

Women's Ready-To-Wear Collection: The Reminiscence of Cambodian Monarch Queen Soma

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Abstract

This study aims to reconnect Cambodia with its rich cultural heritage amid cultural similarities that have been happening in Southeast Asia's neighboring countries. This research used an exploratory descriptive research method with non-probability sampling technique and the application of pattern exploration. Drawing inspiration from a powerful historical figure Queen Soma, the Naga princess, a ready-to-wear collection was created with the fusion of traditional Cambodian attire and contemporary designs. Overall, this study brought a modern approach to traditional clothing to redirect the attention of people towards embracing Cambodian authenticity and promoting its significance to the modern world that could contribute to the cultural preservation.

Keywords: Cambodia, Naga Princess, womenswear, cultural appreciation

Koleksi Wanita Siap Pakai: Kenangan Raja Pertama Kamboja Ratu Soma

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menghubungkan kembali Kamboja dengan warisan budayanya yang kaya di tengah kesamaan budaya yang terjadi di negara-negara tetangga di Asia Tenggara. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian deskriptif eksploratif dengan teknik non-probability sampling dan penerapan eksplorasi pola. Mengambil inspirasi dari tokoh sejarah yang kuat, Ratu Soma, putri Naga, koleksi pakaian siap pakai diciptakan dengan perpaduan pakaian tradisional Kamboja dan desain kontemporer. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini membawa pendekatan modern terhadap pakaian tradisional untuk mengarahkan kembali perhatian masyarakat terhadap keaslian Kamboja dan mempromosikan signifikansinya bagi dunia modern yang dapat berkontribusi pada pelestarian budaya.

Kata kunci: Kamboja, Putri Naga, pakaian wanita, apresiasi budaya

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia is an ancient Southeast Asia country that is rich in culture, tradition, art, heritage. Known as Kampuchea in Khmer language, it spans an area of 69,898 square miles bordered by Thailand to the northwest, Laos to the north, Vietnam to the east, and the Gulf of Thailand to the southwest. Cambodia in fact share as lot of similarities with those countries in traditional clothing, classical dances, language, culture and traditions. For instance, Cambodia's Sampot, the national dress, is similar to Laos and Thailand but has distinct differences. Due to

the close location to the neighboring countries, border disputes have occurred in the past and more recently.

Similarities in Southeast Asia countries have long been evidenced, especially with the two neighboring countries Cambodia and Thailand that share similarities in terms of culture, tradition, and fashion (Rim, 2023). For example, the Cambodia's Lakhon Khol dance which is in Thailand is called as Khon dance are both based on Indian's Ramayana featuring mask-wearing characters in elaborate costumes telling the story through dance and mime (Miettinen, 2018; Rathavong, 2017; Singh et al., 2016). Another example is Cambodia's Kun Khmer and Thailand's Muay Thai share the same cultural origin before they diverged into Thai and Cambodian martial arts. The country's economy mainly depends on two important industries, namely textile and tourism. Tourism is seen as the tool for enhancing the image of Cambodian culture and history, with the hope of erasing the image that Cambodia is well known for: genocide, killing fields and land mines (Hawk, 2020). As compared to Thailand, it is recorded that tourists usually choose to visit Thailand over Cambodia despite having similar culture. Culture has been increasingly an important element of tourism and tourism itself has become the country's economic growth engine (Aras et al., 2019; Cárdenas-García et al., 2015).

Led by Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge has brought negative perception over Cambodia even to these days. Behind the friendly smiles of Cambodian, the country's image is still linked to that regime that is known as one of the most disastrous events in modern history with the genocide of 1.7 million Cambodians (Ebihara et al., 1994; Hawk, 2020). This surely could be one of the reasons as Cambodia loses in tourism over Thailand. However, Angelina Jolie's 2000 visit to the country, filmed in "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider," brought the country's positive reputation to the world. Jolie recently told *Vanity Fair* of her first visit, "I found people who were so kind and warm and open, and, yes, very complex" (Russian, 2018).

The fact that clothes help in creating impressions and perceptions of the wearer (Adotey et al., 2016; Dewayanti & Andhini, 2023), it is believed that clothes serve as a mirror of certain ethnicity and identity of cultural traditions (Fatonah et al., 2022). It is relatively rare to observe the fashion industry contributing to cultural preservation. The initiative of this project is a ready-to-wear clothing collection that draws inspiration from the remembrance of Queen Soma (Naga Princess), the very first female ruler of Cambodia.

Naga belief has long been believed in the Southeast Asia that is linked to the symbol of water and spiritual in Buddhism (จินดา วัฒน ภูมิ & สุ พิ ข ณา ธิ, 2019). In fact, Naga or snake is a sacred animal in the Khmer culture that Thais and Laos has also paid respect to since pre historic as the ancestor. The legend of "Preah Thong-Neang Neak" tells of a foreign king (Kaundinya) who married Neang Neak (Soma)

and drained the entire sea, creating the region known as "Khokatholok Land" (Work, 2019). Queen "Soma" in Sanskrit or "Liu Ye" in Chinese was the ruler of the Kingdom of Funan and widely claimed as the first monarch of Cambodia (reigned c. 1st - 6th century) and the first female leader (Jacobsen, 2008; จินดา วัฒนภูมิ & ศุ พิชฌาย์, 2019).

The Naga belief was then developed into arts and this region later developed into modern-day Cambodia, and their descendants became the ancestors of all Khmers (Khongphianthum, 2015). This legend reflects the significance of the Naga as the originator of the land of Cambodia and a being related to the Khmer regal lineage. The custom of the bridegroom's holding the edge of the bride's breast cloth while walking inside is derived from a motif in the legend of Preah Thong and Neang Neak, which is about the origination of the Khmer race, when Preah Thong holds the edge of Neang Neak's breast cloth while descending into the underworld (Khongphianthum, 2015). A Khmer wedding custom that honors this love story has kept Preah Thong's act of carrying the Naga's tail alive to this day. When entering the honeymoon suite, the groom must carry his bride's Chong Phahom or Sbai (the long train of bride's dress that hangs from her shoulder). Preah Thong's deed also heralds the start of matriarchy in Cambodia. Khmer ladies are considered the Head of the Family (Ratana, 2019).

The sampot (Khmer: សំពត់) is Cambodia's national dress (Green, 2023). While the traditional clothing shares some similarities with the attire of neighboring Laos and Thailand, there are distinct differences. The origin of the sampot dates back to the Funan era when the Funanese king, influenced by both India and China, mandated its use. At the request of the Chinese, the people of the region, which now lies between Cambodia and Thailand, began wearing the Sampot. There are numerous sampot variations, and each is cleaned in accordance with social class. Men and women of lower social classes typically wear the standard sampot, also known as the sarong or waist cloth. It has two ends that are stitched together and measures about 1.5 meters. To keep it on the waist securely, it is tied held in place by a sparkling belt. The traditional dress is similar to the dhoti of Southern Asia.

Even though women were recognized and acknowledged as historical figures, Cambodia has no quota system for women's political participation, according to UNESCO CDIS, since the 2008 elections, only 20.3% of parliamentarians are women. Stereotypes and social norms hinder women's potential (Khoun, 2015), as the traditional "Code of Conduct" for women defines everyday life based on stereotypical roles in family and society. Despite the fact that there are laws and initiatives that demonstrate that Cambodia is making progress in developing a legal framework, the implementation of domestic violence laws is hampered by inconsistent enforcement and societal norms that continue to restrict women's rights.

A six-looks line up was created in this project to foster Cambodia's identity, portraying the vibrant narrative of Queen Soma (Naga Princess) as an approach to redirect attention of the people on Cambodian authenticity. Given that Queen Soma was a powerful woman during that era, her story not only helps to promote Cambodia but also sends a message encouraging women to take part in society and decision-making. Inherently, the goal of this research is to show how the shape of traditional Cambodian clothing, as well as embroidery and pintuck detailing, are used to manipulate fabric and represent Naga figures, while also evoking a strong, elegant energy and an eternal appreciation for our ancestors.

METHOD

An exploratory descriptive research method was used in this study with non-probability sampling technique and the application of pattern exploration. Samples were chosen purposively for interview and online questionnaire aiming on collecting more in-depth knowledge about the topics that could not be found on the internet and understanding target markets' preferences in Fashion.

Two in-depth interviews were conducted to two experts, both are Cambodian traditional costume maker and designer based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with years of experience in manufacturing and customizing various types, shapes, and constructions of Cambodian national costumes and traditional clothes. Moreover, they are collaborating closely with beauty queens in the beauty pageant industry in order to promote Cambodia's heritage, fashion, and authenticity domestically and internationally.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Due to a lack of infrastructure and stone carvings that provided information on the history of the Funan era and historical documentation, both Expert A and B declared that it is unfortunate that there was not enough information available about this incredibly ancient period of the kingdom which also causes the lack of recognition of Cambodia's identity and makes it difficult for people from other countries to fully understand and appreciate the rich history of the kingdom. They mentioned that they had seen several vases and crystal stones in navy blue, red, maroon, or even green according to the actual state of the soil. However, since people were typically wearing plain, solid-colored fabric, like Chinese silk, there were no unique patterns to be found during this time.

Expert A endorsed the notion of preserving the original shape or construction of traditional clothing, such as the "Sbai" breast garment, which will command the attention of the target market. However, the placement and specifics of the breast cloth can be altered using originality and creativity to adhere to

contemporary design principles. This will also give the market a new, intriguing look while highlighting the youthful creativity of Cambodia. In addition, Expert B also demonstrated that “Sbai” was traditionally used to cover the upper part of the body for women because people did not yet know how to make clothes. In dance performances, for example, it is recommended to use long Sbai to represent Naga princess (Queen Soma).

Expert A stated in the interview's conclusion that there are attributes from the Funan era and Queen Soma, our Naga princess, that cannot be ignored, including: (1) Queen Soma is the first female to have founded the country of Cambodia with culture and tradition that we still uphold today. (2) She is a strong woman figure who can serve as an excellent role model for women by encouraging them to pursue their ambitions and take part in decision-making. (3) “Preah Thong Neang Neak” Folklore reflects the significance of the Naga as the originator and ancestor of the land of Cambodia.

Moreover, Expert B concluded the online interview by stating that: *“The definition of art is extremely broad, and I still stand firmly on these 3 principles which are to preserve, to develop and to innovate.”*

The primary inspiration is naga princess Queen Soma as depiction in the inspiration board in Figure 1. Her recognition is based on the legend of "Preah Thong Neang Neak", Preah Thorng is an Indian Prince who traveled by the sea, met Neang Neak as known as Soma and they got married. Naga Raja, the king of dragons who is the father-in-law, drained the entire sea as a wedding gift for them. The land later became the modern-day Cambodia. Therefore, Cambodian believe that we are the descendants of the Naga. Since Preah Thorng must hold on to the naga princess's breast cloth or we call it “Sbai” in the Khmer language to go underwater, this tradition is strong evidence that the Khmer ladies were very powerful in the past (Ratana, 2019). This folklore not only tells the origin of Cambodia but given that Queen Soma is the strong female figure, this also sends a message to encourage women to participate more in the society.

Fabrics manipulations, pleats and pintucks, are incorporated into each design. Figure 3 shows the fabric manipulation process. Traditional Cambodian attire frequently features pleating. Especially on the skirt, like on Khmer sampot (waist cloth) worn by the Khmer gods, narrow stylized folds are seen (Battacharya, 2020). In modern days those folds are known as pintucks. Pintucks are made by stitching the pleats vertically first, then crossing them horizontally in the opposite direction and with the desired width. Every pintuck is evenly spaced and firmly held in place by a lovely texture that perfectly captures Queen Soma's dragon scale.

Figure 4 shows the embroidery development inspired by Khmer motif Kbach. "Kbach" is the general term, used in the Khmer language, to name the variety of ornaments which decorate objects and architectural surfaces throughout Cambodia primarily derived from natural object and organic forms like flowers (Vitharin & Chanmara, 2005; Wolfarth, 2017). The Kbach Phni Tes is the most pertinent form that can act as the design's core component out of the four main families of Kbach (Kbach Angkor, Kbach Phni Tes, Kbach Phni Voa, and Kbach Phni Pleung), according to most contemporary artists. Kbach Phni Tes is used traditional dance costumes that was found during the performance "Preah Thong Neang Neak" Folklore and can be achieved by embroidery threads. The Kbach Phni Tes division style is a family of leaves, stems, buds, flowers, fruits, and shoots that come together to form vines and garlands in intricate compositions that evoke lush natural vegetation and are frequently incorporated in the mythical figures as well (Griswold & Boisselier, 1957). Embroidery can add intricate detailing and depth to the garments, making them stand out and capturing the essence of the traditional Cambodian art form. Textile motifs often resemble the architecture of the era. However, Expert B emphasized that Cambodia's traditional costumes nowadays always incorporate those Kbach as embroidery even if it is not the same era.

The repositioning of the Sbai on the garments while preserving the traditional inspiration and authenticity was achieved by studying its construction and position. By recreating the shape with different construction and size based on the "Preah Thong Neang Neak" folklore costumes, the collection gained substantial yet elegant qualities, appealing to the target market. The distinctively pointy silhouette of the sleeve not only adds visual interest but also elevates the overall quality and sophistication of the collection. Design developments were conducted involving both 2D sketches and the creation of toile for pattern exploration (Figure 5) before final garments in Figure 6 are produced to ensure fitting and proportion.



Figure 5. Design Development.
Source: Author documentation, 2023.



Figure 6. Final Garments.
Source: Author documentation, 2023.

CONCLUSION

Due to its close location to neighbouring countries, Cambodia shares lot of similarities with those countries in traditional clothing, classical dances, language, culture and traditions. Throughout histories, border disputes and cultural similarities between Southeast Asia countries thus have occurred in the past and more recently. This study focused on creating a ready-to-wear collection that could

contribute to cultural preservation amidst cultural similarities that draws inspiration from the remembrance of Queen Soma (Naga Princess), the very first female ruler of Cambodia.

Key elements in this collection are derived from the vibrant narrative of Naga Princess as an approach to emphasise Cambodian authenticity. From the traditional breast garment or sbai to tiny folds on Khmer gods' sampot, blending traditional Cambodian attire with contemporary designs, the line up showcases a new way of innovation and creativity in reinterpreting Cambodia's sartorial heritage. Through this fusion, the project not only revitalized the traditional clothing but also brought it to the forefront of modern fashion, allowing Cambodian culture to resonate with a broader global audience and further emphasising cultural storytelling and heritage-based designs.

Nowadays many designers have increasingly embraced heritage revival through incorporating traditional craftsmanship into contemporary fashion. With the growing interest in cultural sustainability and gender empowerment narratives in fashion, this collection aligns seamlessly with the Queen Soma as inspiration reinforcing themes of resilience and the blending of historical motifs with innovative silhouettes and techniques through design. Through this study, Cambodian culture is not only celebrated but also adapted for contemporary wear through the demonstration of coalescing tradition and modernity into marketable aesthetic ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage.

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