Ikat from Timor and its outer islands: insular and interwoven

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ABSTRACT

The present publication set out to shed light on several technical aspects of ikat from the region under study that have remained underlit, to wit (a) the development of yarns over time; (b) the distribution of the various weave types; (c) the distribution of motifs; (d) the dispersion of asymmetry, a design aspect with technical consequences, previously either not studied or overlooked; and (e) the impact of ikating on the weaver in terms of purpose, commitment, achievement and the presentation of self.

An introductory chapter, 'Angles of investigation', defines which aspects of ikat in the region under study are investigated, demarcates the field of study, and contextualizes the subject matter geographically and temporally. The period studied was the last century of colonial rule, circa 1850-1950, an epoch rife with technical and societal changes in which ikat was still produced to a very high standard, with hand-spun cotton and a variety of natural dyes, most of them challenging to produce and use.

Chapter 2, 'Yarn and weave types', is dedicated to a study of the development of yarns over time and the distribution of the various ways in which weavers interlaced warp with weft. Microscopic study, collated with weighing and measuring of the textiles, presented a clear view of the development of hand-spun cotton over time. The yarn of 19th- to early 20th-century cloths was typically highly irregular (yarn gauge fluctuations up to a factor ten, with factors five and six common). But that irregular yarn was also very fine, hence lightweight. Hand-spun yarn produced after circa 1925, presumably intended to match the characteristics of machine-made thread, was both more regular and thicker, yielding cloths with higher specific weight. Over the studied century an increase in specific weight of circa 40 percent was observed. One consequence was drawing in lower definition, as the increase in gauge meant that circa 15 per cent fewer yarns were used to achieve a given width. A marked correlation was recognized between lightweight and class – the latter defined by level of design complexity and tightness of drawing. Bar exceptions, the shawls that graced the shoulders of royalty and the nobles did not weigh them down.

An inventory of weave types, widened to include nearly the entire 'ikat archipelago' (41 investigated regions) in order to study regional types in a wider context, yielded 21 distinct weave types. Most came in clusters that covered adjacent geographic regions, but several were found on different islands far apart. Occasionally, surprising differences were observed between regions on the same island. A substantial number of unique, idiosyncratic, occurrences was also encountered, mostly on remote islets.

Chapter 3, 'Distribution of shared motifs' studies the distribution of eight motifs that are encountered on multiple islands; some close neighbours, others far apart. The present researcher concluded that five of the eight examined motifs most likely emulated antique textiles from the northern Sulawesi Minahasa region. A number of these presumably found their way into the region under study as gifts to local rulers, all to some degree vassals of the northern Moluccan sultanates Ternate, Tidore and Bacan, who jointly controlled this

swath of the Indonesian archipelago.

Elements of the 'pictorial strip' or *rimanu* that is popular in the South Moluccas, could be traced to a type of Dongson bronze which inspired rock drawings in the eastern tip of East Timor, and thence travelled further east on ikat textiles.

Investigation of an angularly rendered human figure, encountered on six islands in the region under study, yielded two likely sources: (a) depictions of the Fertility Goddess called Dewi Sri on Bali and Nusa Penida; and (b) an angularly rendered dancer in the borders of double ikat Indian trade cloth, *patola*, of the Pan Bhat ('Betel Leaf') design, which, as this investigation established, was traded to the Indonesian archipelago in antiquity,[1] and emulated on a several islands in the region under study. These two lines of derivation may actually be divergent manifestations of a single one. The name Dewi Sri, obviously sanskritised, presumably during the Majapahit period, suggests that this Indian *patolu* motif, a dancer with pinched waist and upraised arms, influenced the representation of the female figure, Dewi Sri or other, on half a dozen islands. Its connotations probably centre on fertility, like those of the Indian original.

Asymmetry was a core element in this investigation. It is intrigueing, because it goes against ikat's technical diktat[2], requiring extra work, yet is found in a dozen of the ikat areas in the region under study. What this implied, technically and psychologically, is analysed in the chapter Chapter 4, 'Asymmetry – in defiance of ikat's technical diktat'. As the investigation progressed, asymmetry turned out to be firmly associated with high status. It was mostly encountered in cloths of a technical and design-technical level well above the average, evidenced in the use of very fine yarn, extraordinarily intricate patterning or very precise drawing. Asymmetric design (except on two islets where it is a design axiom, mandatory for certain types of cloths), is exceptional on all islands in the region under study, the mark of women committed to achieving excellence.

Remarkably, asymmetry *per se*, as a design fundamental, is not sufficiently covered in any of the classic studies of Indonesian textiles. Although asymmetric textiles from across the region under study have been shown in several works, this particular aspect (with the exceptions given above) is discussed nowhere. Could it be that asymmetry's inherent technical complexity was not recognized, or not seen as remarkable? A possible explanation is that in many cases the asymmetry was far from obvious. Indeed it could be cleverly hidden – so clever perhaps that the weavers' very ingenuity prevented us from recognizing its manifestations for nearly a century of scholarly inspection.

On Sumba asymmetry was encountered in the context of creative competition of a high intellectual order. This yielded insight into a previously unrecognized class system of ten disparate panel constructions at the noble courts that incorporated various design tricks,

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[1] This import of Pan Bhat *patola* probably took place mostly in pre-colonial times, as no surviving specimens of certified Indonesian origin have been found.

[2] The way ikat textiles are produced, with relatively narrow twin panels woven in parallel that are joined by their selvedges, 'naturally' leads to the creation of symmetric textiles.

such as hidden keys and illusions. Several specimens represent unmistakable instances of design virtuosity. All of these textiles, some published but previously unrecognized for what they are – also, admittedly, in the works of the present author (ten Hoopen 2018:281-287, 289, 291) – playfully obfuscate the high level of ingenuity and physical work invested in them. This is a crucial characteristic. Their creators relied on the effectiveness of Gombrich's 'etc. principle' (see p. 252) , and used techniques that conjurers employ like misdirection and pretending to be clumsy. This helps to explain why the nature of such textiles has been overlooked by generations of researchers.

An almost arrogant form of inverted boasting, such deceptive ikat is likely to have been highly effective on account of its surprise element: when a key is finally found out, and the true, high, level of the cloth reveals itself, there is a moment of glory for the weaver, who has outsmarted all; for as long as it took at a court full of smart, competitive women. Most of the high class weavers' peers probably had been schooled by their grandmothers in knowledge of constructions with fewer replications, and which types of deceitful visual devices might be expected to hidden in which particular parts of the cloth – though they could be anywere, and tiny. Most were wholly original and could remain undiscoverable for a humblingly long time.

The question arose what may have inspired such efflorescences of virtuosity? This was discussed in Chapter 5, 'Ikat in its social context'. Valuable cues were found in the established view of the females' ikating as a parallel to the males' headhunting. This approach was connected to, on the one hand, contemporary thinking about mate selection and, on the other hand, the presentation of self. What is at stake is a display, not just of a wealth of time – the obvious pecuniary aspect of artefacts that patently take a vast amount of labour to make – but in particular of intelligence. These high performing Sumbanese females, royal and noble, were operating in a formidably competitive culture suffused by an ancient headhunting ethos. The weavers' surprise attack on the senses resembled the men' surprise attack in the night. It was a performance given for the benefit of the men. Several sources stated that women should not continue to ikat when men could not witness their work, e.g. when they were at sea or raiding.

This brought up a question. The *adat* regarding ikat undoubtedley strengthened the women's grip on men by imposing on them countless rules regarding dyeing and weaving, most of which kept them away from the action. The performers' aim, obviously, was to keep men away from 'back stage'. Multiple rules regarding ikat work either awarded the weaver a higher class of food, with more protein, and enough *sirih* to keep her in a good mood, or political benefits.

After circa 1925 such ikat virtuosity on Sumba disappeared with the last high level weavers. Their knowledge died with them. Contemporary weavers on Sumba know nothing or very little about the performances of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. They will no doubt be pleasantly surprised by the various examples of *hondu kihhil walla* design constructions shown in the present publication – and delighted to go hunting in their family heirlooms for similar *kunci disembunyikan,* hidden keys, and what we may call *lungsin*

ketat, warp-packing.

The discovery of the complexity of the early weavers' work has been pure luck, as is many an archaeological find. The author showed a specimen from the Reference Set to the Indonesian textiles expert Kinga Lauren. The latter responded with great surprise that he had never seen a cloth like that in his life: one that combined two different design complications, both of which double the workload. This sparked a hunt for more examples in the Reference Set. Kinga Lauren offered to make his collection of Sumbanese textiles available for a focused research into different types of construction. It was added to the Reference Set as Group C. A rapid mutual learning process set in, with frequent sharing of images and their analyses. This fruitful collaboration furthered the investigation of Sumbanese ikat greatly. The visual tricks employed in these cloths play so cleverly with one's expectations that they can withstand a trained mind's examination for days, and take more than one pair of eyes to expose.

As a result of this accelerated learning the present author discovered several types of construction that were never described, both at the peak and the bottom end of the complexity scale, as well as two technically disparate techniques to achieve asymmetry by means of pattern compression; both rare, but one encountered on three islands. These findings were the result of (a) geometric analysis; and (b) a technical approach to the material, involving measurement, weighing, microscopy and thread counting – the latter fundamental for any attempt to reveal the cleverest women's visual trickery.

The role of ikat as an alpha woman's prime mode of self-manifestation, was this investigation's most rewarding discovery, which trained the spotlight on the weavers. It showed them to be intellectually formidable. The way such ace performers play tricks with observers' perception is awe-inspiring. The weavers who reached old age during the 1920s and 1930s, and a few of their daughters, were the last representatives of the golden age of ikat in this region. Now that we know that their design techniques are even more sophisticated than previously recognized, it is incumbent upon us to preserve as much of their heritage as possible.