



# CAMBODIAN IKAT - AN EXPLORATION

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Some of the most superb silk in the world was produced in Cambodia, now called Kampuchea, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Even within one silk worm cocoon there are different levels of quality and it was the finest portion of silk yarn that was selected and used for the weaving of the soft and luminous Cambodian textiles.

There are three distinct but interrelated silk textiles which were woven in an uneven twill<sup>1</sup> and used a difficult dye-resist technique called weft *hol*, or ikat, in which the weft threads are wrapped and dyed prior to weaving as many times as necessary to achieve the desired pattern and number of colors. The first is a ceremonial temple or altar hanging known as *pidan*; the second, a long rectangular cloth worn by royalty or the wealthy as a hipwrapper, or *sampot chawng kbun*; and the third, a shorter rectangular woman's skirt, *sampot hol*. A fourth, rare, cloth deviates from these in its use of zone-dyed ikat silk threads that carry over into the patterning on the front through the use of continuous supplementary weft weave.<sup>2</sup> Noted by Gillian Green as possible furnishings or hangings,<sup>3</sup> these textiles were first introduced to us as ceremonial table covers, which equally could be taken to mean altar coverings.

## **PIDAN**

*Pidan* is a Khmer word meaning ceiling or canopy. These temple hangings were suspended from the ceiling to decorate the wall behind or hang over a Buddhist altar. They were installed during Buddhist ceremonies and for rites of passage such as weddings and funerals.

Frequently presented as a gift to a temple or monastery as a way to make merit, *pidan* also provided, according to Robyn Maxwell, "comfort and a contemplative vision of the next world for dying." She continues, "Many 19th and 20th century examples contain clear images of temples or palace buildings, with cloisters, curving roofs... often flanked by elephants... (with) some of the most realistic and overtly Indic iconography."<sup>4</sup>

Green comments on their rarity: "It is conceivable that only small numbers of these pictorial and narrative textiles were ever woven. It takes a masterly skill to realize the complex narrative illustrations by the weft *hol* technique...."<sup>5</sup> The employment of the ikat process requires a certain level of skill under any circumstances but two other factors contribute to making the early Cambodian *pidan* exceptional: they were woven of the finest silk yarn and they are pictorial. Green explains what an achievement this was:

Technically it is an enormous challenge for the weaver to create pictorial scenes, including realistic figures featuring curving lines and fine detail in the medium of silk weft *hol*....What distinguishes the weaver as an artist is her ability to delicately place the resist ties, to manipulate a small number of weft threads for tying, and to plan the colour sequence of the dye baths into which the threads are plunged. Mistakes in dyeing cannot simply be erased.<sup>6</sup>

Ikat inevitably has a certain characteristic seepage of dye underneath the resist binding. A further exceptional quality of the older Cambodian *pidan* is the quite amazing clarity of their lines and color. Their technical complexity, however, is only one dimension in their production. Many of the weavers were also master artists, intertwining not only silk threads but intricate imagery.

The *pidan* in this collection are some of the best and most varied examples. Perhaps some of the double or triple views of the figures and architecture, and subsequent multi-layered interpretations that follow, will seem an exaggeration. A careful examination, however, should convince the viewer of the deliberate and astonishing intent of the weavers.



**Jataka Pidan** 2'8½" x 4'9"



The Jataka Tales are stories of Buddha's previous lives before he was born as Siddhartha and attained enlightenment. His Ten Lives prior to his rebirth as Sakyamuni Buddha are the most famous, and of these the most familiar is that of Prince Vessantara who was known in the Jataka story by the same title as "The Charitable Prince".

Unusually set against a nearly black background, the lovely balance and symmetry of this early to mid-20th century Vessantara Jataka themed *pidan* make it especially charming. The detail is concentrated in otherwise bold figures and structures, for example, in the

patterns on the figures' shirts and hipwrappers and in the tiles of the temple roof. Plenty of background space around them makes the entire presentation pleasing to the eye.

Prince Vessantara's wife sits in the center of the temple pavilion at the center of the *pidan*. Next to her are her two children, perhaps after they have returned to the palace after the Prince gave them away as an act of selflessness and un-attachment. The Prince himself is most likely the figure standing at center in the lowest register, flanked by two protective *singhas*. The two white figures on either side of the temple and above the Prince may represent Brahman priests to whom the prince gave many of his earthly belongings, including his white elephant and horses, children and wife. In the left and right-hand upper corners fly *apsara*, or angels, who looked after the children when they were taken away.

Although it isn't obvious at first through the simple lines and layout, the areas of intricacy and six saturated colors used to achieve them, make the execution of this *pidan* more difficult and complex than at first perceived.

***Pidan with Archaic Figures* 2'11" x 11'5"**

This late 19th century *pidan* is perhaps the most amazing and captivating of all in respect to a manifold perspective and interpretation. At first the eye can hardly take it all in. Gradually one begins to see figures, elephants with *howdahs*, horses and carts drawn by some kind of four-legged beast, birds, pagodas, *stupas* and temple offerings. As one becomes lost in this new world, diamond shapes with the spiritual third eye and abstract *nagas*<sup>1</sup> emerge. The eye is then naturally drawn to the solid yellows, perhaps focusing on the two-sided figures that span the middle, a good starting point for this discussion. This is almost a psychedelic journey and certainly in keeping with Maxwell's observation that the *pidan* provides "a contemplative vision of the next world." (p. 231)

It is interesting how the more archaic a figure, the more modern it may look: these figures and the figures above them look like space aliens. Whether these are spirit figures pre-dating Buddhism or depictions of Buddha himself, they are fascinating in several aspects. First, they are dressed in the saffron color of the robes of Buddhist monks. In the central figures, the third eye, while still centered in a diamond, uncharacteristically appears above two regular eyes. It is so prominent it appears to protrude from the forehead, making its spiritual significance evident. In both the lower and upper figures, the feet seem to do double duty as the beaks of two birds with feathery tails flanking the figures. In another perspective they are the tails of horses. Observe even more carefully and you realize the horses are unicorns, the prototype for the gentle *ch'ilin*.<sup>2</sup>

In the middle row, the arms of the figure appear to be holding onto two carts, also drawn by *ch'ilin*. The carts have small structures on them, indicating they were used to transport a god or revered cleric, or a high-ranking or royal person. The front legs and heads of the *ch'ilin* meet over a flaming offering flanked by two similar figures of high status in profile. Two tiny elephants are above the horns of the *ch'ilin*, and above these, two more, with their bodies outlined in white squares. Focus on these as the eyes of a much larger figure, and once again you will be pulled into a perspective that is half ancient and half space age.

Everything in this *pidan* is interconnected. Horses or unicorns double as birds of all sizes, including ones with distinctly snake-like bodies between the *stupas* toward the bottom. If you focus on the wheels of the carts as two eyes, the figure between them becomes the nose of another spirit. Look at the two small diamonds below the feet of the original figure as eyes and you will see a figure within a figure.

From a distance, the balance and flow of the entire textile become evident. The wide bottom border is an anchor to the piece. It is replete with rows of altars and candles, as are the more graphic side borders in a *yantra*<sup>3</sup> pattern, indicating royalty. Once again, the altars can be seen as figures. At the top, the zigzag lines radiate the quality of abstract *nagas*.

This is one of the finest, most intriguing and exceptionally-conceived of any textiles.



This *pidan* is illustrated in *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, p. 291, Figure 327.

<sup>1</sup> Mythical dragon/serpents that are a liaison to the upper world.

<sup>2</sup> Another mythical hybrid sometimes alluded to as the Dragon Horse. Buddhists in the Far East respect this creature for its gentle and peaceful nature. As a symbol the *ch'ilin* is believed to bring good fortune and longevity.

<sup>3</sup> Mystical patterns or symbols that insure protection to the wearer.



***Pidan with Singhas and Horses*** 2'11" x 6'10"



The dominant figures in this graphic turn-of-the-century piece are large and colorful mythical lions, *singhas*, with mysterious ghost-like figures standing atop their backs. Similar figures straddle the backs of horses which also span the entire width; and appear again standing in a row at top, interspersed with yellow-bodied birds whose heads and tails appear ambiguously interchangeable. The birds could be mythical *hamsas*, often shown in conjunction with temple pavilions, or possibly peacocks in profile with each eye at the tips of their distinct feathers symbolic of the third eye. They are perched on long poles displaying temple banners. Peacock feathers with large exaggerated eyes appear elsewhere as well, on the tails of the birds or separately, as offerings.

The anthropomorphic figures may represent spirits, but alternatively, they could also be worshippers since it appears that the figure of Buddha sits within each pavilion, with incense and offerings in the niches on each side. Tiered umbrellas symbolize high rank such as Buddha or a king would hold. The horses with riders could represent Buddha's beloved mount, Kantanakha, or be participants together in a procession to honor and protect Buddha. Between the horses, graceful yellow deer, mirroring the yellow birds above, remind us of the forest in which Siddhartha became an ascetic and stayed to meditate.

Simple top and bottom borders and asymmetrically-colored bold striped side borders frame the *pidan's* complex interior.



***Pidan with Peacocks*** 2'11" x 12'4"

There is a divine quality in the presence of the tranquil peacocks. The flowing curves of their bodies from head to tail and from the tail of one to the head of the next add to the sense of serenity. In the upper portion, protective, prancing *singhas* with banners also function as a focal point for transition to the heavens.

This peacock-laden, late 19th century *pidan* has the quality of an impressionist painting. Broad sweeping strokes create the tails and bodies of the birds, while smaller strokes form other species of birds and recessed altars and temple offerings throughout. The use of yellow, white and touches of green on the peacocks' backs helps to create a three-dimensional effect, bringing the peacocks to the foreground. Peacocks are found in the middle world of the "Three Worlds".<sup>1</sup>

The upper and lower borders and right and left sides (not shown) are in perfect proportion to the center. There is a lovely combination of geometric and floral motifs, specifically forming altars, trees of life, diamonds and abstract *nagas*. The diagonal lines at bottom are reminiscent of mountains, providing abstract perches for the birds and a base for them to fly above. Three ikat bars to each side provide a frame with just enough detail to tie the piece together and just enough width to present the patterned center.



A similar example is illustrated in *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, p. 261, Figure 298.

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explanation, see the caption for the ship cloth *pidan*.



**Ship Cloth *Pidan*** 3'2½" x 5'8"; 4'11½" x 7'11½" including border

This is an outstanding late 19th century 'ship cloth' *pidan* replete with small birds, including ducks and phoenixes, a variety of fish, including swordfish, *nagas*, *singhas* and tiny green elephants. A similar ship cloth is in the collection of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Green refers to the "few surviving examples" of Cambodian ship cloths as being "highly valued" and "fantastical".<sup>1</sup> Maxwell notes that *pidan* with sailing vessels also were "used to decorate the bride's home during the marriage ceremony".<sup>2</sup> Everything about the quality, artistry and intense attention to meaning and detail of this particular piece indicates it was done by royal commission.

The central portion is surrounded by a fine pale green silk border. It was common, especially for smaller temple pieces designed to be hung behind the altar, to have separate silk borders. Often the borders wore out and were removed or replaced. Even though this border has seen much wear and tear, it is original, protecting and enhancing the body of the piece for more than a century. Perhaps its soft but striking aqua green color was chosen because of the aquatic nature of the textile.

The borders within, on either side of the central portion, recreate through rows of small *stupas* woven in supplementary weft the temple theme often found in other types of *pidan*. The religious theme extends into the upper and lower borders as well: where at first a series of geometric shapes appear vaguely floral, on second look they reveal themselves as rows of small Buddha figures in meditative pose. Perceiving them as Buddhas, one notices the third eye in the diamond-shaped head of each figure. As so often is the case in this genre, the figures have a double meaning, or at least a double representation: in this instance they are reminiscent of the temple buildings above, appearing also to be small temple stupas with spires.

The "Three Worlds" inside do seem to float in their own interior border. Although the world of air and the heavens is well-represented, it both flows from and is in juxtaposition with the other two worlds - that of the world we know, the middle world, as represented by the ships and the physical forms of the temple pavilions; and that of the underworld, full of sea creatures. The *naga* appears to do double-duty as a sea serpent and in its usual role as liaison to the upper world where birds congregate or soar. The mythical bird, *hamsa*, rests on either side of each temple structure offering another link between worlds. *Singhas* stand as guardians or protectors of the upper world.

This concept of Three Worlds is restated by the layered presentation. Using temple walls to create distinct boundaries, and the hulls of the large European ships to form a broken but perceptually connected line, the weaver created three distinct sections to represent the lower, middle and upper worlds. However, the worlds are both physically and conceptually interrelated and their various elements merge throughout the piece, reminding us that spirituality and enlightenment are within us. In a sense this *pidan* can be seen as a metaphor for the lotus, a ubiquitous Buddhist symbol, grounded, or one might say mired, in mud, but growing upwards through the water to emerge and float in beauty above.

There are two kinds of ships. The larger vessels are distinctly European and the smaller ones are like Arab *dhow*s, making this exceptional work of art also significant historically. The ships reflect the period when this area of Southeast Asia opened to foreign trade and influence.

By focusing on the ships, one gains an appreciation of one of the most impressive aspects of this piece: its choice of color. Shades of saturated natural dyes lend an aesthetic balance that adds to its status as one of the finest ever created. Red, yellow, brown, green and blue are in combination of great detail and apparently solid hue as in the ships' sails. These aren't really solid at all, however, but not surprisingly imply the texture of fabric or canvas. In counterpoint, the taut strength of the ropes holding the sails in place is achieved with small cord-like dots that through further use of color appear to be in sun or shade. Note also, as an example of technical expertise, the filament-like hairs protruding from the *nagas*, how they are comprised, again, of a series of multicolored dots that offer a wispy quality, as if they were waving in the sea or air, providing movement that carries over to make one believe that the fish swim and the birds fly.

This *pidan* is illustrated in *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, pp. 284-285, Fig. 317.

<sup>1</sup> pp. 269 and 270.

<sup>2</sup> p. 116.





**Ship Cloth *Pidan* with Royal Barges** 3'1/2" x 10'7"



A subtle version of a ship cloth, this late 19th century example has two rows of similar but staggered royal barges, each bearing three abstract royal Buddhist figures. The bases of the boats are formed by double-headed *nagas*, emblematic connections to the upper world. These ships are different from the European sailing ships: they are designed to be stately and ethereal, real and symbolic.

Once again, the ship cloth is representative of Three Worlds. The lower portion

has a series of standing peacocks; and pairs of small white birds adorn the high elaborate structures of the boats. In the middle and upper regions between the boats are small and large altars with their offerings of candles and incense, their flames, smoke and scents rising to the heavens.

This is a more straight-forward *pidan* than some, although it is both pictorially and thematically layered, making the layers also symbolic. The variation in the upper and lower horizontal borders contributes to one's sense that the *pidan* has a top and a bottom even as the borders reiterate the geometric and mythical forms at center. The side borders combine thin and wide, softly varied plain and patterned stripes with two main bars that abstractly reflect the color and design at center.

Probably one of the most exceptional features is the use of color. The shades of red, green, gold, white and brown are as incandescent as they are understated, making this *pidan*, quite simply, beautiful.



***Ship Cloth Pidan with Serpents*** 3'1" x 10'11"

This late 19th century example is dominated by *nagas* with the aspect of Chinese serpents. The serpents form lines that segregate and unify the various elements to create a bold and pleasing whole. Their heads and feet are those of the Chinese dragon, messenger of divinity. Their bodies are of *nagas*, the Southeast Asian serpentine symbol of connection to the upper world. The feet and claws blend into the surrounding lines to create abstract versions of *nagas* and comprise parts of the altars or offerings below. The beards of the dragon heads appear as flames to the candles of the small altars beneath them.

The bases of the altars are like small boats, qualifying this as a ship cloth. Not, certainly, as prominent as in other ship cloth *pidan*, the boats still symbolize a rite of passage into the next world and offer a vision of smooth transition. Small yellow birds throughout provide a similar reference to the heavens and a rest for the eyes amid great complexity. The fine detail in this crisp, clear and multi-colored textile was used as a device to balance broader strokes with great skill and respect for the ikat process.

Above the *nagas*, the top border functions as a canopy for the central portion. Diamond shapes and geometric and floral forms at first appear simple. A closer look, however, reveals standing and seated figures, again with the symbolic third eye present. The arms and legs of the figures are reminiscent of the *naga*. One might also detect a figure in the altars between the tails of the yellow birds at bottom. The lower border may also contain figures - with small heads and arms upraised over large diamond-shaped bodies.

This *pidan* is illustrated in *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, p. 291, Figure 327.





## SAMPOT CHAWNG KBUN - HIPWRAPPERS

*Sampot chawng kbun* are occasionally similar enough in length and layout to the *pidan* to create confusion; however, generally the temple cloths are shorter than the wearable hipwrappers and their iconography is in the Buddhist or spiritual realm. *Pidan* also have a top and a bottom, a right way of looking at them, whereas the hipwrappers often display repeat geometric or floral patterns that can be viewed and understood from any direction. Even a cloth with a repetitive motif if overtly religious, however, would be precluded from being considered anything but a *pidan* by traditional strictures against wearing anything Buddhist below the waist. The one exception to this is the type of hipwrapper that features the *nak*, or *naga*, a mythical serpent-like reptile believed in Cambodian legend to be the original ancestor, worn only by ordinands about to enter the Buddhist monkhood.

*Sampot chawng kbun* were wrapped around the hips and then one end of the length was passed through the legs and tucked into the waist at back, forming a kind of distinctive pantaloons. Related to Indian patola<sup>7</sup> in pattern but not in usage, and to the layout of similar Siamese textiles, Cambodian *sampot chawng kbun* are still uniquely Cambodian. The uneven twill groundweave is exclusive to the Cambodian silk weavings, which also feature their own characteristic symbols and designs. Embellished diamonds -

large, small, concentric, in lattice formation, representing stars and opening into hooks - predominate, even within the *nak* patterned cloths.

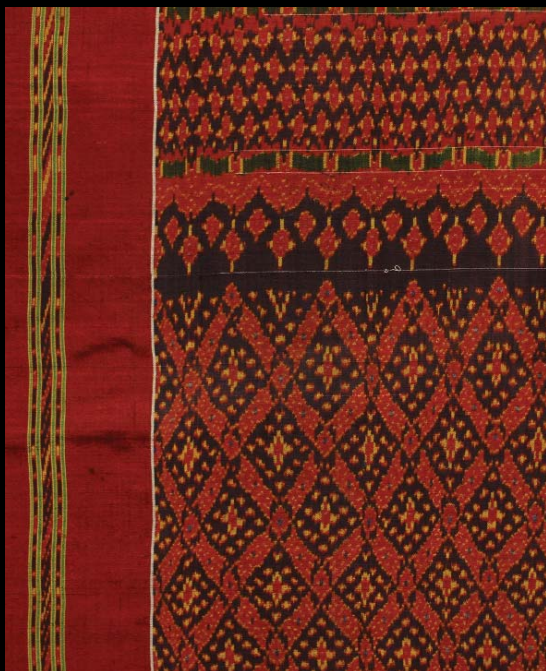
All of the hipwrappers have a similar overall format. A large rectangular center field is surrounded by comparatively narrow upper and lower borders and end borders of contiguous or interrupted bars in varying numbers of weft *ikat* design. Special *yantra* end borders consisting of "abstract signs or letters of the Khmer alphabet"<sup>8</sup> appear on a select few. The *yantra* configurations function to protect the wearer from danger and frequently indicative of royal ownership. (See *Nak Sampot Chawng Kbn*, page ?)--Lee which example does this refer to?

Above: **Sampot chawng kbun**, early-mid-1900s. Large diamonds comprised of small diamonds alternate with diamonds enclosing crosses and terminating in latch hooks. Fine condition. 2'11" x 10'8"

Top left: **Sampot chawng kbun**, late 19th century. This example has a subtle and unusual sense of crossover with *pidan*. Birds hold temple bells in their mouths within a diamond lattice pattern. Scattered pin holes and a few small holes. 2'11" x 9'0"

Top right: **Sampot chawng kbun**, late 19th century. Good example of a diamond lattice pattern. Scattered small holes. 3'0" x 10'3"

Right: **Sampot chawng kbun**, late 19th century. Diamonds and latch hooks which fill the center ground. Side borders are notable for their elaborate, protective *yantra* pattern, indicating that this was a hipwrapper probably used by royalty. Its excellent condition may be a reflection of its past ownership. 3'1 1/2" x 10'8"





## ***Nak Sampot Chawng Kbun*** 3' 1" x 12'2"

This captivating example features *nak* in the form of interrelated snakes and serpents. *Nagas* in this format pose a rare, though recurrent theme: and if this piece is not the prototype for other similar examples,<sup>1</sup> it certainly is one of the best. The color is outstanding and complicated; there is a stunning combination of bold graphic and detail in the design, and fine proportion. The green in the lower serpents was a difficult and rare color to produce.

Serpents are magically incorporated within and without the large diamond medallions: they curve gently around, tails barely touching, to form inverted images of each other. These form a frame around similar images until the eye is drawn to the very center of each medallion. Are there archaic spirit figures here as well, with roughly diamond-shaped heads like a four-pointed star at their epicenter, alluding to the four cardinal directions of the cosmic universe? Do the serpents' heads and bodies form arms and legs in opposite directions around the common head? Similar figures occur outside of and between the medallions as well.

Even the fairly straight lines of the diamonds have a flow and movement enhanced by their detail: latch hooks, small yellow tendrils and lovely inverted trees above and below the serpents, and in another variety, nestled perfectly among the angles formed by the medallions. Trees within the medallions appear as ghostly heads, this time with the serpent bodies as arms that curve around and become legs culminating in snake-head feet. And finally, perhaps the trees are trees of life, engaged in the reproductive process.



The significance of the serpents as *nagas*, with their symbolic connection to the upper world, is balanced by the birds below. In this unusual instance, the birds appear to be pecking at the ground, bringing the mind to earth rather than to the heavens above. The borders above and below are especially bold and intricate. They reiterate similar themes in new variations: the trees rest sideways, their trunks meeting to form two horizontal inverted snakes. The *nagas* emerge again in the top border, creating the trunks of trees on their sides with thicker, bolder branches and again in the M-shapes above and below. The bottom border repeats the tree design in a series of triangles. In the inverted sections is a row of faces, or possibly upside-down altars that could also be seen as figures.

Does what appears simple gain complexity the more we look and reflect? Maxwell's description of one function of the *pidan* comes to mind again: "a contemplative vision of the next world" and suggests a certain crossover between the *sampot chawng kbun* with *nak* and the *pidan*.

<sup>1</sup> For a very similar example, see *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, pp. 126-127, Figure 146.

### **SAMPOT HOL - SKIRT CLOTHS**

Looking very much like miniature hipwrappers, skirt cloths, *sampot hol*, although also made of silk, were more likely worn by women in the general population. Also woven in the characteristic uneven twill with weft *hol*, the skirts generally are not as finely dyed or detailed as *sampot chawng kbun* and didn't command the same talent or effort that was invested in the making of the *pidan*. Nevertheless, they invariably present an attractive balance of color and design and hold a certain charm.



***Sampot hol*, woman's skirt cloth**, early to mid-20th century. Very similar in layout, coloration and design to Figs. 182 and 183, pp. 160-161, in *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*; yet the repeating individual forms are unlike the array of flowering plants described by Green and more like Garudas with spread wings, making this particular *sampot hol* quite unique. 2'7" x 6'0", sewn into a tube



## CEREMONIAL TABLE COVERS, FURNISHINGS OR HANGINGS (?)

Green comments that the “design scheme, reminiscent of *kain songket* hipwrappers of Malaysia and the use of supplementary weft weave for the decoration” suggest that these mystery weavings with an as yet unrecognized function may have been the creation of Malay weavers in Cambodia.<sup>9</sup> As stated earlier, they have been described as hangings, furnishings or ceremonial table covers with no conclusive evidence of their definite use. In comparison to the lightweight *sampot chawng kbun*, however, they are too heavy to have been worn as apparel,<sup>10</sup> especially for the *chawng kbun*, pantaloons, style. In addition, their length is usually two or more feet shorter than that of the hipwrappers.

Although this type of textile is rare, the half dozen or more examples we have seen in person or in pictures have been in very good to excellent condition, indicative perhaps of infrequent - and therefore ceremonial - use. One such textile had straight lines of wear along its two long sides suggesting that it may indeed have been laid over a table or altar. In two instances the center field was framed in plainwoven silk. The very fine quality and therefore fragility of the extra border and its vulnerable position at the outermost edges of the cloth also suggests that originally all of these types were similarly framed, but that time and wear destroyed the borders on most of them.

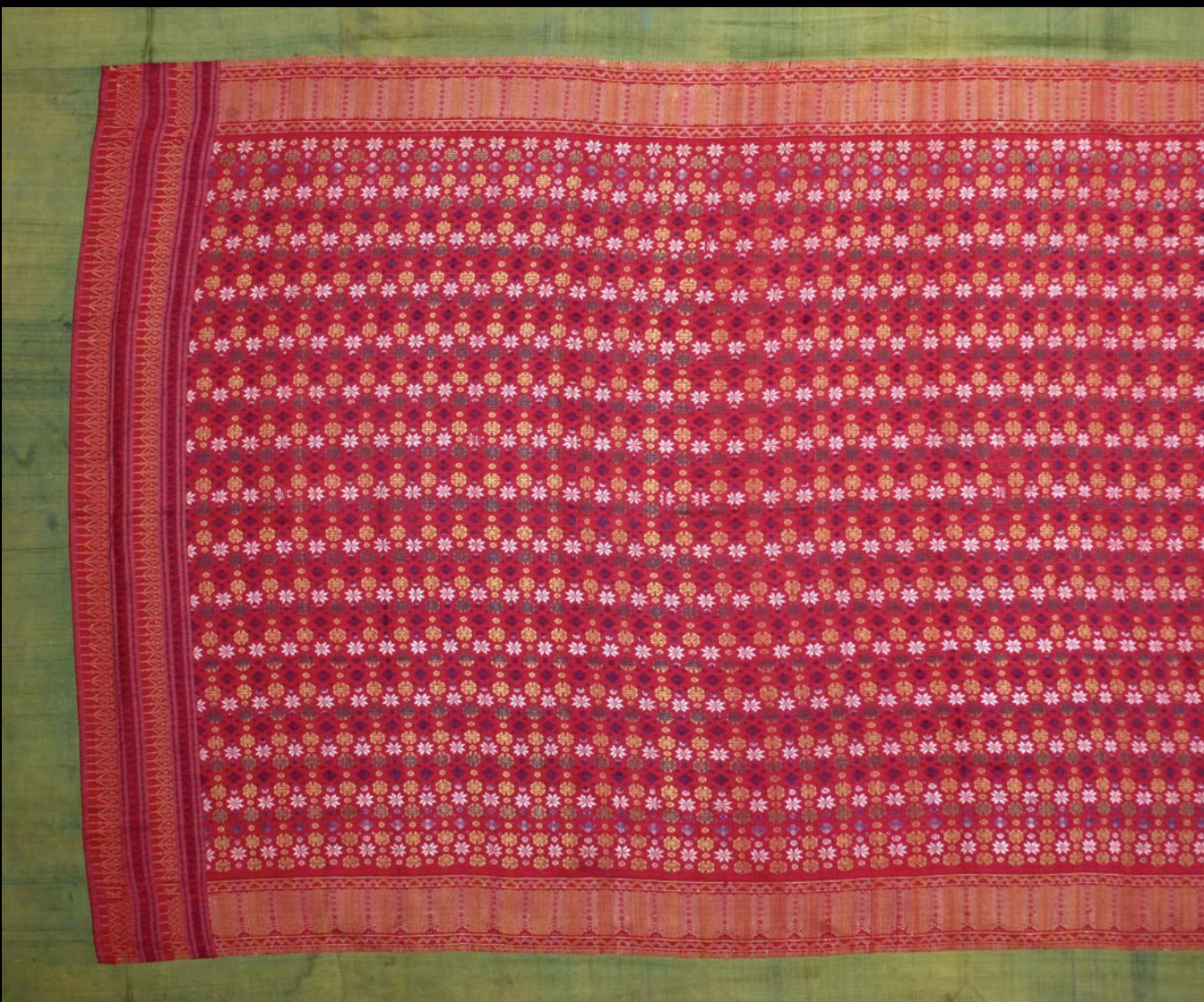
The predominant color in the cloths’ groundweave is a deep bright red, or occasionally a dark purple, with intrusions of yellow, green, blue and white supplementary weft threads on the surface that form repeating combinations of rosettes, flowerets or stars, depending on one’s interpretation. The bands of zone-dyed ikat that float on the back create an impressionistic checked pattern that rivals the delicate beauty of the front.

For a similar example, see *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, p. 207, Figure 234.



*Right: Ceremonial table cover (?), late 19th century. Zone dyed ikat in a continuous supplementary weft weave, complete with what appears to be its original plainwoven silk border. Border has one small repair, minor stains and slightly unraveled edges; center field is in excellent condition. 4'0" x 7'0" center; 2'11" x 5'6 1/2" including outer border. Above left and right: Details of front and back*







## WEAVING IMPLEMENTS

The weaving process for the Cambodian silk weft *hol* textiles begins with the most treasured apparatus: the shaft frame loom. Imbued with the power of creation, early looms were constructed of simple to elaborately carved wood frames. Most likely, the more fine, ceremonial or commanding the textiles a loom was to produce, the more decorated it would be.

Accessory implements often were carved too: into symbolic forms or creatures that enhanced and reflected the significance of the textiles they helped to produce. The making of pairs of wooden pulleys to hold the heddle shafts, were regularly invested with attention. Carved into pairs of flowers or foliage, structures or animals - often birds, biological or mythical - the pulleys are miniature works of art, part of a whole and complete unto themselves. Supposedly a prospective groom would carve a pair of pulleys for his bride, usually in the shape of the mythical *hamsa* or *garuda*, bird-like creatures with mystical qualities. The girl would hang them on her loom and weave her intended a hipwrapper for him to wear during their wedding. As the groom demonstrated his skill and devotion through the gift of his carving, the bride gave in return the product of her ability and artistry. In doing so, they each established a place and status within the other's family.

Other decorated implements included heddle horses which functioned in a manner similar to the pulleys, manipulating the heddle shafts; pairs of warp board guides, usually carved into the heads and tails of dragons, to provide tension to the warp threads; and warp brushes with carved foliate or animal handles, which functioned to remove the tiny loose 'hairs' of the yarn and help separate the warp threads during weaving. Pairs of weft tying stands were used to measure out the weft yarns prior to binding them for resist dyeing. A reel, *ak*, used to store and spool out the warp yarn. It was made of several separate components: a decorative base supported an upright carving, usually in the shape of a *naga* from whose nose or mouth protruded a strong bamboo rod which held the actual reel and allowed it to turn.

Many of the decorative weaving tools were further adorned with coats of red and black lacquer and the application of gold leaf, depending on the wealth and status of the owners. It is interesting to note that forms and patterns on the looms and the various implements reiterate the themes and patterns on all four types of weft *hol* textiles. The *naga*, at times resembling serpent, dragon or snake, is prevalent, as are a variety of symbolic and decorative flora, fauna (especially birds), pavilions and other temple structures. The fact that when possible, so much attention was given to the making of these sometimes charming and unquestionably important vehicles for textile production, signals the tremendous respect in which both the weaving process for Cambodian silk ikats and the weavings themselves were held.

<sup>1</sup> A weaving technique that utilizes three threads, with two weft threads dominating the front surface of the textile, creating on the two sides a 'day and night' effect.

<sup>2</sup> A decorative technique in which a pattern is created from additional weft yarns that are non-essential to the structure of the textile.

<sup>3</sup> Gillian Green, *Traditional Textiles of Cambodia, Cultural Threads and Material Heritage*, River books, Bangkok, Thailand, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia, Tradition, Trade and Transformation*, the Australian National Gallery and Oxford University Press Australia, 1990, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> Op cit., Green, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 220-221.

<sup>7</sup> Long cloths worn as wedding saris and known as "double ikats" in which both the weft and warp threads were dyed prior to weaving.

<sup>8</sup> Op cit., Green, p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Clockwise from top left: **Pairs of loom pulleys**, late 19th to early 20th century. **Textile brush**, circa 1900 with handle carved as mythical *hamsa*. **The reel, ak**, is comprised of three separate lacquered wood parts. The removable cage stored the yarn and allowed it to be reeled out. Base, 23" long; height of upright *naga* rod-holder, 22". Illustrated in Green, p. 74, Figure 73. **Pairs of weft tying stands**, approx. 5" wide and 18" high, are missing the joining rods for measuring. Several are illustrated in Green, p. 79, figure 86.