Cognitive Textiles Cloths: The Indigenous Classification Of Batak

Sandra A. Niessen
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf

Part of the Art and Design Commons

https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/647

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
COGNITIVE CLOTHS: THE INDIGENOUS CLASSIFICATION OF BATAK TEXTILES

SANDRA A. NIENEN
Department of Clothing and Textiles, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2M8

INTRODUCTION
Since completing a doctorate in anthropology on textiles produced by the Batak of North Sumatra (Niessen 1985), I have been supported by various post-doctoral scholarships (1) to produce an inventory of these same textiles. I am pleased to have this rare opportunity to tell you, a learned society of textile scholars, how I have gone about this task, my motives, goals, and methodology. I particularly would welcome feedback from you on what I see to be the theoretical underpinnings and implications of the project.

The inception of this project dates from a day in 1980 when I visited one of the best Batak textile collections in the world, housed in the State Ethnological Museum in Leiden, The Netherlands. I had just returned from the Batak region of North Sumatra, and was visiting this museum to obtain information that could help me locate, in a cultural-historical framework, the hand-woven cloths I had seen in Batak markets. I experienced dismay upon discovering the confusion in the museum documentation and quickly realized that my own field documentation, accumulated during only a few months in the field, could already significantly enhance the museum documentation. These discoveries became the inspiration for the inventory. In short, I had discovered a tangle of fabrics and information and decided to sort it out. In 1985 this germ was developed into a full-blown research project entitled "The Indigenous Classification of Batak Textiles".

While the study of material culture has passed out of fashion in anthropology, and museums are no longer in the forefront of developments in the discipline (Sturtevant 1969), this is not a permanent situation (see e.g. Clifford 1988). The textile classification project I will be discussing here has been constructed to bridge the gap between what has become the more practical work of museums and the more theoretical work of anthropology. It is my contention that museums may better fill a) their pedagogical responsibilities if they deal with, for the edification of the general public, issues that are at the forefront of the anthropological discipline, and b) their research responsibilities if they manage collections in a way conducive to research. In this paper, I discuss how classification research of the kind I have undertaken can benefit museums by exposing cherished myths about history and taste, and how, if adopted as part of standard museum practise, it could promote the study of material culture.
METHODOLOGY

First a description of the Batak textile inventory. I have gone about this project in the following way:

1. I have collected archival data on Batak textiles in libraries and museums in Holland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and France. Much of the data on function, meaning, and classification alludes to Batak textile types by name, but does not provide the visual complement to this information. Without knowing which cloths the data pertain to, the data are of little use.

2. I have visited important Batak textile collections in 15 European museums making for myself a photographic inventory of all the distinct types of Batak cloth that I found. I discovered in the neighbourhood of 120 different types of cloth. I classified the inventory numerically (type 1, type 2, and so on), based on cloth design. Batak weavers make their cloths conform to design templates each of which has a particular social meaning (more about this below). The typology which I constructed was informed, to a certain extent, by what I had learned from the Batak during my fieldwork, but because I was not aware of the distinctive features of all Batak textile types, precisely this being the goal of the research, I simply deduced that cloths of similar appearance were the same type, and I identified each type with a number. This inventory was the inverse of the archival information in that it was based entirely on the visual aspects of the cloths with no reference to indigenous name, function, or meaning.

3. This preparatory work was succeeded by the critical task of relating the physical appearance of the cloths to the data. Some of this was facilitated by museum documentation but most of it was accomplished during an ensuing 8 months in North Sumatra, where I conducted interviews centred around the photographs I had made of the various cloth types. Textiles which I found in the field and which were not represented in European museums, I added to the inventory. My goal was to identify each cloth type with its indigenous name, its meaning and function, and to locate it on a time/space grid. Were they still being produced? Had they changed over time? Which sub-group or region produced/utilized them?

4. I am currently engaged in collating the data described above for publication. The completed typology will be based on the Batak classification scheme rather than the arbitrary numerical scheme which I started out with.

To best meet the pragmatic goals of the project, the resulting publication will explain as well as illustrate the classification scheme so that the reader is able to learn which features of the cloth are the distinctive ones from which the cloth derives its identity. Unfortunately, by necessity, artifact documentation is all too often an arbitrary exercise; books are thumbed through until the lucky documentalist finds a specimen that closely resembles the riddle at hand and is able to
write "probably a so-and-so". By pointing out the distinctive features of the type category, I hope that a catalogue of the kind I am planning will facilitate the process of identification so that the documentalist may substitute informed deduction for the frustrating process of thumbing and guessing.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Aside from the practical implications of this research project for museum documentation, I would like to discuss five ways in which the project has theoretical relevance or implications for textile research.

1. Textile Traditions as Cognitive Systems

Cloths are more than the technical assemblage of warp and weft. They are cultural objects. Correspondingly, an indigenous classification scheme does more than link a name to a cloth; it may reveal how a cloth is locally perceived. A Batak will see in a cloth the region or cultural sub-group from which it originates, and the appropriate social status, sex and age of its wearer, as well as the occasion for which it is appropriate. All these things are implied in a cloth and its name for the Batak. Ever since the seminal work by Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss on Primitive Classification, anthropologists have been investigating how people "think" their worlds by analyzing how they use categories to carve it up. Classification analysis goes beyond a descriptive exercise when its systemic aspect, or its internal logic is addressed. Cloth traditions lend themselves particularly well to classification research. The cognitive analysis of cloth traditions fosters a different focus or level of textile study. It is here that ethnographic research takes over from the clerical task of documentation.

Focus on individual specimens of cloth is implicitly encouraged by the fact that museum collections are generally incomplete and try to specialize in the most spectacular representatives of cloth traditions (hence the epithet "museum quality cloth"). The research I am describing is founded instead on the assumption that a cloth tradition is greater than the sum of its parts, and that a knowledge of the full repertoire of woven goods adds considerably to our insights into the local significance of the particular specimen. As with words in a vocabulary, the meaning of a particular cloth is relative to that of the other cloths in the set. A research focus at the systemic level gives as much importance to the famed ragidup, the "raja" or most prestigious cloth of the Batak, as to the parompa, a cheap cloth which is used to carry a child on the back. Every specimen is an essential component of the whole system. (2)

2. Cross-Cultural Applicability of Classification Research

As I describe my project, there are undoubtedly those among you who know that my research method cannot be adapted to your own study of a particular culture's textiles. This may be due to the fact that cloth classification in your region is informed by something other than overall design appearance. This project is,
Indeed, tailored to fit the peculiar Batak situation. While I acknowledge the limitations of my research methodology cross-culturally, I think it is important to make the distinction between a methodology of research and research goals. Exploring systemic differences between textile traditions as cognitive configurations is a valuable goal of textile research (3) and this goal may be achieved in a variety of ways depending on the data which confronts the researcher.

One of the first questions that must be asked, therefore, is the extent to which my methodology may be applied. In other words, to what extent do other textile classification systems resemble the Batak system? There do appear to be Indonesian systems which may be considered variants of the Batak model and to which my methodology is likely to be more or less adaptable. (4)

Comparisons with textile traditions in other regions of the world may reveal how different cognitive universes incorporate textiles. Are there universals, are there regional systems, or is there a vast array of totally distinct systems? Systemic comparisons may bring us closer to answering the grander questions about the role of cloth in human experience (Schneider 1988).

I will cite Mary Frame’s research on Paracas embroideries as an example. Her data requires her to utilize an entirely different methodology from my own to investigate the indigenous classification system of these particular cloths. She has recently argued in an exciting as yet unpublished essay, that these ancient embroideries contain a record of certain kinds of indigenous knowledge. The cloths recapitulate complete sets of numerical and spatial possibilities on the level of pattern and colour repetition. In the same group of mummy bundles in which the cloths were found, is a series of headbands with images of textile structures. The structure images manifest a parallel set of numerical and spatial relationships and probably indicate that the empirical basis of the pattern system lies in the distinctions in textile structure.

Frame’s research focuses on technique in combination with motifs and their organization in a cloth, whereas my own focuses on whole-cloth design; hers focuses on what is probably esoteric knowledge in Paracas society whereas mine utilizes classification terminology which is generally used by all members of the Batak community. What emerges from the juxtaposition of our respective projects is just how different the social and cognitive role of cloth can be. Our knowledge will have been significantly increased when further research of this type reveals how regionally typical or atypical our respective finds prove to be.

Frame’s research, as my own, is based on a full repertoire of cloths of a particular tradition. In her case, it is perhaps impossible to know, from archaeological recoveries, what per
centage of the tradition she has been able to examine. She has procured as broad a sampling of the cloths as possible in order to estimate the parameters of the knowledge that the cloths record. Each individual cloth is but a single piece in the system, and no cloth on its own could reveal what the full set is capable of disclosing.

4. Cloth Classification and History

It is ironic -- to say nothing of how satisfying it is -- that this Batak textile classification project, so thoroughly rooted in the concept of the "traditional textile", should expose that concept so completely as a myth. I originally commenced this project with a sense of urgency and described it as "salvage anthropology". I was concerned that many of the beautiful old specimens of Batak cloth were no longer being made, and that the old people who could still remember them and how they were used were dying, leaving a gap in our ethnographic knowledge which could never be filled. My research was heavily oriented toward museum specimens which I regarded as generally being of much higher quality than the modern cloths being produced today. Today, as a result of my research finds, I recognize these original motives as being informed by a false historical consciousness (Domínguez 1986) and I have now changed my position to passionately defend modern cloth production and the need to study what weavers today are doing.

The point that I would like to make is that cognizance of the full repertoire of cloths in a textile tradition promotes appreciation for modern developments in the art. In-depth documentation of the Batak textile repertoire has revealed how cloth design transforms through time and space. It reveals no sharp disjuncture between the so-called "traditional" and the "modern" cloth. It reveals how names and designs may disappear and later re-emerge in new forms and combinations. It reveals that Batak textiles, mourned in the ethnographic literature for more than half a century for being in a state of decline, are in fact a dynamic art, very much alive, very innovative.

Textiles are historical documents manifesting inevitably and always, the cultural influences to which the weavers are exposed (see, for example, J. Fox 1979 and G. McCracken 1987:108-109). Analysis of the system of cloth classification presents an opportunity to evaluate, on its own terms, changes happening within a textile tradition.

The myth of the "traditional" cloth as compared to the inferior "modern" cloth pervades our collection practices and our research methods. Museums favour the purchase of textiles which show no evidence of aniline dyes and synthetic yarns; exhibitions please the public with "masterpieces" and "treasures" -- terms used almost exclusively for old cloths which are considered "traditional" and "museum-quality".

The ideological blinkers which encourage us to classify
cloth as either "traditional" or "modern" are blinding us to the exciting, finer features of cloth history and dynamism in design and technique. As we scramble after the elusive "traditional cloth", the equally important "current situation" slips through our fingers. Eliminate the myth of the "traditional" cloth and two blurry masses of time, time past and time present, dissolve into a fascinating continuum.

4. Taste and Textile Traditions
Cloths deserving of the epithet "museum quality" are not simply old, or "traditional"; they are perceived by the users of that epithet as being aesthetically superior to other cloths, and deserving, therefore, of special consideration. An argument that is often, and often justifiably, levelled at the anthropological approach to art is that the aesthetic dimension of the object is sacrificed to its sociological dimension (see e.g. Rubin 1984: 74, n.6 and Flores 1985:29), that it is reduced to a medium by which to explore other domains of social life. It could be similarly argued here, that social classification, using textiles as the medium, is the goal of this particular research project. I think it is important to point out in this regard that taste, by which we judge aesthetic merits, and so often touted as absolute, universal, and supracultural, is in fact historically informed (see e.g. Boas 1940; Lemann, 1987; Blundell and Phillips, 1983). (5)

In the history of western involvement with Batak textiles, current woven products have always been discriminated against. One hundred years ago they were deemed primitive because they were constructed by a technology inferior to that of Europe. Their colour choice, based "merely" on plant dyes, was considered narrow; their hand-spun yarn was considered coarse. Missionaries and colonial educators sought to improve their lot by offering them the advantages of western technology. By the time these efforts were having effect, Europeans were beginning to experience nostalgia for the untouched primitive lifestyles and horror was expressed at the evidence of western encroachment on "traditional textiles". This latter position is unfortunately still extant. While Batak weavers were once put down for the inferiority of their "primitive" technology, their products are now discriminated against for being "non-traditional". Western taste, which purports to discriminate a good textile from a bad one, has never appreciated the woven goods of its own time, always hankering after the future or the past, and the Batak weaver has always been the victim (see Niessen, i.p.).

If textile classification research does not focus on the aesthetic dimensions of the cloth tradition -- by which I mean us to understand western aesthetic interests in the cloths -- what it is capable of doing is exposing the indigenous aesthetic of the makers of the cloth and the vicissitudes of their fashion and taste. Today, as in the past, Bataks produce cloths which appeal to their own taste (they are still their own primary market) and
their regional taste preferences translate into textile style regions.

I entertain the hope that my publication will promote the products of currently living Batak weavers rather than cater to, or operate within, western taste fads.

5. Implications of the Cognitive Cloth for Collection Practices
An increased focus on this cognitive level of textile research has ramifications for collection practices. The "treasures" of particular traditions take on less significance relative to the full repertoire of cloths in a particular cloth tradition. A full repertoire of Batak cloths is an easy enough set to define because the Batak typologize their cloths by design, and have a finite number of designs. Distinct cloth classification systems logically present their own sets of collection parameters which I think museums and collectors will need to take account of if collections are to lend themselves to classification research. Similarly, the standard systems of artifact classification for museum purposes must then also be set up to coherently record indigenous classification systems.

The implication here is that considerable ethnographic research is an essential preliminary to accurate museum documentation and that if museums wish to build collections for research purposes, the process and implications of artifact selection is a crucial step, requiring more serious attention.

CONCLUSIONS
In this paper I have attempted to rationalize the goals and the methodology of a project concerning the indigenous classification system of Batak textiles in a way that responds both to museum practices and the discipline of textile research.

I believe that the project is innovative in its practical goals of providing the logic of indigenous classification for collection documentation. I believe also that it is important for other projects of this nature to acknowledge, in a practical fashion, the importance they have for museums.

The project also implicitly addresses western ideological biases regarding history and taste by providing an alternative vision of the Batak textile tradition. The project started off with its focus on museum cloths, and justified itself as a salvage operation to appraise and document these collections "before it is too late". It has changed to look at Batak cloth through time -- the full repertoire -- with museum collections as only a subset of that whole. It has shown up museum collections and exhibits for a false historical bias, and offers the Batak alternative to current western taste preferences.

I think we still have a great distance to travel in order to build collections that credit the makers of the objects rather than our own interests. We can reflect ourselves, our
philosophies and our myths, through our collections, or we can do our best to expose a different ethnographic reality. This is not solely the task of exhibits and publications, but is implicit in collection practices as well.

Finally, this perspective has resulted from a combination of field research and museum research which generates a time-frame otherwise absent in research that depends on just one or the other. Museum collections add time depth, and field research a framework within which to evaluate the former.

Footnotes

1. This research was supported during 1985-1987 by a research grant from ZWO-WOTRO, the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research, and during 1988-1989 by an Izaak Walton Killam Post-Doctoral Fellowship which I have taken up in the Department of Clothing and Textiles at the University of Alberta. I am extremely grateful to all three for their support.

2. G. McCracken (1987) presents an excellent review of the anthropological literature on the communicative quality of clothing, and points out the limitations of the linguistic metaphor to the study of "clothing as language".

3. This research program is not a new one, having been developed for decades by French and Dutch structuralists. However, it has not yet been applied to the field of textiles.

4. Leiden structural anthropology (The Netherlands) is renowned for its study of Indonesian systems of classification (see De Josselin de Jong (ed.) 1977 and 1984). These studies have revealed remarkable correspondences throughout the Indonesian archipelago of Indonesian thought systems. For textiles, this approach has been successfully attempted by D. Geirnaert. There is tremendous scope for more research of this kind on Indonesian cloth.

5. William Rubin (1984) has discussed how different African traditions have fallen into and out of favour in Europe at different times depending on the vicissitudes of European artistic fashion.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blundell, Valda and Ruth Phillips  
1983 "If it's not Shamanic, is it sham? An Examination of Media Responses to Woodland School Art" in Anthropologica XXV, no. 1.

Boas, George  

Clifford, James  

Culler, Jonathan  

Dominguez, Virginia R.  

Durkheim, Emile and Marcel Mauss  
1903 "De Quelques formes primitives de classification" in L'Annee sociologique, 6.


Flores, Toni  

Fox, James J.  

Frame, Mary  
1988 personal communication (paper presented to the Americanist Conference in Amsterdam, summer 1988)

Geirnaert-Martin, Danielle  

Josselin de Jong, P.E. de (ed.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Publisher and Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Unity in Diversity: Indonesia as a Field of Anthropological Study</td>
<td>Verhandelingen Series no. 103 of the KITLV. Dordrecht: Foris Publications.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>