Ikat from Timor and its outer islands: insular and interwoven

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PREFACE

The research presented here results from a personal passion and commitment. Much as Franz Boas, father of the American school of relativist anthropology, felt that the anthropologist should be engaged on behalf of threatened Indigenous peoples (Smith *et al.* 2014:94), I feel engaged with a threatened cultural tradition, to wit, the ikat[1] of the Indonesian islands. My dedication has manifested itself in (a) creating an archipelago-spanning physical reference set, to then document it with a level of detail not previously realized[2]; (b) curating exhibitions on ikat from the region at the Museu do Oriente in Lisbon (2014 and 2019) and writing, respectively editing, their catalogues[3]; (c) curating the exhibition 'Fibres of Life' held at the University of Hong Kong's Museum and Art Gallery (2017), and writing its catalogue entitled *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago* (ten Hoopen 2018). The present publication *Ikat from Timor and its Outer Islands: Insular and Interwoven*, builds on these previous works, which, apart from providing new insights, also exposed numerous lacunae in our knowledge – most specifically with regard to the technical aspects of these textiles, their impact on the lives of the women who produced them, and their reasons for what occasionally seemed gratuitously complex design choices.

I first saw an ikat textile, a men's wrap from the isle of Sumba, in 1975 and was mesmerized by the shimmering patterns: outlines the eye failed to firmly define, motifs that the mind could not quite grasp because they seemed stable, yet not quite steady. This was precisely what struck Rouffaer, when in 1901 he introduced ikat to his The Hague audience in a 16-page lecture on the occasion of the 'Exhibition of East Indian textiles, Javanase batiks and old-Indian furniture, for a circle of invitees': "Patterns, then, that are characterised by their colours not standing firmly separated, but, to the contrary, gently flowing into one another, having slightly penetrated beyond their intended boundaries, thus giving the woven cloth a very attractive aspect of haziness and merging tonalities (1902:2) [translation PtH]". A century later, ikat had gained familiarity, but lost none of its unique magnetism: "[Ikat] weaving itself radiates a kind of magic, capable of spellbinding even the most realistic western people (van Vuuren 2001:81)".

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[1] The Malay verb *ikat* means 'to tie, to bind'. Rouffaer in July of 1901 noted that the Dutch verb "ikatten" had come into vogue to describe a technique about which little was known in the past, but which turned out to be used from Aceh to "close to New Guinea" – presumably referring to Tanimbar (1902:2). The word has since come to be universally used for both the technique and the finished product, wherever in the world it is made. Warp ikat is a compression-resist technique for textile decoration that relies on placing impermeable bindings on sections of the warp that the weaver does not wish to absorb dye in consecutive dye baths. Weft ikat, whereby such bindings are placed on the warp, and double ikat, which requires bindings on both, are not practiced in the region under study.

[2] See the Pusaka Collection website, URL: www.ikat.us.

[3] *Linguagens Tecidas/Woven Languages* (2014) and *Timor: Totems e Traços/Timor: Totems and Tokens* (2019).

Learning how ikat is produced, by binding off parts of the yarn that one does not want to absorb colour during the following dye bath, made me aware that the attractive visual effect *de facto* resulted from errors or unwanted consequences such as dye seepage, unequal stretching of the cotton yarns and tiny imperfections of alignment. Whereas in the arts humans typically seek perfection, here the subversion of perfection generated attraction.

Having spent a brief but formative period at an IBM research laboratory in my twenties, I was thrilled to recognize that the design of ikat cloths relied on programming. Just like the punch cards used at that time, where a location could have either a hole punched or not, representing a value of one or zero, ikat is inherently binary – there is a binding on a particular spot, or there is not (see Fig. 2). There is no middle ground, no shading.

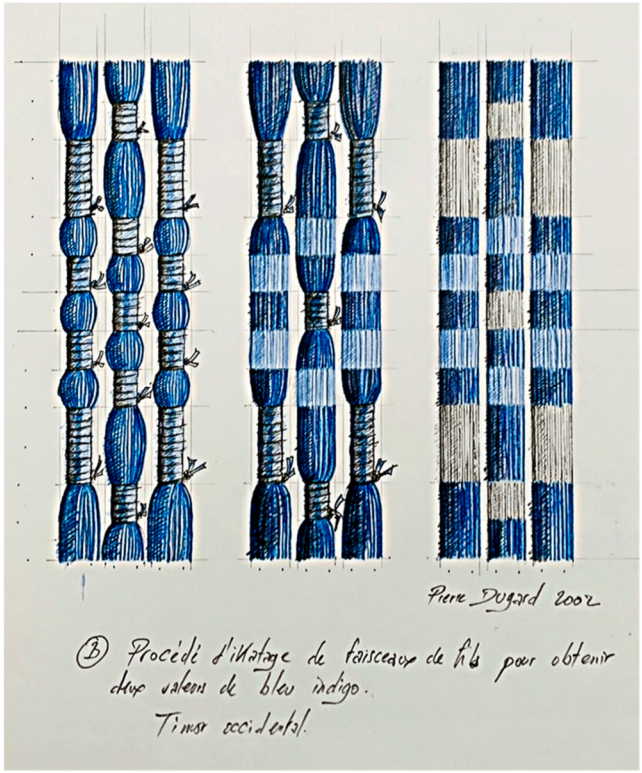

Fig. 2 Drawing by Pierre Dugard, made in West Timor in 2002: *"Procédé de ikatage de faisceaux de fils pour obtenir deux valeurs de bleu indigo"*. It explains the basics of the ikat process, the placing of reserves – demonstrating ikat's binary nature, while also showing how to escape the strictures of a binary technique by overdyeing, practiced in most island regions, either with the same dye, as in this example, or in different colours. In some regions overdying is mandatory for ceremonial use. In Ili Mandiri (East Flores), for instance, a bridewealth sarong, *kewatek méan* (see Fig. 6), must contain motifs coloured by *belapit*, the overdying of indigo and morinda. *Source:* Collection Pierre Dugard.

The same holds true for all other reserve techniques, such as batik, *plangi* and *tritik*: the choice is between allowing a spot to absorb dye or not (although by means of overdyeing additional shades may be created). But with these other techniques the patterns are analog, and can have fluid, even flowery, shapes. In ikat all motifs are constructed out of rectilinear building blocks, like rods of different lengths running in parallel.[1] I analyzed what it took to produce intertwining, nesting or mirroring motifs, or fields covered in arrays of small patterns, and realized that Indonesian ikat weavers had

[1] The Ibanic peoples of Borneo call bundles of warp yarns *kayu'*, which means tree or wood. This word is also used as a numeral classifier for long cylindrical shapes, which is perfectly apt for a tightly wound bundle of yarns (John Kreifeldt, pers. comm., 2021; Chalmers 1998:161-166). The terms rod and stroke could be used interchangeably to describe sections of ikated yarns, but however apt the former may be, for the sake of clarity only stroke will be used from here on, given precedence over the more technically apt rod because it evokes a gesture in drawing, a subject that is at the heart of this investigation. An alternative term, bar, is used occasionally, where reference is made to the ikat technique producing elongated pixels.

developed and memorized advanced algorithms, which they passed along through the generations.

Observing how intellectually challenging and immensely time-consuming ikat weaving was – if of the traditional kind, with hand-spun cotton and home-brewn dyes – made me realise that it stood no chance to survive in the modern world. This assessment created two parallel urges: to assemble emblematic examples from as many regions as possible, ideally covering the entire archipelago, and to document them to the best of ability.

The earliest recourse was to the classics of ikat research, in the first place the German ethnographer Ernst Vatter's *Ata Kiwan* (1932). This distinguished German ethnographer (1888-1948) meticulously described his voyage to eastern Flores and the Solor & Alor Archipelago, during which numerous items of high quality were acquired, to be preserved at the Städtisches Völkermuseum in Frankfurt (later renamed Museum für Völkerkunde and in 2001 Museum der Weltkulturen). This very journey inspired my own travels to these islands during the early 1980s, likewise blessed with a young consort who was willing to accept occasional discomfort for the sake of exploration.

Vatter already pointed out that ikat, as it had been practiced since time immemorial, was deteriorating:

> The young women do still make ikat, but the patterns are simpler, the execution is mostly indifferent and superficial. The current generation has neither the time nor the patience for this work. It is not just the import of cheap European or Indian cottons that displaces the old technique, but a change in the natives themselves. The beautiful, richly patterned cloths of the older generation were more than mere clothing: they served as bridewealth, a valuable part of the family treasure. Ornamentation and colouration were not left to the personal invention and taste of the maker, but passed along from one generation to the next, and charged with secret magic-religious meaning, which in its idiosyncrasy was owned by the clan. All these preconditions are fading away for the young women; the girls find it too boring to work for years on a cloth that has no spiritual content for them anymore. As the old women die off, the ikat technique gradually passes away with them – along with it the ancient cultural wealth that still holds vitality only for the old generation (Vatter 1932:222) [translation PtH].

While this lament rings highly contemporary, it was uttered not today but in 1932.

Fortunately several museums started acquiring ikat textiles early. One of the first to establish a substantial collection of Indonesian textiles was 'sRijks Ethnographisch Museum in Leiden, established in 1837. It was later renamed Museum Volkenkunde, then in 2014 Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, and in recent years *de facto* absorbed the other two ethnological museums of the Netherlands with substantial Indonesia collections. It holds what is presumably the world's oldest collection of textiles from the Lesser Sunda Islands, assembled between 1826 and 1835 by the German naturalist Salomon Müller. Another early entrant in the field is the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde which was founded in 1883 in Rotterdam, later renamed Wereldmuseum, and in 2017 was integrated into the Leiden Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Its holdings include a well-known group of mid-19th-century men's wraps from Sumba, many of them among the finest in the world. The Amsterdam Tropenmuseum, established in 1864 and now also integrated in the

Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, absorbed the collections of Indonesian material culture that were formed in the Koloniaal Museum in Haarlem in 1838 and Amsterdam's Zoölogisch Genootschap Natura Artis Magistra in 1864 (van Hout 2017:21). In the German-speaking world, too, an early interest for textiles existed. Rich early collections are held in Krefeld, Cologne, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Hildesheim, Basel and Vienna[1], and smaller ones all over Europe, including the United Kingdom.

In the U.S. and Australia, by the third quarter of the 20th century, most of the grand private collections had already been built, and found their way to major museums. Robert J. Holmgren and Anita E. Spertus's collection largely went to the Yale University Art Gallery (New Haven, Connecticut), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the National Gallery of Australia (Canberra). Steven G. Alpert's provided the body of the Dallas Museum of Art's Indonesia section, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg's as well as Michael Abbott's enriched the National Gallery of Australia, the E.M. Bakwin Collection found a home in the Art Institute of Chicago. These collections had been built up by wealthy individuals who could afford to go in with open wallets and acquire any heirlooms of the higher classes that they could find.

So one would think that by the early 1980s, when the present author committed himself to creating an archipelago-wide physical reference set, the field had already been cleared of all important pieces. However, this turned out not to be the case. Rare pieces of great quality could (and can) yet be found, but one needed to be patient, on occasion even waiting decades before a representative of a vanished type finally presented itself. Even more significantly, a wholly different type of collection could still be realized. All the renowned private collections were primarily focused on showing treasure; stunning pieces, best of type. What could still be done was to create a purely ethnographic reference set, a scholarly overview of the entire Indonesian archipelago in order to establish (a) which types of ikat textiles are produced where; (b) how do we recognize their origins; (c) what do we know about their weavers; and (d) which changes do we observe over time in terms of material use and style?

It also seemed that proper care for the studied region's cultural heritage required contextualizing the investigated specimens from a scholarly perspective: in which universities or museums are they housed, and which works of reference include similar examples? How do these compare? It gradually became clear that in this respect an enhancement of our knowledge could yet be contributed by mapping out in detail what may be called the 'ikat archipelago',[2] with its rich interculturality, and providing other researchers with a large number of cues for further investigation.

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[1] The Weltmuseum Wien (the former Museum für Völkerkunde) in Vienna holds a gift made to Archduke Franz Ferdinand, during his 1892/1893 tour around the world on an escorted navy cruiser, on the occasion of a stopover on Ambon. The then Governor of the Moluccas, Baron van Hoëvell, presented the archduke with a collection of over 1000 artefacts of ethnographic importance, which included numerous ikat textiles of high quality.

[2] A term coined by Gary Gartenberg, pers. comm., 2015.

Athough from the outset it was evident that such an *opus magnum* could consume a fair part of a lifetime, it was embarked upon without hesitation, and in fact in a spirit of urgency. The ubiquitous and rapid decline of the ikat culture across the archipelago rendered it of paramount importance to (a) start close-reading the textiles in the present collection; (b) record and systematize knowledge gleaned from personal experience in the field; (c) inspect museum depots; and (d) assess primary sources and collate information gathered in exchanges with fellow collectors, curators and dealers all over the world. The amalgamation of input extracted from all the sources allowed thick description *sensu* Geertz ([1973] 2000:311-323) of the textiles – initially just on the above-mentioned Pusaka Collection website, which after its inception in 2000 has hugely expanded, reaching more than 1500 pages to date[1].

In 2015, I collaborated closely with Dr. Florian Knothe, the Director of University Museum and Art Gallery, the University of Hong Kong, to realize this ambition, which resulted in the 2017 exhibition 'Fibres of Life' – the most comprehensive exhibition of Indonesian ikat textiles to date, with 100 textiles on display – and the publication of *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago* (ten Hoopen 2018), which shows 200 mostly early examples that serve as historical records of past styles and techniques. While preparing this reference work, a number of issues were encountered that invited further investigation, but could not possibly be fitted into what was already becoming a tome of serious proportions, liberally exceeding the page count originally foreseen. These issues, however interesting, had to be shelved for the time being.

Early in 2019 I was invited to pursue a doctorate at Leiden University as a guest, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. R.H.A. Corbey and Prof. Dr. P.J. ter Keurs. This presented the perfect opportunity to bring clarity to certain areas, as summarized above, that have remained underexposed, one even to the point of being overlooked by several generations of scholars; until recently including the present author. The research process went rapidly, as it had a running start: I could build on a number of observations made earlier, that just needed to be expanded and formalized. But the most important facilitating factor was the trust invested in me by my supervisors, which produced a constantly felt need to perform. This was heightened by Prof. Dr. R.H.A. Corbey's generous gifts of editorial support, and his guidance regarding anthropological sources that might give me new insights and enrich the documentation of my findings. These gifts made me realize that Mauss's *Essai sur le Don*, one of the foundational texts of the Leiden school of anthropology, also applied to the relationship between the PhD candidate and his (or her) supervisor: those generous gifts require (a) to be received and (b) to be reciprocated.

This understanding made me deliver a counter-prestation at the height of my ability, 'materially' advancing the documentation of the ikat of the Indonesian archipelago. The adverb is especially apposite here because a substantial part of the unprecedented

[1] Recent count: 1524 webpages when crawled on 21-06-2020.

underlying investigation pertains to materiality: how exactly the raw material was transformed into the finished textiles.

The technical analysis of the specimens, which comprised measurement, weighing, thread-counting and microscopic inspection, provides us with an angle on the apparent motivation of the weavers and on the creative intelligence they reflect. This analysis informs us on aspects of interculturality, as well as, perhaps more importantly, the social circumstances of the women who initiated the ikat culture across the archipelago, sustained and developed it through the ages and brought it to the level of a world-class art form.