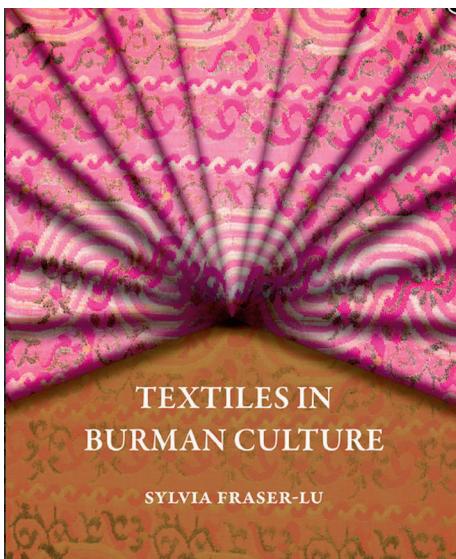


*Textiles in Burman Culture* by Sylvia Fraser-Lu. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2020. ISBN: 9786162151637. 2,200 Baht.



It is always a pleasure to read a well-organized book with a standard transcription method and the relevant photographs on the page of the text, such as this book by Sylvia Fraser-Lu. The maps have been well prepared, the Burmese dating system has been converted to a Gregorian standard dating system and the historical names of towns, together with the most recent ones, have been included, which is very helpful. She is careful to justify her decision to call the Bama(r) people “Burman” and humble in her decision to write the book in the first place. Fraser-Lu has appropriately used eloquent prose in her writing style, fitting to the poetic, creative writing of the people themselves. The informative text brings to life the history and culture of the people and

the author’s humour and wit are expressed in the entertaining poems, songs and folklore stories she has chosen to quote throughout the text.

The textiles themselves are woven into the fabric of the book, but only begin to take centre stage in the later chapters, including the Burman National Cloth (a tapestry weave textile called *lun-taya achiek*), the exotic Embroidered Court Costumes and the Embroidered Wall Hangings. The textiles used by the lower income majority of the population living in Myanmar (Burma), having very little variety dominated by plaids and stripes, are given minimal attention. The author illustrates most of the book with images of wall paintings, murals, sculptures, drawings and diagrams that provide a wealth of information. These indicate that the majority of textiles used in Burman culture prior to the 19th century were imported from India or China, but few of these textiles are actually displayed. The photographs of textiles are rather uneven in quality and poor in artistic arrangement, while other images are excellent. There are relatively few photographs of people wearing full traditional attire. The exceptions are the splendid photographs of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, Dr. Ba Maw and a wedding couple. There are also some important black and white archive photographs of royalty.

In the initial chapters, textiles and garments have usefully been given their local names and purpose, but this does not continue throughout the text, which makes browsing difficult. In both the text and captions, lower garments for men and women are variously called “hip-wrappers”, “tubular longyi”, “sarong” or by their local name. For the lay reader, a short introduction on the main styles of traditional textiles and dress, with their relevant names, would have been useful for easy reference; something similar to the five-paragraph section on “Changes to Traditional Dress” in Chapter 2, which is obscured by its location.

The first chapter transports the reader to Myanmar with a brief topographic

description. The rest of the chapter is divided into sections giving the history for each period. Fraser-Lu's masterly synopsis of the history is easy to read and includes migration routes and the settlement of Myanmar by various groups from different parts of China. The Mon, who are Theravada Buddhists, occupied the coastal areas and probably arrived in Myanmar from Mongolia in 2500 BCE-1500 BCE. In 200 BCE, the Buddhist Pyu settled in the central plains and built sophisticated cities. They were overtaken by the Mranma, considered to be the direct ancestors of the Burmans, in 849 CE, and established the fabled Bagan (Pagan) civilization in 1044 CE under the great King Anawrahta, who managed to overcome the Mon, giving them access to the riches of sea trade.

The chapter on the evolution of cloth and costume is very well referenced with prehistoric evidence from the Samon River valley of mineralized coarse cloths adhering to bronzes dating 700 BCE-300 CE. Although actual weaving equipment was not found, the author convincingly links the technology to contemporary south-western Chinese sites where material evidence of similar weaving was found. In the Pyu and Bagan periods (200 BCE-1284 CE), metal grave goods display similar textile remains. Pyu dress codes have been deduced from Chinese records of the Tang period and a set of Pyu bronze figures bring to life the costumes described. Records show that cotton was exported to China during this period and gold and silver feature often in records of trade goods leaving Myanmar and in costume decoration. Numerous references attest to a flourishing trade, not only with China but also India, especially in the Bagan and later Ava periods. Drawing largely from John Guy, Fraser-Lu suggests that the upper classes wore imported silks, patola and other decorative textiles from India. Paintings on the temple walls in Bagan illustrate Buddhist personalities wearing Indian cloth and the influence of Indian design motifs is evident in architectural features. The oldest known textile in Myanmar was most likely from India, being a temple hanging depicting the Telapatta Jataka dating to 1100-1150 CE, that was discovered after an earthquake. Records of trade also document textiles for the common people. There was a large demand for muslins, finely woven dyed and undyed cottons and simple printed cloths from the east coast of India for this market. Yarn was also traded, in particular red cotton, which was combined with local threads for weaving.

Dress styles during the Ava period (1287-1752 CE) were deduced from ceramic plaques, bas reliefs and the abundance of narrative wall paintings in temples and caves. Long tunics over hip-wrappers were worn by high-class men with many gold and silver ornaments. Women wore long breast cloths with hip-wrappers. Men and women wore flowing scarves and drew their waists in with sashes or belts. Lower-class men and workers wore only lower garments in the shorter hip-wrapper style. The Burman style became more voluminous in the following Konbaung period (1752-1885 CE) and set the trend for the formal traditional clothing styles worn today.

After the Second World War, clothing styles were seen as a cause for political concern. Fraser-Lu gives a witty and candid description of the change in styles of the upper garments that were targeted in the political arena. The end of the monarchy brought the end to sumptuary laws that restricted certain textiles to upper classes and the court. The nouveau riche began to wear the court styles and the lower classes could buy

cheap imported fabrics in prints emulating high-class textiles, in particular the *lun-taya achiek*. Colonization virtually saw the end of local weaving due to cheap imports and aniline dyes replacing traditional natural dyes.

Some natural dye processes have been described, but no distinction is given to silk and cotton dye methods and mordants are not fully understood. This may have been due to secrecy upheld by the dyers. Numerous dye plants are mentioned, including those documented by other writers of the region, but unfortunately many are not given their genus. Indigo plants and processing are given a lengthy description. Of the fibres, hemp was probably the earliest yarn and continued to be used until the Pyu period. Cotton is speculated to have been woven since the first millennium CE, and overtook hemp as it was softer. By the 15th century, cotton was traded for silk, precious metals and tea from China. We are entertained with charming poetry and songs of the planting and harvesting of cotton. Silk was eventually cultivated by the non-Buddhists in Myanmar and there is a detailed description of sericulture.

The chapter on looms and patterning is dotted with lyrics and songs of romance, but the description of loom dressing is rather lengthy and the diagram of a fly-shuttle loom is bereft of a seat for the weaver. Patterning is categorized according to the weaves: plain, twill, tapestry and float weaves with their various decorative ranges, and there are brief descriptions of surface decoration by batik, painting and embroidery. Several incursions into India in the 18th century brought captive weavers from Manipur called *Kathes*, who brought with them, among other techniques, the tapestry weave thought to have evolved into the famous *lun-taya achiek*. The diagram of interlocked tapestry weave is not the usual set for this tapestry technique and deserves further explanation. Amarapura, Shwedaung and Kyi Thei became famous weaving centres. The Saunders' Weaving Institute was the school from which modern techniques, looms and textiles designs sprang.

There is a detailed description of various Buddhist ceremonies, monk's robes and woven offerings. Dress for hermits, religious women and elderly devotees is briefly described. The technique of tablet weaving and the meanings of the fine manuscript binding ribbons, woven by dedicated devotees with their names and hopes, have been given much interesting research. However, some marvellous manuscript wrappers, made in a rare bamboo wrapping technique, are given very little attention, with six small photographs only and no description of the technique.

A whole chapter is dedicated to the *lun-taya achiek*, the Burman national cloth. Fraser-Lu goes into great detail, explaining the evolution of the designs from the wider spaced wave-like forms and zigzags of the late 18th century to the far more complex jigsaw like designs of the 19th century. This information is useful for dating these textiles. She gives the local names of designs and explains, through the arguments of several well-known historians, the origin of these designs, concluding that a pan-Southeast Asian origin is most likely. The technique itself is recorded as coming with captives from Manipur in India, but Fraser-Lu cites Robyn Maxwell in an interesting alternative origin from China through maritime migrations, the Tai Lue and Shan peoples and the dragon robes presented to Shan dignitaries and possibly the Burmese court by Chinese authorities.

The chapter on embroidered court costumes describes the unimaginable wealth of these textiles, couched and appliquéd with gold and embellished with precious and semi-precious stones and pearls in the art of *zardozi*. These costumes were worn to elevate royalty to celestial heights with bird-like, winged appendages and flame-like projections. The crowns were soaring pinnacles and collars had undulating waves of opulent decoration. Sumptuous embroidered wall hangings, (called *kalagas* by foreigners) were made in the *zardozi* technique from the mid-19th century, using similar embroidery techniques but also sequins and glass gems. These decorative textiles had pictorial themes narrating Hindu-Buddhist mythology, in particular the Ramayana and Jatakas, and Myanmar folk tales. The origin of these textiles is discussed and extensive detail is given to the materials and production methods.

The chapters on current weaving centres and modernization are interesting accounts of the changes weavers made to keep up with the market and survive. The best weaving centres are described and their stories told. Each region or centre decided to concentrate on one particular technique or patterning for which it would become unique and famous, such as Amarapura for silk *lun-taya achiiek* and Kyi Thei for cotton warp ikats. Mechanization was largely taken up and thousands of people were employed in the textiles industry. A few hand-weaving studios are mentioned. Textiles made by minority groups, together with their brief histories and cultural aspects, are described, including the Rakhine hand-weaving villages making supplementary weft floral and block patterns. Shan and Mon weaving are given attention, as well as lotus stem weaving at Kyaing Kan.

The final chapter summarizes the history of Myanmar to the 21st century, with the modern concept of dress as an expression of personal identity, as opposed to the traditional emphasis on community identity. The book has covered nearly every aspect of textile evolution and production for the Burman population and is a good reference for the history, sociology and textile arts of Myanmar.

Patricia Cheesman