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Sisters and Others: The Power and Politics of Weaving Supplementary Weft Textiles in a Sa'dan Toraja Village

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The politics of weaving textiles in Sa'dan Sesean Toraja, a district on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia, is shaped by two social and cultural influences. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork in four Sa'dan Toraja villages, I suggest that the matriarchal social organization of village life is the most significant factor influencing the production and sales of textiles. The status and hierarchy of the matriarchies is in turn controlled by the local belief system, known as *adat*, which is followed by the Sa'dan Toraja.¹

In 1993 and 1994 plain weave and supplementary weft textiles were woven, used and sold by the people of the villages of To'Barana', Matallo, Sangkombang and Sankaropi. With the exception of a few scholars, these textiles, and are, dismissed as tourist craft or mere replicas of past finer textiles and therefore, have not been studied or documented (Bolland, 1979; Maxwell, 1990; Hitchcock, 1985; 1991). From June 1993 to June 1994 I gathered data and recorded the entire warping and weaving techniques and technology of plain weaving and supplementary weft patterning techniques of Sa'dan Malimbong in the District of Sa'dan Sesean (Christou, 1997; 2004; 2006). As a weaver and a student curator of clothing and textiles I was able to document the entire process by warping and weaving textiles myself on a Sa'dan loom.

At this time, several Indonesian government proposals for weaving cooperatives were assigned and distributed throughout the Sa'dan Toraja area. Only two proposals had been accepted by the local population because of the problems inherent in the social and political organizational structure of the local hierarchical matriarchies. The weaving cooperative projects were supported by local government legislation, but when it was time for distribution of the funding only the weavers belonging to the high status families would come forward and receive the funds. Weavers from lower status matriarchies would not come forward because they would be going against the religious and socio-cultural rules or *adat* governing their society.

The village of To'Barana' is a site thousands of tourists visit each year, and it proudly displays the talents of its inhabitants in the form of local and regional textiles which are sold in the kiosks to both foreign and domestic tourists. The local population also orders woven cloth to be made into ceremonial clothing for weddings and funerals. There are five types of cloth woven on a back strap loom with a continuous warp; and, depending on the type of cloth there is a variation in the way the loom is set up (Christou, 1997; 2004; 2006).² According to Dinny Jusuf (2012) the supplementary warp and

¹ Adat is a set of religious and social customs and rules adhered to by the Sa'dan Toraja (Volkman, 1985).

² The five textile types include the pa'bunga bunga or supplementary warp; the pa'ruki or supplementary weft; the pa'ramba or multi-coloured striped cloth with plain white centre field; pa'dure dure and pa'borong or multi-stripes; and, the pa'miring or black, red and white striped side panels with plain white centre field (Christou, 1997, p. 133).

supplementary weft patterning techniques are no longer being woven in Sa'dan Toraja. The weavers have lost the knowledge to insert the extra heddles required to weave these decorative techniques.³



Fig. 1 The insertion of the pattern heddle rods with a continuous spiral heddle cord creates the effect of continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterns and motifs. Five heddles rods are used to weave continuous supplementary weft patterns. Christou, 1997.

Today Sa'dan Toraja women weave in public just as they did in the past (Christou, 1997). The present weaving kiosks were temporary shelters set up for a funeral in 1992, but now they are a place to sell textiles and display the weaver's talents. It is also a place where the village people gather and converse amongst themselves. Without this setting other weavers from the outlying villages would not come to To'Barana'. This is where they sell their textiles, or put them up as commission pieces.

³ Dinny Jusuf (2012), founder and Chief Executive Officer of *Toraja Melo*, has conducted extensive weaving research in Tana Toraja as part of a larger weaving rejuvenation project called *Toraja Mel*. Personal communication and interview with Dinny Jusuf, by Maria Christou, September 1, 2012.



Fig.2 To'Barana' weaving kiosks, or langtangs. Christou, 1997.

Furthermore, it is where weavers exchange information about the actual weaving process, the designs and the techniques. Based on my observations, the selling tactics or strategies between the weavers are negotiated within the boundaries of the social structure (Christou, 1997). The conversations that take place around the weaver are about: ceremonies and ceremonial obligations; tourism and money; family and children; pigs and buffaloes; as well as other social and cultural activities such as gossip, gambling and storytelling. The weaving kiosks have become the locus of the village life.

The western market system has altered the 'world view' of the weavers and the people who use the textiles by changing the patterns of their daily routines (Adams, 1995). The commodification of textiles represents a profound change for Sa'dan Toraja weavers because they no longer only weave for their own families and communities daily and ceremonial needs. Today women view their textiles as commodities to be sold to people outside of their social and cultural context (Adams, 1997; Crystal, 1989).

Since the weavers have come to rely on tourists visiting To'Barana', they are under constant economic stress because of the insecure nature of textile sales.⁴ They sell their textiles in order to pay for labour during the planting and harvesting seasons. The money is similarly used to buy pigs and buffalo for

⁴ Dinny Jusuf (2012) has indicated due to the inter-racial religious riots in and around Poso in 1998, there has been a significant decline in the number of tourists visiting Tana Toraja.

sacrifice during funeral ceremonies; and, or to clear debts; gain status; or, retain social equality as well as to pay for their children's education (Christou, 1997).

In spite of the social and economic changes, the To'Barana' weavers maintain their traditional weaving technology. No aspect of the loom has been modified or changed to suit the needs of the changing world of the Sa'dan weaver. Other traditional aspects of weaving are also maintained; for example, the weavers will weave specific colours during the different phases of the agricultural cycle, which also correspond to the ceremonies accompanying, and occurring during the dry and wet seasons.

The Sa'dan Toraja value weaving skills; and, this is what maintains the quality of weaving and the weaving technology. There are many references cited in the oral traditions praising a woman's talents as a weaver (Nooy-Palm, 1979; 1986). Although the quality is lower in some instances, this is not always the case. Individual weavers are praised and respected by their peers for their innovation and talent; however, this can also lead to jealousy and resentment among groups of sisters. The reputation of a weaver's talent may sometimes cross over social status boundaries because personal aesthetics are not culturally rigid, only culturally defined. The power rests with the women—the weavers.

In Tana Toraja there is a renewal of cultural and social identity through the revival of religious ceremonies based on the old religion called the way of the ancestors (Volkman, 1985; Adams, 2006). Tourists are invited to participate in both funeral and wedding traditional ceremonies. Weaving fits into this paradigm because it too is revived and sustained by its popularity as a valued cultural activity. The Sa'dan Toraja value weaving as an ethnic symbol and proudly displays it to domestic and foreign tourists.



Fig. 3 Ceremonial attire. Stripped cloth woven with hand spun, locally grown cotton and dyed cotton. The young women are wearing beaded shoulder cloths, kaudare. The kaudare is plaited onto them. They also wear beaded head bands, a batik shoulder cloth, and ceremonial swords, kris.

In addition, tourism changes the traditional patterns of living in To'Barana' because people alter the way they live in order to accommodate the tourists. Consequently, the world view of the weaver is altered with each visit by both domestic and foreign tourists as well as the guides that bring them to the weaving villages. Foreign tourists similarly bring with them pre-conceived ideas about the Toraja culture, which they glean from the literature and learn from guides. The tourist aesthetic and cultural preferences of what a piece of woven cloth should look like also influences the number of sales a weaver will make per visit.

There are several contributing factors influencing the production of textiles in To'Barana': the quality of the textiles produced is somewhat lowered because the production time must be speeded up; the textile design has become more limited in scope because the more complicated the motifs and patterns are, the more time it takes to weave them; the length of the cloth is also reduced to save time in weaving.⁵ The smaller textiles use less material, so they cost less to weave, and yet they may be sold at the same price as the regular sized textile. The smaller sized textiles are more portable, and thus more convenient for the tourists.

In 1993 and 1994 there were four weaving villages in Sa'dan Malimbong: To'Barana, Sangkombong, Matallo, and Sangkaropi. Today there is no longer weaving in Sangkaropi (Jusuf, 2012). Not all of the weaving villages in Sa'dan belonged to the cooperative. However, most of the weavers from all of these villages brought their textiles to To'Barana' to sell in the weaving kiosks to tourists. It was only after living in To'Barana' for four months that I knew of the existence of the cooperative because nobody ever talked about it, or even behaved as if it existed.

Most of the To'Barana' weavers did not comply with the cooperative's organizational procedures, regulations, and demands. There was an outward aversion to the cooperative in To'Barana' because of the cooperative manager's social rank. The manager organized the cooperative and applied for the government assistantship. Despite, the fact that the manager was a highly educated and independent woman, the lack of success the cooperative had in Sa'dan Sesean was indirectly attributed to the social status and power conflicts that existed, and still exist, among the high status lineages, or ramages.

Due to the structure of the social organization in To'Barana', the people of high status did not regard Indonesian government imposed programs with a positive attitude. They did not care to have outside forces influence local government and politics as they related to the economic and social well-being of the community. Personal conflicts also constrained relations within the cooperative and caused it to stagnate for long periods of time or until a mediator stepped in and helped negotiate certain terms and conditions that would make the unhappy parties comply with the way the cooperative were organized. Thus, To'Barana' as a weaving co-operative was not successful. In contrast to a cooperative, To'Barana' as a tourist site of interest was very successful. The village received 1000 rupiah from each visitor coming into the weaving village compound. Any monies collected from the entrance fee, or from traditional performances put on by the community were put into the communal fund and were used for

⁵ Although the loom technology has not changed the continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning techniques are no longer used to make patterns and motifs. In the past these two techniques were used to make the men's loin cloth or *pio uki* and the widow's hood or *pote'*. These cloths are used as family heirlooms and only displayed for ritual purposes during ceremonies (Christou, 2006). They are woven textiles not embroidered; there is no embroidery, past or present, in Sa'dan Toraja.

community projects. The woman of the highest status, the eldest sister of one of five groups of sisters that were part of the lineage of To'Barana', was keeper of the communal funds.⁶

In 1994 high status weavers and individual economic circumstances determined who had access to weaving and textile culture in Sa'dan Sesean. High status weavers controlled knowledge of weaving patterns and, most importantly, they controlled the knowledge of warping. It is the first and foremost control tactic used by the high status women, for without this significant technical knowledge, no weaving can take place. Thus, over time the supplementary warp and weft techniques and the variations of these two techniques, have been lost.⁷ According to Jusuf (2012), today, of the 100-150 women who weave in Sa'dan Malimbong, only 41% know how to warp the continuous warp and set up a loom and there is no one dyeing the cotton used for weaving.⁸ In 1994, knowledge of traditional dyeing techniques was guarded and not shared openly within the matriarchal lineages. Furthermore, yarns were expensive and if an individual could not afford the purchase price and the cost of transportation, she was unable to produce textiles.

Several factors influence the distribution, restriction, and maintenance of the weaving in this area. For example, knowledge of weaving is passed from mother to daughter, or grandmother to granddaughter. Formerly, children began to weave as early as six years of age; however, this is changing due to the formal education system because children now begin school at age six. Due to the commercial visibility of weaving in To'Barana, the children of all status groups are exposed to weaving; weaving surrounds their daily life more so than in the non-tourist weaving villages of Matallo and Sangkombong. Presently, children of all status groups are able to weave if their mothers' cannot afford the materials and the tools for weaving they weave on their Aunt's and or Grandmother's looms.

Religious customs and rules, or *adat* similarly influences weaving. The adherence to *adat* is a matter of not only saving face for the weaver and her family, but maintains the strength of the community (Hollan, and Wellenkamp, 1994). Individual economic status is another factor influencing the distribution or restriction of weaving because even women with high status may not have the monetary funds available to purchase yarns. Lack of knowledge is an additional impediment; a high status woman may not have the requisite warping skills. A low status woman would not advance in the village because both the low status women and the high status women would see to it that she would not make cloth or most definitely not make any sales. If she does, she and her family will have repercussions such as being alienated from the family or ostracized by the village and eventually being removed from the compound. Being shunned by the family and village is the worst fate for a Sa'dan Toraja person (Hollan, and Wellenkamp, 1994).

In contrast, high status women may have sons, husbands or male kin with extensive knowledge of how to conduct sales with foreigners, and occasionally having the funds to bring tourists in for themselves for a staged cultural experience, and subsequent sales opportunities. They may also have the funds to influence the tour guide operators, that is, they direct the tourists to their weaving relations. This

⁶ Residence in Sa'dan Toraja is matri-local. Groups of sisters reside in the villages. However, each parent belongs to a different lineage and to a different ancestor house therefore the kinship system can be defined as bilateral.

⁷ From 1994 to 2012, these two techniques have slowly disappeared in Sa'dan Sesean.

⁸ When I was conducting my field work in the area of Sa'dan Malimbong, people were cultivating local cotton, hand spinning the cotton and dyeing it with natural dyes for the use in the local weaving production. However commercial cotton was also used at this time, but it was purchased in Ujung Pandang, the capital city of South Sulawesi Province.

activity is not always for the sake of profit alone, but for the maintenance of the hierarchy in the village social structure.

High status women also have the power of education and language skills. Being able to communicate with the tourists is half the sale. The guides will bring the tourists to the same weaver based on the success of the sales and the enjoyment experienced by the tourists. They want to please the clients, and leave them with a good impression of the Toraja culture. The guides want the tourists to experience an authentic cultural performance, but it is not really possible since the performances are specifically staged for the tourists. The cultural performances included a drum and traditional dance performance; traditionally these accompanied adat ceremonies, now they are staged for the entertainment of tourists.

The performances are followed by a traditional meal or coffee served to the tourists while they sit on the rice barn platforms on plaited grass mats, so they can observe the natural environment around them. After the meal, the tourists are led through the village to the weavers' kiosks to make purchases that will become their mementoes of the experience they just had. The entire performance is cultural in all aspects of dress, music, food, weaving and dance. It is a commercialization of the tourist experience and the entire performance, from the entrance fee to the tourist site until the final loading of the bus (Crystal 1979; 1989). The performances have become de-contextualized (Clifford, 1988).

Based on my participant observation in the field, I found that there is competition on many levels: between the local villages; among the groups of sisters in the village; and between the individual weavers. There is a competition for knowledge of weaving skills and techniques, ability and skill levels, business and language savvy, acquiring of materials for weaving, as well as profits and distribution of profits. High status villages will take most, if not all, of the tourist business, leaving other local weavers under the power and authority of the high status village.

In conclusion, despite the many factors influencing the distribution and restriction of the weaving technical knowledge, the on-going local use and weaving of textiles in Sa'dan Sesean communicates and maintains the Toraja identity.⁹ I would say it re-enforces the culture's identity to its self.¹⁰ The social organization of the village maintains the political structure but it is the maintenance and adherence of the traditional rules or adat that controls the local weavers' production of textiles for both domestic and foreign tourist markets. Therefore, social, political and economic domains of the weavers are defined by the Toraja culture and then maintained by the religious code or adat. Power and politics in a Toraja weaving village is most apparent when one lives there on a daily basis, takes part in the daily activities of the village and lives with each of the different groups of sisters.

⁹Dinny Jusuf was the project director for the book and subsequent exhibition by Judi Achjadi and Keiko Kusakabe, "Untannun Kameloan – Textiles of Toraja, Mamasa, Mamuju, Rongkong – Sulawesi, Indonesia," Jakarta, Indonesia, 2012.

¹⁰ The Jakarta Textile Museum hosted the opening for an exhibition titled, "Untannun Kameloan – Textiles of Toraja, Mamasa, Mamuju, and Rongkong – Sulawesi, Indonesia" from Sept. 19-30, 2012. The project director, Dinny Jusuf, said to me that "Untannun Kameloan means Weaving Compassion. It is the message [they] want to share. By working together, across communities, based on compassion, all dreams will come true!" (Jusuf, Dinny. Interview by Maria Christou. Vancouver, BC and Jakarta, Indonesia, 1 September 2012).

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the World University Service of Canada, the Alberta Museums Association, the Clifford E. Lee Foundation, the Brody Foundation of the University of Alberta Students Union, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research Travel Assistantship, the Faculty of Home Economics and Department of Human Ecology, Dr. Betty Crown, Dr. Sandra Niessen, my parents Charalambos and Chrisoula Christou, and my sister Vicky Christou for their generous and kind support. They made it possible for me to live in Indonesia from June 1993 to June 1994. I would also like to thank the Honorary Consulate of Indonesia for Canada, Mae E. Berkel-Ave for her cross-cultural insights and encouragement. Pak Dr. Koesnadi Hardjasomantri made research at the University of Gadjja Mada in Yogyakarta possible. Drs. Hardjoeno, Tuty Gandajih, Mohamed Askin, Burhansah, Rusli Ngatimin, M. M. Papyungan, and Prof. Mattulada assisted me with my research at the University of Gadjja Mada in Yogyakarta and at the University of Hassinudin in Ujung Pandang. I appreciate the generosity and friendship extended to me by my homestay families in the village of To'Barana': Nene' Buahlolo, Nene' Ratih, Nene' Rante La'bi' as well as Mama Erni. Without their constant attention and support, participant based fieldwork would not have been possible in Sa'dan Malimbong. I also would like to acknowledge and thank my Toraja weaving teachers: Nene' Butong, Nene' Juni, Nene' Ati, Nene' Ratih, Nene' Buahlolo, Nene' Ita, Mama Batosi, Mama Betty, Mama Elly, Mama Ari, Nene' Herosome (To'Rongkong), Nene' Normawati (To'Rongkong), Ibu Tei Nonti (To' Wali) and my friend and mentor Om Manangka. With their guidance and encouragement I was able to learn supplementary weft weaving techniques and document the entire process in its social and cultural context. For the purpose of this paper, I would like to acknowledge Dinny Jusuf, founder and Chief Executive Officer of Toraja Melo, for providing me with an interview for this paper. She generously shared with me her knowledge of the weaving in Sa'dan Sesean.

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