Toba Batak Textile Inventions

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on fruits of looms worked by Toba Batak weavers in the Silindung Valley, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Silindung Valley weavings are characteristically bright and fashionable. They are described by the Batak themselves and by visitors from outside as the "least traditional" of Batak woven goods. They are also surging in popularity throughout all of Toba and increasingly making inroads into the market replacing the old-style textiles which are larger, of coarser yarn, and deeper/sober in colour. It is the modern style of Batak textile which today commands the highest prices locally. "Connoisseurs" of Indonesian textiles, however, usually will not even consider buying them. To the connoisseur, they are evidence of the decline that is occurring in the once wondrously sophisticated Indonesian textile arts.

In this paper I will examine some of the changes that are occurring in Silindung Valley textiles. This Valley of so-called "declining textiles" is precisely the location of rapid fashion change. The invention of new textiles is not infrequent. I believe that the vitality and dynamism of the Silindung Valley textile tradition forces us to reconsider what is meant by "decline" as it is used, for example, in the following quotation:

"To me, antique Batak textiles, especially those from Toba, represent the highest achievement of Indonesian weaving. Hence what now comes from this area is so heart-rending to look at. The contrast between modern and antique products is nowhere else so extreme ... Decline through European influence is especially evident in the imported regular yarn dyed in bright aniline colours... (Visser 1918-1919:21,22).

SILINDUNG VALLEY TEXTILE INNOVATIONS

To discuss Silindung Valley textile innovations, I will focus on the work of a single weaver/ikat-maker, Nai Ganda (ill 1), who inhabits the village of Hutagalung. She first told me about her textile inventions in 1986, and again in 1990 she showed me several more of her creations, hot off the loom.

Each of Nai Ganda's inventions is of a different order, but each exemplifies the "modern" features for which Silindung Valley textiles are known. I shall briefly review the inventions she introduced me to, both for their innovative features and to indicate the nature of current Silindung Valley textile fashions.

Nai Ganda's Ragi Botik (ill 2), Harungguan (ill 3), and Silinggom (ill 4) are examples of textiles which were popular at one time in the past. The Ragi Botik and the Harungguan once had...
HYBRID INVENTIONS

the larger dimensions characteristic of the shouldercloths of the earlier period (70 cm. X 180 cm.); the Silinggom was a hip-club. Typically, they were constructed from coarse yarn and coloured with the deep reds and blues produced from plant dyes. Nai Ganda rescued them from the oblivion of the almost-forgotten, and transformed them into a fashion appealing to localContemporary Batak ikat textile consumers. They represent the "modernization" of the old, the adaptation of the passe to the new context. Nai Ganda reduced their dimensions to present-day shouldercloth size (45 cm. X 160 cm.) and brightened their colouring, choosing freely from the full chemical range available to her on the market. As a result, her products each lost any significance they might have retained in the context of customary law and ritual. They are worn only by women and only as fashion items. They are appropriate garb for church and other such modern rituals. They adorn the Sunday-best attire.

Another attempt to corner a lost market has been the production of yardage (bakal baju), to be cut and tailored into sarongs. The Gundung Pahu represents the successful attempt to corner the lost market of textiles for the lower body.

Each of the inventions described so far affirms the established repertory of textiles as much as it departs from the "tried and acceptable"; textiles forgotten in the past have reappeared in modern form (Ragi Botik, Harungguan, Silinggom); motifs in the twined medium have been adapted to the ikat medium (Gundung Pahu); the inherent capacity of an ikat technique has been exploited to produce a new design (Udanudan). The inventions are interesting, ironically, precisely for their lack of inventiveness. They may be more aptly described as involutionary than as a radical break with the known Batak textile inventory.

Furthermore, the new market context and the economic need of the weavers to corner the apparel market have introduced two new function categories to the repertory: the sarong and the bakal baju. The categories are new, but they attempt to recapture the market stolen from Batak weavers by foreign imports.

HYBRID INVENTIONS

Another kind of invention which I would like to describe is the hybrid ikat cloth, technically the most complex of the inventions in most respects, yet it tells us the most about the dynamism of the Batak textile tradition. It demands an understanding of Nai Ganda's ikat technique which I summarize as follows:

Ikat, according to Dorothy Burnham, describes "the process by which a pattern is resist-dyed on the warp, or the weft, or both, before weaving begins. Precision in the ikatted pattern, she argues, makes this a "scientific" process..." (Burnham 1980:51). Essentially by doing this the weaver sandwiches the "modernization" of the old, the adaptation of the passe to the new context. Nai Ganda reduced their dimensions to present-day shouldercloth size (45 cm. X 160 cm.) and brightened their colouring, choosing freely from the full chemical range available to her on the market. As a result, her products each lost any significance they might have retained in the context of customary law and ritual. They are worn only by women and only as fashion items. They are appropriate garb for church and other such modern rituals. They adorn the Sunday-best attire.

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warps are ready to be warped in with the rest of the textile warps. Only when the cloth is woven, does the ikat patterning obtain its ultimate definition and express itself clearly.

While these are the very general principles of Batak ikat production, the conventions of Batak textile production invest additional critical rules governing how these steps are executed. Because the weaver is bound to make cloths that conform to design precedents, these technical rules are functions of the designs. To make the ikat of the Si Tolu Tuho is not to make an approximation of the design, but to follow exactly the design process, knowing how many warp ends the ikat ends of the textile will consist of, how many warp ends there are per tied bundle, how many bundles comprise a complete pattern unit, and precisely how a pattern unit is tied off. Depending on the cloth a weaver makes, she knows how many wooden rods to use to "count" her warp, how many warps each must "pick up", and in what order.

Nai Ganda's textile inventions which I have designated "hybrids" utilized the conventions of two distinct textiles. In the cloth called Si Bolang Rasta na Marpuosoran, Nai Ganda counted out the warps as though to make a Si Bolang Rasta, but tied off the warps as if she was making the ikat of a Simarpusoran textile. Her hybrid as its name Si Bolang Rasta na Marsimeoreor (ill. 10) suggests, combines features of the Si Tolu Tuho na Marsimeoreor (ill. 11) and the Sibolang Rasta. The cloth arises from the manner in which a weaver arranges the ikat of the Sibolang Rasta as if it were a Si Tolu Tuho, viz. in three bands across the cloth, and adds the vertical ikatted stripes (Simeoreor), typical of the Si Tolu Tuho textile. The finished ikat is warped according to the conventions of the Si Bolang Rasta design and technical possibilities. Again, it was a financial risk by the weaver to make such a cloth called Si Bolang Rasta na Marpuosoran, Nai Ganda counted out all the warps to "count" her warp, how many warps each must "pick up", and in what order.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE INNOVATIONS

While such innovations may not appear to be revolutionary to weavers in textile traditions that emphasize individual creativity, they must be evaluated in terms of their own tradition. Batak weavers enjoy a different latitude for creative expression. The textiles they make are all named and are designed according to conventions which are associated with that name. A weaver's individual creativity must not blur her cloth's category. A cloth must be of a recognized and distinguishable type for it to have any social value. In such a context, therefore, the mixing of categories is a significant and radical step to take, and it does not happen with great frequency. An innovation is approached with caution on the market. It may catch on and it may not. The weaver takes a financial risk by producing one. The cloth will have no social significance at first, and initially at least, it will be merely a fashion item. The Silindung Valley, where the most Batak fashion-textiles are made, is the likely place to find such radical innovations as Nai Ganda's hybrids.

In spite of their radical nature, the hybrid textiles are also aptly characterized as involutionary. Even in their nearness, they acknowledge established textile types and utilize the same technology. They represent variations on established themes rather than whole new themes.

However, the innovations inspire a whole new understanding of the Batak textile tradition. In stark contrast to "tradition" as a monolithic something that does not change but only erodes, the Batak textile tradition appears to be a set of abstract possibilities that have been selected by weavers and by historical circumstances. The Batak textile tradition reveals itself as self-generating, each cloth presenting a fresh set of design and technical possibilities. Tradition, in this sense, becomes a cognitive corpus, clues about which are the finished textiles. Viewed diachronically, the repertory of Batak textiles is a parade of some of the possibilities inherent in that tradition. Impulses from outside, such as new yarns and colours have been selectively incorporated and manipulated by that tradition.

If one were to search for a more concrete definition of tradition in the form of a set body of information, the Batak textile tradition would be more likely to reside in the weaving techniques than in the repertory of finished products. The Batak textile tradition corroborates Junius Bird's Andean finds (1960): textile traditions are made up of techniques, conservative in nature, and slower to change than the products which they make. This observation also has profound implications for popular conceptions of "declining" Indonesian textile traditions. "Decline" has tended to refer to a loss of more regular warp with the ikatted warp than does the Si Tolu Tuho (hence the lighter colour of the cloth).

"Decline" has tended to refer to a loss of unique and original designs. An evaluation of Indonesian textile traditions by technique would undoubtedly yield a different story and decline in this dimension would represent a more profound kind of loss.

Although not always explicitly, decline is usually perceived by connoisseurs in aesthetic terms. Aniline dyes and machine-spun yarns are anathema to "good" textile traditions. The present evaluation of "decline" has left aside questions of aesthetics, preferring to allow the Batak aesthetic to speak implicitly through the products that the weavers make. I believe that the discussion of Batak textile innovations reveals what the Silindung Valley Batak textile consumers look for and enjoy in their textiles. We would be hard put to justify ranking the aesthetics of the connoisseur above that of Batak weavers and consumers. The more interesting and constructive task is to explore the weaving tradition in its own terms.

Within academe, in recent years, there has been much discussion of the values that North Americans and Europeans have invested in the material objects of politically subordinate cultures (see e.g. Price 1989). Much of the discussion has reconsidered our conceptions of history and put them in the context of political and scientific developments in our own
culture (see e.g. Wolf 1982, Dominguez 1986, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The discussion has shown up our search for "authenticity" and "traditional societies" as a mirage of our own projection. "Traditional" societies, Dominguez has noted, "are assumed to be rooted in the past but to undergo little historical change from within" (1986:549). Furthermore, we have valued what we perceive to be the "authentic" more highly than the products of societies which we perceive as having lost their traditional character. Ruth Phillips (1989) writes that "One of the most damning features of the representational practices of Native American art history is that its standard periodization contains no "modern" era at all...It is as though Native American artists, in keeping with predictions of their imminent disappearance, had been rendered invisible through much of the twentieth century ." (1989:10). These words apply equally to the Indonesian textile art traditions. It is time for a new and broader strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

While Silindung Valley weavers use their wits, will, and energy to take up a position in the national and international playing fields of apparel, a certain kind of international attention to their talents and woven products has plummeted. Silindung Valley weavings in the collectors' world are shunned as modern, hence no longer traditional. Silindung Valley textiles are no longer collected, and with that oversight we are losing an opportunity to investigate the adaptation of a dynamic art tradition to radical outside influences.

Silindung Valley textile inventions force us to confront the too-easy use of the terms "traditional" and "modern" as these have been applied to third-world arts. In the Batak world, the textile "tradition" is not being replaced by innovations, but is, rather, reinforced by it. In other words the "modern" actively preserves the "traditional". The inventions have underscored the necessity of looking beyond the products to the cognitive framework which allowed their realization. It has been necessary to reinterpret "tradition" as the combination of techniques and design, and the set of woven possibilities this combination generates, plus historical accident which has selected the products, bringing some to prominence and others to oblivion.

The Batak textile tradition is dynamic rather than static. It has adapted rather than declined; it is surviving.

FOOTNOTES

1. The field research for this paper was conducted in 1986 under the auspices of LIPI and with the sponsorship of Universitas HKBP Nommensen in Medan, North Sumatra. Funding for the research was generously provided by WOTRO-ZWO of The Netherlands. In 1990, a return visit was made possible by a SSHRCC grant (1989), and a Killam Post-Doctoral Fellowship (1988-1990)
ill.7 Mamutik: The ikat-maker inserts the rods to count the warps.

ill.8 Mamutik
The rods are used to count the warps.
The string marks off motif units.

ill.9 Tying off the warps
Each vertical stripe represents all the warps picked up by one of the wooden rods.
INTRODUCTION

No discussion of late 20th century trade in textiles - particularly trade in what has been called "regional" or "ethnic" textiles - would be complete without a discussion of the terms "traditional" and "authentic" for these terms inform even a lay person's evaluation of textiles on the market today.

As textile professionals, we encounter terms like "textile tradition," "traditional textiles" or even "authentic traditional textiles" in our everyday experience: a textile brought back by a collector from travel to a Third World nation or a textile on display in a museum. These textiles are subjected to discussions of their authenticity, of whether they represent a tradition. The authentic, traditional textile is often, either openly or implicitly, contrasted to the inauthentic, tourist textile. There is an assumption that we share a common understanding of the term "traditional textile."

However, a growing body of interdisciplinary literature from the fields of anthropology (Clifford, 1988; Dominguez, 1986; Handler and Linnekin, 1984), folklore (Kirchenblat-Gimblett, 1988; Bendix, 1989), history (Hobsbaum and Ranger, 1983) and sociology (Cohen, 1988) has challenged our commonsense understanding of what constitutes a tradition. In this emerging literature, traditions are viewed as "negotiable" (Cohen, 1988:374), "invented" (Hobsbaum and Ranger:1983) and "socially-constructed" (Handler and Linnekin:1984). Further, collected objects, formerly seen as the locus of interesting data about other cultures and their "authentic traditions" are now being reevaluated for what they can tell us about ourselves and our values. For example, the quest for authenticity in the objects we buy and study is seen as a sign of our own alienation (Cohen: op. cit.) or as a "means of preserving our own historicity" (Dominguez, 1986:548). As the terms "tradition" and "authenticity" have been scrutinized and deconstructed, long-held assumptions have given way.

What is meant by the social construction of tradition? Rather than viewing a tradition as a natural phenomenon, which existed in the past, tradition is viewed as a symbolic process. Shils noted in 1981 (195) that tradition is "capable of being retrospectively reformed by human beings in the present." Later, Handler and Linnekin (1984) wrote, "Tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present...a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them;" tradition is "...a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present through making reference to the past" (1984:276).

In the case of a textile tradition, what is passed on is not simply a product. The product is the physical manifestation of a tradition. Instead, what is passed on is what Shils (ibid., 31) calls "the pattern which guides the reinactment," for our purposes, the...