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Ancient Emblems, Modern Cuts: Weaving and the State in Southeastern Indonesia

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The province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, or NTT), at the southeastern corner of the Indonesian archipelago, is home to the most vibrant traditional textile cultures in Indonesia today. Across Flores, Timor, Sumba, Savu, Rote, Lembata, and dozens of smaller islands, textiles are worn and used at all varieties of traditional ceremonies, such as births, weddings, and funerals, the foundation of houses, prayers for fertility, and thanksgiving at harvest time. And every day, in thousands of villages, thousands of weavers sit down at body-tension looms, producing cloth that will meet the ritual requirements of their communities.

The cloth also tells the stories of pre-colonial kingdoms, and outlines systems of thought and belief that predate the arrival of Christianity and Islam, the religions professed today by the majority of NTT residents. The vocabulary is varied, and subtle. Successive generations of artists have adapted and reinvented cultural influences from Europe, China, India, and Vietnam, creating unique combinations of decorative techniques, motifs, colors, and design structures. NTT is astonishingly diverse. West Timor alone had 11 kingdoms before the modern Indonesian state reorganized the area into four administrative divisions (kabupaten). In each of those old kingdoms, local weavers devised ways to differentiate their people from those around. Small differences in color, motif, fringing, or other features would immediately mark the person wearing a cloth as a resident of Amanuban, or Amfoan, or Amarasi, or another of the old kingdoms. Within each group, colors and motifs held particular significance, based on local legends or customary law. Although the old kingdoms have disappeared as meaningful political units, they remain important in textile culture. For traditional ceremonies—rituals based on customary law, or *adat*—the cloth you wear remains important. It marks your kingdom, your clan, and your social status within the community.

Figure 1. A man in Waigalli, West Sumba, dressed for a major festival. Photo by the author.

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The form of traditional clothing varies from region to region, but tends to follow a general pattern. Women wear a closed, tubular sarong, folded and tucked under the armpits or at the waist; men wear an open, blanket-style sarong, folded around the waist. Both sexes often wear slender, scarf-like shoulder-cloths, and men often wear a head cloth, similar to a bandanna, which can be folded in a variety of ways. Belts, bags, hats, elaborate jewelry, and other accessories can complete the ensemble. NTT textiles are closely identified with ikat, a dye-resist decorative technique, and with the use of supplementary warp and weft weaving techniques such as *pahikung* in Sumba or *sotis* in Timor.

The Republic of Indonesia projects its identity on the world stage with a different kind of textile: silk batik, the cloth of choice for formal occasions, from corporate press conferences to photo opportunities with president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who often offers batik shirts to visiting dignitaries. Indonesia even fought a battle with neighboring Malaysia for official recognition as the home of batik by UNESCO, the UN body for cultural affairs.

Batik has a long history in Java, the seat of Indonesia's government and the home of roughly one-half of its population. But it has almost no history in NTT. Batik has circulated in the southeastern islands for centuries, but as a trade item. Local production centered on ikat. To the world, batik may represent Indonesia. Within Indonesia, batik more commonly represents Java alone. In NTT, where cloth is still so closely linked to identity, this is not a trivial issue.

In 1997, NTT governor Herman Musakabe introduced a new regulation ordering employees of the provincial government to wear uniforms made of traditional cloth from NTT on Wednesday and Thursday of each week. Workers are free to choose any cloth they like; no restrictions of ethnic group, status, or traditional usage are enforced.

Figure 2. Edy Latu, from the NTT Department for Development (Bappeda) wearing a jacket of cloth from Belu, West Timor. Mr. Latu himself was born in Manggarai, Flores. Photo by the author.

The policy had three main goals. The first was economic. Most weavers were poor women living in rural areas. By creating a new market for their products, the government hoped to boost livelihoods for these women. The second goal was to preserve traditional culture. The third was to promote tourism to the province, by promoting its identity within the nation at large.

All employees of the Indonesian government pay for their uniforms out of their own salaries. The same rules apply to uniforms made from handwoven cloth, which can be more expensive than ordinary khaki by an order of magnitude; regular uniform jackets cost around $5, and handwoven jackets cost between $35 to $75, or even more. Most employees of the provincial government take home between $100 and $200 dollars each month. As a result, most of them go looking for the least expensive way to satisfy the requirement, creating a powerful downward pressure on the price of handwoven cloth. Weaving is a laborious, time-consuming, and resource intensive process, and work of high quality demands a high price. And so, to meet the new price point, weavers began to downgrade the quality of their production.

Representative from the NTT Department of Industry and Trade (Desperindag) tried to stimulate production of this low-quality cloth by visiting villages around the province, and encouraging the formation of weavers cooperatives. Trainers from Desperindag encouraged weavers to increase the size and reduce the complexity of the motifs in their work, and to replace natural dyes with chemical ones, even offering free supplies of chemical dyes and training in their use.

Katarina Neparasi Siga is a weaver living in Baun, a small village about 25 kilometers from Kupang, and the seat of the old kingdom of Amarasi. Mama Kete, as she is called, refuses to participate in the production of low-quality cloth, or the use of chemical dyes. She finds it impossible to make a living producing cloth to such a low standard—*kain industri* (industrial cloth), as she calls it, after the department which supplied the dyestuffs—because the prices do not justify the work.

There appear to have been three main reasons why the prices should be unsupportable. First, the increase in the supply of low-quality handwoven cloth, encouraged by Desperindag, caused prices to bottom out. Second, rural weavers like Mama Kete only have access to rural markets, where low-quality cloth was not in demand. Even the 25 kilometers separating Baun and Kupang prevented the cloth from reaching its end consumers. Third was a problem of information. Fifteen years after the introduction of the uniform regulation, and in spite of numerous training sessions in which Desperindag instructors taught local weavers to use chemical dyes and simplify their motifs, Mama Kete had never heard that the provincial government required its workers to wear uniforms of traditional cloth.

Mama Kete is a talented textile artist, and a leader of the Kai Ne'e weavers cooperative in Baun. A regular trickle of foreign visitors and collectors visit her at her home, looking for high-quality ikat cloth in the Amarasi tradition. Her work is too valuable to be made into jackets and skirts, but I asked her how it would make her feel to know someone was cutting up her cloth. “I worked myself half to death to make it,” she replied, with a laugh. “If someone cut it, my blood pressure would rise, and I would die!”

The great majority of the handwoven cloth used in Kupang uniforms is produced not by rural weavers, but in the city itself, either by enterprising individuals, or by large workshops, employing dozens of women. One such workshop, perhaps the largest in Kupang, is the Ina Ndao Group Textile Production House. The workshop presents a very different picture from the home industry of rural weavers such as Mama Kete. When I visited, about eight women were seated at frames, using plastic raffia to create large, simplified ikat patterns on bundles of unwoven threads. Four more women in thick rubber gloves were mixing chemical dyes in plastic buckets, and rubbing the color into partially finished textiles. Two more were chalking and cutting finished cloth, tailoring it into jackets and skirts. The weaving had been done on large looms, called ATBM in Indonesia (*alat tenun bukan mesin*, or non-mechanical looms), at which weavers would have worked while seated on a bench, raising and lowering the sheds with foot-

pedals—a nearly industrial technology, when compared to the body-tension looms used by home producers. One more woman was crouched over a cloth, tracing the outlines of its motifs with lines of white glue, and sprinkling them with generous handfuls of gold glitter. The cloth produced at Ina Ndao is predominantly in the style of Roti, a small island off of Timor, and the original home of nearly all the women employed in the workshop. But the women also told me that they were capable of making motifs from Sumba, Savu, Flores, and Timor, claims borne out by the variety of cloth available in the shop on the front of the workshop.

Figure 3, left. A jacket of Rotinese cloth in the Ina Ndao shop. Photo by the author.

Figure 4, right. The pahikung prayer rug in the Ina Ndao shop. Photo by the author.

In the shop were long and short-sleeved jackets, skirts, dresses, neckties, purses, and all manner of souvenirs and tchotchkes incorporating cloth made in the workshop. In addition to ikat, other weaving techniques were on display, especially *pahikung*, a supplementary warp patterning technique associated with the kingdom of Pau in East Sumba, and *buna*, a warp-wrapping technique that has become very popular in Timor in the last ten to fifteen years. Bright chemical colors were the norm. Easily more than a dozen different cultural traditions were represented, from the old kingdoms of Timor, Flores, Sumba, Roti, Savu, and Alor islands, all of it made by the Rotinese women in the back rooms. Any of the jackets or skirts in the shop would have been deemed suitable for wear to the provincial government office.

Also hanging in the store was an odd piece, a Muslim prayer rug, woven with *pahikung*, a technique of supplementary-warp patterning from the island of Sumba. That is, it was a cloth woven in a Sumbanese style, made by Christians from Roti, for use by Muslim migrants from Java living in Timor. I felt that this single textile exemplified contemporary NTT textile culture brilliantly.

The weaver Ester Koro, known as Ina Koro, moved to Kupang from Savu island with her husband in the early 1990s. After a number of years together, she divorced him—a difficult proposition for a woman, under Indonesian law. She lost everything. But when she spoke to me, in July 2012, she had put her daughters through high school, and purchased land in the city and built a house for each of them. She

also owned a boarding house, and a playstation center, where children could play video games by the hour. To be sure, Ina Koro is a talented weaver and an aggressive businesswoman. But she attributes much of her success to the government's uniform policy, which provided her with more commissions than she could fill. Commissions aside, she feels strongly supported by the government; local officials frequently bring her gifts of thread, she said, and offer her places at government-sponsored exhibitions. Overall, her feeling was that the uniform policy empowered her to live an independent life, and to provide a secure future for her children.

Every respondent I consulted in the course of preparing this paper—including government spokesmen and employees, weavers, traditional leaders—agreed on only one thing: the meaning of a traditional might be, and the restrictions that apply to its use in a traditional context, vanish the instant that the cloth is cut. Leo Nahak, the head of the Provincial Museum in Kupang, told me that the restrictions on who can wear what are actually burdensome, and that being allowed to step outside them was like stepping out of a prison. Of all the government employees who agreed to speak to me, not one expressed a preference for wearing jackets of the same cloth they wore in their home villages; everyone embraced the new freedom. Mr. Nahak, in our interview, pointed at his own jacket and laughed; it was made from an *ei worapi*, a type of tube sarong worn only by women. “Even gender restrictions are thrown out!”

Figure 5. Caption: Leo Nahak in his ei worapi jacket. Photo by the author.

The *ei worapi* itself is an unusual case in Indonesian textiles, and one worth taking a moment to describe. It was developed on Savu island, where women's ceremonial garments are governed by a single, basic distinction between two female descent groups: the *hubi ae*, or “greater blossom” lineage, and the *hubi iki*, or “lesser blossom.” Each descent group is required to wear a particular type of sarong, following a prescribed set of guidelines, and incorporating motifs that describe the clan and sub-lineage of the wearer in greater detail. With the introduction of Christianity, and the European artworks that

accompanied it, Savunese weavers felt the need to develop a third type of sarong. The new kind of sarong would be ritually neutral—it could be freely worn by members of either the *hubi ae* or *hubi iki*—and could also include the pictorial and vegetal motifs featured in European art. That new kind of sarong, which emerged sometime in the last several centuries, was the *ei worapi*.

The evidence suggests that a similar process is underway in the offices at Kupang. The government office, like the Church, is a new kind of space, where a new kind of power is exercised, unconnected with prior tradition. Cutting those textiles for jackets, instead of wearing them in their customary form as sarongs, renders them ritually neutral, unsuitable for village rituals, but suitable for re-definition in a new context. Textiles remain important in this new secular political space, as can be seen by the president's use of batik, or by the official photographs of NTT governor Frans Lebu Raya, who has posed for official photographs in at least three different types of clothing. In one, he wears a white military uniform, with a peaked cap and medals on his lapel. In another, he wears the garb of Timorese royalty: blanket sarongs tied with cloth belts, shoulder cloths, and elaborate golden necklaces and headgear, supplemented by folded headcloths of silk batik. (Mr. Lebu Raya is not from Timor, but from Lembata.) In the third, he wears a tailored jacket made of handwoven, chemically-dyed ikat cloth, with motifs from central Flores.

Figure 6. NTT Governor Frans Lebu Raya in three official photographs, rephotographed by the author.

More than one respondent suggested to me that what was happening was the creation of a new *adat*, a new kind of customary law. In addition to *adat kampung*, the law of the village, there was now an *adat kantor*, the law of the office. *Adat*, in the village context, is generally understood to be not a closed and coherent system, but an accretion of precedents, similar in a sense to British Common Law. These precedents govern, among many other things, what clothing should be worn and by whom, and in what situations. The same kinds of rules are now emerging for the office. Some events call for conventional, khaki uniforms, others for uniforms of handwoven cloth. And at some rare events, word is handed down that actual ritual dress should be worn. I was unable to get a clear sense of who it was who made that decision in each case.

Robert Koroh believes the institution of the uniform regulation is a deliberate power grab on the part of the government, trying to co-opt the authority and prestige of traditional leaders. Mr. Koroh is the *raja* of Amarasi, one of West Timor's 11 colonial-era kingdoms and the one closest to Kupang. He admitted to me that he has a special interest in maintaining continuity in traditional culture, of which textiles are a highly visible element. “No culture, no kings,” as he said. He is aware that his own position in the

community, in a democratic age, depends on a conservative interpretation of traditional culture, and on being the arbiter who decides what is and is not traditional. Pak Robby's house is the first stop for any foreign visitor to Amarasi, the place to learn about local culture, and to buy traditional textiles, which he gathers from local weavers, and sells and a slight markup. He only accepts cloth that is made with natural dyes, and conforms to existing norms of motif and structure.

This is a source of frustration for some of the weavers at work within his territory, who are trying to respond to local demand. Victoria Nai'sanu lives in Merbaun, a few kilometers down a bumpy road of crushed limestone from Mr. Koroh's house in Baun. Mama Victoria lives in a cinderblock house, on a dry and windswept slope, where the swirling dust sometimes forces her to move her loom inside. She refers to herself as a poor person, and is eager to accept any commission, regardless of how it might differ from received notions of what is and is not traditional. Articles in bright colors are big sellers on the local market, as is cloth with stripes of shiny golden tinsel. Mr. Koroh refuses to sell these things through his house, as they do not represent the image of the traditional that he wants to present to the outsiders who come to him.

Mama Victoria, like Mama Kete, was unaware that the provincial government in Kupang required uniforms of traditional cloth. But she did show me a finished piece, which had been commissioned by an employee of the sub-district government, who intended to cut it into a jacket. The cloth was dominated by the bright red special to Amarasi—though reproduced in chemical dye—and included a traditional Amarasi motif. But the man had also asked Mama Victoria if she couldn't put some butterflies on it as well. And so she invented a new ikat pattern, a large butterfly with patterned wings and long antennae, and placed it at intervals between the traditional motifs.

Figure 7. Victoria Nai'sanu with the butterfly textile. Photo by the author.

One primary goal of the NTT government's uniform program, after boosting the earnings of rural weavers, was to preserve traditional culture. One result of the policy was creating conditions for innovation in textile design, almost unfettered by traditional restrictions and guidelines. Now, the innovations made possible by the re-appropriation of textiles by the state may be moving fashion in the villages, the heartlands of traditional culture.

In the past several years, a new type of textile has emerged: bolts of lightweight, synthetic fabric, produced in factories in East Java, and printed with variations of motifs from around NTT. This cloth was lighter than handwoven cloth, and more comfortable for wear in stuffy offices. And as a factory product, it could deeply undercut the price of any home-made, handwoven textile. Mr. Koroh—who referred to this sort of cloth, interestingly, as "batik"—brought up a handful of objections to this printed cloth. For one, the motifs had been appropriated without compensation to the ethnic groups where they originated. Ownership of traditional motifs is a contentious issue in Indonesia, where copyright on such patterns and images technically belongs to the state. Mr. Koroh was also concerned that these motifs were being reproduced by machines, not by people—and even worse, by machines run by people who did not belong to the ethnic groups that created those motifs, and who could not understand the deeper meanings behind them. The effect was a dehumanization of the textile arts, and a loss of what was really important: the spirit of the weaver. In the last year, the NTT government has disallowed the use of Javanese factory-made cloth from use in uniforms, not for cultural reasons but for economic ones, to keep government employees patronizing local weavers.

Figure 8. Caption: Factory-made cloth for sale at a fabric shop in Kupang. Photo by the author.

Rank and file government employees believe that on balance, the policy was a good thing. Zakeos Safis, a caretaker at the NTT provincial museum, told me that it stirred pride in him to see cloth from his home district—the old kingdom of Amfoan—worn by someone from another area. The feeling was not uncomplicated. Sometimes, he said, people would wear motifs meant only for funerals, or patterns previously restricted to members of the royal family. These days, he said, wearing a complex pattern was not about a display of status, but of money; fine motifs with many colors are more difficult to produce, and the cloth is more expensive. He also told me that nearly all meaning was lost. A person wearing such a jacket might inquire as to its place of origin, and perhaps learn the meaning of the main motif. But more subtle knowledge fell by the wayside. In Amfoan, he told me, red and white stand for the physical bravery and spiritual purity of a hero, and their use is a moral reminder and a mark of

aspiration. If somebody bought Amfoan cloth in the form of a jacket, the lesson would be lost on them. Mr. Safis and others also spoke of a feeling of brotherhood, solidarity among the different peoples of NTT, which was fostered by the use of this cloth in the office. The offices of the provincial government are, after all, a place where members of dozens of different ethnic groups, each with their own language, history, and culture, converge for a single purpose. One element that most of these cultures hold in common is a high regard for textiles. So even as, in many ways, the uniform regulation seems to degrade traditional culture, it might also be read as the next evolution of that same culture. Cloth is still important, but its meaning has changed. It's no longer about differentiation between neighboring kingdoms. Now it's about brotherhood within NTT, and the declaration of an NTT identity separate from Indonesia.

Where it becomes problematic is in the understanding and use of words such as "traditional" to describe the cloth made specifically for uniforms. At stake is the understanding of what elements make an object more or less traditional; where does "traditionality" reside? Each of my respondents seemed to have a different answer to this question.

Initially, the government defined traditional cloth as having motifs that originated from the territory of NTT province. More recently, that definition has changed to *where* the cloth was made—within the province, and not in Java—and *how* it was made—in an industrial textile plant, or on a hand-powered loom. Motifs, in turn, have been de-emphasized. Weavers such as Mama Victoria excluded cloth made on hand-powered ATBM looms, such as the ones at the Ina Ndao workshop. For her, it was important that the cloth be woven on a backstrap, body-tension loom. But Mama Victoria accepted all kinds of innovations—in color, motif, and the use of gold lurex thread—that Pak Koroh would reject as non-traditional. For him, and for Mama Kete, the use of natural dyes would also be at the core of a textile's "traditionality." They also insisted that the weaver should belong to the ethnic group whose art she is producing, a compunction not shared by the Rotinese women at Ina Ndao, busy making cloth in styles from the entire province. In short, respondents defined the traditionality of a textile by *where, how, from what,* and *by whom* it was made.

This is an issue that extends beyond NTT. At a recent visit to the Sintang Cultural Museum in West Kalimantan, I saw a textile on display as an archetypal example of Dayak ethnic art. The cloth had been woven by a woman from Flores, who had moved to Sintang and learned the local motifs. The categorization of such pieces remains an open question.

While I was researching this paper, someone passed away in Baun village, and the neighbors gathered in his house to pay their respects. I took this photo of four women on their way to the ceremony. They were not wearing sarongs. Instead, each of them draped a shoulder-cloth across her neck, wide handwoven scarves dyed in bright chemical colors. Three of the four cloths featured classic hook-and-lozenge Amarasi motifs. The fourth had Savunese designs, vegetal scrolls in the European style, such as might be woven into an *ei worapi*. I pointed out the Savunese design, and the woman responded that she came from Savu originally, but had married in Amarasi. Strictly speaking, she should have been expected to adopt her husband's traditional clothing. Clearly there was some room for interpretation.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein, culture is everything that is the case. Culture is a living, evolving thing, beyond the power of anyone or any institution to define or contain it. Textile culture is thriving in NTT, but not the textile culture of previous generations. Instead, textiles are absorbing the influences of

government policy, changes in popular taste, demographic shifts, and the democratization of Indonesian society, including the appropriation and re-definition of formerly hierarchical art forms such as textiles. The effect that the NTT government's uniform policy has had on traditional textiles is surely not the one that they envisioned. As an economic development policy, and as a cultural preservation policy, it is a failure. But in other important respects, it is an illustration of a nation carrying its traditional culture into the future.

Figure 9. Four women walking to a funeral in Baun, West Timor. Photo by the author.

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