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

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The influence of the Indian double ikat silk patola on Southeast Asian textile structure and design has long been acknowledged, however, the impact of Indian painted and printed mordant-dyed cotton textiles, traded into the region over centuries, has been largely undocumented. Recent finds now indicate the great variety of cotton textile types imported into Indonesia. This talk explored the role of these Indian cotton trade textiles in the development of Javanese batik, and the effect of the change of medium on design transformations. Designs from a range of batik-producing regions were examined, including the well known pisang balik (inverted banana) pattern of the central principalities.
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 a woman's 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 disgorges into the sea. Wolotopo has few of the natural resources that support Onelako. Agriculture in Wolotopo is marginal at best. Only jicama (Pachyrhizus 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 weaver 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. But there is not always a buyer 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 and men virtually work one shift; they then go back to their 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 returns 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 copra as their main source of income while those in Onelako are most likely to mention copra (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 hillsides 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 (Arenaga 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 more alike than they are today. The major crops in both villages would have been dry field rice and corn, produced by shifting cultivation. 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, 5 sacks of hulled rice, or 1500 ears of corn. 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 young people 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. The blouse, now considered to be the "traditional" Lio garment, 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
initiated 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. Currently
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.

Origin of the Barter System

Clearly ecological considerations have been the main
determinants of the Lio textile barter system. Although 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 in such cases, 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. The barter system is one of the few 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 a degree of stability, continuity and isolation that seems to me unlikely and for

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 changes 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. The barter system is one of the few 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 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 "archaic" in eastern Indonesia [1942:1604]. 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, barb cloth has been constructed to some extent in the Ndona region, but 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 Ndona 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.

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 inland? To what degree were 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 Ndona].

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 Ndona 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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