Ikat from Timor and its outer islands: insular and interwoven

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5. IKAT IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT

[O]ne tries to understand what has been observed by considering it as a manifestation of a structure which may itself be hidden.

de Josselin de Jong (1977:233)

We know from the existing literature that ikat textiles have a great variety of social roles, but the role of the women's dyeing and weaving as a pursuit with identifiable social roots and consequences has remained underlit. So has ikating as the main manner in which females could manifest their talents. The author aims to redress this situation in the present chapter by studying ikating in its societal context, suffused as it was, and to a certain extent still is, with the ancient headhunting ethos and its inherent spirit of competition.

To fully recognize the import of the women's work and the way it counterbalances the men's, we may need to see it in a Maussian perspective: ikating as the women's counter-prestation to the men's martial prestations. In this context we should take into account four connected aspects, to wit (a) ikat's agency (its impact on society and producer), which has enjoyed scant attention; (b) ikat's empowerment of the women, which has been understudied[1]; (c) the use of ikat in marriage exchanges; and (d) ikat's equipoise with the men's headhunting. The latter aspect has been dealt with by several authors (e.g. Haddon & Start [1936] 1982:22; Gittinger 1979:219; Gavin 1996: *passim*), but it may need to be recontextualized, integrating contemporary perspectives with their accent on competition for mates (Miller 2000; Heppell *et al.* 2005).

We may also need to incorporate an understanding of virtuosity – particularly with regard to the factors that cause its florescence. The underlying psychology is an indispensable extension of our research as highly labour-intensive examples of virtuosity have come to light during this investigation which make us wonder what motived their manufacture. Such specimens confirm Veblen's recognition of clothing as supremely suitable for the manifestation of pecuniary standing ([1899] 1934:167) and are emblematic examples of costly signalling *sensu* Smith & Bliege Bird (2005). As we gain a better appreciation of the technological proficiency required for the production of high class ikat we should also take into consideration Gell's "Technology of Enchantment and Enchantment of Technology" (1994). To integrate these various new perspectives we can rely on the conceptual framework regarding the presentation of self developed by Goffman ([1959] 1990).

Ikat's consequential agency

Ikat textiles are deeply embedded in the producing community and play a vital role in its

[1] Bar the contemporary pursuit of women's empowerment in the context of NGO-sponsored 'ikat revival', which is of a different, usually purely monetary nature.

cultural and ritual life. Nearly all have consequential agency, in the sense of impacting on the community in which they came into being, and on the life of their creators, and once

> appreciated as indexes of agency, iconic objects in particular can occupy positions in the networks of human social agency that are almost equivalent to the positions of humans themselves (Thomas 1998:vii).

Such near-equivalence requires a reconceptualising of 'object' from an inactive entity that passively undergoes our actions, to something active and momentous.[1] Iconic objects, such as mentioned by Thomas, a category that surely includes ikat textiles, can play a 'vital' role in the lives of those who made and wore them. In the case of ikat this role is both prominent and intimate. First, they are making their genesis felt in daily life for months or years on end, taxing the household. Then they serve as valuables for exchanges, treasured heirlooms, carriers of identity markers. Indeed, one could almost call them part of the family, as the Romans did, too (Mauss 1966:48).[2]

Ikat textiles from the region under study clearly qualify as indexes of agency in Gell's sense of "material entities which motivate inferences, responses or interpretations" (Thomas 1998:x). They are of such diverse manifestation and so consequential that several types of agency (or, from the reverse perspective, types of their use by humans) need to be differentiated. The present analysis stresses their function as instruments in competition for status. Ikat cloths also clearly possesses "a certain cognitive indecipherability" in that they tantalize, frustrate the viewers unable to recognize at once "wholes and parts, continuity and discontinuity, synchrony and succession" (*ibid.*:x). Ikat textiles from the region under study patently possess this quality of intrigue, managing to generate fascination to the point of a whole literature on them being produced. Weavers from Sumba and Timor raise it to an extreme level by deploying covert techniques (documented above for the first time) that serve as proofs of the weavers' virtuosity while remaining invisible to the uninitiated.

The manifest agency of ikat textiles largely derives from (a) their ubiquity and (b) the multiplicity of roles they play in the producing societies. They were, and in some regions still are, continually in evidence. Second perhaps only to dwellings and boats, on most islands ikat textiles are the most visible manifestations of material culture, and among the most valuable, in worldly as well as spiritual terms. Still, if they had just a single function, e.g. the exhaustively covered use as bridewealth (numerous sources, including Barnes 1989b:46; Thomas 1995:291), their agency would have been much more limited, but on the basis of the existing literature in the Indonesian archipelago as a whole we can differentiate twenty distinct other social functions, ranging from birth to burial, from mere decoration to

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[1] "In certain contexts, persons can seem to take on the attributes of things and things can seem to act almost as persons (Hoskins 2006:74)".

[2] "Originally, we contend, things had a personality and virtue of their own. Things were not the inert objects which the laws of Justinian and ourselves imply. They are a part of the family: the Roman *familia* comprises the *res* as well as the *personae* (Mauss 1966:48)". This passage may have influenced Thomas (1998:vii), cited above.

protective force, from the mundane to the sacred. This is not the place to present a full inventory of all these different functions and meanings[1], but one example may be given to illustrate the extreme diversity of usage: in Suai-Camaneça (East Timor) women's sarongs and men's shawls when slung over the shoulder in a certain way played a semaphoric role. They signaled from afar, on the approach of a village or neighbourhood, that someone in the family passed away (Hamilton & Barrkman 2014:172, 176).

A richly differentiated view of the multifacetted nature of the 'life' of ikat textiles in the region under study, should also reflect awareness that the nature of their agency was decidedly conservative:

> Within the transference of style over longer periods of time the artefact functions as the material repository, if not the monument, of the various roles it plays in the situations that together constitute the lifespan of a style (Van Eck *et al.* 2015:6).

We return to this subject in the next section when analysing the ways is which ikating as a pursuit empowers women.

Fig. 258 Weaver resting after dyeing with indigo in Haumara village (East Sumba), 2017. Skeins of cotton warp have been hung out to dry on a dead tree, mimicking the way severed heads used to be displayed on skull trees (Hoskins 1989:172) Note the deep blue, nearly black hands, which in many islands mark the active weaver, and in some, e.g. on the Tanimbars, accord great respect. Photograph by Serena Lee.

[1] For a preliminary outline hereof, see ten Hoopen (2018:51-60).

The dark art of dyeing empowers women

The true distribution of power in society does not always conform to first appearance. While women in most island societies have no formal political power, they may be accorded great symbolic capital (Reuter 2009:13). They may exert considerable power 'behind the scenes' through the erection and maintenance of various social strictures that (a) allow them to dominate important aspects of their society's functioning, and (b) limit the freedom of males, or even direct their conduct. In West Sumba, for instance, men cannot be present at either death or childbirth (Hoskins 1991:154). This reduces their stature, going some way towards infantilizing, respectively emasculating them. It is infantilizing as it suggests that men cannot handle bereavement, and it is emasculating because it robs males of the ecstasy they might enjoy on seeing the fruit of their loins come to life.

Producing outstanding ikat, which is not just physically but also intellectually demanding, is greatly empowering. Although there are several other examples – in an archipelago where on some islands the men are away for months on end as itinerant workers or goldsmiths, while the women run daily life with the kids on their own (e.g. Ndao, Palu'e) – there is hardly a finer example of the indirect power of females than their ikat work and what it brings them in terms of recognition and decision-making.

The way ikat is embedded in the culture of the producing community can also be empowering. In some cases (most markedly on Savu and Raijua) ikat is even instrumental in shaping that very community, or at least perpetuating its structure. The islands' women established intricate rules linking the numerous social groups and sub-groups to specific proprietary ikat motifs and occasions at which they were or were not appropriate. This is yet another proof of ikat's potential for agency. Elaborate canons scaffold the societies that construct them as they limit groups of actors to prescribed behaviour. But in recent times the scaffolding has lost cohesion and in most island regions currently serves more as a memorial (thanks to conversion not necessarily valued) than as something that gives structure.

Paradoxically, these limitations strengthen the groups' cohesion by articulating its identity. So on these islands where the women – of the class that had mastered dyeing and weaving – among themselves determined which descent groups wore which male and female motifs and in which colours, they had extensive normative powers which helped shape their societies through differentiation, while literally colouring the differentiated groups' outward presentation.

> There is evidence from other areas that locally handcrafted textiles were once part of larger ordering structures that are no longer recognized, although the particular style or design elements may still occur (Gittinger 1979:43; cited by Danerek & Danerek 2020:113).

Dyeing skills also bestow on women collateral advantages that men are not even aware of, such as control over who gets abortions (Hoskins 2008:103). But such skills are not

flaunted, probably to prevent their existence from becoming known to men.

> [Matrilineal ties give women] access to occult knowledge, especially of the 'blue arts' of herbalism, indigo dyeing, and midwifery and abortion, but they are carefully kept out of the spotlight and alluded to only discreetly when marriages are being negotiated (Hoskins 2002:330).

Ikat textiles were essential for the life of the community, for the family's standing in society and for one's chances in the afterlife. All this vital power was woven into them, transmitted in the form of special patterns and distinct degrees of dye. And the women who made these cloths must have been associated with this power every day they were worn; an association that was doubtless largely enjoyed in the form of respect. This respect carried forward into in our global society with its growing appreciation for Indonesian ikat. In future the agency of Indonesian ikat textiles collected by foreign institutes or private collectors is expected to take the form of generating a sense of urgency regarding the documentation of the ways they were made, and of the roles they played in the lives of the women who produced them.

The women's worthy returns

Fig. 259 A 1948 photograph by the missionary P. Donatus Dunselman, previously published in Dunselman (1955:185), showing a re-enactment of the reception of a severed head at a Mualang (West Kalimantan) longhouse, probably in Pajak. While it is a mere re-enactment, given that the photograph was taken just a few decades after the practice of headhunting was rooted out by the Dutch colonial authorities, it may be assumed (with some reservations) to realistically represent the formerly customary proceedings.

This image is highly symbolic as it visualizes the reciprocity of the male prestation and the obligatory female counter-prestation, which here coincide at the moment of transfer. *Source:* KITLV/Royal Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies, N° KITLV 113929.

Ikating fundamentally is a dyers' art, which can be described as a battle that mirrors the men's battle for the acquisition of respect, formerly largely synonymous with the taking of other men's heads. Dutch colonial rule suppressed headhunting (in some areas as late as the second quarter of the 20th century) but never the central cosmological concept of freshly harvested heads as bringers of fertility. Motifs that allude to headhunting, such as the skull tree, kept being used, although in some parts they are reduced to a vague notion that it "brings luck" (Geirnaert 1992:163). Hoskins distinguishes

> 'headhunting as history' – a discontinued piece of the past that has been preserved in narrative form – and 'headhunting as heritage' – a continuing tradition that contains positive elements and values that are celebrated, even when the bloody practice itself has been suppressed (Hoskins 1996c:218).

A series of authors has drawn attention to the parallel between headhunting and ikat production using one and the same phrase. Howell, at the conclusion of an ironic passage explicating how Iban ikat weavers were at pains to show off how hard their work was ("supposed to be very difficult"), described how

> They make a great deal of fuss over the work of laying out the thread on the platform (*tanjeu*) and the business of it is called the *kayau indu*, or 'warpath of the women' (Howell 1912:63).

Haddon and Start in their oft-cited work reused Howell's term a quarter of a century later ([1936] 1982:22). Gittinger was the first to employ it in a work intended for the general public (1979:219). Richards in his Iban-English dictionary defines *kayau* as warfare and has an entry associating *kayau indu* with weaving (1981:142). Gavin appropriated the term by elevating it to the title of her best known and most controversial work (1996). That the term 'the women's warpath' became established by reuse is understandable, as it is both evocative and memorable. The present author takes it to cover the entire ritualized complex of prescribed and proscribed behaviours that women have turned the dyeing process into, a theme that is elaborated below.

While the sources cited in the above paragraph all relate to practices among the Dayak of Borneo, in most of the regions under study the dyeing and weaving likewise was either directly or indirectly complementary to the men's headhunting and other displays of bravery and bravado. "[..] Belu women on Timor say that textile weaving is the 'headhunting of the women'". "The world of indigo dyeing is conceptually opposed to that of the male activity of feasting (Hoskins 1996b:23; 1991:166)".

Nearly all of the ikat-producing island cultures in the Indonesian archipelago perpetuate a probably ancient division of social duties:

> In all regions where headhunting was practised [most of the archipelago, although at different levels of institutionalisation, PtH] these two duties were conflated: the men's 'harvesting' of heads and ceremonially surrendering them to the women, was seen as essential for fertility of the lands (Hoskins 1989:419-440).

With reference to Timor we read that the division contained an element of antagonism, and that an aggressive attitude was not the preserve of men:

> The representatives of the earth [women] were associated with evil, but the earth also yielded produce. In the social-functional dualism the gender opposition was pre-eminent. The male element was associated with headhunting, the hunt and fishing; the female element with agriculture. In this antagonism the female half was the elder and also the more distinguished, and moreover often displayed a certain malice (Van Wouden 1935:166)" [translation PtH].

Van Wouden's characterisation of women as inclined to malice paints them as no less daunting than their headhunting men – which is consistent with several other authors. An assertive, or even aggressive, stance of women in headhunting societies has been witnessed from the mid 19th century on; most frequently among the Dayaks of Borneo, who, perhaps not incidentally, produce some of the Indonesian archipelago's most technically challenging textiles. Dayak weavers surpassed nearly all others in the demands that they made on themselves, which is manifest in their unparallelled degree of precision. They not just revealed female power in their weavings, they flaunted it – and used it to underscore demands they made on their men. In a blatant display of sexual domination, an Iban woman

may pull her skirt off, exposing her genitals – an act normally considered dishonourable – and throw the skirt at her man's head to taunt him to go out headhunting (Heppell c.s. 2006:41; cited in Ten Hoopen 2018:95).

We should not be tempted to take van Wouden's words on female aggression as entirely metaphorical. As Anak Osup reports, Iban women had and have plenty of occasion to harbour jealousy of their free-ranging men, whose workdays tended to be less onerous, and who, moreover, could escape any contribution to the household by the *adat*-sanctioned and prestige enhancing institution of *bejelai,* roaming abroad as a fortune seeker, which might keep them away for months or even years. The glorified *bejelai* essentially entailed men abandoning their wives and children with no guarantee of a valuable outcome – for as long as it took them to obtain enough to have something to show for their absence. According to two of Anak Osup's sources, Iban prostitutes in Sarawak tended to display "a surprising intensity of anger" and several mentioned that their trade was a way of avenging themselves on their husbands (Anak Osup 2017:27).

The equivalence of male and female assertiveness and agression helps us to contextualize the competitive virtuosity (expressed in hidden complications) that we observe in several regions, most extremely in East Sumba, with its well-established headhunting heritage (Hoskins 1996). Ikat at its highest level is a major undertaking involving all of a woman's being; her physical, spiritual and intellectual faculties. It was also a grand protracted performance which minimally lasted several months, but often took years, the formula being: spin the yarn, concoct the dyes, develop a creative design, tie the thousands of bindings, kneed the warp into the dye pot, dry it and sort out which part of the warp goes where – and when done repeat.[1] All this in a forbidding atmosphere rife with taboos. How could a man not be impressed?

Mauss in his signature work did not address the mutual obligations between men and women in the context of marriage (perhaps because he found the subject self-evident) but the central tenet of *Essai sur le Don* – "The obligation of worthy return is imperative (Mauss 1966:41)" – clearly pertains to the marital context, with its continual flow of prestations and counter-prestations between man and woman. Both repetitively and perpetually exchange gifts of energy, attention, and brain power. Obviously, the women of the region under study would not want to underperform their men, nor would the men appreciate underperformance.

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[1] Many events could hold up production. One of the most common was lack of morinda. The *Morinda citrifolia* is a thirsty shrub, and if the dry season has lasted longer than normal it was risky to rob it of roots. Caution would dictate postponing work for a year. On several islands cotton could not be grown, or there was so little fertile land that all but a tiny corner needed to be devoted to food production. On the isle of Ternate (Solor & Alor Archipelago) land was so scarce that the women worked small plots of arable land around Alor Besar on neighbouring Alor, across the strait (Peni & McIntosh 2020:7). Work might occasionally halt till the weaver had managed to arrange a triangular barter: ikated sarongs from Ternate against clay pots against from Ampera on Alor, which then were loaded into prahus and brought to Ili Ape on Lembata to be exchanged for cotton – the going rate being as much cotton as could be stuffed into the pot (Wellfelt 2014: n.p.). Another major impediment was that pregnancy made any handling of dye unthinkable.

Women who did not display skill and fortitude at the loom could not expect to find husbands of high stature, and those who did were worth a fortune in bridewealth. The important thing for any male, therefore, was to find a woman who could raise daughters ikating at a high level, as this meant valuable bridewealth in store and the prospect of a talented son-in-law (Heppell *et al.* 2005:36). An illustration is provided by Wielenga in his book on Umbu Diki Dongga, a wealthy Sumbanese commoner. He relates that Dongga's second wife "was widely known as an artist in the application of splendidly stylised patterns and colours. That is why he needed to pay such a high dowry for her (1928:47)".[1] She apparently transferred her ikating skills to her firstborn, Rambu Dai Ataluda, who became one of island's most creative designers and created the refined and extremely clever men's wrap shown in Fig. 222.

Ikat was the women's "worthy return". This is beautifully illustrated by an early 20th-century photographed suffused with symbolism (a reenactment, but given its age probably a realistic depiction of earlier practices), of a Mualang Dayak in Kalimantan stepping up the ladder to a longhouse with a skull in his hands and a woman standing ready at the house's entrance with an ikat cloth draped over her outstretched hands in which to receive it (see Fig. 259). At the very moment of giving, the man's ceremonial gift was instantly repaid with a counter-gift of his wife's own making.

The power that producing ikat with illusions and other complications bestowed on the weaver, as she played games on others people's perception systems, must have been considerable. We may benefit from imagining the moment that a weaver's husband (or brother, etc.') discovers the keys she hid in his cloth – finally! – and realizes not just how much labour she invested, but also how smart she is. Such a moment of glory yields a perfect example of the weaponizing aspect of virtuosity, the attainment of the power to dazzle. The defining characteristic of dazzlement, a state of extreme surprise which delivers an incapacitating jolt, is that it overwhelms the subject's ability to process sensory data. This produces awe, temporary or chronic. In "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology" (1994) Gell states that

> The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form. Art, as a separate kind of technical activity, only carries further, through a kind of innovation, the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity (2014:44).

The objects are seen, not for what they are – artfully shaped material – but for something more. Gell uses the example of Trobriand Islanders' dazzlingly decorated canoe prows, and speaks of "the halo-effect of technical 'difficulty'" – which we likewise observe around *patola* and high-end *hinggi*. The "efficacy of art objects as components of the technology of enchantment" is not predicated so much on their qualities as physical objects

[1] See also ten Hoopen 2021, in press, which devotes a chapter to the talented weavers in Diki Donga's family, who might be wealthy, but as commoners had no access to the Sumbanese nobles' repertoire of motifs, hence were forced to be creative and invent their own– with spectacular work as a result.

but on their being perceived as "vessels of magical power" (*ibid.:* 46). i.e. on the underlying technology, perceived as so wonderful that it must have a supernatural component. This bestows a power on the objects which has the potential to be used offensively, in battles for domination.

> There is an obvious prima-facie case for regarding a great deal of the art of the world as a means of thought-control. Sometimes art objects are explicitly intended to function as weapons in psychological warfare (*ibid.:* 44).

This meshes with our concept of competitive ikat, and provides it theoretical underpinning based on a recognition of the central role of technology in this psycho-social construct: the best dyers in the region under study had developed a technology to enchant, to stun with visual trickery, to overwhelm. They presumably did this to assert themselves, to score in a tussle for dominance. In Gell's "psychological warfare", with every supreme piece that a dyer presented to the community she was making her mark, waging battle – of course only figuratively speaking, although in East Sumba competition for the invention of the most clever visual devices appears to have been fierce.

The battles the women fought with the spirits they called up in the dyeing and weaving process are often described as having taken place in parallel to the men's battles in taking another man's life. Just like the headhunter, the weaver needs a specific, finely honed skill set, and the ability to shift to high levels of intensity. She also needs to open herself to spiritual inspiration, visions, creative flashes. This implies that, like a successful Timorese *meo* warrior (a status achieved by headhunting), she needs to enter into a profound relationship with the spirit world, which is believed to be dangerous, not just for the weaver herself, but for all of her relations. Should a woman breach "the naturally sequenced order sanctioned by the spirits" – attempting a skill or a design beyond the level of her attainment – her life is said to be imperilled" (Sather 2006:99). The same holds true if she should receive a pattern in dreams or a vision, and make a mistake in executing it (Drake 1988:30).

> A master weaver earns honor and acclaim for her technical abilities and for having mastered the dyer's art. A third component of excellence, similar to that of a warrior in training, pertains to gaining a prerequisite proficiency in navigating systems of taboos, offerings, and dreams that might allow an acknowledged weaver to borrow or expropriate the characteristics of powerful animals and spirit beings, and then reproduce them in her cloth. Her own struggle to gain the assistance and the protection of totemic animals such as say a snake or a crocodile can be thought of as a binary complement to a man gaining, and then further propitiating his own prowess in the realm of warfare and headhunting. It was not uncommon for an august weaver intent on depicting a potent and perhaps potentially dangerous design element to slightly alter the composition in her last bundle of warp threads as sign of respect, and as a marker that an arduous journey has been successfully completed.[1]

The men's *keberanian,* 'bravery, guts', then, found its complement in that of the

[1] Steven G. Alpert, pers. comm., 2017, while discussing Timorese men's cloth with *katak* motifs, some of which appear unfinished (see PC 245, Fig. 199); paraphrase authorized, 2020.

women, who were not just the emotionally charged spectators to their performances, but also incited the actors: they formally celebrated their heroes' victorious moments, thus providing a continual incentive to keep on raiding.

> Although women did not normally take part in raiding expeditions, they played a critical role in motivating men for combat, in the rituals that greeted them on their return, and in the ceremonies that brought each expedition to a closure. [..] In mocking the bloody head when it is first brought into the house, or displaying it in the ritual dancing which followed the raiders' return, the behaviour of women reflects something of the "beraniness" so associated with males (Andaya n.d.: 24).

The women were linked to headhunting through emotional involvement and vocal support, and also through their wombs, their physical fertility.

> In Timor, a young mother was dressed in a headhunter's costume at the end of her seclusion after having given birth, with the large man's cloth and the headdress and neck pendants of a successful headhunter (Andaya undated: 25).

How the women's competence in dyeing and weaving was conceptually linked to the men's hunting, and how intimately, is manifest in a West Sumbanese transfer ritual. The finished textile, just off the loom, warp uncut, is still in the female domain. For the nobleman to wear it, the cloth needs to be transferred to the male domain.

> By its very nature, being a representative of the sacred python, the *hanggi* [West Sumbanese men's wrap, PtH] offers the possibility to switch from a context in which life and growth are highly desirable to another one dominated by the idea of inflicted death symbolized by the cutting of the warp. Eventually, it appears that the cloth for men reestablishes the continuity of life as its fringe, plyed by men, is dipped into indigo, hence refilled with life by husband and wife. In this textile work sequence, the border or *kalibura* that can be twined by men as well as by women represents a transition between two different contexts: one in which life is stressed and one in which hunting activities are implied. […] This transition can be performed by circumcised men only, that is by men who have learned how to master *hala*[1] and who know how to protect the inner life contained in the cloth (Geirnaert-Martin 1992:130, 131).

Men giving the finishing touches to a cloth by dipping the fringes into indigo, the dark substance which symbolizes the women's spiritual force and control over magic processes, is an eloquent token of the equivalence of female and male prestations. It is the conclusion of the woman's performance – which from this moment on will be integrated in the man's performance, becoming part of his identity.

[1] *Hala* is a life force associated with the sun, with hotness, danger and violence; essential in war and headhunting raids: a force from which women must be protected as it is harmful to fecundity (Geirnaert-Martin 1992:57).

Ikating as a performance

When we analyse the societal aspects of the dyeing process it is hard not to see it as a performance *sensu* Goffman, with the females as actors and the males of the community as the audience (Goffman [1959] 1990:28-82), a performance in which the former strive to deeply impress or even outcompete the latter.

The first to have underlined this is Heppell: "The Iban would certainly support the Goffman view."[1] A brief detour to Sarawak at this point is elucidating, because certain cosmological concepts that we see in the region under study here are more articulated, which helps to understand them and see their context. Heppell, who collaborated with local associates (Heppell *et al*. 2005), found that the Iban, men and women both, were highly competitive – particularly in partner selection. Procreation to them was a matter not to be taken lightly. They were convinced that the only ones to survive are those who make clever partner choices. Given the challenging nature of their natural environment this comes across as a level-headed assessment of the facts of life.

The Iban were keen, therefore, to impress potential high quality mates. Men did this primarily by collecting heads, which would fertilize the family's field. Women did this primarily by creating powerful textiles which (among other purposes) would facilitate connection with gods and ancestors, ward off malevolent spirits and incite men to go and collect more heads. In the region under study the ability of women to concoct dyestuffs and mordants and to produce ikat textiles to a large extent defines their status in the community, hence their attractiveness as mates. Geoffrey Miller's *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (2000) provides an interesting perspective on our findings, particularly with regard to sought complexity. Dyeing a complex ikat textile, especially one containing visual trickery, requires excellent math skills. Hence, showing off sought complexity to peers and potential mates serves as an effective intelligence display *sensu* Miller.

The 'mating mind' perspective is apposite because the males' headhunting equally served as a display of intelligence. Outbursts excepted, it was not raw violence. Raids, typically, were carefully planned (McWilliam 1996:134) – often, just as weavers did in ikat, seeking an element of surprise. It takes a first-rate brain to find a way to cut off other people's heads, especially when said people are aware that they are potential donors. It is likely that males endowed with such brains were aware of the level of intelligence needed to create an ikat with thousands of bindings and to calculate where tiny details must be changed in order to create a spectacular illusion.

On islands such as Timor, Sumba and Kisar the values of the headhunting culture always served as the backdrop to the performance, *sensu* Goffman ([1959] 1990), which the women were giving on the stage that was their village, their community. On the level of verifiable fact dyeing involves difficult chemical processes such as the fermentation

[1] Michael Heppell, pers. comm., 2019.

that production of indigo dye relies on and the preparation of mordants that make morinda adhere to cotton; processes that are without doubt challenging[1] and which can easily go wrong, a disaster which is considered similar to a still-birth (Geirnaert 1992:302). In terms of the dyer's subjective experience, it involves the struggle for creation with spirits that can either help along the process by providing visions of exciting designs, or thwart it by making the dye go off (turning the indigo greenish or faecal brown[2]) or bringing illness and other misfortunes to the weaver and her kin.[3] Men know such struggles, as they have similar ones of their own – which must add to the respect they have for highly performing dyers. Another factor was the putrid smell of the dye pot. That their women could deal with this cannot fail to have made an impression on the men.

In the Indonesian archipelago, indigo, or more correctly indigotin, is made from the leaves of *Indigofera tinctoria* or the closely related *Indigofera suffruticosa*, which are easy to grow even in poor soils. These plants do not contain indigotin as such, but several of its chemical precursors, the most important of which is indican. Indigotin has the great advantage that it adheres to cotton fibre without requiring a mordant. Its great disadvantage is that it is insoluble in water. To be usable as a dye it first must be chemically reduced to a soluble form called leuco-indigo, and then after the dyeing oxidised back into its insoluble blue form. This reduction-oxidation sequence is known as 'vatting' (Chavan 2015:37), after the clay vat or pot – nowadays often a plastic bucket – in which it takes place. The fetid odour produced, the smell of a rotting corpse, makes the women involved appear to have power over life and death.

Women in the region under study have used the indigo dyer's aura of dark magic as the core of a construct of taboos that gave them a unique, unpredictable and untakable weapon in their vying for, if not dominance, than at least power-symmetry with the sex fielding the greater physical force. Since the means of control are so multifarious and detailed and the advantages gained so substantial, it is hard not to see intent – although the control system is clearly ancient and weavers of recent generations may not be conscious of its nature, nor of their own agency in perpetuating it. Similar taboos pertain to morinda, especially among the Lamaholot, who call it *méan* (pronounced 'may-ahn'), the blood-red lifeblood of bridewealth ikat in their area, with its associations of bloodshed and warfare

[1] The processes involve a series of chemical reactions set in motion by various additives such as masticated fruit pulp and alum, usually obtained from certain fruits' ashes.

[2] Not a facetious choice of adjective: the human digestive tract also produces indican, part of which is degraded by intestinal bacteria to a smelly indole-compound called skatol causing human and some animal excrement to smell the way it does (Baeyer 1880:2339-2240). While Chavan (2015) also mentions this phenomenon, Bayer's article appears to be the first to point to the relationship between indigo and skatol – the theoretical undergirding of the present author's use of sense of smell in dating cloths dyed with indigo: all indigo-dyed cloths older than circa 50 years have a faint 'stable' smell as a result of gradual degradation, although those of 100 years old typically have largely or entirely lost this smell.

[3] A sublime example of the weavers' reliance on contact with the spirits was given by the anthropologist Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (ten Hoopen 2018:555) in her observations of an Iban weaver who was to perform on stage at an NGO's promotional demonstration of traditional weaving, but collapsed in the conference venue's kitchen when she found that the *petara*, the spirits she called upon, in that environment did not appear.

(Barnes 1994:17).

As the preparation of both dyes involves chemical processes dependent upon factors such as temperature, airspeed, trace elements in water and other intangibles, it is easy to see how weavers have always come to explain failure not just by procedural errors, but also, and perhaps more frequently, by the intervention of malevolent spirits, angered by the breaking of certain taboos; and how, again assuming intent (see also Hoskins 2008:104), they have enveloped said processes in an aura of mystery that helps them subjugate their men, those incorrigible breakers of taboos.

Fig. 260 A dyer in the village of Brenai on Lembata (Solor & Alor Archipelago) drawing strands of cotton from the indigo dye pot. Note the vat at the far right, full of a fermenting leaf mass. Photograph by Kees Sprengers, 2020.

Merit gained is exalted for effect

By making abundantly clear to the men, and to non-dyeing, uninitiated women, that producing and dyeing with indigo and morinda is hellishly difficult (*ita est*) women, especially those of the higher classes, where time can be found for labour-intensive pursuits, give the process the character of an elaborate performance. Thus they make it seem even more meretorious than it would be without such image-buffing enhancements, while implicitly making themselves look more deserving of favour.

Forshee (2001:65) regards

> magic as the negative contour of work, haunting technical activity like a shadow. The value of women's work in Sumba is sometimes founded in and protected by magical beliefs, which take technical skill out of the realms of the ordinary. It thus becomes 'magical technology', which 'consists of representing the technical domain in enchanted technology form' (Gell 1994: 59). On Sumba, this 'enchantment' persists in the realm of textile production – particularly where is involved the use of indigo dye – maintaining a distinct contour to women's work.

This is in line with our argument that women in parts of the area under study used their fearsome and ardently shielded technology in part to position themselves in society as powers to be reckoned with. At the same time, they inherently contributed to the maintenance of the structure of that society. The dyers' work was embedded in webs of

traditional directives and proscriptions related to descent and place in society, which had the disadvantage that these limited creative freedom. But the women may have seen it as rather an advantage that all those rules also prevented men from controlling this part of their lives – an activity that might be highly regarded in the community and in one's family, but was also hugely time-consuming, and very much present, down to the indigo plants all around the house. As they maintained their canons over generations, defining which field divisions, motifs and palettes belonged to which descent group, the weavers concurrently reinforced their collective identities. On a personal level, ikat work ostensibly raised the dyer's personal esteem to the extent that she was seen to contribute to the community's cultural heritage, the yardstick being her product, on display at all ceremonies.

At the royal courts of East Sumba, where time could be found for such labour-intensive pursuits, this was taken to extreme levels. The element of magic was here reinforced by the use of illusions – which rely on techniques, such as misdirection, that are identical to those used by conjurers. The noblewomen's illusions no doubt served mainly to impress their peers, as these would be in the best position to judge her level of virtuosity. But which man would not be in awe of the creative intelligence displayed in the masterpieces – once he 'got' the visual trickery, and became cognizant of the extraordinarily meritorious nature of the design's construction?

We have seen above (see Section 4.2 'Sought complexity: asymmetry as proof of mastery') how among the highest class weavers merely upholding the region's standards was not enough. A small number show a keenness to surpass them – be it in pursuit of artistic excellence, or in order to extort the congratulations of their nearest competitors. In terms of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman [1959] 1990), ikating in the region under study offered a wide spectrum of gestures, set pieces and props, all of which a woman could bring on stage to show her command and virtuosity, and turn herself into the local diva, her position secured by a tightly roped-off backstage.

One becomes a diva by outperforming the ruling diva. At the highest courts of Sumba, as well as on Timor and Roti we see ikat so intellectually and technically challenging that it can only have been made to display supreme self-confidence – which for such weavers must have been predicated largely on their ability to visualize a complex design, less on their dexterity, as there were plenty of slaves for the drudgework. The most 'nerdy' example found in this investigation is the creation of asymmetry through the compression of patterns (See Ch. 3, under the heading 'Techniques to achieve asymmetry'), producing an effect that is barely noticeable; or rather, noticeable only for eyes that know what to look for. At this level, ikating is sheer competition, every cloth an act of domination. Any young weaver on the ascent would be very impressed by such ingenious work of an alpha female.

A number of arrangements, including secrecy – information not shared with men, and even information not shared with other women – set ikat work aside from the realm of the mundane, the prosaic, They pad it with emotional and symbolic weight, which increases its impact on several levels, and makes it accrue social regard. Hoskins (2008:104) regarding West Sumba speaks of a 'cult of secrets managed by older women'.

> Like medieval alchemists, indigo dyers are also believed to harbor secrets about poisons, special potions, and the roots used to induce menstruation and stanch bleeding after childbirth. This knowledge is sometimes said to border that of witches, who are called 'people who handle blue substances' (*tou morongo*).

Holmgren and Spertus (1989:13), when characterizing Indonesian textile production in general, describe the weaver as going into an almost trance-like state: "Through offerings to the spirits, meditation, sexual abstention, purifications, observance of taboos, and other austerities, the weaver sought to maintain an elevated, concentrated, and tranquil state of mind while work progressed."[1] Note the sexual abstention, which cannot have failed to have had an impact on the men. If any of them in youthful ignorance had thought that ikat was trivial, before long they would get occasion to alter their perspective.

Part of the *spiel* appears to be an opportunistic use of religion: the women speak, not just of how complex it all is, but also about how dangerous it can be, how they are fighting with the demons to pull it off. There can be little doubt that this indeed is what most of them believe – or half-believe if they are converted[2] – but it is also strikingly convenient.

We should attempt to see the context as a local male, the husband, the father of daughters would see it. Imagine the impact that the women's ikating had on land use. Dyestuff producing plants were grown everywhere around the house, be it indigo plants or morinda bushes. One could not have enough of them – if only to be able to dress decently and not be even more backward, as one early ethnographer suggested (Müller 1857:90). On many islands, cotton was the second most important crop next to rice.[3] The impact, both visual, in terms of the vista from the house, and in terms of expended family energy, was immense. You could barely walk anywhere, not even in the fields, and not think of ikat, also because of the rhytmic clacking in the distance produced by weavers ramming down their hardwood swords onto freshly shot in weft threads.

Another continual presence of ikat in the world of men lay in what their womenfolk's handiwork signaled about the latter, in terms of origin, descent and class. They were not just wearing these cloths, but also modeling them – figuring in a competition that they as men perhaps only half understood, but all their contacts' wives would be keenly aware of. In this competition technical superiority was a key status marker, where not the ultimate status marker. Specific to Timor, Khan Majlis states that:

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[1] A sceptic may wonder how such trance-like states mesh with a view of ikating as performance. Having personally witnessed shamans and like individuals entering trance states in Iran, the Himalayan regions of India and Nepal, Sri Lanka, the Putumayo and Chocó jungles of Colombia, Togo, and various parts of South and Southeast Asia including Indonesia, I regard all of them as performers – though I have no doubt most were convinced of the value of their performance, a conviction that, paradoxically I share. Trance states are events that take much energy and mental power, but they do have an effect on both the shaman and the audience that can be life-changing, healing or spiritually uplifting. The performer may at times lose control, but this outcome, which can be dangerous for actor and audience, is an integral part of the performance.

[2] A striking example was given by Welyne Jeffrey Jehom (pers. comm., 2017), anthropologist at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur (cited in ten Hoopen 2018:555).

[3] We are indebted to Kucing Berjanggut, 'The Whiskered Cat', for bringing up this perspective. URL: https://sarawakdotcom.blogspot.com/2008/02/iban-craft-pua-kumbu.html, accessed 28 Feb. 2019.

> It would be straightforward [*einleuchtend*] for us if the principle of social ranking had manifested itself also in the textile motifs. It appears however, that the ornamentation of the textiles primarily reflects territorial and political entities, and that differences in rank can be discerned not so much by specific motifs but rather by a richer and more careful ornamentation (Khan Majlis 1984:111) [translation PtH].

This is entirely in line with an analysis of the Reference Set. We found such "more careful ornamentation" on several levels of complexity, always in a context rich in high class markers such as size, weight, intricacy, yarn quality, or displays of virtuosity that highlight an uncommon level of complexity and *luar biasa* expenditure of material and time.

Ikat from the performer's point of view

Khan Majlis's is an important observation, and clearly applies not just to Timor but to all islands in the region under study. During her tenure as textile curator at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne she documented a vast number of Indonesian textiles in German public and private collections, so her judgment carries great weight. Its most consequential effect is that it makes us look more keenly at technical aspects of the cloths that reflect quality from the performer's point of view. Which technique is most patently challenging, hence most meritorious? What design best displays virtuosity? Which technical exploit will make me shine on my coming out?

The ikat culture was a female meritocracy. In etic terms, the way to achieve true status among peers, was to produce superior ikat that bespoke intelligence and control – and impressive investments of time and energy. As Barnes recorded the emic perspectice on Lembata, local women disapproved of technical short-cuts. Her crucial observation cited above (see Section 4.2) bears repeating: "It is the quick results one gets which were precisely what most of my friends found unsuitable" (Barnes, 1989:30). This attitude inevitably lends ikat production a competitive aspect.

Inspection of the Reference Set reveals several ways in which weavers from the region under study displayed their virtuosity:

(a) **Intricacy of design**, e.g. a Miomafo men's wrap with large *katak* patterns (see PC 182).
(b) **Depth of dye saturation**, e.g. a Kisar men's wrap (see PC 102).
(c) **Elegance of figuration**, e.g. a Luang high class sarong (see PC 272, Fig. 261).
(d) **Enhanced tactile experience**, e.g. the crêpe-like sarongs of Raijua (see PC 105).
(e) **Secondary ornamentation,** e.g. warp wrapping (see PC 285) or supplementary weft (see PC 268).
(f) **Surprise**, e.g. hiding advanced levels of complexity in minute visual devices that are designed to remain overlooked – till they are suddenly discovered (see PC 333, Fig. 253).
(g) **Sought complexity**, e.g. shading by stippling (see Fig. 180) or creating asymmetry in contravention of ikat's 'natural' construction (see PC 200, Fig. 202).

As ikat is a reserve technique, its decorative components by definition stand out in white against a dark background. A weaver can leave such a component plain white, which suffices for drawing. She can also shade it a pale blue (see PC 181), respectively give it a pink hue (see PC 177) by stippling the open spaces with short strokes – adding countless

tiny ties to the labour load. This 'costly signalling' option costs a few months extra work; more if she also had kids and a husband to care for.[1] But some weavers on Roti and all high class Timorese weavers made this choice! Or they ordered their slaves to do it. Either way was honorific, because it displayed conspicuous consumption of labour, thus raising their family's status in society (Veblen 1924). Heppell, placing slave work on Borneo in the context of costly signalling:

> Their possession provided the children of war leaders in particular with leisure time as all their needs were taken care of by their slaves. Daughters had long hours to perfect their weaving skills while those of other households had to go off into the fields each days for much of the year to tend to their rice swiddens. Consequently *degrees of difficulty very much favoured the daughters of the wealthy* (Heppell 2014:102) [emphasis added, PtH].

Fig. 261 Elegance of figuration. Detail of a pictorial strip on a circa 1935 high-class *lawar¸* sarong, from Luang (Sermata Islands, South Moluccas), the only island in the region under study with a long tradition of ikat production for export to other islands. Much of its product is of mediocre quality, though some of it is outstanding. Ceremonial *lawar* such as this, which before World War II used to be produced and occasionally exhibited by upper-class Luangese women, set a standard of precision that few other weavers in the region under study could match. Note that the figuration is constrained to a strip merely 35 mm wide. Experience counts, it appears. Source: PC 272 (see also Fig. 14).

This applies to several parts of the region under study. The most extreme examples of sought complexity are the royal *hinggi* with multiple complications from East Sumba – where slaves formed a major segment of the population. (See Section 4.2 'Sought complexity: asymmetry as proof of mastery'.) Many weavers there appear to have enjoyed being able to produce what we now recognize as sophisticated works of art. They could not have made such outstanding examples if not a lot of love went into them, but for a good understanding of ikat's role in society, the aspect of performance – *de facto* counter-performance – and its associated costly signalling is important to bring to the fore.

In summary, in terms of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and impression management, the men of the region under study are given in what Goffman would call a

[1] "A mother is hampered in her role as cloth producer until her children are able to walk. Her productivity at this time decreases about 50 per cent or more…" (Koning *et al.* 2013:272, as to Flores).

spectacular ‘dramatization’ ([1959] 1990]:40) which took months or even years of painstaking preparatory work, and yielded not just an aesthetically pleasing result but also the admiration of many in the community. This high regard would increase the couple's status in the society, be it at village level or, if the man was powerful, even at regional level. Quite a performance, indeed. And men were resolutely kept out of what Goffman calls ‘back stage’ (*ibid.:*114).

Taboos close off ‘backstage’ and heighten dramatic aspect

Because most of the ikat work is done in small villages and hamlets with precious few walls, fences, hedges or other physical space dividers, the men are kept away from backstage by specific psychological barriers beyond the conventional separation between female and male lives on the investigated islands.

> Taboos mark most if not all phases of production from spinning cotton to the final woven, dyed cloth, stressing the sacred character of textiles (Geirnaert 1992:xxiii).

This has resulted in the adoption of numerous prescriptions and proscriptions. As these are adhered to with fervour (and fear of transgression), rarely of course will anything occur that could test the truth of the superstition. The taboos vary from region to region[1] but nearly all are quite severe. Men cannot be around when indigo or morinda is being prepared – except when heavy digging needs to be done to extract the roots of the *Morinda citrifolia* tree, or scrabbling in the dirt to get at the smaller roots of bushes. That particular phase is not taboo (Hamilton, ed., 1994:65), but as soon as enough bark has been stripped off the roots, the men can go – and must not under any pretence intrude upon the following parts of the process, otherwise terrible things happen. Examples from different regions illustrate the idea:

A man walked over spilled indigo in his bare feet and was left *wingu katiku*, dizzy, for weeks (Forshee 2001:65). Men are “forbidden to approach dye-pots, step under or over drying threads, or touch the ikat tying-frame or the loom (Maxwell 1981)”. It is widely believed that the breaking of these prohibitions results in the failure of that stage of the cloth-making process and brings personal misfortune upon the transgressor (Maxwell 2003 [1990]:145)”. “In most places men will avoid an indigo dye pot like the plague (Forshee 2006:160)”. Men are so completely shut out from indigo production that “Control over this colorant is a realm where women wield uncontested power (*ibid.*) ”. The Sumbanese believe that if at any time a man enters the dyeing hut, the colour will not take.[2]

The dramatic aspect of the various phases of ikat textile production was amplified in

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[1] The overview given below is not limited to the region under study, as the very diversity of regulations across the archipelago helps to get a clear understanding of the way women managed ‘backstage’. It also serves to show that while the regional manifestations of the praxis varied, evidently the underlying intent was universal and consistent.

[2] Threads of Life website, URL: https://www.threadsoflife.com/techniques-and-materials/natural-dyes/, accessed on 28-5-2019.

nearly all ikating regions by protocols that served to set the activity apart from daily life and stress its exceptional nature. “Every stage of the process – collection of dyestuffs from shrubs and plants, harvesting of cotton, fixing of patterns, dyeing, weaving, finishing – was regulated by strict procedures, and observed by tutelary deities who guarded the cotton field, made the dye react, guided the maker’s fingers, or gave mental clarity and repose. Through offerings to the spirits, meditation, sexual abstention, purifications, observance of taboos, and other austerities, the weaver sought to maintain an elevated, concentrated, and tranquil state of mind while work progressed (Holmgren & Spertus 1989:13)”. “No man who has been fishing or hunting [*i.e.* most men, PtH] must come near the indigo vat, otherwise the preparations will go bad (Geirnaert 1992:102)”. On Savu, two chickens, *manu pehami,* are chosen, one is tempted to say ‘elected’, to protect the dyeing process. They may not be slaughtered while it is ongoing and should they die they must be replaced with other chickens (Duggan 2001:23, 38). When ikating is completed and before weaving can start, one chicken must be sacrificed, a ceremony the completion of which will be recorded on the completed sarong with a special stitch (Spée, 1989:35). Said stitches were encountered on several examples, e.g. on PC 185.

In most parts of the Indonesian archipelago, “indigo carries a magical and dangerous quality” and in many areas its preparation is the preserve of older women (Forshee 2006:64), ideally post-menopausal to prevent harm to a foetus. In several regions, food that has come into close proximity with the indigo pot is regarded as perilous for pregnant women, as is the dye itself (*ibid.:*136). In Aceh, while work with dyes is going on one must not speak of the dead or of dead animals, and pregnant women may not take part in the work, nor even be around as bystanders. If the indigo does not attain the proper colour, this is an omen that someone in the family will fall ill (Jasper & Pirngadie 1912:8). According to Macassarese and Buginese superstitions, men may not touch the loom's shuttle. This is *kasipali* for them, undesirable, as it would make them impotent (*ibid*.:1912:9) – again a formidable sanction few men would dare to risk.

As in many parts of the region under study, the Tanimbarese weavers had a taboo, *pemali*, on pregnant women handling dyestuff: if she were to prepare it herself, the dye would not bind to the yarn (van Vuuren 2001:38). In the Lio region on Flores, some patterns are taboo for younger women, presumably because they are considered too powerful for a young mind. One of these is a pointed oval called *mata bili*, which is said to represent the vagina, a fertility symbol. This may not be used by all women (Hamilton, ed., 1994:217, Fig. 10-8), presumably only by the post-menopausal, as the onset of menopause lifts a woman to the level of maturity, with attendant greater social recognition and fewer restrictions. The motif is also found in the appliqué work of *lawo butu,* the adat sarongs of the Ngada. Such important ikat textiles are collective property and trading them is *piré*, taboo. Ancestral spirits will chastice transgressors with illness (de Jong 1996:169).

Women must free themselves from ikat when men cannot witness them

Remarkable is the number of stipulations that require women to interrupt their ikat work when their men are not around to witness their effort, in other words are incapable of receiving the women's daily counter-gift. Several of the taboos on ikat work are related to warfare, its male counterpart.

> This atmosphere of hotness during warfare could not co-exist with one of coolness centered on fertility [ikat is associated with the cool earth which provided both the cotton and the dyes came, hence with fertility]. This is evident for instance from a rule that the women staying at home had to observe: they were not allowed to spin or weave (Van Dijk & de Jonge 1990:17).

Taboos of this kind are pervasive in the region under study. A Sumbanese weaver was required to stay inside her house while her husband was away on a headhunting raid, refraining from performing any women's work, specifically including sewing and weaving (Watson Andaya 2004:42). In Kodi, West Sumba, "The wives in the village had to follow a series of taboos to protect their husbands on the warpath. [...] She could not loosen her hair from her bun during the whole period of his absence, or do any form of women's handiwork – sewing, plaiting or weaving (Hoskins 1996c:226)". In the Nagé region ikat weaving could not be done while the men were away hunting or waging warfare (Maxwell 2003:145). The Dusun of Sabah similarly observed a taboo on weaving while men were raiding (Maxwell 2003:145). On Tanimbar there was no weaving while the men were at sea, as the women would dance on the beach to assure their return. These feasts never lasted very long[1]. "[In] his observations on the Manila region in the late 16th century, Miguel de Loarca noted that women refrained from work while their men were at war (Watson Andaya n.d.:24)". In Tenganan on Bali work on cloth production halts during major ceremonies, "including men's rituals such as the fighting with thorn branches (Maxwell 2003:145)"; major distractions which of course make men fail to pay attention to the women's valiant efforts at the dye pots and looms.

Positioning of ikat work secures concrete benefits

The way that females positioned their dyeing and weaving brought them several concrete benefits, both material and political. A rule prescribing generosity towards the weaver may heighten the drama (why else would extraordinary generosity be required, if not in recompense for extraordinary, almost superhuman effort), while at the same time securing her tangible material benefits. In 1922 Kruyt remarked that among the Toraja of Oeri, ikating women must be put on a diet rich in meat.[2] It is fine to feed her vegetables as long as there is ample meat or fish on the side. One must also make sure that she is amply supplied with betel, so that she can chew a wad whenever she wants. As if we did not

[1] Marianne van Vuuren, pers. comm. 2019.

[2] "In het algemeen kan men zeggen, dat het eten van veel vleesch een vereischte is om het ikat-werk goed te kunnen doen."

already get the drift: “So, for this work the woman must be and stay in a good mood.” Kruyt (1922:416)

Political benefits derive from regulations regarding proprietary use of certain decorative elements. Motifs often were the exclusive prerogative of a narrowly defined clan or class. For a commoner to arrogate a noble motif was unthinkable. Misappropriation could invite capital punishment (Quincey 2001:40). Inter-island misappropriation in one documented case led to war between the ruling classes of Kisar and Wetar (Jasper & Pirngadie 1912:274). Apparently, the Kisarese ladies were past-masters in the art of creating drama. This allowed them to dominate the political realm, at least at times, considering that it was the Kisarese men who were sent out to war in open boats, risking their lives in an attack on the Wetarese – presumably no mean fighters either – all to recover the women’s honour, immanent in the stolen motifs. The women of punished Wetar vowed never to make ikat again.

Kodi dyers – the ultimate performance artists

Mentioned above are just a few examples of the countless rules surrounding ikat that women have established, and their consequences. This is their domain, and they run a strict house – albeit stricter in some regions than in others. The relatively remote and conservative Kodi region of Sumba, described in depth by Hoskins (1991) and Geirnaert-Martin (1991), provides a perfect illustration.

In West Sumba, often called Kodi after the main town, indigo preparation separates women from the men, who are strictly forbidden to get anywhere near the activity. It also ranks the women, creating a hierarchical order based on the degree of initiation into the mysteries of the process. Nearly all women in West Sumba learn to place ikat bindings and to weave, but only a select few are taught the preparation of indigo, which is a complex of magical and technical skills, including masticating herbs that go into the mixture of indigo plants and other vegetable matter that, through fermentation, produces the indigo dye.

The preparation is circumscribed by so many rules and taboos, and by so many aspects of veneration, secrecy and a belief in magical powers, that it is no exaggeration to say that the women engaging in it are members of a cult. Girls can learn and assist in the dye preparation, but they are not actually allowed to dye anything until they have reached sexual maturity. Once they do, they often have to recuse themselves, as indigo is seen as dangerous to menstruating and pregnant women. The most active dyers are all women who have already produced children and are past menopause.

> Thus participation in cloth production marks stages in the female life cycle, and creates a ‘rite of maturity’, celebrating the culmination of a woman’s career by her acquisition of hidden knowledge and greater control not just over the processes of dyeing, but also of childbirth, menstruation and menopause (Hoskins 1991:143).

The indigo preparation is regarded as dangerous and revolting – to the Kodinese the foetid smell invokes the odour of a putrefying corpse. It is also considered polluting: dyers are not allowed to touch meat with their bare hand, only with a meat fork. Women who have

overcome these challenges are held in high esteem. As the same 'binding medicines' used in dye preparation are also used in childbirth to stanch bleeding, weavers' mastery of indigo preparation qualifies them to serve as healers and midwives. This role affords them a high status and great power in their communities.

> Kodi indigo cults are distinct from male cultic preoccupations with ancestors, headhunting and warfare. They show that female arts and weapons are distinct from those of men, and have a darker and more mysterious colouring, directly grounded in the bodily experience of childbearing (Hoskins 1989:141).

When we look at a Kodi men's blanket or *hanggi* (e.g. PC 163) in the light of this cultic aspect, it gains in importance, especially if the indigo work was well executed, or enriched by subtle variation in saturation. It makes us realise that the men who wore these cloths were powerful figures in their communities, but that, true to the old cliché, behind every great man stands a great woman – a master of mysterious arts that he was expressly excluded from, and probably fearful of. As there is no mastery stronger than the mastery of the reproductive process, powerful men tremble at the very thought of it.

In the present publication we have seen how, traditionally, almost everywhere in the Indonesian archipelago, ikat motifs were never simply decoration, but full of meaning. They formed a symbolic language that spoke of cultural and religious traditions. Every woman was expected to bring some of her own work to her marriage as a form of dowry, and they were also used in other ritual exchanges and in burial ceremonies. This ritual role ensured expert weavers a position of elevated status in their communities.

A reversal of values began to take place in the second half of the 20th century, especially in administrative centres and market towns where in socially ambitious, 'modern', circles ikat began to be seen as a relic of traditional life, backward. As conversion to Islam or Christianity deprecated and hollowed out the ancestors' value systems and weekly sermons assured brimstone and hellfire to adherents of the old pagan ways, the performance of the women lost its old magic. This was true with a vengeance in regions where the traditional dye and mordant preparations – difficult, hugely time-consuming and proportionally meretorious – was traded for the serial, unceremonious, opening of packets of Wantek[1]. However, these regions where traditional ways faded early, tend to be the same where ikat production is currently becoming a cottage industry and women gain economic ascendancy, often to the initial discomfort of their men.

Tanimbar here serves as a perfect illustration. Whereas hands tattood black by the frequent immersion in indigo, the status mark of an accomplished weaver, in the Tanimbar archipelago used to be a requisite for marriage, in the latter part of the 20th century weaving became an option, often chosen to create household income, as cloths might be sold to

[1] The brand name that became a generic name for chemical dye, whatever its actual brand name was, e.g. Tiga Kelinci (lit. Three Rabbits) or Cap Kalkun (lit. Turkey Brand).

others, including tourists. Ikat sarongs are still required for bridal exchanges, and production of them continues unabated, albeit only with commercial yarn and chemical dyes. While ritually essential, they are not seen as being of much value – mere tokens of adherence to tradition – and do not rank highly among the exchanged valuables.[1]

Beyond that, ikat has become a product for export and tourist markets, so cottage industries are springing up in which men, driven out of fishing by the usual overfishing and dynamiting of the reefs, now also find employment. This has brought fundamental societal changes in the region under study. Whereas in the past most males lived like autocrats, although subject to constraints (perhaps more than they were aware of) set by the women, now they may work in a traditionally female domain, performing tasks set by their wives, whose economic ascendency as cash-earning weavers already shifted the balance in marital relationships (Adda 2014:97).

> As a weaver, a woman is able to exert control over her own labour products and, to some extent, over the other members of her household. The high economic value of tenun ikat [..] strengthens the position of local women in household power relations because of their role as tenun ikat produces in generating significant income (de Jong 2000:274, cited in Williams 2007:63).

As change is generally uncomfortable and resisted there will have been occasional marital tensions, but in the contemporary context these appear to have been largely resolved. A dyer who sells her ikats through an NGO or QUANGO has essentially become, on a micro-scale, an entrepreneur, and in this day and age is newly respected, for qualities that in the past would have been considered 'male'.

> Regardless of the existence of the division of roles among family members, these women have exhibited good work in managing their businesses. This in turn leads men to trust them to be in charge more in family-related issues and therefore, women are more appreciated by their husbands and families (Adda 2014:18).

The changes we have observed in the region under study, Timor and its neighbouring isles, can be observed throughout Southeast Asia. As the traditions and belief systems dissolve, the material culture is commodified and ancient heritage turned into marketable memes. The performance of the women loses its magic. *Ikat perindustrian, produksi, produksi.*

[1] Marianne van Vuuren, pers. comm., 2017.