

# **Generate a Design Tool to Express a Cultural Identity in Thailand by Decoding Khon Demon Mask: A New Perspective**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study has decoded the visual elements of the Khon demon masks to generate a design tool. This is an idea to create an alternative method for designers by using cultural identity as means for design. Six key visual elements are identified by the analysis of the aesthetic appearance and their meanings: color, proportion, material surface, nature inspiration, delicate form and symbolic meaning. After the design tool was generated, twelve graphic designers are selected to use this tool to design their artworks by using all visual elements under the concept, Gentility Fierce. They did not know where the elements came from. Twelve artworks are expressed in their own ways. The designers were interviewed after they finished their works. They suggested this tool limited their ideas because all elements need to be used. They wanted to choose some to fit their ideas. However, they have positive opinions when they knew that this tool was decoded from the Khon demon masks, and understood the decoding process. A majority of them suggested this tool is very interesting because design outcomes are more different than the existing cultural design. This tool helps to transform cultural identity to contemporary design. It also renders new design perspective for the future. They believe that they can use this decoding process to decode other cultural identities which are interesting to them, and used it to create their own tools to generate their new cultural design.

Keywords: Design Tool, Cultural Identity, Khon

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Thailand is a country which has a lot of beautiful, elaborate and delicate cultures, for example *Khon, Lakorn, Loy Krathong and Songkran or even Thai boxing and Thai foods* which are well-known to people around the world. Can these cultural identities be used in another aspect? In the design aspect, it would be good if Thai cultural identities can be integrated with contemporary design. This idea is to study and present a new choice for the designers to help them generate their ideas by *decoding* Thai cultural identities. The question is why Thai cultural identities need to be decoded?

The definition of the word ‘decode’ is to convert a coded message into intelligible language. This means whenever designers want to decode Thai cultural identities they want to study about each cultural identity and then use this understanding to create their designs. There are 2 typical ways to use the cultural identity in the designs as shown in Figure 1. First, the exactly cultural elements are used in the design materials, this concept can be seen in the very traditional design materials. Secondly, the cultural elements are integrated to the design materials. This concept is popular in the contemporary design. Designers will apply some cultural elements to their works.



Figure 1: A design material which the exactly cultural elements are used (left) and one which some cultural elements are applied (right).

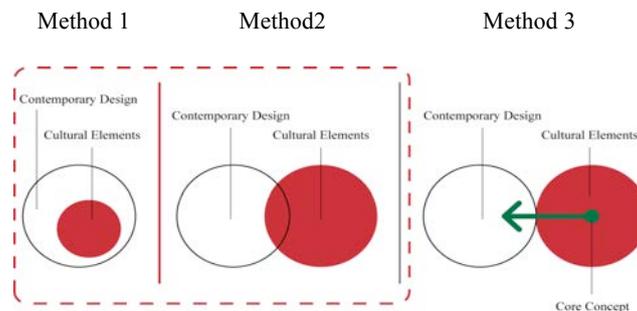


Figure 2: The difference among 3 methods of cultural design.

As shown in Figure 2, the difference among the methods of cultural design. Two diagrams in the dashed line square are the existing methods that designers have already used to generate cultural design. The first one on the left, the exactly cultural elements are used in the design materials, this concept can be seen in the very traditional design materials. Secondly, the cultural elements are integrated to the design materials. This concept is popular in the contemporary design. Designers will apply some cultural elements to their works. The last one (on the right) is the diagram for this study. It decodes the core concept of the cultural elements, then use this decoded knowledge as a tool to create new artworks.

Khon Demon Mask is a cultural identity as focused by the study. As suggested by Bridhyakorn and Yupho (1962) that ‘the mask is perhaps the most important

characteristics of the Khon, for through it more than any other agency one distinguishes the variety of roles'<sup>1</sup>

Khon masks are divided into 3 distinct types: humans, non-humans or demon, monkeys and animals. The Khon mask for a human and celestial being looks like a man's face, reflecting vigor and energy. Unlike that of a non-human or demon which has a fierce look. The masks of monkeys and other animals are fashioned into 2 styles. The first covers the whole face. The second is in the form of the head of an animal to be placed on the head of an actor. The monkey mask is usually decorated intricately. Accessories are considered to indicate the status of each character. Over ten styles of crowns are employed with Khon masks. There are six types of demon masks depending on the features of the eyes, mouths and fangs. The monkey mask, with or without a crown, also indicates the status of a monkey character. Apart from heads and faces, colors are also important for distinguishing the features of the characteristic parts.



Figure 3: The Khon Masks; human (left), demon (middle), monkey (right)

The Khon demon mask consists of 3 features:

1. Appearance - The elements are shown on the mask, such as eyes, mouths, fangs, facial colors and headdresses.
2. Knowledge - The artisans use their local wisdoms and techniques to create the demon masks, applied the existing environments to the demon masks. For example, all of the headdresses are inspired by the natural materials.
3. Value - Thai people believed that the demon masks are a respectable material. The artisans and the Khon dancers should pay respect to the masks because they believed that the gods live in the masks whenever people show disrespect to the masks, they will get very bad things.

The study will mainly focus on the decode of the visual appearance of the demon mask and develop it as a design tool. This tool will be tested in order to study its effectiveness to be used for the contemporary design.

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<sup>1</sup> H.H. Prince Dhanivat, Kromamün Bidyā labh Bridayākorṇ and Mr. Dhanit Yupho, The Khon, Bangkok, Thailand, p.20 (2001)

## 2. THEORETICAL ISSUE

The appearance of the demon mask consists of 6 elements:<sup>2</sup> eyes, mouths, fangs, facial colors, headdresses and materials.

Regarding the eyes, the demon masks have 2 eye shapes i.e. Bulging eyes and Crocodile eyes. The eye shape can express a different characteristics of its character. The crocodile eyes can express more fierceful and aggressive than the other.



Figure 4: The difference between Bulging eyes (left) and Crocodile eyes (right).<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the mouths, the demon masks have 2 types of mouths which are Snarling mouth and Clamping mouth. Each type of the mouth can express its characteristics. The clamping mouth is more fierceful than the snarling one.



Figure 5: The difference between Snarling mouth (left) and Clamping mouth (right).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the fangs, there are 3 special characteristics of fangs<sup>5</sup> which are Straight fang, Curve fang and Jasmine fang (little fang). Each shape can express the level of its fierce. The curve fangs are more fierceful than the straight one, and the jasmine fang is used only for the young demon.



Figure 6: The difference among straight (left), curve (middle) and jasmine fang (right).

Regarding the colors, the demon masks have one hundred and fifty-nine different characteristics in Ramakian. It is very difficult to distinguish each other, one way to differentiate them is to identify their characters by color. There are too many colors

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<sup>2</sup> Department of the Ten Crafts, Department of Fine Art, Head Adornments: Focusing on Khon Masks (เครื่องศิวาครณ์: ศึกษาเฉพาะกรณีหัวโขน), Bangkok, Thailand, p.23 (1993)

<sup>3</sup> Sumalin Phueangphan, Khon Mask and Characters in Ramakien (หัวโขนและตัวละครในรามเกียรติ์), Bangkok, Thailand, p.19 (1989)

<sup>4</sup> Sumalin Phueangphan, Khon Mask and Characters in Ramakien (หัวโขนและตัวละครในรามเกียรติ์), Bangkok, Thailand, p.19 (1989)

<sup>5</sup> Department of the Ten Crafts, Department of Fine Art, Head Adornments: Focusing on Khon Masks (เครื่องศิวาครณ์: ศึกษาเฉพาะกรณีหัวโขน), Bangkok, Thailand, p.25 (1993)

which are used for the Khon's demon masks, all of these colors come from the natural materials, such as trees, soil, rust and charcoal. These materials are mixed with the resin of the acacia tree in the right ratio<sup>6 7</sup> to create dark tone color painted on the mask to express ferocity. The term 'dark tone' in the tradition way is not like dark tone color in the present day, which is just mixed black into any color. In the tradition style, artisans mix more of the same colors to make it darker. For example, green color is the combination of yellow and blue, if artisans want it darker they add more blue not black, the darkness of each color depends on each artisan's perception. Even though the eyes, mouths, fangs and facial colors can distinguish the demon masks from one another, it is still difficult to differentiate the masks. According to UCOM (1999) the scholars categorized all colors into 9 groups, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Color categories for Khon masks.

Group Names	Group members
Red	Daeng, Daeng chad, Daeng sen, Din daeng, Lichee, Hong sa bat, Hong din, Hong chad, Hong sen, Sad, Dok chaba and Fa lap
Yellow	Lueang, Lueang on, Lueang thao, Lueam lueang, Lueam praphatson and Chan
Blue	Khram, Khram on, Dok tabak and Mo khram
Purple	Muang, Bua roy, Muang kae and Muang on
Green	Khiaw, Kam pu and Nam lhai
Black	Dam, Dam muek, Phan dam and Mo muek
Grey	Thao, Phan khaw and mek
Brown	Nam rak and Phan daeng
White	White

<sup>6</sup> Department of the Ten Crafts, Department of Fine Art, Head Adornments: Focusing on Khon Masks (เครื่องศีรษะ: ศึกษาเฉพาะกรณีสหัวโขน), Bangkok, Thailand, p.31 (1993)

<sup>7</sup> Thanit Kaewniyom, Delicate craftsmanship and Head Adornment: Focusing on the Making of Khon Mask (งานช่างประณีตศิลป์และศีรษะ: เฉพาะการสร้างหัวโขน), Department of Fine Art, Bangkok, Thailand, p.38 (1994)

According to these color groups. The demon masks can be categorized into 7 groups: red (top left), green (top middle), purple (top right), yellow (middle left), white (middle), blue (middle right) and black (bottom), as shown in Figure 7.



Figure 7: Seven color groups of the demon masks.

Regarding the headdresses, the demon masks have 10 types of the peaked mask. The headdress is another element which helps to differentiate the characteristics of the demon masks. The demon masks have 14 types of the headdresses. In these types, they can be divided into 2 types: (1) peaked masks: the mask with the headdress and (2) bald masks: the mask without the headdress. Most of the demon masks are the peaked mask. There are 10 types of the peaked masks as shown in Figure 8. For example, Yod Kra Nok Crown is inspired by Thai traditional art which called Kranok. Yod Hang Kai Crown is inspired by the form of cock's tail. Yod Hang Lhai Crown is inspired by the eel. Yod Sam Klib Crown is inspired by the petal of Champak and Yod Nak Crown is inspired by the naga's head.

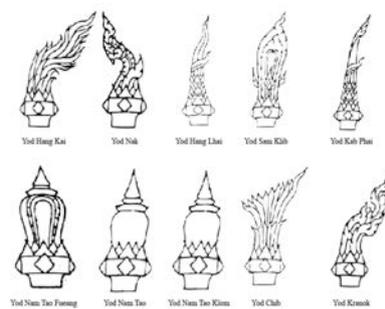


Figure 8: The Peaked masks of the demon mask.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> UCOM Group Co. Ltd., Khon Mask: Thai National Art Treasury (หัวข้อ: สมบัติศิลป์ แผ่นดินไทย), Bangkok, Thailand, pp. 25-26 (1999)

Regarding the materials, all demon masks are made of natural materials found in everyday life, such as pearl and animal skin. The masks' surface materials are shiny and reflective with the light, such as diamond, gem and gold. The artisans have to use the important material, called 'Rak-Samuk (Semi-hard lacquer)'. This material is always used for the facial sculpture process, to sharpen and highlight their facial line. Rak-Samuk comes from the mixture among Rak rubber, Samuk, oleo-resin and red lime. This material can be molded in many shapes before it dried. It becomes stiff and stays in shape for a long time. It is hard to break, unless it hits with strong force.

Due to the fact that Khon mask is an artifact which transfer the inspiration of the artisan to the symbol. There are the theory which related to these ideas called 'Semiotic'.

Semiotics, also named 'semiotic studies' or 'semiology', is the study of cultural sign processes (semiosis), analogy, metaphor, signification and communication, signs and symbols. Semiotics is closely related to the field of linguistics, which in its part, studies the structure and meaning of language more specifically.

Semiotics is the study of the relationship between 'signified' and 'signifier', studying how the meaning is created and how it is instructed. Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), a Swiss linguist said every 'semeion' or 'sign' should has the following two elements. 'Signified' is the concept which occurs in the mind or the idea of audience. 'Signifier' is the thing which we can perceive via our senses, such as visual text, images or hear sounds that are emitted (acoustic-image). The relationship between signs is occurred by the logic of difference. The meaning of each sign comes from the comparison that it is different from others in the same system. If it is no difference, the meaning cannot happen. The difference making the most obvious meaning is called 'binary opposite' i.e. white-black, good-bad and hot-cold.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher, logician, mathematician, and scientist categorized the relationship between signified and signifier to 3 groups. First, 'icon' is the relationship between signified and signifier, the same as or similar to what it reflected for example photograph, portrait, movie and diagram. Secondly, 'index' is the result or identification of something about the relationship between signified and signifier i.e. the animal's footprint on the ground, whenever the footprint is seen, it is reminded about the animal which owed it. Finally, 'symbol' is the relationship between signified and signifier which indicates something that they do not have any similarity. The usage must be in term of convention and representation which is the social acceptance of this relationship for instance, wearing the ring on the left-ring finger represents the marriage.



Figure 9: Icon (left), Index (middle), Symbol (right).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

At the beginning, the study decoded the Khon demon mask to generate a design tool. This generated tool done by the analysis of the Khon's visual appearance and the interview of 2 Khon mask masters. The tool consists of one core concept and six key aspects. The main concept which analyzed from the demon masks is 'Gentility Fierce'. The artwork needs to convey the sense of 'ferocity'. At the same time, this ferocity also needs to show in the 'gentility' approach.

Six key aspects are as the following:

**Color:** After I analyzed masks, what are their facial colors and then put them in the groups and then treat all of them as "one" and calculated the ratio between the group's members in term of percentage. These are 7 groups of colors used for the demon masks; green, red, purple, white, black, blue and yellow. The ratio of these colors in term of percentage is shown in Figure 10.

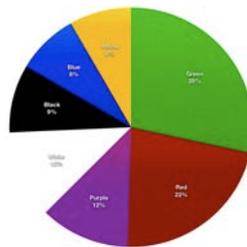


Figure 10 : The ratio among the colors of the demon masks.

**Proportion:** Ten peaked masks with the different headdresses were analyzed in the same scale in 2D proportion, width (W) x height (H).

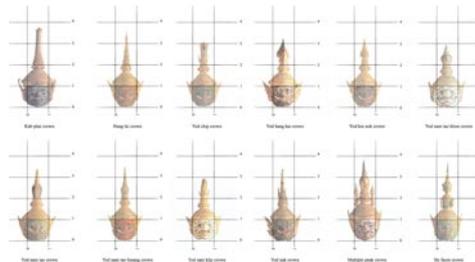


Figure 11: The proportion of the masks with the headdresses.

As shown in Figure 11, the most of the masks have 1:3 proportion. Since the masks have to be worn on the human's head, so their proportion should be analyzed in 3D proportion. However, the depth of the mask is customized to each human head which is very difficult to analyze the depth. Estimating from the human scale in comparison with the demon mask is shown in Figure 12

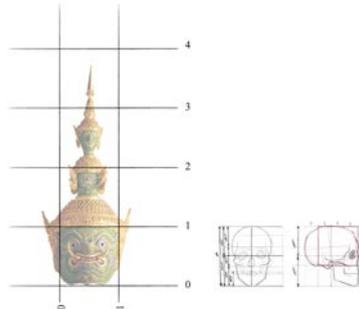


Figure 12: The comparison between the demon mask and the human head.<sup>9</sup>

The ratio between the width and the depth of the mask is about 1:1 1/3. As the result, the three dimensional proportion of the demon mask is

$$\text{width: depth: height} = 1: 1 \frac{1}{3}: 3$$

3. Shiny and Reflective Material: In term of materials, all of them come from the natural things in everyday life, such as pearl and animal skin. Their surface should be shiny and can reflect with the light such as diamond, gem and gold.

4. Inspired by Nature, Delicate Form and Symbol: In the past, the artisans designed the demon masks by the inspiration of Thais' surroundings in everyday life, traditional arts and beliefs. With this information, some elements in the demon masks have the inspirations from natural elements. According to the semiotics theory, the nature is *the icon* of the mask and the artisans design the mask's elements as *the index* and expressed them as *the symbol*. For example, the headdress called Yod Kranok Crown. is inspired by the Thai traditional art, *the icon* of this idea is *Thai traditional art*, then they used the traditional element called 'Kranok' to represent as *the index* of their icon and after that, they use only the form or outline of Kranok as the symbolic idea of this type of the headdress which reflects the Thai traditional art. It can be analyzed that all inspirations come from 'Natural Elements' i.e. parts of the animals, local fruits and plants. This is the *icon* of the demon masks' inspiration and when the shape and form of the natural elements were analyzed, their shapes have a sense of delicateness. So 'Delicate Form' is the index identified by the

<sup>9</sup> Head Proportions-How to Draw Head [Online],  
<http://www.draw23.com/skull-sketch> [26 April 2011]

inspiration. And the index is presented by using ‘Symbol’, This represents the inspiration as symbol.

After the design tool was generated, twelve graphic designers were selected to test it. The designers were assigned to follow its instruction and design their artworks under the core expressive concept ‘Gentility Fierce’. The designers participating in this test were the graphic designers and photographers, they got the explanation about how this design tool worked. The study did not mention about the tool’s background. They have to use all of these keywords; proportion, inspired by nature, shiny and reflectable materials, delicate form, sign as symbol and colors to help them generate their artworks.

This is the instruction for the designers, as put in the design tool, as shown in Figure 13.

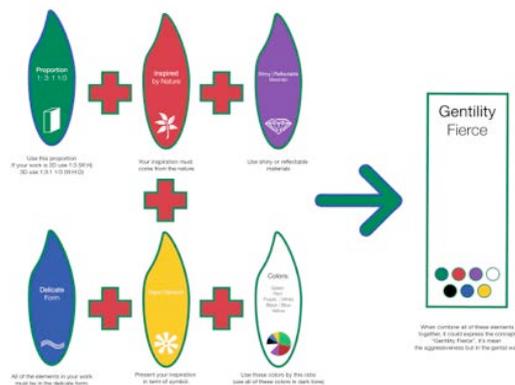


Figure 13: The design tool.

- Proportion: The designers have to use the proportion 1:3 for the main object or the main idea of their artwork.
- Inspired by Nature: All of the inspirations must come from the nature materials.
- Shiny and Reflectable Material: For this keyword, the designers have to show the materials which can reflect to the light i.e. gems and diamond in their artwork. Since this artwork is 2D artwork, it will be difficult for designers to show the materials through their artworks so this can be the exception for them to skip this keyword if they want.
- Delicate Form: In this artwork, all elements must be in the delicate form.
- Symbols: After the designers got inspiration, the designers have to present their inspiration in a symbolic way, not use the inspiration in the real forms.
- Color: The designer can use all of the colors which are shown in Figure 11 or just select some colors which are fit to their artworks.

After the designed artworks were finished, the designers were interviewed for the feedbacks about the usage and asked for their suggestions about this design tool via the questionnaire. There were 4 questions (1) how the designers implement six key

aspects from a design tool to their artworks? (2) What is your opinion for the design tool when you used it as a tool to communicate the concept ‘Gentility Fierce’? (3) Which keywords can help you to express your ideas in term of ‘Gentility’ and ‘Fierce’ (4) What is your suggestions for this design tool? The designers were interviewed after they completed the questionnaire. Before the interview session ended, the designers got the explanation about the starting point of this design tool. At the end, they were asked for the opinion for this tool again.

#### 4.RESULTS

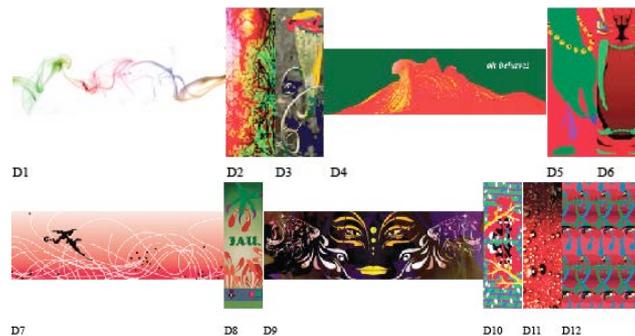


Figure 14: The design outcomes

As shown in Figure 14, twelve designers can use the design tool to generate the different impressive artworks which are under the core expressive concept ‘Gentility Fierce’, based on their backgrounds.

According to the research analysis, most of the effective keywords for the designers to use to communicate the concept ‘Gentility Fierce’ are ‘Inspired by Nature’ and ‘Symbols’ because both of them can express both senses of gentility and fierce. It is a good scope for them to use these keywords to express their idea and most of the designers also use both of these keywords to express their design identities. On the contrary, the keywords ‘Proportion’ and ‘Shiny and Reflective Materials’ are the least effective in this design tool because they do not express any sense of gentility or fierce. For the rest of the keywords, ‘Delicate Form’ is effective to express the sense of gentility more than the sense of fierce. ‘Colors’ are more related to gentility but when using these colors in dark tone, they can express the sense of fierce. Most of the designers mention that this tool is very new, interesting and exciting to them because it decodes Thai cultural elements, then brings Thainess which has already decoded to create the design. This tool makes the design much different from the previous cultural design which is very traditional. The combination between the traditional ideology and the contemporary renders new design perspective for the future. However, this design tool still has some weak points. The limitation comes from the keywords. They blocked imagination because the tool instruction require users to use all of the 6 keywords together, it is very strict. It will be better if some keywords can be chosen to fit the ideas.

## **6. SUGGESTION**

This study is only a case on a cultural identity. In the future the visual expression of any cultural identities can be decoded by following the study suggestion. Since the cultural issue is very sensitive, before starting decoding any cultural identity, these issue should be concerned. The first thing is 'Core Concept Understanding'. A very clear understanding is crucial about the cultural identity, it protects decoding it in the wrong way. If a wrong understanding is occurred, it will be decoding the wrong way and the worst effect is designers who use the tool and audience who perceive the artworks from these designers will get the wrong information. The second issue is 'Information Conflict'. Since the cultural information are historically recorded, there can be the possibility of changing information. So, it is necessary to compare the collected information all together and then analyze for the true information. The last important issue is 'Personal Bias'. The cultural knowledge is the common knowledge that everyone already knows. Sometimes when you start to study about the cultural issue, you may found that the information which you have already know is not the same as the information which you got from the research. In this case, please do not make the decision on the existing knowledge either right or wrong, it is better to go to study more and finally the right answers will be appear.

In the case of cultural design, a design tool will has more value when it was generated from the deeper understanding in each cultural identity. The Khon demon mask consists of 3 features (1) Appearance (2) Knowledge (3) Value This study has only emphasized on the visual appearance. For future research other aspects can be studied further: 'Knowledge' and 'Value'. It would provide a new perspective to increase more aspect in design tool. As a result, this tool could help designers to produce more valuable artworks, and the audience will be able to collect specific cultural value contents more easily.

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