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## Local Textile Trading Systems in Indonesia: An Example From Flores Island

Roy W. Hamilton  
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Several of the papers presented at this symposium deal with the trade of textiles over long distances, from one continent to another. Such trade systems undeniably had tremendous impact on the societies involved, but in many parts of the world individuals and communities are bound together in much smaller circles of trade that are equally formative. In this paper I will discuss a tiny network of textile trade that involves the carrying of cloth to neighboring villages over mountain paths and along surf-swept beaches. Trading systems on this scale are as much the rule as the exception and our understanding of textile trade must encompass the minute as well as the grand.

This paper developed out of a talk I gave at a conference in August, 1989. At that time my arguments were fairly straightforward, focusing on the role ecological factors have played in the development of this textile trade. Having thought over my material for the past year, I am now less inclined to try to make it yield any single conclusion. The present paper is therefore somewhat less tidy, but gives a more realistic picture of the complexity of the problems posed by my research. I will present my material in accordance with the reality of the situation, which is that I am forced to work backward, beginning with the present, which I hope I understand accurately, and then attempting to recreate the past, for which the evidence is patchy.

### Three Villages

In the course of my research on Lio<sup>1</sup> textiles, I have been investigating the role of weaving and cloth trading in the economies of three villages in Ndona Subdistrict, which is located east of the town of Ende on the south coast of Flores. Although they are separated by only a few kilometers, ecological conditions vary considerably from one village to another due to the extremely rugged topography. Together with cultural and historical factors, this has led to differing economic strategies in each village.

The village of Onelako, where I made my home, is in many ways atypical of the 12 villages in Ndona Subdistrict. It is the only village connected to Ende by road and public transportation, allowing many to commute to employment in town. A government office complex is located in the village, which serves as the administrative capital of the subdistrict.

Since the 1920s, the village has also been a major center of Roman Catholicism on Flores, including the bishop's residence and one of the island's leading schools. These factors have led to a higher standard of education, wider employment opportunities, and greater cash income in Onelako than in the other villages of the subdistrict.

In agricultural resources, too, Onelako is relatively well endowed. The village spreads across the undulating valley of a small stream, 2 kilometers inland from the coast. This valley is planted with coconut groves, which yield copra income, and with permanent gardens of staple crops such as cassava (Manihot utilissima) and mung beans (Phaseolus aureus). Most importantly, the village lands include a strip along the Wolowona River that has been suitable for the development of irrigation and wet rice agriculture. This land is far more productive than the dry hillside rice fields that once predominated in Lio agriculture. However, the number of families with access to this land is limited and the village is not self-sufficient in rice, the desired staple.

Most women in Onelako, except for the elite minority who have government jobs, spend some of their time making textiles. This is rarely a full-time activity and most women are primarily interested in making cloth for their own family's use. Nearly all Onelako women, again with the exception of those employed outside the village, wear handwoven sarongs on a daily basis. Women's sarongs are constructed by the labor-intensive warp ikat technique and the work involved in making them accounts for the majority of woman-hours devoted to textile production. Men in Onelako are somewhat less likely to wear sarongs on a daily basis, but the making of men's sarongs is very common as well. All men own sarongs for relaxing and sarongs are also required dress for certain traditional functions such as marriage negotiations. In terms of the actual number of cloths produced, men's and women's sarongs are roughly equal, but the men's sarongs require less labor because they are constructed of plain striped cloth that does not involve the tying and dyeing steps of the ikat technique. The third type of garment made in the village, men's ikat shoulder cloths, represents a small but persistent part of production. These garments are an important part of traditional dress now worn only on special occasions.

In addition to serving as garments, families strive to maintain a stockpile of textiles. These are among the exchange goods passed from the bride's kin to the groom's as part of the marriage arrangements. Textiles can also be sold in time of need and thus serve as a hedge against the future. Nevertheless, few Onelako women make textiles specifically for sale. The women of the household in which I lived made textiles on a regular basis, often working several hours a day, yet had never sold a single cloth. They felt that all

they could make were required to meet family needs. Well-made textiles are highly appreciated in the village and a woman's skill in making particularly the ikat cloths is a source of pride and respect. Many women prefer to work with the traditional natural dyes, indigo and morinda, which demand time and mastery. Such textiles are necessarily expensive and women feel they cannot get a commensurate price by taking them to the available markets. Those who do occasionally sell high-quality cloths typically wait to be approached by relatives or customers who come to their homes, drawn by their reputations.

Five kilometers from Onelako, inaccessible by road, the village of Wolotopo perches on the rocky slope of a canyon where it discharges into the sea. Wolotopo has few of the natural resources that support Onelako. Agriculture in Wolotopo is marginal at best. Only jicama (Pachyrrhizus erosus) and cassava are grown with much success in the steep, exposed fields. All rice must be purchased in Ende and carried on foot to the village. To pay for it, and to cover other cash needs, requires a great deal of walking back and forth over the trail to the head of the road in Onelako. A number of villagers hike daily to jobs in Ende. Others can be seen at dawn carrying heavy loads of jicama, firewood, or weaner pigs to market. But more often than not, those going to market are women carrying Wolotopo's number one commodity, textiles.

The making of men's sarongs predominates in Wolotopo. These cloths are made quickly from pre-dyed commercial yarns and sold at low prices. Usually the women taking sarongs to Ende sell them immediately to full-time traders in the textile section of the town market, rather than waiting indefinitely for an uncertain direct sale. With their small earnings, they buy rice and the yarn needed for their next sarong. They can be back in Wolotopo weaving again by mid morning. Some of these women are virtually full-time weavers. In many households the pressing need for cash to purchase food drives this strategy of production and marketing. Under such conditions, women prefer to make men's sarongs, which they can complete in a week. Although this may result in lower return for their labor in the long run, they feel they cannot afford the longer period without cash income that would be required to complete a woman's sarong.

It would not be accurate to portray this contrast in economic strategies between Wolotopo and Onelako in absolute terms. Many fine ikat cloths are made in Wolotopo by talented weavers. In fact, the village has a reputation for strongly maintaining the textile exchange aspects of traditional marriage customs. Nor is Onelako without families who are hard pressed for cash income and hope to sell textiles. But as a matter of degree, Wolotopo is clearly more dependent on textile sales than Onelako, and this dependence has led to a



relative specialization in the making of men's sarongs. Villagers in Wolotopo unhesitatingly cite textiles as their main source of income while those in Onelako are most likely to mention copra<sup>2</sup> (although in reality government salary is probably the leading source of cash income in both villages). Onelako women, having on average less need to sell textiles, are more able to concentrate on making the labor-intensive ikat cloths for family use. One informant in Wolotopo summed up his view of the situation when he told me that due to their superior resources, the people of Onelako can afford to be lazy, while those in Wolotopo are by necessity more clever and industrious.

The third village that enters this discussion, Pu'utuga, lies in a broad upland valley 7 kilometers inland. It is approached from either Onelako or Wolotopo over a difficult trail that climbs a spectacular 3000 foot escarpment. Pu'utuga is a non-weaving village. Indeed, a traditional ban prohibits weaving. Villagers say that if a Pu'utuga woman were to weave, a fierce storm would arise to destroy the village.

The conditions for agriculture, on the other hand, are relatively good. Ironically, mountain villages tend to have more gently sloping land and deeper soils than the villages that hug the precipitous coast. The high elevation ensures a cooler, misty climate, mitigating the effects of the long dry season that sears coastal villages like Wolotopo. Both dry hillside rice and a lesser amount of irrigated rice are grown in Pu'utuga, although even this village is not presently self-sufficient in rice. Pu'utuga additionally specializes in the production of vegetables, such as Chinese cabbage and chayote (*Sechium edule*), and a distilled alcoholic beverage called *moke*, made by fermenting sap tapped from the flower stalks of sugar palms (*Arenca pinnata*). Coffee and cloves have recently been planted and are beginning to come into production. All of these products fetch relatively good prices, but carrying them down the mountain to market requires Herculean effort.

The people of Pu'utuga wear the same types of sarongs as coastal villagers, but have little knowledge of the names of the patterns or the fine points of construction. Western-style clothing is somewhat more prevalent in Pu'utuga than on the coast. This is primarily because imported, ready-to-wear garments, purchased in Ende, cost less than locally-woven sarongs. In a village where clothing must be purchased with cash, this is an important factor.

#### Barter and Change

Although the people of Pu'utuga now buy their clothing mainly in Ende, occasionally a villager from Wolotopo or

another coastal weaving village will climb to Pu'utuga to sell handwoven sarongs. Such visits are the last vestige of a system of barter that once regulated the exchange of agricultural surpluses from the interior for textiles produced on the coast. However, I have found it is no simple matter to extrapolate the workings of this system from present-day conditions. Moving backward into the past, we very quickly find that nothing has been constant; the agricultural products, the economic strategies, the textiles, and perhaps even the settlement patterns, have all been in flux.

Onelako's relative wealth is largely newfound. The development of irrigated rice and the emergence of the village as an administrative center are very recent, beginning only in the 1960s. The copra plantings and the establishment of the church date back to the 1920s. Before these changes occurred, the economic strategies in Onelako and Wolotopo must have been much more alike than they are today. The major crops in both villages would have been dry field rice and corn, produced by shifting cultivation.<sup>3</sup> Under this regimen, the lands of Onelako would have been only marginally more productive than those of Wolotopo. In times of hardship, which were more the rule than the exception in the lean months before the new harvest, villagers from both villages took textiles to non-weaving villages in the mountains to barter for food.

According to one of my oldest informants, one woman's sarong traded in the 1920s for 10 sacks of unhulled rice, or 5 sacks of hulled rice, or 1500 ears of corn.<sup>4</sup> An ordinary man's sarong traded for half as much, although there were special, oversized men's sarongs dyed with indigo that were worth as much as a woman's sarong. Even younger villagers remember these bartering journeys, recalling in particular the long walk back home with heavy loads of grain. These arduous journeys gradually came to an end by the 1960s with the development of a cash-based marketing system and improvements in transportation.

In terms of the textiles traded, many changes have occurred. The making of handwoven women's blouses, for example, has waxed and waned as an economic factor in the space of this century. Within the memory of my oldest informants, many village women did not routinely wear an upper garment. What is now considered to be the "traditional" Lio blouse is in reality a non-indigenous style that can be traced to influence from Sulawesi [Hamilton 1989:83]. Middle-aged women recall a period when these blouses were widely made of handwoven cotton. Today, all women's blouses are made of synthetic fabrics imported to Flores and young women are unaware that cloth was once woven for these garments.

Perhaps the most significant change in cloth manufacture, though, has been the adoption of commercial yarns. In the

opening decades of this century, considerable labor in weaving villages was directed toward the growing and spinning of cotton. Well before World War II, however, this had largely been supplanted by commercial yarns, at least in villages near Ende (Kennedy 1953:221). This change corresponds in an interesting way with a change in the type of cloth being made. Before the hierarchical social structure that once prevailed in Lio villages began to loosen its grip under the influence of Dutch administration and Catholic education in the 1920s, the wearing of ikat cloths was restricted to the Lio aristocracy. Indigo was also associated with this group, while the use of morinda is said to have been known by only a few aristocratic women. Commoners wore plain cloth, either white or dyed with a variety of plant or mud dyes. Thus the widespread use of ikat garments today represents a dramatic popularization of formerly aristocratic styles. While social change was a prerequisite, in terms of labor and output I believe it was the adoption of commercial yarns that permitted this development. The tremendous amount of labor which had once been spent in growing cotton and spinning was reinvested in the ikat process. With regard to the barter system, I suspect the end result was a null set, changing the type of garments worn but having little effect on the balance of economic strategies between weaving and non-weaving areas.

Bartering was by no means a closed system among the three villages I have been discussing. Villagers from Wolotopo recall travelling to places more distant than Pu'utuga, while those in Pu'utuga traded food for textiles produced in other coastal Lio villages as well. Some additional villages specialized in other goods, including pottery and plaited mats. Trade followed established inter-village relationships, which were probably once based on kinship ties. Current informants say they traded freely in the villages they visited, but that was after the Dutch extended military and administrative control over Flores in 1907. Prior to pacification, mutual suspicion prevailed among villages and only known individuals would have been allowed to enter a village unchallenged.<sup>5</sup>

#### Origin of the Barter System

Clearly ecological considerations have been the main determinants of the Lio textile barter system. In the past, food production would have been more reliable in the moderate climate of the mountains, just as it is today. Cotton, however, was a suitable crop for the hot, dry coast. Similar barter networks involving the exchange of coastal textiles for interior food have been reported for other parts of eastern Indonesia. What is less clear is what role cultural and historical factors played in these systems. Adams [1969:58] has written about kinship-related aspects of such trade, while Barnes [1987] has examined the complex division between

weaving and non-weaving areas in East Flores in terms of historical events and political divisions. In the Lio region, my feeling is that the cultural constructs in which specialization came to be framed, such as the prohibition against weaving in mountain villages, evolved in response to the development of economic strategies that exploited localized ecological diversity.

Speculating about how such systems came into being, however, has been extremely problematic. The main difficulty is that as we move backward into the 19th century, for a number of reasons we cross a threshold beyond which evidence is very scarce. The recollections of living villagers do not extend that far. There is virtually no historical record regarding Lio territory prior to the Dutch incursion of 1907 (although there is some for Ende). No archaeological work has been conducted to shed light on previous settlement patterns or economic activities. The evidence preserved in textile designs or in other aspects of Lio culture allows for some conclusions but is mute on other issues.

I have been working with three possible models for the development of the Lio textile barter system, which I will briefly critique in the remainder of this paper (see Hamilton [1989] for a more detailed discussion). Be forewarned that none of them is completely satisfactory and all of them buck conventional wisdom in certain respects.

**Model #1: The barter between weaving and non-weaving areas is very old, with stable villages having pursued their respective economic strategies for at least several centuries.** Villagers themselves say that such practices were handed down from their ancestors, yet I have frequently heard textile motifs that were adopted only a generation ago described in the same nostalgic terms. Nor have anthropologists and art scholars been immune to this sort of thinking. Too much credence has been given to the conservative nature of eastern Indonesian village society as a measure of the antiquity of patterns of behavior and institutions that prevailed in the historical period. In any case where complex sequences of social change have been painstakingly reconstructed (such as the work of James Fox on the Rotinese), inexorable, dynamic change proves to be the rule. Yet many authors remain prone to making statements about "ancient" patterns and "timeless" continuity. Nevertheless, it is true that villages or kin groups in eastern Indonesian societies have often gone to great lengths to preserve rights they have established to particular privileges or economic activities. The codification of trade relationships represented by the prohibition of weaving in the Lio interior is an example of how such arrangements became institutionalized through cultural constructs. In summary, the main difficulty with Model #1 is that it requires faith in a degree of stability, continuity and isolation that seems to me unlikely and for



which we have no real evidence. This model becomes more palatable to the degree that we think in terms of generalized patterns of relationships between coast and interior while allowing for constant flux in the economic strategies of individual communities.

**Model #2: Weaving is not as old in the region as has commonly been assumed and was established only after a wave of outside influences began to penetrate beginning in the 16th century, after which it gained hold on the coast but never in the Lio interior.** The 16th and 17th centuries brought profound changes to coastal eastern Indonesia, not only from European contact but also from Islamic expansion from Sulawesi. In Ende, for example, a hybrid Islamic society developed that was as much a water-borne transplant as an autochthonous development [Needham 1983:17]. All agree that the influence of textiles traded from India beginning at this time was very great, but most authors have assumed that weaving per se predated this period. On the basis of linguistic reconstructions, Blust includes weaving as part of a 4000-year old complex of cultural traits maintained by Austronesian-language populations at the time of their earliest expansion into the archipelago [1976:34]. Bühler implied antiquity when he concluded that the ikat technique was at its most "archaic" in eastern Indonesia [1942:1604]. Fox has characterized some textile design configurations on Roti as predating the patola trade [1977:99] and Petu has divided Lio motifs into categories according to their origin in the Stone or Bronze Age [1977:11]. Even if all these hypotheses are true, they do not necessarily imply that Lio weavers were at work on the south coast of Flores at any particular point in time. Even into the 20th century, bark cloth was still worn to some extent in the Lio interior. I think it must be considered plausible that not only patola patterns, but weaving and dyeing technology as a whole, came to the port of Ende only after the 16th century and spread from there along the Ndonga coast at an even later date.

**Model #3: The Lio population as a whole once practiced weaving, but subsequently divided into weaving and non-weaving subgroups, maximizing local resources as it expanded and filled diverse ecological niches.** A legend about a Lio king who divided his domain among his sons and gave each a specialized economic role has been cited by Watters [1977:87] as accounting for the origin of the Lio barter system. This myth would make nifty evidence for Model #3, but a description by Lewis [1988:256] of how Sikka orators "remember" or "inherit" from their ancestors oral passages that have never been heard by any living person casts grave doubts over oral tradition as history on Flores. Such passages, once "remembered", become eminently suitable ingredients for political manipulation. I think it more likely that the myth recorded by Watters is an after-the-fact validation of pre-existing Lio economic realities. Nevertheless, the ecological

conditions I have described make it quite plausible that the Lio were once entirely an inland, agricultural people, for whom successful settlement of village sites in the harsh coastal environment required the development of specialization and textile bartering. Certain notions the Lio hold about their origin and identity (though they may arguably be no more reliable than "remembered" texts) lend some credence to this idea. Both on the level of cosmological origin and on the more mundane level of recent clan and village migrations, coastal villagers maintain that their ancestors descended in stages from the mountainous interior of Flores toward the coast. Their self identity is resolutely as an agricultural, interior people; even in villages where ancestors many generations back are said to have been settled on the coast, few Lio engage in fishing or other sea-oriented activities.<sup>6</sup>

### Conclusion

Whichever model is correct, my basic premise holds true, namely, that localized ecological variation has structured, and continues to structure, the balance of economic strategies among neighboring villages. Unfortunately, I am currently unable to support any one of my models over another as an explanation of how these relationships developed. Nor have I yet mentioned several additional variables that further complicate the equation. For example, what impact did the Ende-based slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries have on Lio villages, coastal and interior? To what degree are the ecological constraints that now so evidently limit agriculture in coastal villages like Wolotopo the result of only recent environmental degradation, brought about by overpopulation and the shift to permanent gardens? Although archival or linguistic research may shed some additional light on these issues, it seems unlikely to me that there can be any real resolution until we have a much better archaeological picture of Flores, focusing not so much on the early pre-historic period as on economic activities and settlement patterns over the past few centuries.

## Notes

1. The Lio (or Lionese) people number approximately 136,000 [Hamilton 1989:25] and inhabit central Flores east of Ende town. They are closely related in language and culture to the Ende (or Endenese) people, their neighbors on the west, but less closely related to the Sikka people living to the east in the districts surrounding the town of Maumere.

2. Onelako produced 61,275 metric tons of copra in 1986 and Wolotopo only 4,225 [source: unpublished statistics of the subdistrict copra cooperative, KUD Pama Imu Kecamatan Ndonga].

3. The current reliance on cassava is another recent development. In Onelako the conversion of swidden land to copra plantations necessitated permanent use of the remaining garden space for food crops. The traditional dry rice and corn crops do poorly in permanent gardens without fertilizer and these crops are now little grown in Onelako or Wolotopo. The introduction of new varieties of cassava following World War II also contributed to this transition.

4. I suspect these were idealized equivalents subject in reality to negotiation and fluctuation depending on the circumstances. Lio marriage exchanges are also calculated in such standardized, ideal quantities, which now have little to do with the actual goods exchanged.

5. Informants say that if a group of unknown intruders was sufficiently large or threatening, the inhabitants of the entire village sometimes fled.

6. This presents an interesting contrast with Lamalera, the coastal weaving village on the island of Lembata studied by Ruth Barnes. The people of Lamalera say that their ancestors made their way gradually to Lembata from Sulawesi [Barnes 1989:114]. On Lembata, they maintain a maritime way of life rather distinct from that of the non-weaving interior population to whom they trade textiles. In Ndonga Subdistrict, I found no corresponding belief in an over-the-sea origin and no pervasive cultural distinctions between coastal and interior villages. The Lamalera evidence is conducive of an interpretation resembling my Model #2, in which not only the techniques, but also the direct ancestors of the population, were dispersed from Sulawesi. Regarding the Lamalera oral traditions that tell of these migrations, Barnes concludes that there is "no reason to doubt their general outline" [1989:119]. In the case of central Flores, I am not prepared to make such a claim for any of the oral traditions I encountered, whether the Lio accounts of their mountain origin or the Ende legend regarding the founding ancestor of the line of the Raja of Ende, who is said to have come from Java on the back of a whale.

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