

Tagwerker, Edeltraud: *Siho and Naga – Lao Textiles. Reflecting a People's Tradition and Change.* Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009. 195 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-58689-1. Price: € 34.80

The rich textile heritage of Laos has received considerable attention from professional scholars and nonacademics. Most of their publications focus on the textiles of a particular ethnic group or of related groups, mainly Tai-speaking groups, while the textiles of many non-Tai groups remain poorly documented. "Siho and Naga" by the Austrian ethnologist and textile enthusiast Edeltraud Tagwerker is relatively ambitious in its aim to provide a general overview of the textiles of Laos. While such a volume would be welcomed, unfortunately Tagwerker's book falls far short of this goal.

The book is divided into 3 parts, plus an introduction, conclusion, and appendices. Part I is a brief overview of Laos and its people. There is not much here and the discussion gives the impression that the author is not very familiar with the literature on Laos. Moreover, the section is not very well organized and little effort is made to link what information is provided to textiles. The author draws attention to the ruling communist party's post-1991 policies relating to culture (19 f.), including encouraging women to wear traditional skirts rather than Western-influenced fashion, but has little to say about the impact of these policies. There is a section on the fine arts in Laos that is followed by a section on crafts. These sections provide background to someone with very little knowledge of the subjects, but the coverage is uneven and mostly of only indirect relevance to textiles. Part I concludes with a survey of ethnic groups in Laos, paying particular attention to the Kmhmu', Hmong, and Akha. The discussion is quite superficial the author draws on only a few published sources.

Part II is on "Lao Traditional Textiles," but in fact has little to say about them. It begins with a look at the Lao Textile Museum. The museum is a private one, run by a prominent family and is closely linked to the family business. It is similar to many of the private museums in Thailand. The book includes a brief biographical sketch of the founding family and of the museum itself, although it provides little specific information on the museum's holdings. Next comes a brief overview of three prominent textile businesses in Vientiane, including the well-known one run by American Carol Cassidy. The book fails to give much of a sense of the traditional textile business in Vientiane and makes no mention whatsoever of other important textile-related enterprises in Vientiane (such as the Hoey Hong Vocational Center) or elsewhere in the country. The failure to mention any of the numerous entities in Luang Prabang, including the Traditional Arts & Ethnology Centre, is especially noteworthy, as is there being no mention of Thonglaphasinh Company in Savannakhet, which is well known internationally for its promotion of Phu Thai textiles. In fact, many tourist guidebooks provide far better introductions to textile-related galleries, museums, and weaving centers in Laos.

In the portion of Part II devoted to describing Lao garments the author provides a general overview of the

types of clothing worn by some Tai-speaking groups and the Hmong drawing largely of information from a handful of other written sources. The discussion is quite brief. There are also descriptions of some of the textiles used for domestic and religious purposes. These descriptions are mostly very short, except for a few pages devoted to the special cloths used to wrap palm-leaf manuscripts. The author, however, devotes most of this discussion to the manuscripts themselves and has relatively little to say about the cloth wrappers.

The section on natural fibers is poorly done. The discussion of silk begins with several pages on the Silk Road that have absolutely nothing to do with silk production or trade in Laos and could easily have been left out. The relatively brief discussion of Lao silk mentions the main silk producing areas in the country and the characteristics of silk produced in them without providing much detailed information. The discussion of cotton pays far more attention to the general history of cotton elsewhere in the world than in Laos and provides almost no information on cotton production in Laos. There are also two paragraphs devoted to hemp. The section on dyes focuses on indigo and provides only very limited information.

There is a fairly long section on general weaving techniques and looms that draws on European sources and is quite general in nature. It too could have easily been left out. The portion on Lao weaving techniques begins with the general statement that there "are two kinds of looms in Laos" (109), forgetting to take into account the distinctive types of loom used by the Hmong, Akha, and a number of other peoples in the north of the country. The survey of techniques is superficial and adds nothing to what has already been published elsewhere.

Given the title of the book, which refers to two prominent figures depicted on textiles in Laos, one might expect the final portion of this section that is devoted to patterns and motifs to be its most substantial. It is perhaps the best part of the book and provides a useful overview for those not especially familiar with the topic. That said there are a variety of shortcomings in the descriptions. Thus, the statement in relation to snake worship that "Many ethnic groups [in Laos] do not hurt snakes and Nagas" (131) is far too vague and calls for more care, especially since most people in Laos have no compunction about killing snakes. Tagwerker also makes the common mistake of referring to the rhomb shape as a diamond.

Part III is a brief overview of some rituals and festivals in Laos. The author includes this section (139) since "To give an idea and to understand the deep meaning of figures and patterns on Lao crafted textiles, it is important to understand the religious and philosophical background of the people." A section on spirit and ancestor worship includes a summary of the major Kmhmu' agricultural rituals based on a published study. The author devotes about 6 pages to this. While Kmhmu' rituals are interesting, it is hard to see how they have anything to do with textile patterns, especially since most Kmhmu' do not weave and those who do copy patterns from Tai-speaking groups. It would have been far more useful to examine animistic beliefs of the non-Buddhist Tai-speaking groups and their

influence on textile patterns. The author starts a section on Lao ceremonies with a short paragraph on Katu beliefs. It is hard to understand why this paragraph appears here or in the book at all. The remainder of the section describes a variety of Lao and Kassak ceremonies with little indication of their relevance to textiles.

While the book is nicely produced, it is hard to see what it adds to the existing literature on the textiles of Laos.

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Tarlo, Emma: *Visibly Muslim. Fashion, Politics, Faith.* Oxford: Berg, 2010. 241 pp. ISBN 978-1-84520-433-4.
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The veil – a term that conceals a wide range of forms and meanings – has come under special scrutiny in the past few years, particularly in Western Europe. In France, a 2004 law against wearing headscarves in public schools was succeeded by a 2010 law banning full face coverings anywhere in public. Similar proposals are on legislative agendas in Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, and a frequent item in British public debates. The “burqa” – the face-veil with a curtain over the eyes – has become, for many Europeans, a symbol of the oppression of women in Muslim-majority countries. And yet, through all this fury of condemnation, relatively little attention has been paid to why and how some Muslim women choose to cover their heads, faces, and bodies.

Emma Tarlo’s splendid new book takes a major step towards remedying this situation. Ostensibly about fashion, her accounts of clothing and religion in England weave together struggles in faith, strident politics, and the world of the tactile and visual. Above all, it places front and centers the lives and thoughts of a number of young British Muslim women, as they work through ways to dress in the particularly multidimensional socio-religious atmosphere of today’s London.

The relatively spare instructions provided in the Qur'an about how Muslims ought to dress have made possible a wide range of juristic interpretations. Some Muslims think that God has commanded Muslim women to cover themselves down to their ankles, hands, and faces. Others think that Muslims, men and women, are enjoined to observe norms of modesty and that these vary according to time and place. Still others emphasize the spiritual dimension of modesty over the choice of clothing. This range of views has given rise to a range of practices, but also to sharp swings in dress styles. When I began work in the relatively conservative Muslim region of Aceh, Indonesia, in the late 1970s, many young women wore short skirts and loose tops; others wore longer garments; very few covered their heads. The growing calls for Islamic government in the face of a long war between the central government and a guerilla movement changed social norms, and by the 1990s it was rare to see a woman in a short skirt. By the early 2000s virtually all women in urban areas wore head coverings of some sort, although as of 2011 face coverings are rare. Despite the media focus on Aceh’s “shariah police”, this swing began in the form of popular reactions against a perceived breakdown in social order.

Emma Tarlo writes of a very different situation, but where many of the women who are fashioning their own Islamic looks are doing so against the background of Muslim-majority societies. Fatima provides an example. Coming from a close-knit Bengali neighborhood in England, when at home she often favors the South Asian *shalwar kamiz* (long tunic over trousers), so as to fit in culturally. But in London where she works, she adopts a style that she considers to be “more British on the one hand and more Islamic on the other” (95): long skirts and fitted tops, combined with brightly colored headscarves (worn to conceal the hair and neck) and large earrings. She finds this style to be more covering than the Bengali one and so more Islamic, but it also reflects a fashion sense acquired on Oxford Street and not in her Bengali neighborhood.

The richness of Tarlo’s ethnographic work lies in the multiple portraits of Muslim women, each engaged in a different sartorial, social, and religious trajectory, but each contributing to the same overall story: that Muslims *bri-colent* much as does everyone else. Sukina and Muneera come from Bristol and a Jamaican background. On stage their clothing choices become part of their Poetic Pilgrimage performance, and they might combine long skirts and floral head scarves with hooded tops and denim jackets to present themselves as urban, black, British, and Muslim. Muneera uses bright eye shadow to convey a bold look and counter assumptions that scarves mean submissiveness.

Performance is central to this study, from Shazia Mirza’s *hijabi* standup routines to the chic silk scarves and fashionable jeans on display at the Rich Mix London multicultural arts scene. Bright color photo sections complement the text (and the many black and white illustrations), showing how women use and shop for headscarves, and how entrepreneurs design them. But the book’s content is not limited to arts and consumerism; the strongly felt politics of British Islam are well described here as well. Tarlo recounts the uses made of current events, notably the long-running Shabina Begum case, in which a schoolgirl claimed that wearing a *shalwar kamiz*, already allowed by her public school, was insufficiently Islamic, and demanded to wear a longer *jilbab*. Tarlo argues that Begum’s claims were from the beginning part of a campaign led by the group Hizb ut-Tahrir to radicalize British Muslims; her argument is all the more convincing in that her approach throughout the book starts from the perspectives and practices of Muslim women.

In an insightful analysis of the conversations and anxieties of three women who interact frequently in a hair salon, Tarlo gives a reasonable and indeed underplayed account of how *hijab* can become a threat on a more personal level, affecting even the most liberal and multicultural-minded of Londoners. Jane had fled her Catholic upbringing to embrace pluralism and choice, but her friend Loraine’s conversion to Islam and her decision to wear the full-length *jilbab* led to her to reassess her own life choices. She began attending her local Catholic church in order to secure a place for her son in the church school and pull him out of his current multi-religious school, lest he be drawn towards a similar, and in her eyes dangerous, religious and personal transformation.