

## Khit cloth: Networking and creative economy oriented product development based on Isan culture

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**Abstract** – *The purposes of this research are to investigate the historical background, current circumstances and problems of Khit cloth products in Isan communities, making networks and orienting the creative economy based on Isan culture. The research population for this qualitative research was composed of 88 individuals. The research area was the three North-eastern Thai provinces of Kalasin, Yasothon and Amnat Charoen. Data were collected by means of basic survey, interviews, observations, focus-group discussions and workshops. The results show that Khit cloth weaving group members at Ban Sri Than, Ban Kham Phra and Ban Dan Nuea learned weaving skills from previous generations. Cloth weaving is considered valuable traditional knowledge and the inherited cultural responsibility of Isan women. They weave their Khit cloth along with other fabrics and designs. Silk and cotton cloth were the two types of Khit. Khit cloth using cotton thread is more popular than silk thread. Khit clothes are made for personal use and as community commercial products. The creation process includes thread formation, dying, cloth designing, weaving, processing and marketing. Weavers receive training supported by various government offices and also undertake field studies. There have been four stages of weaving development in the three communities: family consumption, variation, group integration and networking. The last development stage was the time of creativity and expansion of networks for product processing within the community and surrounding area with government support under the ‘One Tambon, One Product’ initiative. The problems encountered are high production costs, difficult production process, high number of production steps and inadequate profits. In light of these problems, young people choose higher paying jobs as careers and are not interested in Khit cloth weaving. The study found that each of the three communities sets up its own community business,*

*encouraging members to share ideas, knowledge and develop their capacity for product improvement. Each group also has its own organizational and business management structure. By defining roles and responsibilities, each member and related local authority is allowed full participation in the running and maintenance of the community business network.*

**Keywords** – *creative economy, Isan culture, khit cloth, networking, product development, Thailand*

### **INTRODUCTION**

From evidence recorded in pre-historic cave-paintings dating back to 3000-4000BC, it is clear that humans have always worn some form of clothing. In ancient communities, weaving technology had not yet been developed, so primitive garments were made from animal hide or fur. These materials provided short-term cover but disintegrated rapidly due to the lack of durability and composition from organic matter, very few examples of early clothing remain [1].

When considering Thai clothing, the first images that spring to mind are of beautiful, intricately designed fabrics that are too elegant to be practical for everyday use. This image is influenced by pictures of the past, drawings and photographs that were royally commissioned or reflected royal fashions. There are two types of clothing actually worn by modern Thai people, hand-woven and factory produced. Indeed, almost all modern clothing is factory produced, domestically and internationally. Hand-woven fabrics are contemporary interpretations of traditional Thai designs and are reserved for special occasions. The value of traditional Thai costume is in its styles, patterns and colours, which reveal much of Thai ideals and history [2].

Woven fabric is a traditional community handicraft that comprises one part of the economy of

local communities. The traditional practice provides supplementary income for many people in local communities and also constitutes the primary occupation of some skilled artisans. As such, weaving receives governmental support as a genuine means of developing the economy. However, there must be greater understanding of the art at both macro and micro levels.

Traditional products are currently very popular among Thai consumers and hold the hopes of the government in their ability to develop community economies. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the products reveal the traditional knowledge and identity of Thai people. Secondly, traditional handicrafts require minimal overhead capital, making them cheap to create and buy. This increases their appeal in a society affected by global economic downturn. Additionally, traditional products are simultaneously a means for providing income to poor families and a medium for conserving Thai heritage. Development of handicraft production will strengthen the community economy and is thus of great interest to the Thai government [3].

Weaving, whether it is cotton, silk, Khit fabric or any other material, is an activity that generates income for the community. As such, any economic or social developments will have an effect on the nature of community weaving, such as the emergence of free trade, technological advancement and government policies. Changes to the production process are intended to meet consumer demand and include product size, colour, design and transformation. Community weaving has developed from its original purpose of providing clothing for the family to a more commercial community venture. With the help of government and private sponsorship, many community weaving groups have been established [4].

From the concepts and policies of solving poverty through community corporations, the government created the Royal Act for Supporting Community Corporations in 2005. The intention of the bill was to support and sponsor community economy as the foundation for developing the King's 'sufficiency economy'. Those communities that were not ready to compete in the market would receive government support in traditional knowledge, income generation, mutual support, management ability development and corporation model development in order to strengthen the local community economy and create integrated internal and external networks. The important principle of the new strategy was that, for successful

community corporations, the members of the community must work together to develop understanding, relationships, networks and management principles from within [5].

One thing that will enable continuous community business is creation and development of products under the principles of the creative economy. The components of the creative economy include knowledge, education, creativity and intellectual property, which relates to the cultural wealth of a society and new cultural technology. The development of the creative economy was detailed in the tenth national Thai social and economic development plan, which identified value creation as its main goal. The policy suggested that knowledge and innovation were the means to achievement of value creation by harnessing the plentiful natural, cultural and social resources in Thailand that had been passed down through the generations and contributed to the essence of 'Thainess' [6].

Despite government and private support that has helped develop the community economy in many ways, there remain problems in almost every aspect of community weaving:

- There is a lack of understanding regarding business management, marketing and funding.
- Few steps are taken to reduce excessive production costs, causing overpriced final products and reduced producer profits.
- The products are not standardized, reducing their overall quality and affecting consumer confidence.
- The majority of raw materials is imported from abroad and is expensive [7].

From initial investigation, the research team discovered that there were problems with the community weaving networks of Kalasin, Yasothon and Amnat Charoen provinces. For each of the provinces, there was a lack of analysis and evaluation of business management, the market and production processes. There was no development of creative economy or business networks. Given the problems discussed, the research team undertook this study, 'Khit cloth: Networking and creative economy oriented product development based on North-eastern Thai (Isan) culture'.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The purposes of this research are to investigate the historical background, current circumstances and problems of Khit cloth products in Isan communities,

to make networks and orient the creative economy on Isan culture.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This is a qualitative investigation of three purposively selected provinces in North-eastern Thailand. The research population is composed of Ban Sri Than in Yasothon Province, Ban Kham Phra in Amnat Charoen Province and Ban Dan Nuea in Kalasin Province. The research area was determined using the following criteria:

1. The province was famed for its long history of producing traditional woven handicrafts and had a pool of local experts in traditional weaving knowledge. Additionally, the province had a variety of famous local handicrafts.
2. The province had community Khit networks and had produced many famous Khit fabric products for a long time, which generated substantial income for the community.
3. After initial examination the research team discovered problems with the Khit fabric production process that required addressing.

For this investigation the research team employed both document and field study techniques. The research tools used for data collection were basic survey, participant and non-participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and workshop. The purposively selected research sample of 88 individuals was divided into three groups for data collection: key informants, casual informants and general informants. All informants gave informed consent for the research. Collected data was anonymized and stored in a secure, encrypted computer file. The results were kept and used exclusively for the purposes of this investigation. All data was validated using a triangulation method and the information was categorized according to the aims of the research. Data analysis was conducted using typological analysis and analytic induction before the results were presented as a descriptive analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The history of Khit fabric weaving**

Each of the three weaving communities investigated during this research had a long history of producing Khit fabric products. Ancestors had passed on weaving techniques, which they originally learned since the foundation of the community by exchanging techniques within the family, with other family units,

within the community and with other communities in North-eastern Thailand. The unique community identity has been passed down in the fabric from generation to generation. Initially, weaving was undertaken by females during the rainy season, when they could not practice their principal occupation of agriculture. This practice became the cultural heritage of females in Isan, who wove Khit fabric into garments for personal use, gifts, exchange and, eventually, sale. There are five reasons for the importance of Khit fabric: Khit fabric is used to create clothing; Khit fabric weaving is used to distinguish the social roles of males and females; Khit fabric helps reveal the social status of an individual. People of a high social standing would traditionally wear Khit fabric made from silk. People of a low social standing would traditionally wear Khit fabric made from cotton; Khit fabric weaving helps to socially discipline females into understanding the importance of fulfilling their household duties; and Khit fabric weaving generates income for the family.

There have been four stages of weaving development in the three communities: family consumption, variation, group integration and networking. The first stage was before 1967, when traditional weaving was used to produce fabric for use within the family and community. Raw materials used for the creation of the fabric came from cotton planted in the community, which was processed into threads and dyed from natural dyes found in the area. Weavers used a wooden-frame loom and produced the fabric individually. The fabric remained within the communities because transportation links had not been developed enough to allow the products to generate a widespread reputation. The second stage of weaving development was between 1968 and 1981, when public utilities were developed nationwide, especially communications, transport, water, electricity, public health and education. The development of industry was one objective of this expansion. As a result, weaving factories began to appear in the cities, which mass-produced quality goods for sale and export. Consumers preferred to purchase the factory-made goods and community weaving businesses declined. Many weavers moved to the cities to work in factories and those who remained in the communities were forced to expand their product variety to compete with factory-made goods. The third stage of development was from 1982 to 1997, a period of revival for community weaving businesses. The ministry of agriculture and

cooperatives and the municipal community development organization sponsored the formation of community weaving groups. The two institutions organized community training for weavers, particularly in the use of colour dyes and the production of traditional triangular pillows using Khit fabric. The creation of weaving groups helped spread the appeal of weaving in the communities and enabled weaving businesses to expand their production. The final stage of development was from 1998 to the present day. During this period businesses adopted a creative economy model and created larger business networks. The final stage of development coincides with the government 'one tambon, one product' initiative to promote traditional handicrafts as souvenirs. The weaving industry experienced an upsurge in business and product variety greatly increased thanks to government support programs and creative training seminars and workshops. In 2010, the creative economy was formally adopted as a government policy as part of the 11<sup>th</sup> National Social and Economic Development Plan.

### The current state of Khit fabric weaving and problems with the process

Field research found that none of the three weaving communities produced traditional *sinh* clothing with waistbands and hems because they were not popular among members of the community. If this particular type of clothing is needed, it must be ordered as a special request and it will be produced by the weavers in the community or another member of the weaving network. The types of Khit patterns that are produced include elephants, hooks, Bullet Wood flower, coconut husk, scorpion, lotus flower and Orange Jessamine flower. Due to changes in society and technological advances, there has been a shift from hand-woven products to machine woven products and different varieties of product have also been developed, such as square and triangular Khit pillows, mattresses, cushions, tablecloths, bags, blankets and shawls. The weaving communities have grown so much that they should be considered as small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The products in each of the three communities have their own identities, which are described below in table 1.

**Table 1. The identities of signature products made by each of the three weaving communities.**

	<b>Ban Sri Than in Yasothon Province</b>	<b>Ban Kham Phra in Amnat Charoen Province</b>	<b>Ban Dan Nuea in Kalasin Province</b>
Signature product	Triangular pillow.	Naturally dyed Khit fabric.	Marble patterned fabric.
Materials	Khit fabric (factory produced), base fabric, netting, cotton, straw, string.	Market-bought threads (10/2).	Market-bought threads (30/2).
Equipment	Sewing machine, scissors, needles, cotton, embroidery kit.	Loom, shuttle, reed, guiding rod.	Loom, shuttle, reed, guiding rod.
Production steps	Khit fabric, base fabric and netting are cut to size and sewn together. The materials are then turned upside down, the straw is stuffed in the netting and the pillow sewn shut. The pillow is checked, cleaned and wrapped in plastic.	Khit threads are inserted into the reed according to the desired pattern, string is pre-dyed and dried and the fabric is created according to the weaving steps of the particular loom.	Khit threads are inserted into the reed according to the desired pattern, string is pre-dyed and dried and the fabric is created according to the weaving steps of the particular loom.
Identity	Triangular pillows unique to the community.	Hand-woven and naturally dyed.	Soft and light.
Sale Price	Price based on size from 20 baht to 250 baht.	170 baht per metre.	100 baht per metre.
Design	Self-designed within the community	Self-designed within the community	Self-designed within the community
Packaging	Plastic-wrapped and sold with cardboard handles.	Paper bags with string handles.	Cardboard boxes.

There are six major problems with production in the three weaving communities, as outlined below:

1. Raw materials are not produced within the communities due to the time-consuming process of cultivating and harvesting the plants. Raw materials are bought at the markets and are expensive. It is no longer popular to use netting in pillows, so the weavers of Ban Sri Than in Yasothon Province must purchase old pillows, remove the netting and recycle it because it is hard to find in the shops. This means that they must pay for the extra cost of the old pillows.
2. The weaving equipment is expensive and takes a large chunk of the budget.
3. There is dust that causes weavers difficulty in breathing. The production process is very long.
4. There are budgeting problems caused by expensive materials and equipment and reduction of product value caused by competition between groups.
5. Weavers are inadequately trained in the design process, so there are few newly designed products. There is a lack of institutional support for product design and the products are not up to date.
6. The packaging for the products is not interesting enough and there is a lack of institutional support for packaging design. The packaging lacks variety, there is no individual identity and the packaging cost is high.

There is one further problem, unrelated to the production process. There are not enough weavers. The existing labour force is made up of full-time agriculturalists and the elderly, neither of whom is able to work at the levels required for continuous production. This means that consumer deadlines are often missed. Additionally, there is a lack of interest from younger members of the society because weaving requires dedication to meet the levels of skill and experience required, which young people are unwilling to give. Furthermore, the market for hand-woven Khit products is not large enough for a sustainable occupation.

### **Networking and development of the creative economy**

There are three main characteristics of the weaving network in the three communities: a network of ideas, a network of activities and a network of financial sponsorship. The network of ideas focuses on the exchange of production and design ideas. This

network is made up of people in similar positions but different locations. Related personnel are community leaders, municipal/provincial community development office, municipal/provincial agricultural office, provincial industry office and provincial commerce office. The network of activities is for creating events at which the weaving groups can cooperate and combine. This enables the groups to see the working practices of others and collaborate on new products. The network focuses on communities helping one another. There are three types of activity organized by the network: raw material supply activities, production process and product development activities and marketing activities. The network of financial sponsorship includes idea and knowledge support. This network for knowledge support is made up of municipal/provincial community development office, municipal/provincial agricultural office, provincial industry office and provincial commerce office. The network for financial support is made up of group members, community savings institute, sub-district administration organization, provincial commerce office, provincial office for agricultural and cooperatives, provincial industry office, provincial labour office, Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC), Small and Medium Enterprise Development Bank of Thailand and regional industrial support centre. A diagram of the relationship between the networks is outlined in Figure 1.

The development of a creative economy on the foundation of Isan culture means the potential for using culture as a driving force for the weaving group activities to add value and services to the products. This is to be achieved by using traditional knowledge and innovation. There are four areas of the creative economy: knowledge exchange, creation of group procedure, creation and development of products, and sale of products in the marketplace. During focus group discussions, new products were designed as part of the push towards a creative economy. The new products were:

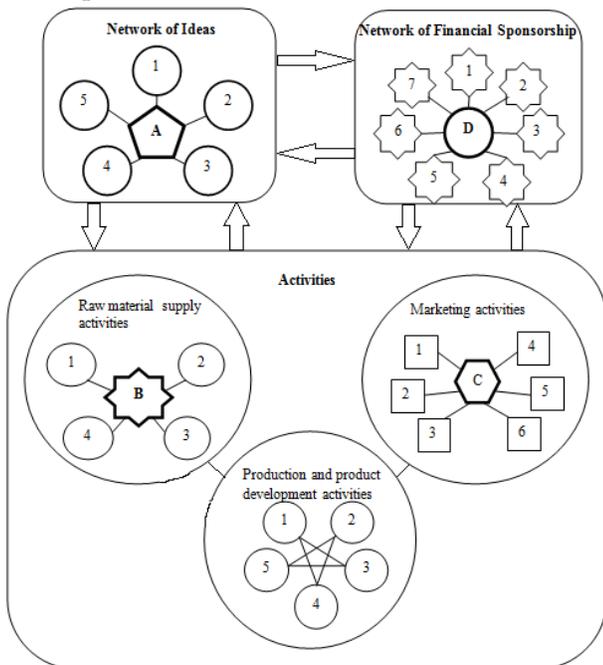
- Ban Sri Than in Yasothon Province – A 2-part Khit cushion (Fig. 2)
- Ban Kham Phra in Amnat Charoen Province – A Khit notebook bag (Fig. 3)
- Ban Dan Nuea in Kalasin Province – A marble Khit hat (Fig. 4)

Aside from these innovations, the research team designed two further products themselves:

- A bed-set, including a bed sheet and pillowcase with Khit butterfly pattern (Fig. 5)

- A lion-patterned Khit shawl (Fig. 6)

These new products were innovations borne out of this research into the use of Isan culture as a foundation for developing products in the creative economy. The design and development of the products used traditional knowledge and weaving techniques combined with modern concepts and utilized the weaving networks of the three communities. This is a model for the future development of traditional weaving communities and their products in North-eastern Thailand.



**Fig. 1** – A diagram of the relationship between weaving networks in North-eastern Thailand



**Fig. 2** - A 2-part Khit cushion created by Ban Sri Than weaving group in Yasothon Province



**Fig. 3** - A Khit notebook bag created by Ban Kham Phra weaving group in Amnat Charoen Province



**Fig. 4** - A marble Khit hat created by Ban Dan Nuea weaving group in Kalasin Province



**Fig. 5** – A pillowcase with Khit butterfly pattern designed by the research team during the investigation



**Fig. 6** - A lion-patterned Khit shawl designed by the research team during the investigation

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The history of Khit fabric weaving corresponds to the cultural ecology theory of Julian Steward [8]. Steward theorized that people adapt to suit their surroundings and other communities around them, which explains why ancient Isan people used the materials in their surrounding environment to devise Khit fabric weaving as a means of producing clothing. The nature of weaving as a female pastime also links to Steward's principles of structural functionalism, which stated that roles will be defined in a society to help that society function to its maximum possible level. According to Erikson's theory on identity, the relationship that people feel with their ancestors is a reason for the inheritance of culture [9]. This helps explain why each community in this investigation had inherited a different identity for the same basic product.

Malinowski concluded that there must be structures in society to ensure cohesive and united work practices [10]. In the weaving communities of North-eastern Thailand, this is the role played by the weaving networks. One further reason for the requirement of networks is the sense of place and purpose that they provide. As Mead concluded, humans discover meaning and understanding in the symbology of others. By creating networks of knowledge exchange, weavers will be rewarded with benefits and security in their occupation [11].

Kusuma Na Ayutthaya argued that the creation of new products and services adds value to a community,

which was the intention when designing the new items as part of this investigation<sup>12</sup>. However, the new products do not only add monetary value, but they also add cultural value and meet consumer requirements. In this way, the weaving communities have been able to use their own traditional knowledge of Khit fabric weaving and transform that into tangible products as part of a creative economy. This will serve as a model for future development and enable the continuation and growth of a sustainable cottage industry compatible with modern society. When considering the results of this investigation, it must be remembered that, while the results of this case study may indicate the trend of a particular geographic area, they are not generic. Further research must be conducted to consider the product development of other fabrics in other areas of Thailand. These future results can then be compiled with the outcomes of this investigation as a central body of knowledge for academics, designers and weavers.

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