

Sustainable Practices and Ecological Wisdom in Naga Motif Weaving of Phu Thai Communities: Implications for Environmental Heritage and Community Resilience

Jakrawut Jongthep¹, Sarawadee Phuchomsri², Kittisan Sriraksa³

¹Ph.D Candidate Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University

²Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University

³Ph.D, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University

Abstract

This qualitative research aims to explore the indigenous knowledge embedded in Naga-patterned textiles and apply this knowledge for creative performance development, with a focus on its environmental dimensions. This qualitative research focused on two Phuthai communities: Ban Phon, Phon Subdistrict, Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province, Thailand, and Rahannam Village, Sepon, Savannakhet Province, Lao People's Democratic Republic.

The findings reveal indicate that the development of Naga motifs in Phuthai textiles is intricately linked to their clothing traditions and language, forming a key aspect of their cultural identity. These weaving techniques and craftsmanship, passed down through generations, contribute significantly to both cultural preservation and economic value, especially through the use of indigo-dyed cotton and Pha Phrae Wa silk. This traditional use of natural materials offers insights into sustainable resource management and minimized ecological footprints compared to modern synthetic alternatives.

The development of Naga-patterned textiles reflects a continuum of cultural wisdom from the pre-migration period through settlement and into the present day. These textiles are not only admired for their aesthetic value but also for their embodiment of local beliefs, spiritual reverence, and cultural identity. The transition in weaving materials and dyes from natural to synthetic presents an opportunity to discuss the environmental implications of these changes, highlighting the ecological wisdom inherent in traditional practices such as matmi (ikat), khit (supplementary weft), and chok (brocade). This research underscores the importance of indigenous environmental knowledge in textile production for fostering sustainable development and preserving ecological heritage within these communities..

The study also highlights the vital role of women in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge, adapting to changing socio-economic and cultural contexts. As a result, the Naga-patterned textiles have become diverse in form and elevated as both cultural products and high-value local commodities.

The knowledge derived from this study served as the conceptual foundation and inspiration for creating a performance entitled Phraewaphatthanaka Song Fai Fa, which expresses Phuthai identity through advanced choreographic processes. This performance integrates local wisdom with contemporary performing arts, reflecting a meaningful cultural narrative.

Keywords: Naga-motif, Communities, Phuthai textile, Weaving, Creative Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Isan cultural wisdom is deeply rooted in a confluence of diverse elements, harmoniously integrated across indigenous religious beliefs, geographical and environmental conditions, and social processes (Thamwatt, 2021). The transmission of intangible cultural heritage among Isan communities is described as the intergenerational transfer of lived experiences, sustained from the past into the present. Specifically, the transfer of local wisdom in Isan involves audience-specific and context-sensitive methods that bridge generations. For children, knowledge transmission is characterized by simplicity, engagement, and playfulness. Approaches include traditional games, storytelling, and experiential learning activities such as riddles. These are constructed using vivid imagery, metaphors, humor, rhymes, and rhythms to attract attention and facilitate memorization. Storytelling, for instance, uses entertaining characters and compelling narratives—usually concise in length and infused with moral teachings that cultivate desirable personal and social behaviors.

For adults, the transmission of wisdom occurs through diverse formats: oral narratives, su khwan ceremonies, Buddhist rituals, rites of passage, vocational practices, reading from manuscripts, and performing arts. In this age group, storytelling contributes not only to knowledge sharing but also to social cohesion, by creating communal spaces for mutual assistance and collaboration. Elders or knowledgeable individuals often serve as the transmitters of such wisdom. One prominent occasion for this is during

funeral gatherings, where villagers assemble at the home of the deceased to support the family and participate in the night-time wake. Activities during these events include traditional games such as tiger eats pig and folktale reading from ancient palm-leaf manuscripts. The host typically selects a skilled narrator whose expressive voice can provide both entertainment and moral instruction (Punnothok, 1984).

Weaving is a form of local knowledge and traditional wisdom that has been passed down from one generation to the next. It serves not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as a livelihood, generating income for individuals, families, and communities. The knowledge of weaving represents a form of art that contemporary Thai people must collectively work to preserve.

In the past, Thai women were responsible for making household necessities, and one of their most important tasks was producing clothing, such as garments, sarongs, and blankets, for use within the family. Textiles were essential not only in everyday life but also in various rituals associated with birth, ordination, marriage, and death. Handwoven fabrics, therefore, held a vital place in Thai life. The processes and techniques used in weaving to create patterns reflect the unique skills and creativity of individual weavers. Fundamentally, weaving involves interlacing cotton or silk threads to create patterns. One set of threads, called the **warp**, is stretched vertically, while another set, the **weft**, is woven horizontally across the warp. The intersection of these threads produces diverse patterns and textures. In certain types of cloth, the weaver employs specific methods of inserting and alternating colored threads. Some techniques involve tying threads in intervals or selectively lifting threads to form intricate designs. These methods contribute to the aesthetic richness and complexity of traditional Thai textiles.

The motifs found on woven textiles of the past are more than aesthetic expressions—they represent the transmission of ancestral wisdom passed down through generations. These textile patterns also reflect the belief systems associated with religion, sacred entities, customs, cultural practices, and the everyday lives of various ethnic communities throughout history. In essence, the diverse designs that appear on each piece of fabric are intrinsically linked to the belief systems of the weavers, continuing traditions that originated in antiquity.

The Nāga motif—or serpent design—is one such pattern influenced by religious beliefs. This design is commonly seen on traditional woven fabrics not only in Thailand but also across many countries in Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, China, and India. Whether the Nāga motif is rendered as a clearly defined figure or integrated with other decorative elements, it always serves as a symbolic expression of ancient belief systems that date back more than 2,000 years.

The Nāga is widely regarded as a symbol of greatness, abundance, auspicious fortune, and a spiritual bridge between earthly and cosmic realms. In some local traditions, Nāgas are believed to inhabit subterranean or aquatic realms. In others, Nāga beliefs are closely tied to the human life cycle—from birth to death. For this reason, ancient textiles across various cultures often feature Nāga imagery, a tradition that continues in contemporary weaving practices. While the motif appears throughout many regions, the specific designs and terminologies vary depending on the cultural context and the imagination of the weaver. Examples include **Naga Spiral**, **Winged Naga**, **Upward Nāga**, **Palatial Nāga**, **Arched Nāga**, **Nāga Bones**, and the more general **Nāga** or **Great Serpent** pattern. These regional variations reflect the diverse symbolic interpretations embedded in local traditions and belief systems.

In the realm of empirical reality, the Nāga may be dismissed as mythical or nonsensical. However, within the world of belief, the Nāga is regarded as a sacred and powerful entity, commanding profound reverence and awe. The Nāga holds deep cultural and spiritual significance for communities and nations throughout Southeast Asia, as evidenced by the widespread presence of Nāga-related myths and legends among diverse ethnic groups across the Mekong subregion—including Khmer, Lao, Thai, Burmese, and Vietnamese communities.

In particular, the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River—such as Ban Phon in Phon Subdistrict, Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province, Thailand, and Ban Rahan Nam in Songkhon Town, Savannakhet Province, Lao People's Democratic Republic—possess rich traditions involving Nāga beliefs. These communities uphold legends of the Nāga inscribed in their sacred local texts, reflecting a belief system that continues to be honored and respected.

The enduring veneration of the Nāga within these communities illustrates its continued symbolic relevance to the Phu Thai people. This reverence has also found expression in various forms of performance art across historical periods and cultural dimensions. The story of the Nāga has been

interpreted and represented through Thai classical dance, Lao traditional performance, and Isan regional dance traditions, serving as a dynamic medium for cultural transmission and identity.

Isan dance, a branch of traditional performing arts in northeastern Thailand, plays a vital role in society and possesses unique characteristics that reflect the way of life, economy, politics, governance, art, and culture of the region (Sensai, 2014). As noted by His Royal Highness Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, the origins and development of dance are intrinsically tied to human nature and emotional expression:

“Dance is a tradition found among all human races and languages; each culture expresses it in its own way. Even animals engage in dance-like behavior. One can easily observe this in dogs, chickens, and other animals—when stirred by emotion, they leap and move in various expressive gestures. This, too, can be understood as a form of dance within the nature of animals. Scholars who have investigated the origins of dance conclude that it stems from a natural reaction to sensory experience. Whether arising from pleasure or pain, when emotions become intense and cannot be suppressed, they manifest through physical movement. A clear example is how infants, when experiencing happiness, move joyfully, and when distressed, squirm or cry out—demonstrating their emotional state. As people grow and develop awareness, their emotional gestures become more varied, extending to actions that convey desire, affection, aggression, or anger. These bodily expressions, born from visceral emotional response, represent the foundational form of dance.” (as cited in Wirunrak, 2000) This view emphasizes that dance originates from the innate human impulse to express emotion through movement—an impulse shared across all cultures and time periods, and deeply embedded in the everyday life and ritual of the Isan people.

Given these factors, the researcher recognizes that the body of knowledge concerning Nāga motif weaving traditions on both sides of the Mekong River, along with the associated belief systems surrounding the Nāga, constitutes a valuable cultural resource. This knowledge can serve as the foundation for the creative development of performance-based communication. Therefore, this study proposes to explore and present the wisdom embedded in Nāga-pattern weaving as a basis for innovative performance creation.

The research focuses on studying the cultural knowledge related to Nāga textile weaving traditions along both sides of the Mekong. Documentary evidence and archival materials will be employed to examine the accumulated local knowledge, including the historical value that provides insight into the past and its transmission to the present. Social values are also reflected through customs and traditions that incorporate moral principles. The study applies concepts from choreographic composition and aesthetic theory to develop a new form of performance. This creative process is supported by analytical input from experts in the field, in order to construct a contemporary Isan folk dance performance. The aim is to disseminate this artistic creation and offer it as a model for future performance development rooted in local wisdom.

2. Objectives

1. To study the weaving wisdom and Nāga textile motifs of the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

2. To apply the knowledge derived from the development and cultural significance of Nāga motif weaving among the Phu Thai ethnic groups toward the creative design of a performance.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study titled “Nāga Motif Weaving Wisdom of the Phu Thai Ethnic Communities on Both Sides of the Mekong River for Creative Performance Development” is a qualitative research project. The objectives of this study are 1) To explore the traditional wisdom embedded in the Nāga motif weaving practices of these communities. 2) To apply the acquired knowledge toward the creative design of a performance.

This study employs both **documentary research** and **field study** methodologies. Data collection involves surveys and in-depth interviews, which are subsequently analyzed to extract insights relevant to cultural heritage and performance development. The target group for this research focuses on individuals directly associated with Nāga motif textile weaving among the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River. Emphasis is placed on both tangible and intangible aspects of local weaving knowledge. Informants were selected based on their expertise and relevance to the research objectives.

The primary participants include scholars and practitioners with specialized knowledge in Phu Thai ethnic weaving traditions. The study specifically draws from Phu Thai communities in both Thailand and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic. In Thailand, participants are selected from the cultural context of

Ban Phon, Phon Subdistrict, Kham Muang District, Kalasin Province. In Laos, participants are chosen from Ban Rahan Nam, Songkhon District, Savannakhet Province.

The interview guide focused on themes related to textile patterns, specifically Nāga motifs, and was divided into two formats:

1. **Structured Interview:** This format involved pre-determined questions used to interview key practitioners associated with Nāga weaving knowledge. The aim was to obtain concrete answers regarding the wisdom embedded in Nāga motif textiles.
2. **Unstructured Interview:** This open-ended format allowed participants to respond freely, enabling the researcher to gain deeper insights into the development of Nāga motif textiles among the Phu Thai communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

The collected data were interpreted using the **in-depth interview** technique, informed by expert opinion. This method involved the preparation of broad, guiding questions in advance and consisted of the following strategies:

- **Open-ended Interview:** The interviewee was informed of the purpose of the study and encouraged to speak freely about their thoughts and experiences. Topics included the history, cultural significance, current context, and other relevant aspects of Nāga textiles.
- **Focused Interview:** The researcher directed the conversation to specific topics of interest relevant to the study, allowing for in-depth exploration of targeted themes.
- **Key Informant Interview:** This involved selecting interviewees with in-depth, specialized knowledge directly related to the study's subject matter. Examples include experts in Phu Thai textile history, interpreters of animal symbolism in textile motifs, and specialists in performance creation.

Data analysis in qualitative research is a critical component of the research process. Unlike quantitative research, statistical methods are not used as the primary means of analysis; if statistical data are used, they serve only as supporting information. Data collected from the field—through non-participant observation, structured interviews, unstructured interviews, and focus group discussions—are analyzed through triangulation with secondary sources that the researcher has previously studied. The researcher plays an active role in interpreting and organizing the data to address the study's objectives. The following analytical techniques were employed.

Field Data Analysis : Data from observations were analyzed in relation to events, activities, customs, and rituals occurring within the research sites. Interviews were conducted to validate community knowledge and to collect additional information about the history and stylistic forms of Nāga motif textiles among the Phu Thai ethnic groups on both sides of the Mekong River. Social and cultural meanings embedded in these textiles were interpreted using relevant sociocultural theories. The data were then categorized and grouped according to themes aligned with the study's conceptual framework. Visual materials—including photographs, line drawings, and interpretive illustrations—were used to identify design patterns and to visualize symbolic interpretations of Nāga motifs.

Synthesis and Interpretation : All data were synthesized based on the research framework, incorporating relevant sociocultural theories and comparative studies. The findings were discussed in relation to existing literature to generate new knowledge. Results were presented through descriptive analysis, supported by photographs, drawings, charts, and tables to illustrate the conclusions drawn from the data.

The findings from data analysis are presented using descriptive and interpretive narrative supported by visual elements such as photographs and line drawings. In addition, charts and tables are constructed to summarize and represent the body of knowledge related to the historical background, stylistic characteristics, and symbolic meanings of Nāga motif textiles in the studied areas. The analysis also includes sociocultural interpretations of the meanings embedded in these textile traditions. The research outcomes are then disseminated to the public in various forms, including live performance, research documentation, academic articles, scholarly posters, and presentations at both national and international academic conferences, as appropriate.

4. RESULTS

4.1 To study the weaving wisdom and Nāga textile motifs of the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

4.1.1 Textile Wisdom of the Phu Thai Ethnic Group (Lao)

Traditional handwoven textiles reflect the Phu Thai community's cultural beliefs surrounding the Nāga, a symbol of abundance and spiritual protection. The Nāga motif is central to Phu Thai weaving traditions

and intimately tied to local folklore and cosmological beliefs. Findings from this research indicate that such weaving knowledge has been passed down through generations via experiential learning and an understanding of natural materials, dyeing techniques, and motif design. These motifs embody narrative and cultural symbolism, making the woven textile not only a garment but also a medium of visual storytelling.

Key Aspects of Nāga Textile Wisdom:

1) **Visual Form** Phu Thai Nāga textiles are handwoven on traditional looms and often used in traditional clothing such as sarongs (pha sin), shoulder cloths (pha biang), and shawls (pha sabai). The Nāga design is typically intricate and visually prominent:

- **Nāga Motif Sarong:** Long tubular skirts featuring Nāga motifs along the hem or midsection. Common designs include Nāga coiled horizontally or intertwined like vines. Dominant colors are gold, deep red, green, and purple, often worn during auspicious ceremonies such as ordinations, weddings, and festivals.
- **Nāga Motif Shoulder Cloth:** Long shoulder drapes woven with continuous flowing Nāga patterns resembling water currents. The technique often used is khit weaving, highlighting the craftsmanship of the weaver.
- **Nāga Motif Shawl:** Wide rectangular textiles draped over the shoulder or wrapped around the body, with Nāga motifs (e.g., Nāga heads, Nāga scales) woven primarily at the ends to accentuate visibility when worn.

2) **Materials** Materials used are both traditional and symbolic, chosen for their aesthetic and cultural significance:

- **Silk:** The primary material, valued for its sheen and durability. Locally produced silk adds cultural authenticity and sustainability to the craft.
- **Cotton:** Used in areas where silk is less accessible. Cotton yields durable textiles with a different tactile and visual character.
- **Gold Thread:** Employed for ceremonial textiles, symbolizing wealth and sanctity. Adds grandeur to the woven Nāga motifs.
- **Silver Thread:** Often used decoratively, enhancing visual texture and value in formal textiles.
- **Natural Dyes:** Derived from plants and organic materials, providing soft, symbolic hues—e.g., red for good fortune, gold for sacred power, blue/black for religious or ritual use.

3) **Motifs** The central motif is the Nāga, representing reverence, fertility, and protection. Complementary patterns like vine scrolls (lairo), curls, or ancient spiral designs often enhance the main motif. This research categorizes motifs into three groups:

- **Single Nāga:** A solitary Nāga depicted in dramatic motion—rising, coiling, or encircling. Represents individual strength, protection, and unity.
- **Paired Nāgas:** Two Nāgas in harmony, symbolizing love, duality, and balance. Common in wedding attire and ceremonial cloths.
- **Multiple Nāgas:** A group of Nāgas conveying collective power, protection, and unity—often used in communal or large ceremonial contexts.

Each design type carries specific symbolic meanings deeply rooted in Buddhist and Southeast Asian cosmology.

4) Production Process

1. **Raw Material Preparation:** Cotton is cultivated, harvested, and spun; silk is produced via sericulture and drawn into threads.

2. **Dyeing:** Natural dyes are prepared through boiling and fermenting local plant materials.

3. **Weaving:** Traditional floor looms are used; intricate motifs like the Nāga are produced using chok (supplementary weft) or teen chok techniques, requiring advanced weaving skills.

4. **Finishing:** Woven cloths are inspected, cut, and hemmed; decorative borders may be added to enhance aesthetic appeal.

4.1.2 Textile Wisdom of the Phu Thai Ethnic Group (Thailand)

Research findings indicate that Phu Thai weaving traditions in Thailand are rooted in integrated local knowledge systems. These include:

1. **Intangible elements** such as life philosophy, values, and meanings associated with daily practices.
2. **Tangible expressions** such as livelihood activities, craftsmanship, arts, and music.

This knowledge stems from both direct learning (personal experience) and indirect transmission (intergenerational teaching). It reflects the capacity of communities to adapt and thrive within ecological and socio-cultural environments through intellectual synthesis, problem-solving, and cultural exchange. The Nāga motif, central to Phu Thai textile culture, reflects ancestral beliefs passed down through generations. It symbolizes protection, fertility, and cosmic connection, appearing in textiles used in both daily life and religious rituals. Although found across Southeast and South Asia—including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, China, and India—regional variations exist in style and symbolism.

The Nāga motif represents the cosmological relationship between humans, nature, and the universe. It is especially significant in women’s weaving practices and embodies shared cultural memory. Documenting and analyzing Nāga designs in countries with Nāga traditions contributes to cross-cultural understanding of symbolic textiles in Southeast and South Asia.

Components of Nāga Textile Wisdom:

1) Visual Form

Nāga Sarongs: Long tubular skirts with Nāga patterns woven at the hem or midsection. Colors like gold, deep red, green, and purple dominate. Worn during auspicious occasions.

Nāga Shoulder Cloths (Pha Biang/Pha Phrae Wa): Long fabrics draped over the shoulder, often featuring continuous Nāga patterns woven with khit technique to show refined craftsmanship.

2) Materials

Silk: Derived from Bombyx mori silkworms, silk offers luster and durability. Cocoon reeling and silk thread preparation require expert care and are rooted in traditional sericulture.

Cotton: Traditionally processed through carding, spinning with hand tools, and dyed using natural substances. Despite lacking silk’s sheen, cotton provides strength and cultural distinctiveness.

3) Design Motifs

Main Motifs (Lai Mae): Large patterns like Nāga, flowers, and vine stems.

Secondary Motifs (Lai Rong): Smaller patterns like animal fangs, pine buds, or floral scrolls that frame or support the main motif.

Nāga Types:

Single Nāga: Represents solitary strength and divine power.

Paired Nāgas: Symbolize harmony, marriage, and dual energies.

Group of Nāgas: Reflects communal power and social protection.

These motifs derive from Buddhist cosmology and mythological interpretations of serpents as sacred beings. Phu Thai weaving is highly meditative, requiring focus to align threads and replicate ancestral designs with precision.

4) Production Process

Sericulture: Silkworms are raised on mulberry leaves until cocoon formation. The cocoons are harvested and reeled for thread.

Dyeing: Natural dyes from roots, bark, and flowers are used to imbue textiles with symbolic color meaning.

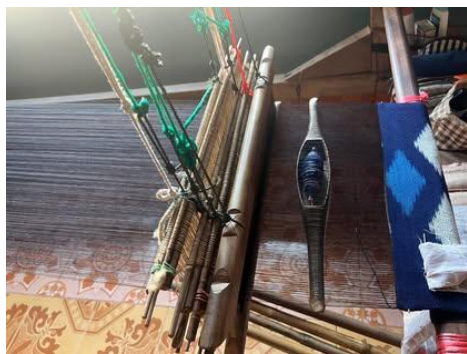
Weaving: Done on handlooms using khit or chok techniques for intricate patterns.

Finishing: Includes washing, softening, and precise cutting/sewing into garments or ritual cloths.

The Pha Phrae Wa silk weaving process is a meticulous, multi-step craft practiced in northeast Thailand (Udon Thani, Nong Khai, Mukdahan). It reflects the artistry and ingenuity of generations of Phu Thai women who have mastered this tradition.

Comparative Textile Wisdom of Nāga Motif Weaving among the Phu Thai Ethnic Group in Lao PDR and Thailand

Phu Thai Textile Wisdom – Lao PDR	Phu Thai Textile Wisdom – Thailand
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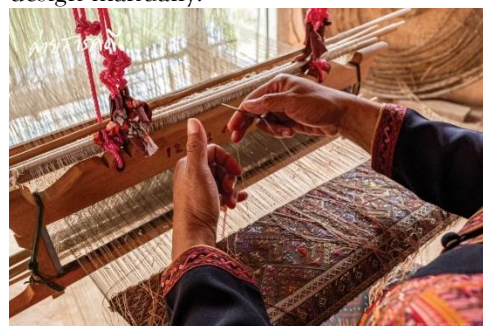
Nāga motif weaving wisdom in Lao PDR involves the use of the **treadle loom** (ki katuk), a traditional technique passed down through generations.



In Lao PDR, **natural indigo dyeing** is employed, reflecting ecological knowledge and local resources.



Nāga motif weaving wisdom in Kalasin, Thailand, also uses the **treadle loom** but with added complexity—**pattern rods**, **supplementary pattern threads**, and the **pinky finger** are used to raise the design manually.



In Kalasin, Thailand, **natural dyeing** is performed using a variety of **tree barks**, showcasing biodiversity and herbal dye traditions.

4.2 To apply the knowledge derived from the development and cultural significance of Nāga motif weaving among the Phu Thai ethnic groups toward the creative design of a performance.

The researcher identified key issues emerging from the integration of traditional wisdom, the evolution of Nāga motif weaving, and the symbolic interpretation of patterns. This line of inquiry aligns with the 20-Year National Strategy on Arts and Culture and the ASEAN Cultural Policy and Strategy. These frameworks share a common vision: “Culture as a driver of a secure, prosperous, and sustainable society in a developed nation.”

In particular, Strategy 2 focuses on the conservation, transmission, and promotion of religion, arts, and culture. It emphasizes encouraging research that applies cultural and artistic knowledge to foster innovation and development, while simultaneously preserving and disseminating cultural heritage.

Analyzing Nāga motif weaving on both sides of the Mekong within this policy context highlights its relevance across multiple dimensions—including cultural, economic, and performative. Promoting the Nāga textile tradition as both a cultural and economic resource contributes not only to the preservation and transmission of local identity but also offers a sustainable economic tool for community development. Policy design in this area should emphasize intersectoral integration and international cooperation to strengthen regional capacity and elevate Southeast Asia's cultural heritage into global cultural markets.

Creative Performance Design Based on Nāga Textile Motifs of the Thai–Lao Phu Thai Ethnic Communities

The researcher developed a creative performance concept using **contemporary dance** as a medium to reinterpret the symbolic and cultural meanings of Nāga motifs woven into traditional Phu Thai textiles. This choice stems from the absence of existing contemporary dance works that explicitly engage with the symbolic richness of Nāga textile patterns. The creative process aims to present this deeply rooted cultural heritage—linked to history, society, religion, and daily life—through performance, emphasizing its significance for communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

The Nāga, a mythical serpent, is revered in both Thai and Lao belief systems as the guardian of the Mekong River. It symbolizes prosperity, protection, and sacredness. Integrating Nāga motifs into textile weaving reflects profound cultural beliefs in both nations.

The significance of Nāga textiles can be understood across six dimensions:

1. Cultural and Spiritual Importance:

Nāga motifs appear in ritual textiles used in major life events such as ordinations, weddings, and religious festivals. They are believed to bestow good fortune, spiritual protection, and personal empowerment upon the wearer.

2. Religious Significance:

In Buddhist traditions, the Nāga represents the bridge between the human and divine realms. Iconic narratives, such as the Nāga sheltering the Buddha during his enlightenment, elevate the motif's presence in monastic robes, temple adornments, and religious ceremonies.

3. Social and Ethnic Identity:

Nāga textiles serve as a symbol of ethnic pride and cultural distinction, especially in Northeast Thailand and Laos. Variations in motif—single Nāga, paired Nāgas, or groups—express regional beliefs and social narratives.

4. Economic and Livelihood Value:

The weaving of Nāga textiles supports local economies, especially among women artisans. Beyond cultural preservation, these textiles generate income through cultural tourism and export markets as high-quality handmade goods.

5. Artistic and Design Value:

The complexity of Nāga motifs reflects weavers' creativity and technical skill. Patterns convey myths and historical narratives through intricate visual language, requiring mastery of pattern repetition and symbolic composition.

6. Cultural Heritage and Sustainability:

Nāga weaving represents intangible cultural heritage worthy of preservation. It encapsulates ancestral wisdom and local worldviews, passed down through generations and now revitalized through performance art.

From Textile Symbol to Performative Expression

The creative reinterpretation of Nāga motifs into dance was developed using choreographic methods that reflect both artistic vision and cultural depth. Drawing on the principles proposed by scholars such as Suksanti Waengwan and Usa Sobruk, the research adopts a **structured creative dance development process**, involving:

- **Content analysis**
- **Rehearsal and practice**
- **Observation and interpretation**
- **Improvisation and movement invention**
- **Presentation and performance**

• Reflection and evaluation

This methodology not only aligns with traditional dance creation but also allows the discovery of personal and collective movement vocabularies inspired by Nāga forms.

Semiotic Interpretation and Choreographic Development

The researcher employed **semiotics theory** as the interpretive framework, decoding the symbols embedded in Nāga textiles. Nāga is not merely a decorative motif but a **cultural signifier** linking spirituality, identity, and corporeal presence.

The resulting choreography integrates movement inspired by the fluidity and structure of Nāga weaving patterns, bridging tangible (physical form) and intangible (beliefs and meanings) dimensions. The dancer's body becomes a medium for expressing spiritual relationships and ancestral narratives, grounded in the cultural ecology of the Thai–Lao borderland.

This research-led creative process explores how **movement design can reflect Nāga symbolism** by aligning bodily structure with serpentine motion found in the textile designs. The outcome contributes both a new perspective in performing arts and a methodological model for future artistic research that honors and reimagines cultural heritage through dance.

Choreographic Design and Structure of the Creative Performance

The researcher adopted the creative dance process outlined by **Surapol Virunrak (2004)** to conceptualize and develop the performance. This model consists of four key stages:

1. Overall storyline development
2. Emotional segmentation
3. Movement and directional design
4. Choreographic detailing

These four stages were used to construct a conceptual framework for the performance, dividing the show into three thematic acts. The structure was informed by documentary research and creative conceptual analysis. The performance unfolds as follows:

Act I: Pathama (Beginning)

“The Birth of the Nāga and the Sacred Textile”

The performance begins in a mystical, sacred atmosphere. The gentle sounds of traditional instruments, including the pin (lute) and khaen (reed mouth organ), draw the audience into the Phu Thai world. Through graceful movements, dancers reenact the weaving of sacred cloth, symbolizing the divine energy transferred into each thread. This act honors ancestral spirits and the origin of the Phu Thai people, believed to have descended from ancient communities in southern China. Historically, their migration began during the 17th–18th centuries CE (late Ayutthaya period) due to conflict and resource scarcity. Eventually, they settled along the Mekong River basin—including parts of northeastern Thailand (Kalasin Province) and Laos.

Act II: Majjhima (Middle)

“The Movement of the Nāga and the Life of the Phu Thai”

As the music intensifies, the dance transitions into serpentine movements—coiling, slithering, and spreading the Nāga's crest. Drawing from major and minor Isan dance principles (Mae Bot Yai, Mae Bot Lek, Mae Bot Isan), the performance integrates contemporary fashion models dressed in Nāga-motif textiles. These models move fluidly in harmony with dancers, representing the Phu Thai way of life where beauty, belief, and nature coexist. The choreography breathes life into the garments, animating the textile patterns through embodied performance.

Act III: Pachchima (Finale)

“The Power of the Nāga: Sacred Legacy and Continuity”

The final act crescendos in intensity. Music swells to highlight the majestic emergence of the Nāga's full form. Dance movements evolve into strong, grounded expressions that symbolize the enduring cultural power of the Phu Thai identity. The combination of a fashion runway and expressive dance functions as a **duality of art forms**—the external visual (fashion) and the internal emotional (dance)—together conveying a shared cultural narrative.

As the performance concludes, dancers unite in a symbolic formation, representing the interconnection between **cloth, people, and the spirit of the land**. This final tableau affirms the commitment to preserving and transmitting local wisdom through contemporary performance art.

The process draws upon the concept of **creative dance as choreographic invention**, defined by Usa Sobruk (2002) as a sequence involving: content study, practice, observation and analysis, improvisation, creative development, presentation, and reflection. This framework provides a pathway to develop personal and group dance styles rooted in cultural identity.

Through the lens of **semiotics theory**, the researcher interprets Nāga textiles not merely as decorative elements but as **cultural signifiers**—embodying spirituality, identity, and the corporeal self. The resulting choreography is a synthesis of body-based design and Nāga-inspired motion, creating a unique mode of artistic research grounded in both tradition and innovation.



Figure 1: Performance of “Phraeophattra Nāga of the Two Celestial Realms”

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Conclusion

5.1.1 The weaving wisdom and Nāga textile motifs of the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

Nāga motif textiles woven by the Phu Thai ethnic group in Thailand and Laos hold profound cultural and symbolic significance. The patterns found on these textiles reflect not only the belief in Nāga as a sacred and protective figure but also serve as a visual representation of the Phu Thai identity. Nāga designs frequently appear on woven textiles and are deeply embedded in local beliefs, customs, and aesthetics. Beyond their artistic beauty, these woven patterns represent a vital form of intangible cultural heritage passed down through generations. Each region contributes distinct stylistic interpretations, making the textiles both diverse and locally rooted.

Textile weaving remains an essential part of the Phu Thai way of life and ceremonial practice. However, contemporary social and economic shifts have led to a noticeable decline in traditional pattern production. This is largely due to the demand for more complex, newly invented designs aimed at attracting buyers in today’s highly competitive textile markets. Therefore, preserving and revitalizing traditional Nāga motif weaving is imperative—not only in its original form but also through thoughtful innovation that honors its artistic and cultural heritage.

Currently, government and private sector initiatives have attempted to preserve and elevate indigenous textiles by rebranding them as contemporary cultural products. These efforts aim to integrate traditional textile design with modern fashion. Yet, many initiatives still struggle with the lingering perception that traditional textiles are outdated or unfashionable. Overcoming this stereotype requires a collective approach: building strong, sustainable textile brands rather than fragmented, individual efforts.

Historically, handwoven textiles have long been a part of village and urban life throughout Thailand. Without proactive preservation, revival, and development efforts, however, traditional handloom weaving

practices face the threat of disappearing entirely. Thus, it is crucial to support the safeguarding and advancement of Nāga motif weaving as a living heritage that embodies the enduring wisdom and identity of the Phu Thai people.

5.1.2 Apply the knowledge derived from the development and cultural significance of Nāga motif weaving among the Phu Thai ethnic groups toward the creative design of a performance.

Based on a study of creative processes, principles of choreographic invention, and related dance performance research, several integrative dimensions were identified—such as movement style, costume, and music—that can be synthesized to inform performance design. The creation of this dance work draws from both Thai classical and folk dance traditions and aligns with the creative framework proposed by Taylor (1964), who argued that creativity does not necessarily equate to producing something entirely new or of the highest level. Rather, creative output may occur at any stage and can involve adaptations or incorporations of previous work. As Taylor posits, creative outcomes may emerge through reinterpretation or recombination of earlier ideas.

Applying this concept, the researcher developed a new dance performance that incorporates existing movement motifs. Certain dance gestures may resemble earlier works, not due to replication but because of shared bodily expressions or thematic constraints. What differentiates the new work is the context, interpretive lens, and scholarly foundation brought in by the researcher.

Additionally, the choreographic theory of Surapol Virunrak (2004) was instrumental. Virunrak views choreographic invention as a process of conceptualization, design, and adaptation—encompassing the refinement of prior artistic outputs. According to him, choreographic work is inherently interdisciplinary, integrating philosophy, narrative, meaning, gesture, movement, formation, solo and ensemble performance, music, costume, and other essential elements into a cohesive composition. This approach aligns with aesthetic theories that emphasize both universality and authenticity in artistic creation.

In this project, the researcher emphasized the imitation of Nāga (mythical serpent) movements with high fidelity to evoke a sense of beauty and authenticity. The dance piece is an original choreographic creation based on foundational movement principles and traditional cultural motifs. The methodology followed a structured creative process that allowed for both adaptive innovation and novel expression, thereby offering a fresh interpretation that is distinct yet grounded in heritage.

5.2 Discussion

5.2.1 The weaving wisdom and Nāga textile motifs of the Phu Thai ethnic communities on both sides of the Mekong River.

This study offers insights into how historical value can be added to the traditional Naga-patterned woven textiles, which represent the indigenous craftsmanship of the Phu Thai ethnic communities in both Thailand and Laos. These textiles are deeply embedded with cultural wisdom and have undergone developmental transformations that are reflected in their distinctive motifs—motifs that have become cultural identifiers preserved over generations.

In contemporary practice, Naga-pattern weaving has extended beyond domestic and heritage purposes to become a commercial craft, increasingly demanded by external markets. This shift marks a significant evolution, driven in part by a collective yearning for traditional motifs that had nearly disappeared. The current generation of Phu Thai weavers has shown remarkable creativity and innovation by initiating branding efforts—something historically unprecedented in the context of indigenous textiles in Thailand and Laos. Today, Phu Thai descendants from both sides of the Mekong River are actively developing multiple brands, signifying a growing awareness that traditional textiles can meet modern quality standards and become recognized as certified and reliable cultural products. This branding effort serves as a vital foundation for transforming indigenous textile knowledge into viable fashion enterprises.

Fieldwork, along with participation in government-led initiatives, such as those by the SUPPORT Arts and Crafts International Centre of Thailand (SACICT) and the Department of Industrial Promotion (Ministry of Industry), has revealed how various projects support local weaving communities in enhancing the value of their handcrafted textiles. These programs aim to sustain and promote the “woven fabric path,” while also fostering the individual identities of weavers who are transforming traditional knowledge into brand-oriented, everyday fashion products for both Phu Thai and other ethnic groups nationwide.

Furthermore, the shift from producing traditional textiles solely for local use to creating marketable goods such as woven bolts, pha sin (tubskirts), and textile-based products has propelled these communities toward becoming full-fledged entrepreneurs. They are now involved in building fashion brands from their indigenous foundations.

One of the key success factors identified by the researcher is the growing global interest in "craft" as a design and lifestyle trend. This interest aligns with contemporary consumer behavior, making it a strategic opportunity for these communities. A particular strength among the participating weavers is their established identity and expertise in textile arts, as well as access to distinctive local materials. This strong foundation has allowed them to reimagine their heritage into unique fashion products and brands.

The researcher contends that traditional folk art has the potential to evolve into highly refined craftsmanship. Such development can elevate handwoven textiles into the domain of elite craftsmanship and eventually position them as leading fashion brands, textiles, and lifestyle products in the global market.

5.2.2 To apply the knowledge derived from the development and cultural significance of Nāga motif weaving among the Phu Thai ethnic groups toward the creative design of a performance.

The researcher adopted the contemporary dance creation process outlined by Surapol Virulrak (2004) to structure the performance. The creation process is divided into four stages:

1. Determining the overall storyline
2. Segmenting emotional progression
3. Establishing movements and direction
4. Detailing the elements

Each step supports the conceptual framework in which the researcher designed a movement-based performance drawing from symbolic gestures of the Nāga, guided by **semiotic theory**.

Application of Semiotics in Performance Design

Semiotics is a theory that explores how signs and symbols communicate meaning. The representation of the Nāga's gestures—commonly observed in performance art, rituals, and literature—was decoded using semiotic theory.

1. Ferdinand de Saussure's Structural Semiotics

Saussure (1916) proposed that signs comprise two elements:

- **Signifier:** the physical form (e.g., serpentine motion in dance)
- **Signified:** the conceptual meaning (e.g., sacred power or mystical authority)

An example is the writhing motion of a Nāga in a performance, which signifies a bridge between the physical and spiritual worlds.

2. Charles Sanders Peirce's Model of Signs

Peirce (1931–1958) categorized signs into:

- **Icon:** resembles the object (e.g., the Nāga's coiling movement mimicking a snake)
- **Index:** causally or physically linked (e.g., a gesture of spraying water signifying abundance)
- **Symbol:** culturally agreed meanings (e.g., a fire-breathing Nāga symbolizing divine wrath or protection)

3. Roland Barthes' Cultural Code

Barthes (1972) emphasized that the meaning of signs is shaped by **cultural codes**. Within the Mekong context, the Nāga is revered as a guardian of Buddhism. Thus, ritual dances invoking the Nāga—such as the "Ram Phaya Nak"—symbolize supplication, reverence, and faith.

4. Semiotics in Artistic Design

Semiotics informs multimedia and performance design in numerous ways:

- **Film:** CGI techniques to animate Nāga movement
- **Contemporary costume design:** integrating Nāga iconography
- **Ritual choreography:** crafting dance that embodies sacred meanings

CONCLUSION

By employing semiotic theory—drawing from Saussure's sign structure, Peirce's typology of signs, and Barthes' cultural interpretation—the researcher devised a performance that conveys the sacred and symbolic attributes of the Nāga. This framework ensures deeper emotional and intellectual resonance with audiences through culturally embedded meanings.

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