



Textiles, Deities And Religious Practices

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Abstract

Textiles have always been an integral part of human societies. Humans historically covered their bodies with a variety of materials, including animal skins and bark. The materials used for covering bodies have evolved from skin to natural fibres to synthetic man-made fibres. One of the earlier instances of utilising textile by fishermen was through spinning of natural fibres into yarn for knitting finishing nets to catch fish for their survival. Fabrics have played crucial roles in the cultural, economic, and spiritual development of their respective communities. Textiles are symbolic and are used in many religious or pious rituals, religious offerings. These have a spatial function, and are used in different forms in religious places, and are used for draping deities and covering religious scriptures. These have been used to preserve and protect sacred texts in various religious traditions. Additionally, textiles may have symbolic meaning in religious rites and ceremonies. For example, a textile or garment's colour, material, and design might invoke spiritual characteristics or transmit particular meanings. The current review paper discusses the use of diverse textiles in the worship practises of people from various regions and religions. The literature depicting the use of textiles by gods and goddess has also been discussed in the paper.

Index terms – textiles, religions, deities, ornamentation

The Neolithic period, between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago, marked the first appearance of the cultural horizon that included the processing of fibre into thread and the transformation of those threads into garments, arguably the oldest human technology (Vollmer, 2018). Discovering different fibres and using it for different purposes evolved at different locations across the globe.

Linen, the cloth obtained from linseed trees, was first developed in ancient Egypt. After the Ancient Egyptians, linen continued to be a staple of clothing in the Western world for many centuries. Wool was developed in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Kashmir Valley. Cotton was reported to have been developed in India and Peru. The prince of textiles, silk was reported have been developed first in China some 5000 years ago. Some of its varieties were manufactured in India (Ghosh & Ghosh, 2017). The wall paintings of Ajanta from the fifth to the eighth centuries provide an invaluable chronicle of the development of the Indian textile industry. The cave frescoes depict servants, dancers, nobles, and musicians wearing loincloths and garments that appear to be patterned by tie-dye, printing, and brocade weaving (Gillow & Barnard, 2008). However, textile artefacts from

the sixth millennium BCE that were discovered in central Europe and the Middle East indicate that textiles were used in religious ceremonies (Vollmer, 2018).

Textiles have symbolic forms and processes. Cloth and its creation were used as life metaphors in the majority of nations that developed textile technology. Textiles are valuable both materially and symbolically. During the time of Byzantine control, silk was an important political instrument. Silk was given as a prize to foreign traders that the Byzantine emperors deemed worthy since it represented monarchy.

"Every religious ceremony and ritual involve textiles." Esoteric philosophic concepts like Buddhist *sutra*, *granthi*, and *tantra* owe their origins to textiles, where *sutra* means 'to weave' and *tantra* means 'to spread the thread' (Dhamija, 2014).

In religious offerings, textiles play a significant role. For example, Tibetans make acts of devotion by donating rectangles of cotton cloth that have been block-printed with prayers to the elements. Offerings of textiles played a significant role in ceremonies celebrating personified deities. In Egyptian culture, the gods were roused in the morning, fed, bathed, dressed, and led on joyous excursions before retiring for the night. Giving clothes to temple idols was a frequent practice in Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Daoist Asia. For example, during the New Year's and birthday celebrations in late imperial China, when prestige cloths were given out, many of the city gods received brand-new robes that were unusually enormous and often had no side seams—a fact that was regularly documented.

The simple Indian cotton gauze scarves used by Tibetan Buddhists and imported Chinese silk scarves with Buddhist designs both imply offering and sacrifice. Exotic imports like this were offered to the gods and used as trade markers in the wool-producing regions of the Tibetan Plateau. As a sign of devotion, Tibetans also present to the elements rectangles of cotton cloth block-printed with prayers. The winds that call forth petitions to the Gods actually destroy these textiles, which are flown from poles, suspended on lines, or attached to the roofs of temples and sanctuaries.

Many cultures likewise revere or hold textiles in the highest regard. For instance, the Ongot, or hearth deities, were entirely made of felt and revered by the nomadic Mongols. Before Buddhism's rich figural iconography emerged after the second century CE, devotees used representations of the Buddha's attributes—such as his mantle and his throne with its cushion covered in textile—as a symbolic object of adoration. Sarita and ma'a, sacred textiles, are symbolic of supernatural power among the Toraja tribes of central Sulawesi.

These textiles are heirlooms passed down through the generations and are used for a number of ritualistic and ceremonial purposes. Monasteries receive donations of applique-worked cloth mandalas from Tibet. Chinese silks and other exotic textiles are used to prepare them. Several Buddhist pantheon deities are portrayed in these mandalas.

Textiles have spatial purposes and are related to space. Textiles have the power to turn a place into a hallowed place or one that conveys the presence of a deity. A table becomes an altar simply by putting a cloth over it, be it the plain linen covering for the Christian altar or the intricately patterned silk covers for the Buddhist incense tables. Repeatedly using textiles or textile sets in a sacred space imbues it with a sense of holiness and serves as a symbol for it. Examples are the red vestments and altar pieces found in churches.

Additionally, textiles have been utilised to cover spaces for religious and spiritual activities—particularly when mats and carpets are used. Buddhist monks frequently use little square woollen carpets embroidered with Buddhist symbols. A vast range of items, including reading tables, books, paper scrolls, pillows, kneelers, and furniture, are covered with fine textiles. Textile valances provide beauty to architectural environments. When the Torah curtain is covered with a kapporet, the Torah shrine transforms into the Ark of the Covenant's mercy seat. Richly embroidered valances were often used to embellish niches holding image sanctuaries in East Asian religious contexts. A portion of these were unique commissions sponsored by temples. Congregation members made a patchwork version of a common Chinese Buddhist valance using their own textiles or temple-donated textiles (Vollmer, 2018).

A Greek idea known as theoxenia deals with showing hospitality to a visiting god. It features a ritual wherein fabrics are used to decorate couches, thrones, or stools to welcome deities. Comparably, the sellesturnium rite from Roman culture involves setting up thrones and chairs with lavish draperies and cushions so that the gods might watch performances held in their honour.

Ancient Greeks communicated with the gods and goddesses through votive gifts, sacrifices, and prayers in order to establish and preserve good ties with them. There were several reasons for offering textiles to gods, as there are with other votive dedications. People have been dedicating textile sacrifices to the deities in order

to have their wishes fulfilled. Both dedication and sacrifice were considered gifts; however, whereas the sacrifice was either consumed as smoke by the gods or the community, a dedication was kept as a tangible item in the sanctuary.

In Hinduism, deities are draped in textiles, and every deity has a distinct fabric. Lord Shiva, the Hindu deity and the yogi par excellence, wraps his waist with nothing but tiger hide. His neck is coiled with a serpent, and a crescent moon adorns his head. The sacred river Ganga flows from his hair, while Lord Vishnu and Brahma wear a silky cotton wrap over their shoulders and loin apparel, or sarong, draped around their waists. The three Hindu goddesses Lakshmi, Parvati, and Saraswati are adorned with rich saris and blouses. These garments are adorned with ornaments of gold and other precious jewels. Rock engravings and paintings of Ellora illustrate goddesses are with *dhoti* wraps. In Hinduism, there is a notion behind selecting appropriate clothing, and several types of clothing are recommended that not only protect one from negative energies but also bring in the good and spiritual energy already present within the devotees. A certain line of clothing is recommended for *dharmaacharan* 'righteous behaviour', which includes *dhoti*, *uparna* 'a shawl', *mala* 'rosary', *gandh* 'sandalwood paste', and so on. Wearing proper attire is supposed to draw positive energy from the environment. Hindu mythology and the apparel of our ancestors can be inferred from the divine attire of Hindu deities (Dwivedi, 1970).

On various occasions, a life-size statue of Lord Krishna sculpted from a single piece of black marble in the temple located in Nathdwara and popularly known as Shrinath ji Temple is decorated with precious gemstones, rubies, pearls, and stones. There, *Thakurji* wears a diversity of turbans, including the *Paga*, *Pheta*, *Dumala*, *Mukut*, *Morshikha*, *Tipara*, and *Gokurna*, among others. Even the fabric and embellishment vary with the season. During the month of *Vaisakh*, from April to May, for instance, vibrant and colourful *mulmul* fabric is used, while *moti* (pearl) and *chandan* (sandal) are used for *shringar* (adornment). During the months of *Ashad*, i.e., June and July, diamond-studded jewellery is popular. During *Phalgun*, the months of February and March, white cotton garments with gilded silver laces are worn. Throughout this month, only gold and *meenakari* (the art of enamelling metal for ornamentation) *shringar* are used. As the month of *Kartika* (October-November) is distinguished by the presence of *Navratri*, weighty brocades of silk are used for clothes, and precious stones are used for jewellery (Sachdeva, 2020).

Mata ni Pachedi are religious wall hangings and canopies from Gujarat that showcase a vibrant folk-art style that combines block printing and freehand sketching. The central figure in these pieces shows one of the Hindu mother deities in a temple or similar setting. These mother goddesses are embodiments of shakti, which is loosely described as power or force. It also features devotees and allusions to religious epics and folklore. Hindu gods and goddesses also have an animal vehicle that aids in iconographic identification of the deity. These religious wall hangings frequently feature a series of bands portraying devotees on their approach to the goddess' temple, as well as a variety of themes based on well-known folklore or religious stories. Religious narrative paintings are not exclusive to Gujarat. Phad story textiles from the neighbouring state of Rajasthan, which tell ancient stories in narrative bands, are a related painting on fabric tradition. Kalamkari fabrics in South India depict religious events through bands of drawings created using both block printing and hand painting (Johnson, 2014).

Religious scriptures are adorned with fabrics that are likewise deemed sacred. Sacred text volumes, such as the Bhagavad Gita, were traditionally covered in red cloth. A red silk cloth was utilised as an additional protecting layer. There could be two reasons for this: first, red is a natural colour, and in ancient times, natural colours or dyes were utilised; second, red is connected with auspiciousness and riches. Aside from red, yellow is considered an auspicious colour. As a result, haldi-kumkum (haldi or turmeric is yellow, and kumkum is red) was seen as a joyous celebration. Thus, it is usual to find objects thought fortunate wrapped in red fabric, red paper, or similar colours. The majority of gold jewellery has been wrapped in crimson paper. Palm leaf collections were wrapped in red silk as a natural dye since these were reasonably free of insect attacks (John et. al. 2014). Textiles can also be used as containers since they isolate what is inside from the outside world and prevent quality or property loss. The act of enclosing a cult image in textiles serves two purposes: it allows the picture to diffuse into an enclosing shape, in this case a textile, and it prevents the image's qualities from escaping. Because the fabrics took on the properties of the God they covered, the textiles used to adorn cult icons became sacred artefacts in themselves (Brøns, 2017).

Textiles are used not only to cover sacred texts, but also to decorate numerous religious sites. In ancient times, flags, regal tents, and other symbols of power were hand-imprinted with silver stamping, also known as Chandi ki chhapai, to signify the holder's prestige and rank. This technique is also known as 'Varak gold or silver leaf printing' because it uses varaks, which are formed by flattening gold or silver to a paper-like consistency. It's a popular adornment in temples and religious sanctuaries (Pareek, 2020).

Banners and hangings highlight the distinctiveness of ritual locations. They may be carried in procession or displayed indoors. The majority of these items are flamboyant and made of lightweight fabrics; some, such as Buddhist temple banners, feature lengthy streamers that add movement and colour to the ritual space. Banners depicting deities convey popular iconography and may have an informal teaching purpose, although they are difficult to distinguish from comparable secular decoration in general (Vollmer, 2018).

Buddha's temple was traditionally decked and embellished with elegantly draped fabric, as is widely known in Tibetan culture's 'textile-conscious' legacy. Religious hangings, such as baldachins, round silk banners, triple banderols, and thangkas, mark the sacred space of Buddhist temples. The pillars, doors, and ceilings are covered in silk brocade stitched with golden and silver threads in ceremonial hues. On important occasions, the clay sculptures of deities that decorate the walls are 'dressed' in beautiful silk textiles. Tabo wall paintings of deities and celestial thrones adorned with textiles reflected Buddhist consecration rituals and devotional practices (Kalantari, 2018). The most valuable religious textiles were and continue to be used to respect important locations in Mecca and Madina, as well as the Prophet Mohammed's tomb in Madina. Even the calligraphic motifs are carefully selected to reflect the purpose and location of a holy textile. Islamic ceremonies and culture rely heavily on Quranic motifs. One of the most remarkable specimens is a green silk bag with gold lettering that was used to carry the Kabba's key. Each year, a special bag is created to hold the key, and it is delivered to the most senior representative of the Banu Shayba, the man appointed by the Prophet Mohammed to protect the Kabba keys 'until the days of judgement' (Ghazal, 2021).

Textiles have long carried both symbolic and economic significance. Prior to the industrial revolution, when most textiles were reduced to disposable consumer commodities, all textiles had intrinsic value due to the effort needed in farming, spinning, dyeing, and weaving. Many monastic establishments used cloistered workshops to create liturgical linens. These companies were typically owned by women, and their textile production is suggestive of specialty dowry items. Some of the time-consuming specialised procedures included in these seminars are analogous to holy acts of worship, such as repeated invocations and blessings.

The majority of textiles used in religious ceremonies have no ceremonial function or meaning as religious symbols. Rather, they serve a purely cosmetic (decorative) function. These textiles, whether temporary or permanent, enhance ritual through magnificent presentation. These decorations often featured fabrics that had been transformed from secular uses for the purpose. Many churches encouraged believers to donate secular prestige textiles as a good deed, and this collection of luxury goods was available for recycling. Especially costly textiles were frequently used to wrap relics and other religious things before storing them in reliquaries. Many specimens of mediaeval silks exist solely in these contexts in the West. Textiles that adorn the inner walls of worship buildings, like the wall paintings they have replaced, are often didactic. Painted cotton temple hangings from northern India, for example, frequently reflect Hindu mythological stories. Many of the tapestries woven for religious organisations in mediaeval Europe represent saints' lives or apocalyptic visions. The appeal of such gigantic fabrics in the West faded as the Gothic architectural style gained traction. The Graham Sutherland tapestry at Coventry Cathedral is an exceptional example of the twentieth-century resurgence of tapestry weaving, which has affected contemporary Western Christian Church decoration (Vollmer, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, textiles have been an integral part of many civilizations, frequently becoming entwined with religious rites and beliefs. These have been utilised to make religious objects, ceremonial clothing, and sacred symbols in many different civilizations. In many religious contexts, textiles have generally functioned as a material manifestation of devotion, spirituality, and cultural identity, demonstrating the close relationship between material culture and religious belief systems. Beautifully created textiles can be offered by devotees as a token of respect, appreciation, or request. These offerings, which are frequently accompanied by prayers or ceremonies, represent a material manifestation of faith and devotion.

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