

In Pursuit of a Prototype

Diffusionism may have fallen out of fashion with anthropologists in recent years, but the importance of trade and its relation to the quest for the exotic should not be underestimated. Here, **Thomas Murray** points to certain design occurrences in the textile traditions of the Indian Subcontinent and the Indonesian Archipelago which may owe their inspiration to designs found on carpets and textiles of the Mamluk and Ottoman realms of the Near East, and identifies trade cloth as a perfect vehicle for carrying a motif far beyond its place and culture of origin.



1. Left: Iban Dayak wedding scene, north Borneo, ca. 1940-50, with a rare Kufic-bordered 'Mamluk' design trade cloth as a backdrop. After K.F. Wong, *Pagan Innocence*, London 1960

2. Right: Indian *sarasa* (chintz) with Ottoman-style composition (detail), 16th century. Private collection, Wyoming



The culture of Ottoman Turkey had a great impact on the Islamic world from the 15th century onwards. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the *haj*, promoted an exchange of ideas and products within this world and beyond, as evidenced by the distinctive Ottoman-style composition on an early Indian mordant-resist trade cloth (2). It is likely that this fine cotton chintz, probably made no later than the 16th century, emulates an Ottoman silk velvet (see, for example, Donald King, *Imperial Ottoman Textiles*, London 1980, pl.3) that was brought to India, perhaps via the Arabian Peninsula. Soon afterwards, an Indian chintz version of the design found its way through pre-colonial trade to Indonesia. There it was preserved in a clan treasury of the Toraja, a head-hunting society in the

remote mountains of Sulawesi, where it only recently came to light. From this example an inference can be drawn about the transmission of patterns that are important in one culture being later absorbed and appreciated in a far distant land.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) monopolised by military force the trade routes between India and Indonesia. They brought vast quantities of Indian trade cloths, both silk and cotton, to the Indonesian market, where they were exchanged for spices.

Among these trade cloths were double-ikat silk *patola* from Gujarat, with a variety of elephant (3), tiger and geometric motifs. Painted and/or stamped mordant-resist cottons, known locally as *sarasa* and in the West

3. Double-ikat silk *patola* (detail), Gujarat, India, 19th century. Private collection, Wyoming



as chintz, came in an astonishing array of patterns, including an arabesque design (4) imbued with tremendous prestige. This design was absorbed into the vernacular of many indigenous weaving traditions, including the Iban Dayak *pua sungkit* from Borneo (6) and the *geringsing batun* of Bali (5). It is also found in other regions, including Lampung and other parts of Sumatra, Sumba and Toraja.

In Indonesia this geometric arabesque pattern is referred to as a '*patola*' design, although it appears almost exclusively in cotton textiles. Silk *patola* with this design are very rare. No example was included in the seminal 1979 Basel Ethnographic Museum study by Alfred Bühler and Eberhard Fischer, which documented all the variants then known. However, in 1985 Robert



surviving examples. However, an alternative explanation might also account for their scarcity. Perhaps not many were made in the first place. The somewhat cruder surviving VOC arabesque chintz (4) might not require the *patola* as an intermediary but, like the *patola*, might descend directly from a theoretical refined prototype of an earlier period. Indeed, rather than the *patola* silks being the primary elite textile from which the arabesque chintzes were copied, I would like to propose that they were 'limited edition' secondary variants of an earlier prestige chintz which no longer survives. That such quality work is possible may be seen in the domestic, court and temple hangings preserved in the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad.

What then is the design source of the arabesque found in chintz? I cannot help but notice the similarity between Turkish Lotto arabesque rugs of the 16th and 17th centuries (7) and chintzes displaying the so-called *patola* arabesque motif (4). It is possible to show design sequencing parallels for both rugs and textiles in which large polygonal elements, as seen in 15th century small-pattern Holbein rugs (9) and a very early *sarasa* (10), evolve into the compressed arabesque of the Lotto and the later VOC *sarasa*.

No example of an early and ultra-refined Lotto-type arabesque chintz is known which could have served as the prototype for both *patola* and VOC trade *sarasa*. However, in a personal communication, Mattiebelle Gittinger has told of the astonishment of 17th century Dutch traders when they first arrived at the Thai court at seeing what they described as "carpets" hang-



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J. Holmgren and Anita M. Spertus presented two silk *patola* with this design at a symposium (see 'Newly Discovered Patola Motif Types', *Symposium on Indonesian Textiles*, Cologne 1989), and suggested that they were the elite prototypes from which the arabesque chintz was copied.

That this chintz is an imitation of an earlier, elite textile is not in doubt, but that the model was this specific type of silk *patola* is difficult to prove. *Patola* are famously ephemeral, which no doubt contributes to the dearth of

4. Above: Dutch East India Company (VOC) *sarasa* with an arabesque design (detail), Gujarat, for the Indonesian market, 17th/18th century. Private collection

5. Top right: *Geringsing batun* (detail), Bali, 19th century or earlier. Private collection

6. Left: Iban Dayak *pua sungkit* (detail), Borneo, 19th century or earlier. Private collection

7. Right: Lotto arabesque carpet (detail), west Anatolia, 16th or early 17th century. Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Varie 6. See HALI 83, p. 86



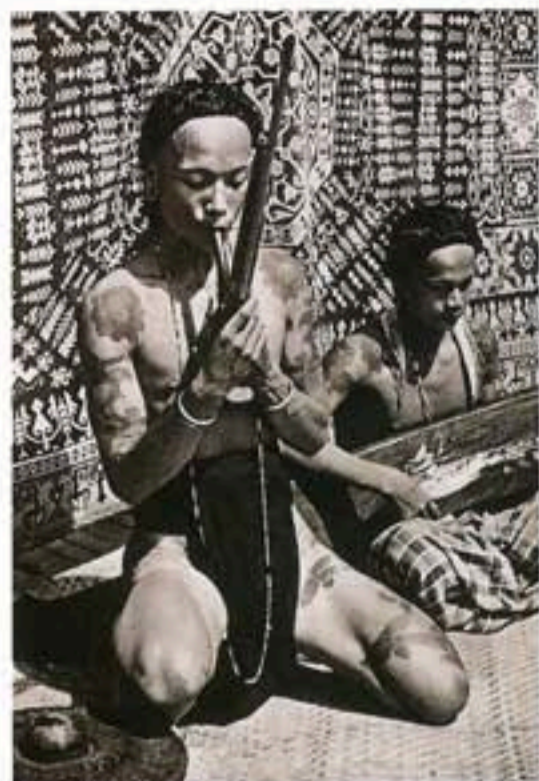
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ing in the palace. Might these have been chintz imitations of rug designs?

Shedding some light on this question, a collection of photographs of Borneo by K.F. Wong, published in *Pagan Innocence* (London 1960), shows an Iban Dayak wedding scene (1, 8), probably of the late 1940s or early 1950s. In the background may be seen an intriguing trade cloth with an unmistakable rendering of an Egyptian classical carpet design. The cloth clearly imitates a very rare type of Mamluk carpet design with a Kufic border, dating from the 15th century or earlier, of which one of the best known examples is a large fragment in London's Victoria & Albert Museum (11). One has the impression that the artist must have seen either an original Mamluk carpet, or a cartoon or other image of the original. The question remains as to when this might have been?

North Borneo was still under the



British flag when Wong took his photographs, so it is not impossible that the chintz is a modern copy of the published image of an existing Mamluk carpet in a museum in Britain or elsewhere in the West. However, the rarity of Mamluk carpets in general, and especially those with this border, makes it highly unlikely that one was the source of a 20th century commercial effort at creating trade cloth suitable for the Dayak market. It is both more exciting, and arguably more reasonable, to imagine that this hanging might indeed be what it appears to be: an ultra high quality chintz of the type postulated above, with a carpet design. This would explain the vigour of the artistry.

That Indian trade cloth entered Borneo at an early date can be seen the design of the Iban *sungkit* (6) and has been discussed by Ruth Barnes and Traude Gavin ('Iban Prestige Textiles

and the Trade in Indian Cloth: Inspiration and Perception', in *Textile History*, vol.30, no.1, 1999, pp.81-97).

A connection between the Indian Subcontinent and Turkish speaking kingdoms can be shown from as early as 1038, when the Seljuk Turks took Ghazni. The Delhi Sultanate was established in 1206 and during this period the Mamluks, another Turkic dynasty, established a powerful base in this area of northern India. A court-commissioned chintz with a carpet design would have served to express the Turkic aesthetic in the context of an Indian medium.

Another, and perhaps more likely, route by which an early Mamluk pattern could have found its way first to India, and thence to Borneo, would be through Fustat, the port of old Cairo, or one of the Egyptian Red Sea ports such as Quseir al-Qadim that are associated with the prolific Indian Ocean trade. Specimens of Indian trade cloth excavated in Egypt and now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford and other collections establish these as active transit points for trade goods, including textiles, during Mamluk times.

The iconography of these excavated textiles, examples of which have been C-14 dated from the 14th to 16th centuries, includes the *hamsa* or 'goose' design (12) and the 'leaf' design (13). Cloths with identical iconography from the same period have been found miraculously intact in Indonesia. This establishes that trade routes from Egypt to India and between India and Southeast Asia were vital and that a court-commissioned chintz in the Mamluk taste could well have ended



8. Top left: Musicians at an Iban Dayak wedding, north Borneo, ca. 1940-50. After Wong 1960

9. Below far left: Small-pattern Holbein rug (detail), west Anatolia, 15th century. Wher Collection, Switzerland. See HALI 42, p. 86

10. Below left: Large polygon design *sarasa* (detail), Gujarat for the Indonesian market, late 16th or 17th century. Private collection

11. Above: Mamluk carpet fragment, Egypt, late 15th century. Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 150-1908

12. Right: *Hamsa* design cloth (detail), Gujarat for the Indonesian market, 15th/16th century. Private collection

13. Bottom right: 'Leaf' design cloth (detail), Gujarat for the Indonesian market, 15th/16th century. Private collection, Wyoming

up in Borneo, just as a chintz with an Ottoman velvet design ended up in Sulawesi. Further, it is also possible that an elite chintz copy of a Lotto carpet, akin to the Mamluk carpet design chintz, may have served as the prototype for an arabesque *patola* design. In any case, the universal appeal of the design bridges time and space, from head-hunting to court cultures, up to and including the present observer.

My thanks to Sheila Keene for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article.

