


1994

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Hamilton, Roy W., "Supplementary Weft on an "Ikat" Isle: The Weaving Communities of Northwestern Flores" (1994). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1039.

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## **SUPPLEMENTARY WEFT ON AN "IKAT" ISLE: THE WEAVING COMMUNITIES OF NORTHWESTERN FLORES**

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Among textile enthusiasts, the island of Flores is known primarily for its beautiful warp-ikat cloths. Most of the island's numerous ethno-linguistic groups, including the Ngadha, Nagé, Endenese, Lio, Palu'é, Sikkanese, and Lamaholot, produce related yet distinctive textiles within this tradition. It is therefore surprising to find a series of weaving districts, stretching along the northwest coast of the island, where the ikat technique is not used. Instead, weavers in this region produce indigo-dyed textiles decorated with colorful supplementary-weft motifs.

In the ikat districts, sarongs<sup>1</sup> for men and women differ in their patterning and in the names applied to them. In the northwest, on the other hand, sarongs are "unisex" and are known consistently by the single term *lipa*. The looms of the northwest also differ from those of the ikat districts. Ikat weavers use a body-tension loom with a simple warp beam and a continuous, or "circular," warp. No reed is used, as the desired fabric is tightly warp-faced. In the supplementary-weft communities, the warp beam consists of a flat plank set into upright posts. The warp forms a single flat layer, with its length wound onto the plank. A reed is used to produce a balanced weave. The weaver usually sits on the ground like an ikat weaver, but in one community I have seen a bench fixed to a rigid frame that also supports the warp beam.<sup>2</sup>

Many cloths produced in northwestern Flores include both continuous (i.e., running from selvage to selvage) and discontinuous supplementary weft. The simple patterns executed in narrow bands of continuous supplementary weft are controlled by a set of pattern sticks at the back of the loom. For the more complex patterns executed in discontinuous supplementary weft, weavers recognize two levels of skill. Less skilled women use pattern sticks, resulting in the repetition of identical motifs along the length of the cloth. Women who don't know the patterns pay to have the sticks inserted by women who specialize in this task. Highly skilled weavers work without pattern sticks. Instead, they use only a single pair of supplementary heddles, which provide the proper lifts for inserting the

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<sup>1</sup> I use "sarong" as a gloss for the Indonesian term *sarung*, the tubular garment that is the preeminent article of clothing on Flores.

<sup>2</sup> As the tension is still supplied by the weaver's body via a wooden yoke behind her back, this is not a true frame loom, but appears to be a transitional type.

colored yarn but do not program the motifs. These weavers can then create any motif they desire; successive rows need not be identical.

Today the supplementary-weft districts form a continuous band stretching across the boundary between two administrative divisions or "regencies" (*kabupaten* in Indonesian). Manggarai Regency, the westernmost in Flores, was in former times divided into a large number of subdivisions called *dalu*. During the period of Dutch colonial administration (1908-1942), the *dalu* were subject to the Raja of Manggarai at Ruteng. Although this system has now been supplanted, the people of Manggarai still use the names of the former *dalu*. Not all of Manggarai produces textiles. Indeed, the supplementary-weft districts are limited to a small number of *dalu* located in the north-central and northeastern parts of the regency. From west to east, the weaving *dalu* are Ruis, Cibal, Lambaleda, Congkar, Biting, and Rembong (see map).<sup>3</sup>

Across the border in Ngada Regency, to the east of Manggarai, are two additional supplementary-weft districts, Riung and Mbay. In the colonial period, Riung was administered under its own raja. Mbay fell under the jurisdiction of the Raja of Boawae, the leader of the Nagé people.

These political divisions have tended to obscure underlying cultural similarities among the various supplementary-weft districts. The languages spoken in Rembong and Riung are essentially identical, and in fact rather closely related to standard Manggarai. The language spoken in Mbay is also much closer to Riung and Manggarai than to Ngadha or Nagé. The linguistic picture therefore corroborates the evidence of the textiles. In cultural terms, Riung and Mbay can be seen as outliers of Manggarai, though they have in modern times been grouped in Ngada Regency with their culturally-distant Ngadha and Nagé neighbors.

## REGIONAL VARIATION

On the basis of the types of cloth that predominate in the weaving villages today, the supplementary-weft districts can be divided into three stylistic regions:

- 1) North-central Manggarai (Ruis, Cibal, and Lambaleda)
- 2) Northeastern Manggarai (Congkar, Biting, and Rembong)
- 3) Mbay and Riung

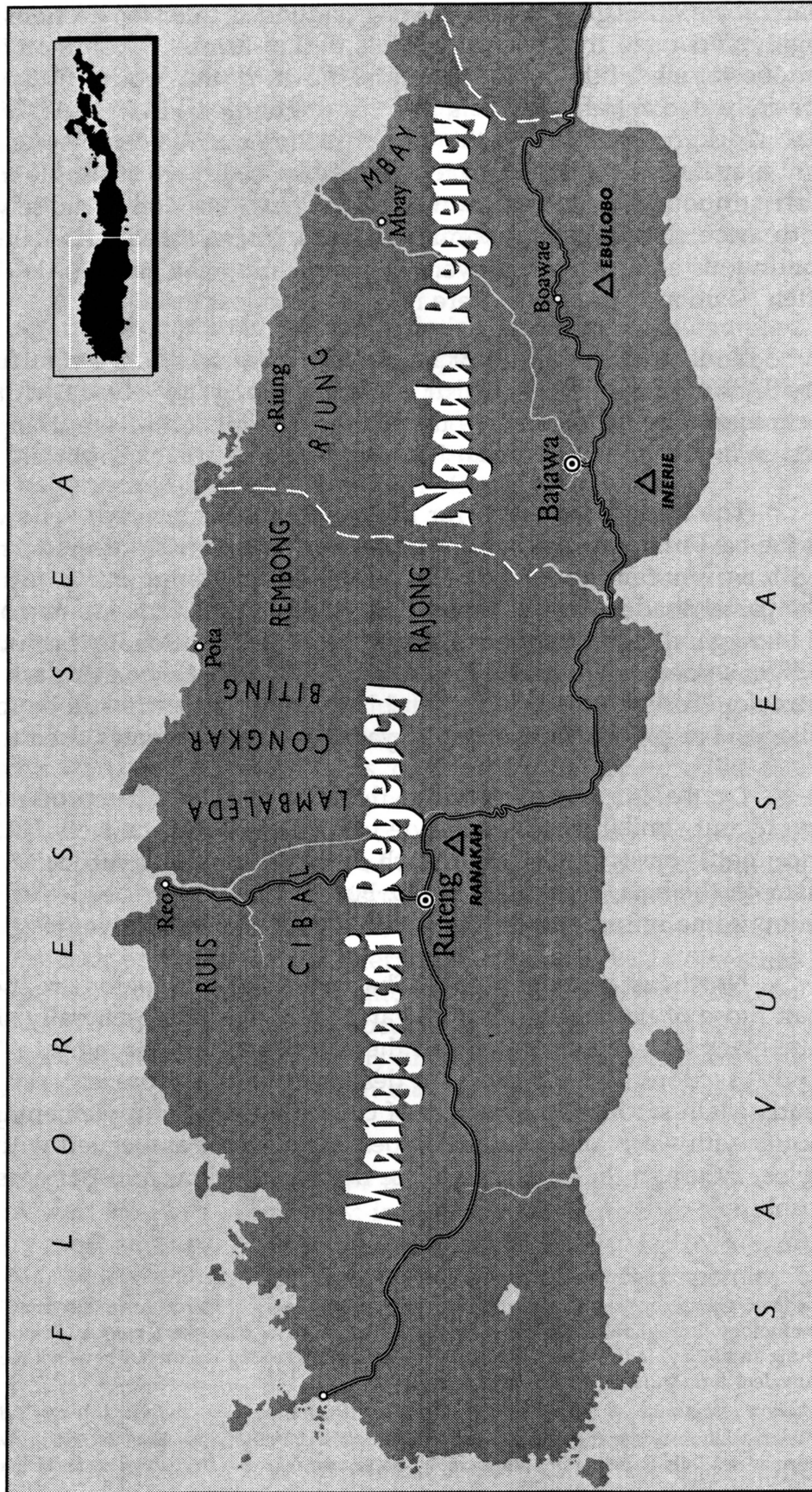
**North-central Manggarai.** The sarongs produced in this region, called *lipa songké*,<sup>4</sup> feature polychrome motifs arranged on a blue-black ground (see

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<sup>3</sup>The *dalu* of Todo in south-central Manggarai is also a weaving area, but has a distinctly different tradition of mostly plaid cloths; see Hamilton (1994:86-89) for a consideration of Todo weaving.

<sup>4</sup>*Songké* is the Manggarai cognate of *songket*, the widespread Indonesian term for supplementary weft.





THE SUPPLEMENTARY-WEFT WEAVING DISTRICTS OF NORTHWESTERN FLORES



Hamilton 1994: fig. 4-12). The sarong is divided into two sections, one more highly decorated than the other. This design format is common in western Indonesia, where the main section is known as the "body" (*badan*), and the specially decorated section as the "head" (*kepala*).<sup>5</sup> In *lipa songké* the blue-black background fabric of the "body" section may be completely unadorned, or it may be decorated with a few widely spaced rows of simple motifs in discontinuous supplementary weft. The "head" section is densely covered with more elaborate discontinuous motifs, interspersed with bands of continuous supplementary weft. When wearing the sarong, the "head" is often positioned in back, where it will not be lost in folds.

A distinctive feature of high-quality *lipa songké* is a colorful border of small triangles called *jok*, which is worked along the selvage with a tapestry technique. The *jok* represents the Manggarai version of the triangular border design found on textiles from India and many parts of Southeast Asia.

The traditional colors for *lipa songké* motifs are red, yellow, and white. In the past red was dyed with sappan and yellow with turmeric, morinda (with no mordant), or the dye wood known in Manggarai as *haju gulung*.<sup>6</sup> The pastel shades created when these fugitive dyes fade are one of the delights of Manggarai cloth. The background color has traditionally been dyed with indigo, sometimes over-dyed with various types of wood or bark to darken the color. Today indigo dyeing and handspun yarns can still be found in some villages, but pre-dyed commercial yarns are nearly always used for the motifs.

Lambaleda is recognized as the leading *dalu* in the production of *lipa songké*, but similar cloths are made in Cibal and Ruis as well. If there were once motifs or styles unique to each of these areas, it is difficult to distinguish them on the basis of today's cloths. Further research is needed to validate the claims some informants make regarding locally distinctive designs.

**Northeastern Manggarai.** The sarongs of this region are more diverse than those of north-central Manggarai, although they generally share the blue-black background color and the division of the sarong into "head" and "body" sections. Several different design formats are present, ranging from nearly plain sarongs to a variety of combinations of supplementary-weft motifs with warp and/or weft stripes. Each *dalu* is associated with its own styles, although the correspondence between regions and patterns is not absolute.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>As there are no consistent alternative terms in the languages of Flores, I use this "head" and "body" terminology throughout this paper. The variant terms *punca* (Congkar), *pungsa* (Rembong), and *punsan* (Riung and Mbay) indicate the "head" or the bands of patterning within it. I have not recorded an equivalent term in north-central Manggarai.

<sup>6</sup>*Maclura cochinchinensis* (Verheijen 1982:109), known in Indonesian as *kayu kuning* ("yellow wood").

<sup>7</sup>The association between particular patterns and *dalu* presented here is as described by a number of informants. While traveling in Manggarai however, one notices a mixture of styles in many places. In

The style identified with Congkar, called *naé sudi*, is decorated with only a few narrow bands of continuous supplementary weft spaced across the "head" of the sarong (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 4-16). The "body" shows only the plain blue-black ground. The motifs in the supplementary-weft bands are very simple, created with a small number of pattern sticks (*téti*). The bands themselves are called *punca téti*. Traditionally only one color was used, a light indigo known as *ula*. This accounts for an alternative name applied to these cloths, *punca ula*. Commercial yarns in other colors, especially yellow and white, are now common as well.

In Biting, the predominant sarong style is somewhat more complex. The warp is blue-black with widely spaced stripes of light blue. In the "body" section these intersect with plain-weave weft stripes, creating a grid of large open squares (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 4-17). In the "head," the plain-weave stripes are replaced with stripes of continuous supplementary weft, using the same simple patterns and limited colors of the Congkar sarongs.

In Rembong, a number of different design formats are produced. The plainest are blue-black sarongs entirely undecorated except perhaps for the *jok* border, locally called *kaet* (Erb 1994:203). Another simple style, called *lipa léling lauk*, is plain in the "body" and has only a few light blue plain-weave weft stripes in the "head" (see Erb 1994: fig. 9-6). The style for which Rembong is now best known, however, is the most elaborately decorated sarong made in northeastern Manggarai. The background fabric has plain-weave stripes running in both warp and weft directions, creating a grid structure like that found in the sarongs of Biting. These stripes are composed of yarns of both light and medium shades of blue. This accounts for the name *lipa punga ula zua* ("sarong with stripes in two shades of blue"). In the "head" section, the spaces within the grid are filled with discontinuous supplementary-weft motifs (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 1-22). Rembong weavers call these motifs "stars" (*talaq*), which accounts for the alternative name *lipa talaq*. They are created with pattern sticks, known in Rembong as *ghun*, and weavers refer to the various motifs according to the number of pattern sticks required. Rembong women weave these motifs only after an advanced stage of their marriage rites has been performed, which may not take place until middle age (Erb 1994:203).

**Mbay and Riung.** Mbay is perhaps the most renowned weaving community in western Flores. The most important garments are supplementary weft sarongs, *lipa dhowik* (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 5-34), and shoulder cloths, *sapang dhowik* (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 5-6). Sarongs may be further categorized as *lipa dhowik punsan*, in which the supplementary-weft

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part this is due to the trading of sarongs beyond their area of manufacture. Also, many weavers have mastered the making of sarongs in a variety of styles, although they usually are careful to differentiate their "own" styles from those which are copied from neighboring areas.

motifs are entirely confined to the "head," and *lipa dhowik sewekkin*, in which the "body" also bears motifs. The techniques used in Mbay are the same as in Manggarai, but Mbay cloth is readily distinguished by its color scheme. The background is a true black, produced by over-dyeing indigo with wood from a tree called *rengit* (*Acacia glauca*). This does not readily fade to deep blue as is common with Manggarai cloth. The traditional colors for the motifs are orange and yellow. Today Mbay weavers have added new colors, including red and yellow-green, but they shun the white and pastel shades favored in Manggarai.

In Riung, the most common sarongs today are quite similar to those of Mbay. Riung's *lipa kaet sewekkin* and *lipa kaet punsan* are analogous to the two types of Mbay sarongs (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 5-36). Riung weavers also produce rather plain sarongs with light blue weft stripes called *lipa punsa bulung*, identical to the *lipa lélang lauk* of Rembong. Interestingly, it is these that are required for bridewealth exchange. That such plain cloths are more esteemed than supplementary-weft cloths is a clue that the supplementary-weft technique may be a relatively recent innovation, not yet sanctified by association with generations of ancestors.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE SUPPLEMENTARY-WEFT COMMUNITIES

Although it is at first a surprise to find a thriving tradition of supplementary-weft weaving on an island known primarily for ikat, it is not necessary to dig very deeply into the history of Flores to discover an explanation. The western part of the island was dominated, from the 17th century to the early 20th century, by powerful Islamic states on neighboring islands. The principal players were the kingdom of Goa on the island of Sulawesi and the sultanate of Bima, located directly west of Manggarai on the island of Sumbawa.

Newly converted to Islam in the first decade of the 17th century, the state of Goa rose rapidly to prominence. Its expansion came most notably at the expense of the Bugis, Goa's main rivals in the southern arm of Sulawesi. As the leading sea power in eastern Indonesia, Goa was soon extracting tribute from overseas regions such as Manggarai. By 1633 it was strong enough to dominate Bima, which thereafter became a vassal, with the royal families of the two states intermarrying [Andaya 1981:280]. The spectacular growth of Goa put it on a collision course with the Dutch. The East India Company forged an alliance with the Bugis and together they crushed Goa in 1669. The result was a diaspora of the Goanese people, or, as their descendants are known today, the Makassarese.<sup>8</sup>

The groups migrating overseas were so vast that the fleets were likened to floating cities. [...] The sudden appearance of these

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<sup>8</sup>The city of Makassar (now Ujung Pandang) grew beside the ruined Goanese capital.

fleets of armed men aroused terror in the local populations, which were incapable of repelling the newcomers. [Andaya 1981:210]

Makassarese exiles, many of them members of the Goanese nobility, founded new settlements in coastal areas throughout the archipelago, including Manggarai. Bima had to contend both with the new powers in Sulawesi and with the exiled Makassarese. A failed attempt at marriage diplomacy in the 1720s resulted in war between the Bimanese and Makassarese in Manggarai (Gordon 1975:50-55). The Sultan of Bima eventually prevailed and Manggarai remained a dependency of Bima into the 20th century, administered via the port towns of Reo and Pota.<sup>9</sup>

Once Islamic communities had been established, the coastal portions of northwestern Flores were drawn permanently into the larger network of contact and trade in the Flores Sea. New settlers continued to arrive from Sulawesi, Bima, and even the Moluccas. In Pota, a section of the community to this day speaks Bimanese rather than Manggarai. In other communities, elders can still tell stories about the founding of their communities. I have been particularly interested in Riung and Mbay, two important weaving communities with fascinating histories. As neither of them has yet been the subject of a thorough study, I have attempted during a number of short visits to record at least the basic outlines of their oral histories.<sup>10</sup>

Elders in Mbay credit the founding of their community to Keraéng Jogo, a Sulawesi noble who came as a settler to the coast of Flores. Jogo arranged a marriage between his daughter Supi and Tuju Bae, a man belonging to the indigenous Dhawé ethnic group. Tuju Bae converted to Islam and took the name Abdula Tuju. According to the legend, all Jogo requested for bridewealth was a piece of land "as big as a buffalo hide." The Dhawé quickly agreed to this bargain. When Jogo received the hide, he had it cut into the finest possible strand and stretched across the coastal plain, laying claim to all the land enclosed between the hide and the sea. This is the land of the descendants of Supi and Abdula Tuju, who became the Mbay people.

The original hamlet of Mbay was located inland at the base of the hills backing the coastal plain. The site is still marked today by the *ngandung*, a monument that symbolizes the community's origins and is the Mbay version of the various forked ceremonial poles that appear in village plazas in many parts of Flores. It consists of a living tree growing from the center of a pile of rocks. The tree is said to represent the penis of Tuju Bae and the circle of rocks

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<sup>9</sup>Bima was weakened by the catastrophic eruption of the volcano Tambora in 1815, but direct administration of Manggarai by the Dutch colonial government was established only in 1908.

<sup>10</sup>For the information that follows, I am indebted to Haji Hussein in Mbay and to Ahmad Hassan and Sa'idin Ali Sela in Riung.



the vulva of Supi, thus commemorating the sexual union that produced the Mbay community. Only in recent decades has the Mbay population fanned out across the coastal plain.

In Riung, elders divide their community into three groups based on their place of origin overseas. One group is said to be the descendants of settlers from Goa, the second from the Moluccas, and the third from Makassar. The first to arrive were six Goanese brothers.<sup>11</sup> Their abandoned boat is said to have turned into a small islet in Riung harbor called Lain Jawa. Today's head of this section of the community claims to be the 14th-generation descendant of the founding brothers. Calculating 20 years per generation, plus 50 years for the age of this man, yields a date of 1664, or approximately the time of the fall of Goa. It is therefore quite possible that the founders of Riung were part of the wave of exiles spun out of Sulawesi at that time. Today's elders believe the six brothers were born in a place they call Wua Lio, in Luwu, a region of South Sulawesi that was a vassal state to Goa.

Like Mbay, Riung originally consisted of a single hamlet. For defensive purposes, it was located at the top of one of the hills that rise sharply out of Riung harbor. Today the site is marked by a few ruined ceremonial poles called *ngadhu*.<sup>12</sup> With the coming of Dutch administration in the first decade of the 20th century, the hilltop location was abandoned for a more accessible site at the base of the hill. The new village, complete with its original mosque, is still the main settlement of the Riung people today.

The regions surrounding Riung and Mbay are now sparsely occupied by additional settlements, some of which produce supplementary-weft cloth, but these have never equaled in reputation the two historically prominent communities. The situation across the border in Manggarai Regency is somewhat different. The two main port towns, Reo and Pota, were Bimanese strongholds, obviously settled by Islamic outsiders and developed as centers of trade and administration. The main weaving areas, however, consist of numerous villages located further inland. The most thoroughly documented oral histories in this region are those of the Rembong people, who have two sets of origin myths (Erb 1987:17). One set recognizes overseas origin while the other claims autochthonous origin, suggesting that the Rembong population may be a mix of newcomers and indigenous inhabitants. Nevertheless, as we turn from oral history to the evidence of the textiles themselves, the link between supplementary-weft weaving on Flores and Islamic settlement from Sulawesi and Bima is unmistakable.

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<sup>11</sup>Named Teto, Redo, Sambung, Solok, Talu, and Panda.

<sup>12</sup>In both their name and their forked shape, these poles are identical to those of the Ngadha people. Although the Riung legends do not mention any intermixing with a pre-existing local population, as those in Mbay do, the presence of the *ngadhu* suggests otherwise.

## EVIDENCE OF THE TEXTILES

The most direct evidence linking the textiles of northwestern Flores with Islamic settlement is the Rembong sarong *lipa talaq*. This garment is a rather exact copy of a characteristic style of sarong made in Bima, where it is known as *weri*.<sup>13</sup> Another Manggarai cloth, worn around the shoulders or wrapped over trousers in the Malay/Islamic fashion, is a version of the Bimanese cloth *salampé*.<sup>14</sup> These cloths have a solid-colored central lozenge set off from the borders by a row of tapestry triangles. They have now become rare and the only example I have seen still at its place of manufacture was in Biting, but similar cloths were perhaps once made throughout the weaving regions of Manggarai. Indeed, they occur as far east as the Sikka region.

In more general terms, both the specific supplementary-weft motifs and the overall design formats used throughout northwestern Flores would not appear out of place anywhere in the coastal Islamic reaches of the archipelago. Quite similar cloths can be found as far away as peninsular Malaysia where, interestingly enough, they are known as *kain bugis* or "Bugis cloth."<sup>15</sup> This suggests that such cloths were also popularized in the western parts of archipelago by traders or settlers from Sulawesi.<sup>16</sup>

The terminology used in supplementary-weft weaving on Flores provides additional evidence of the link to Sulawesi. The term *lipa* occurs in South Sulawesi and Selayar (Maxwell 1990:263), while it is never applied to the ikat sarongs made in other parts of Flores. The terms *punca* in Congkar, *pungsa* in Rembong, and *punsan* in Riung and Mbay are variants of the term *puncang*, used in South Sulawesi (Kartiwa 1986:62). *Sudi* and *su'i* are variants of the Sulawesi term *subi*.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the distribution of the loom using a plank as a warp beam is another clue linking the northwest coast of Flores to other weaving areas to the west. This loom appears prominently in the supplementary-weft centers of Sulawesi and Bima.

The copied textiles, borrowed terminology, and foreign style of loom all undoubtedly entered Flores via settlers from Sulawesi and Bima. An historical photograph shows Bimanese weavers at work in the port town Pota early in the 1920s (see Hamilton 1994: fig. 4-15). Although the Bimanese-speaking women of Pota no longer weave today, similar women must certainly have been the link responsible for establishing the supplementary-weft technique on Flores. Unfortunately much remains to be learned about

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<sup>13</sup>Compare Hamilton 1994: fig. 1-22 with Hitchcock 1983: fig. 36a.

<sup>14</sup>Compare Hamilton 1994: figs. 4-5 and 4-6 with Gittinger 1979: fig. 114.

<sup>15</sup>See Nawawi (1989: plate 5.7) and Selvanayagam (1990: fig. 166).

<sup>16</sup>Unfortunately, relatively little has been written about these textiles in their Sulawesi homeland. Further research there may eventually allow the tracing of more specific links from Sulawesi to Flores.

<sup>17</sup>Kartiwa (1986:63). I have also recorded *so'bi* among weavers of Bugis descent at Samarinda on the island of Borneo.

the process of diffusion and its timing. In order to explore some additional clues, and also interject some new puzzles, I now turn to a brief examination of the relationships among the various communities in the region.

#### BARTER, SLAVERY, AND CHANGE

I have up to this point referred to supplementary-weft weaving on Flores as a coastal tradition, in that it is closely linked to Islamic maritime settlement from neighboring islands. Yet if one charts the weaving communities on a map, an unexpected pattern emerges. Across the entire region from Cibal to Mbay, the leading weaving villages are found in the ranges of hills that reach inland from the coast. Deeper into the interior, in the high mountains and valleys that form the crest of Flores, women do not know how to weave. Immediately on the shoreline, although some weaving can be found today, the weavers invariable trace the origin of their craft to the recognized weaving centers in the hills. In many cases, only in this generation have they resettled on the coast.

Two factors, one of them environmental and the other historical, account for this peculiar distribution. The rugged topography and seasonal monsoons of Flores produce dramatic differences in climate between regions that are often separated by only a few kilometer's walk. The north coastal plain presents for many months on end a landscape parched and sear. The hills are close to the sea in most places, but at Pota and Mbay they recede, leaving flat plains sparsely dotted with scrub and lontar palms. The Mbay region in particular once provided grazing for goats and other livestock, but was worthless for growing rice. The people of Mbay thrived in this harsh environment by specializing. The men excelled as herders and the women as weavers. To obtain food, they bartered their products with inland agricultural populations, especially the Nagé and the people of the Soa valley. In a good year (i.e., with adequate rainfall during the short wet season), it was possible to grow cotton or corn on the coast, but even these commodities were often obtained by bartering with inland people.

Although the hilly regions provide somewhat better agricultural conditions, they are far from ideal for rice. This most important of food crops grows best in the higher mountain valleys, where temperatures are moderate and rainfall more plentiful. The contrasting environmental conditions are personified in the relationship between the people of Rembong, a weaving *dalú*, and their non-weaving neighbors in the mountain *dalú* of Rajong. According to the local mythology, these two groups are descended from a pair of brothers. When the younger brother raped and murdered the elder brother's wife, he was vanquished and his descendants forever cursed.<sup>18</sup> Those descendants are the Rembong people and their curse is two-fold. First, they occupy land in the hills that is unreliable for producing rice. Second, the

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<sup>18</sup>See Erb (1994) for a more complete account.

women of Rembong must endure a life of labor at their looms, producing cloth that can be bartered to the Rajong for food (Erb 1994).

Such ecological relationships go a long way toward explaining the distribution of weaving communities, but if cotton can be bartered as well as food, why are there not more weaving communities of long standing directly on the coast? The answer is that the coastal plains, and in some cases the first ranges of hills, were empty of settlement of any kind. To explain why, I quote a description, which though written regarding distant Johore on the Malay Peninsula, best gives the flavor of the times:

...the kingdom has long been without energy to resist piratical attacks on parts of its shore much less exposed than this. If a hut were now made here, every inmate would be carried off by pirates within a year and sold into slavery (Sopher 1965:43).

On the northwest coast of Flores, Bimanese or Makassarese settlements such as Reo and Pota existed as armed strongholds on the littoral. These ports, inhabited by non-Florinese, were centers of administration and trade, or, in more blunt terms, of tribute collecting and slave raiding. The indigenous population, probably already predisposed to mountain settlements due to the more favorable agricultural conditions, abandoned the dangerous coastal plain and lower hills altogether. The mixed communities of Riung and Mbay seem to have occupied a middle ground. The hilltop site of the original Riung settlement, for example, commands a wide view over the coast, to provide advance notice of approaching strangers.<sup>19</sup> In turn, the Riung people, who were well-connected in archipelagic trade, engaged in slave raiding against indigenous communities further inland.

The distribution of the weaving communities raises interesting questions about the diffusion of textile patterns and technologies that can only be answered with further research. In communities like Riung and Mbay, which are directly descended from Islamic settlers, were today's patterns brought by the original settlers or did they evolve more recently in conjunction with the textiles of other areas connected by Islamic trade? In more isolated regions like Rembong, where the people purposefully maintained their distance from the dangerous coast, how, and when, were the imported patterns and techniques adopted? Rembong weavers regard supplementary weft as a recent addition to their repertoire and, in fact, the production of this type of cloth in Rembong is only now overtaking the production of more plain styles of cloth. This suggests that in some areas the process of diffusion continues today or may possibly be a recent phenomenon altogether.

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<sup>19</sup>Even today, the Riung people talk about fleeing their village when strangers were spotted in the harbor, although these stories date primarily to the time of the Dutch incursion in the early 1900s.



Today the conditions that once determined the distribution of the weaving communities have altered. With the establishment of peace, it has been possible for the people of hill settlements, including many weavers, to take up residence in more accessible locations on the coast. The development of irrigation allows these new communities to grow their own rice. The Mbay plain, once shunned except by its hearty population of weavers and headers, has been transformed by the construction of a dam and irrigation canals. Women's labor has become more valuable in the fields and the looms of Mbay have nearly fallen silent. Only a few elderly women continue to produce the traditional high-quality cloth that was once the lifeblood of the community. Improvements in transportation provide isolated regions like Rembong with easier access to markets, allowing for increased sales of handwoven cloth and for easier access to commercial yarns and chemical dyes. Despite these changes, the weaving of the northwest coast maintains its distinctive character, based in its origin as a craft transplanted from a foreign shore.

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