migrated from southern China. The wooden frame of this loom creates tension for the weaving elements suspended within it, which gives the weaver enough flexibility to create long pieces of cloth.

Traditional fibers include hemp, homegrown cotton, and silk from silkworms raised in villages. Today, some weavers use durable synthetic yarn; however, local, naturally dyed yarns are returning to the Mekong region as consumers request them.

The traditional dress for men and women of most cultures in Southeast Asia was a wraparound skirt and a separate shawl to cover the chest. Lowland women made men's skirts of higher quality silk than they used in their own skirts. Men of the hills tended to wear loincloths that local women carefully designed and wove. Tailored clothing was more common among the Chinese of the northern Mekong, the Vietnamese, and recent immigrants to the Mekong region, such as the Hmong, Akha, and Nung, who were heavily influenced by Chinese practices. The blouses, shirts, and tailored trousers found throughout the region

today are sartorial additions inspired by Western definitions of modesty and modernity.

Often the simplest Mekong River textiles are the most treasured. They include the robes of Theravada Buddhist monks, the elegant textiles of the Cambodian and Thai rulers and elite, and the garments worn by ordinary people to religious services. These textiles can be difficult to produce because they require high quality yarn, subtle dyes, and complex weaving.

At the other extreme, decoration on mainland Southeast Asian women's skirts and shawls can be very intricate. Today, these designs continue to employ some of the extraordinarily complicated weaving techniques found in older textiles of the Mekong region. The patterns range from subtle "pinstripes" of twisted yarn to dazzling, compound designs that incorporate tie-dyed yarn, continuous supplementary warp striping, and continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft. Such textiles show off the weaver's accomplishments and the wearer's prestige.

The women of the Mekong continue to weave beautiful textiles amidst the proliferation of shoddy products that sell cheaply. Discerning buyers directly support the continuation of a great regional textile tradition.

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