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## NTT Ikat Woven Cloths: Weaving Tradition, Motifs and Their Symbolic Meanings

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### A B S T R A C T

For most of the East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) people, weaving traditions and ikat woven products are not just common local product or cultural manifestations. Each motif in ikat woven product has its own symbolic representation. This is a qualitative descriptive study carried out using an ethnographic research model. The data was collected by observing a number of ikat artisans and their cloth products, providing deep interview to related parties in the manufacturing process including meanings behind the decorative motifs in the ikat woven clothes. This study relies on of data notes linked to the research object as well as images of woven ikat cloth products in NTT. The result showed that the woven cloth products locally manufactured in NTT, with varied ornamentation and motifs are subject to local knowledge values and symbolic meanings that have a spiritual and mystical aspects. Many motifs on the cloth developed identify each regional area in NTT. Ikat cloth motifs are symbols of communication tools; i.e., Ende-Lio motifs associated with traditional rituals are represented by cloth motifs are the symbols for regulations that must be implemented by the people. For people of North Mollo, NTT, ikat woven product with identical motifs have widely been used for blankets and sarongs named as Pauf designed exclusively for males to wear. In Pauf, there are two interpretations of the rhombus-shaped symbols on Lulat Pohok and Lulat Kollo symbolically represent the expressions of social interaction between society and the ruler or king.

### A. INTRODUCTION

East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is one of the Indonesian provinces that has woven cloth products with a wide range of motifs and distinguishable to audience members of NTT ikat woven cloth (indonesia.go.id, 2019). Similarly, weaving activities play a key part in the daily lives of NTT people as they serve as a medium and complement to traditional and religious ceremonies. Participating in the Gelu Kawate wedding custom or sharing *ikat* cloth between men and women has a very huge implication of establishing bonds of brotherhood.

*Ikat* woven cloth was first discovered to be used primarily to hide people's private areas. This clothing eventually developed to meet cultural and aesthetic demands, differentiate a person's social standing, and

even become symbols of specific responsibilities in ceremonies. To meet this requirement, ornaments and colorful motifs were developed for clothing. In addition, ikat woven has the opportunity to evolve in a more adaptable, creative, and inventive form. If sufficiently protected as a work of indigenous peoples' art within the framework of Intellectual Property Rights, ikat woven can be developed in the style of modern industry.

Woven clothes are literally a dead product, nonetheless it is a live testimonial of a culture that may show its characteristics (Seran Erni, 2022). In addition to being manufactured as traditional textiles for local communities or for party clothes, NTT *ikat* woven clothes have now frequently been used as raw material for other handicrafts such as bracelets, purses, and caps. The *ikat* weaving industry is largely run by women at home (personal comm., 13/11/2023). The woven product can

additionally function as a source of pride for an individual or family. This may be evident when an individual or family receives visitors who intend to stay the night. The host must be able to provide a blanket or woven craft product as a cover for the body when sleeping or feeling cold. The host takes delight in this practice (Arby et al., 1995, p. 22).

In addition, woven cloth, as an object of material, is manufactured through the stages of production that weavers go through based on their everyday experiences, which become tangible and then interpreted with symbols formed in the creative process and their aesthetic sense of these symbols. In addition to the process of producing an aesthetic sense, another component of the weaving process is the division of labor system (Ahmed & Uddin, 2023; Patti & Acierno, 2023). The *ikat* woven cloth of East Nusa Tenggara serves as an important object of anthropological study as it encapsulates the intersection of cultural practices, everyday experiences, symbolic meanings, creative processes, and aesthetic sensibilities within the communities producing it. By delving into these intricacies, anthropologists can gain a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and artistic dynamics at play in the region.

Many academics in their field of study have previously studied indigenous textiles and Indonesian Tenun (woven cloth) artisans. Kunian (2016) who studied the meaning of the decorative Nago Besaung motif on Palembang Songket cloth and found that the Nago Besaung motif is an element of belief in the Palembang community featuring a special meaning that is closely related to marriage, all of which has been agreed upon (conventionally) by the Palembang community. Kartikasari (2017) studied the meanings of Gedog Batik motifs, explaining that each item can be understood based on the meaning of the individual who wears it. The motifs in *batik* additionally represent the views and behaviors of the people who developed batik, as seen by the symbols and functions shown in batik. Dediansyah et al (2021) studied the history of Sambas weaving from the monarchy to the republic, where weaving is a product of the identity of the Malay community in Sambas Regency, as well as efforts by the community and local government of Sambas Regency to preserve Sambas woven products. Noer (2021) studied the development of E-commerce by women weaving craftsmen in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, using ethnographic methods and interviewing twelve women weaving craftsmen. The marketplace opens up better opportunities for selling woven products by cutting distribution channels, allowing products to be sold directly, appreciated by customers, and they cut indirect expenses by doing campaigns using social media.

Unlike most clothes, every sheet of *ikat* crafted by the artists is one-of-a-kind and has a distinct backstory. Comparable to paintings, each *ikat* strand reflects the weaver's imaginative thinking, creativity, and emotion.

The meanings of the decorations and motifs embedded in *ikat* woven cloths are important to understand to preserve a well-established weaving culture and creative minds inherited from the people's ancestors to further understand the residing philosophical meanings through creative minds from the decorated motifs. Considering each region in the NTT Province has a cultural weaving tradition with distinct meanings of both color and design, such beauty will be more fully appreciated if any observer recognizes the symbolic meanings inherent in the *ikat* woven cloths. Therefore, this study not only aims at describing how the weaving tradition developed among the people of NTT, but also seeking out the philosophical meanings behind the motifs applied in each *ikat* woven products especially those produced by Ende people, Flores Island, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia.

## B. METHOD

This study was designed using an ethnographic method that includes a qualitative descriptive research model. Using a series of words and sentences, this study discusses, outlines, and explains *ikat* weaving artisan traditions and textile businesses in East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). In this study, data collection was carried out by: (1) interviews, where the researcher held questions and answers with typical Ende and Molo *ikat* weaving craftsmen in order to obtain clear information about matters related to the problem under study; (2) observation, direct observation in the field of activities related to the problem raised; (3) documentation of *ikat* woven cloth photos as evidence of traditional *ikat* weaving in the Ende Lio and North Molo indigenous communities. This study relies on data notes linked to the research object as well as images of woven *ikat* cloth products in NTT. To strengthen the result, this study additionally examines literature studies related to the phenomena of *ikat* woven clothes in numerous areas of the East Nusa Tenggara Community from book sources and scientific journals to broaden the discussion about relevant evidence.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. NTT *Ikat* Woven Cloth

Woven cloth has been used as the language of life in a variety of symbols and works, including traditional attire and dances, every day body protection, respect and admiration in marriage, prayer and admiration in death ceremonies, a symbol of the attempt to restore social balance, and a representation of tribes and motifs in the form of particular patterns and designs. The sort of traditional woven textile understood in East Nusa Tenggara in general is *ikat* weaving; the term is known through Indonesian ethnography originated from the Netherlands, particularly G.P. Rouffaer, who conducted

research on producing decorations and the coloring process of woven cloth about 1900. Roffaer believed that the decoration was the consequence of dying linked warp threads, consequently this weaving became known as *tenun ikat* (ikat woven) (Depdikbud, 1995). Ikat weaving is a technique to produce decorations by tying parts of the weft or warp threads, or both the weft and warp threads (Kartiwa, 1993, p. 91).

One of the *ikat* woven products for women entrepreneurs in Nansan village, North Central Timor Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, has developed a home industry of ikat woven products in the village through economic empowerment efforts for women in developing ancestral heritage that has long been cultivated in the village. In mid-October 2017, 25 local female participants with a weaving background participated in workshops guided directly by the Head of Nansan Village. The training effort's background is intended to develop original motifs that have previously been suspected to have faded, consequently what the Village Head anticipates to stay in his directives include being able to develop ikat woven motifs in local villages to maintain quality and the need to improve existing motifs whose production can compete with home industry products from other regions in order they can compete with others (Edy, 2017).

The image of traditional products has to be supported by high quality to ensure that it is not as usual, which is an attempt at making local products competitive, which can help endeavors to enhance the family economy and needs to be appealing in the market through the creativity of local women. Training initiatives were provided by grant funding (alumni Grant Scheme Round) from the Australian Government in 2017, managed by Australia Awards in Indonesia. Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Basic Handcraft training workshops, the development of weavers' cooperatives, and ikat woven craft exhibits (Alfonsa, 2018; Edy, 2017).

## 2. Women and the Weaving Activities in the NTT Society

Although NTT women frequently have to do with cooking and weaving tasks, traditionally, mature women in the province were not just determined by their abilities to undertake household duties. Despite the fact that men are accountable for the household's finances, women offer to help the family through their weaving efforts (personal comm., 13/11/2023). In traditional weddings of the NTT society, prospective grooms will typically offer the brides a dowry called *belis*<sup>1</sup> in the form of masculine items, such as; buffalo or horse livestock, as well as combating weapons such as machetes and spears.

<sup>1</sup> *Belis* is a bridal dowry gift of money or animals from the man's family to the prospective bride's parents.

However, *belis* type does not solely include male goods. Women's *belis* take the form of *mamoli* jewelry. *Mamoli* is a sign representing a woman's womb. The giving out of *mammoli* is also a sign of releasing ladies who would be carried away by males (Susan, 2019).

In addition to such a unique dowry system, NTT women must be qualified at weaving before they are getting married, which helps to preserve their ancestral culture. In March 2019, Viktor Bungtilu, former Governor of East Nusa Tenggara, supported initiatives to conserve NTT ikat woven clothes (Nong, 2019). Traditional weaving activities are seen as highly important since the people of NTT have been dealing with issues of an increasingly rare number of weavers. Only old women continue to weave, whereas young women are claimed to be oblivious of their abilities (Katarina, 2023). However, this seems to be contrary to the norms that have been customarily enforced in the community. According to the governor of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), NTT women were once only permitted to marry if they were skilled at weaving (personal comm., 15/11/2023).

## 3. East Nusa Tenggara Ikat Woven Motifs and the Implied Philosophical Meanings

Weaving is a valued family resource in traditional East Nusa Tenggara community as it is a difficult artwork to manufacture. The process of creating or pouring woven patterns is costly as it is solely reliant on the weaver's ideas. Weaving is exceptionally important due to the meaning that it holds, including the meaning of the decorations, because particular decorative elements integrated in the woven products have spiritual and mystical worth according to custom.

There are profound and noble meanings in the woven cloth produced; by holding and wearing woven cloth, we appear to be walking through a piece of historical document from the community that formed it; woven cloth is an inanimate product; however, this object is a living witness of a culture. A spiritual value or message is inherent in the pattern or variation that will be developed into a masterpiece in a woven product. A motif will symbolize the religious and social meanings and values appreciated by the people of East Nusa Tenggara's weaving producing regions (personal comm., 16/11/2023).

The woven motifs used for each traditional event or ceremonial are unique. With a range of distinct elements in woven clothes, ranging from rituals, customs, and prayers to producing motifs with the characteristics of each area and tribes. The meaning of motifs found in cloth is essential to know in order to maintain the culture passed down by their forefathers, as is understanding the meaning of decorations. The meaning of weaving creating decorations and colors. Each location has its own cultural

legacy of textiles each with a unique meaning for decorative details and colors. The beauty of the cloth is enhanced if the person who sees it knows what symbolic meaning is replicated in it.

#### a. *Ikat Woven of Pauf Motif*

People in North Mollo, NTT, call the following woven pattern, Pauf, the Pauf motif, may be woven into blankets and sarongs. However, it is most commonly used as a blanket and worn by men. Pauf is made using traditionally spun threads or embroidered thread using the Sotis or Lotis technique. The process for creating decorations with this technique involves pulling the warp threads and adding weft threads while the Gun is placed. Then the thread that was pulled from the wick is put on the loom for further weaving. One *ikat* artwork is usually worked on by between three and ten workers at once. Some are seeking for supplies, whereas others are weaving, coloring threads, spinning yarn, and coming up with ideas or artwork. A number of steps are involved in the production of a piece of weaving fabric. The first is the *lamili* process, which separates cotton seeds, and the last is the *wari rumata* process (personal comm., 15/11/2023).



**Figure 1.** *Ikat* Woven Cloth of Pauf Motifs Cloth with the Lulat Kollo and Lulat Pohok symbols, which can only be worn by kings or rulers.

Based on the motif applies to the cloth above, there are two interpretations for the rhombus shaped symbols for Lulat Pohok and Lulat Kollo. Lulat Pohok (Lulat means "king" and Pohok "wrap") can be worn by aristocratic or royal families, but lulat kollo (depicting the Garuda bird) can only be worn by kings or rulers. The meanings of such decorative motifs are the expression or reflection for the social interaction between the people and the ruler or king (Kabnani, 2022). It additionally defines the king's attitude toward the people in terms of protection or support. The motifs symbolize the wise king's concern for the people he governs.

#### b. *Lotis Woven Cloth*



**Figure 2.** Lotis Woven Cloth (worn by common people)

Religious meaning has been attributed to Lotis woven textiles. A rhombus motif with religious meaning is used in Lotis woven product. This Lotis woven is more commonly worn by women in North Mollo in the form of brightly colored sarongs and shawls. The rhombus motif that fills the sarong or scarf dominates the decoration on this cloth. The rhombus motif represents people's optimism and faith in God, familial bonds in which they must respect and help each other, and the cardinal directions (Kabnani, 2022).

#### c. *Ikat Woven Cloth Ende-Lio*

Many motifs on the cloth developed identify each regional area in NTT, one of which is Ende Regency. The main colors of Ende Regency ikat woven cloth are white, blue, and red, which resemble the colors of Kelimutu Lake. Ende Regency has approximately twenty different varieties of traditional ikat woven cloth. Besides, this practice is simply carried out by rural women and is at the heart of the Ende-Lio communal culture. However, not all women in one village can carry out weaving activities. This is due to the lineage and persistence of the women who can carry out weaving activities which makes it distinctive *ikat* woven among other existing woven clothes. Ende-Lio's varied cloth motifs have aesthetic value as well as symbolic meaning, and they serve as a guide in the lives of the people in the region. According to Hartono (2010, p. 43), Ende-Lio cloth reflects or provides cultural meaning and can be used for practical reasons, evoking feelings of pride, patriotism, brotherhood, depending on the user's cultural setting.

In the creation of the Ende-Lio cloth motifs, a symbol serves as a means of communication. In this case, people convey information through sending and receiving messages, whether this is intended or not. Messages are transmitted by the source and received by the recipient. The term *beragih* denotes that the recipient who are not passive in accepting the message communicated by the source, but actively accepts the message. Likewise, Ende-Lio cloth motifs constitute a non-material cultural communication channel for normative components that have been conventionalized by society, such as those found in Ende-Lio cloth motifs associated to traditional

rites. Each theme has value in the community's living system as a representation of regulations that must be upheld.



**Figure 3.** Mboko Mite Motif      **Figure 4.** Seri and Koba Teke Motif

The Mboko Mite symbol depicts a human journey and is usually colored in black and white. This pattern represents the story of human life, which is not always easy; there are tears and happiness, sadness and joy. The Seri and Koba Teke motifs are flowers and twigs, respectively. This rose design is understood as a symbol of elegance, attractiveness, beauty, moving forward life, personal affection, and the Ende-Lio community's beliefs. Meanwhile, twigs are a representation of life as it develops and grows. A ladder scabbard is an Ikat woven Lawo Seri. Sari is seen as a ladder or *trap* when opened. Flowers or roses are the floral motif. Meanwhile, the Koba Teke motif is known as a twig in the form of a rope that expands widely and is densely packed with leaves and blossoms. The term Lawo Seri refers to the Queen's Crown, which is located in the traditional residence (wife of Mosalaki) (Rupa & Ri'a, 2021). The Seri is seen as a headdress for the queen, known as Sisi Bidi. The rose develop design in the Lawo Seri ikat woven cloth was chosen since Ende is an area of Flores and is known as the flower city or motherland because Ende is lush terrain, and roses are frequently seen in this region.



**Figure 3.** Teo Timbu Motif      **Figure 7.** Wekoc Motif

Teo Timbu is derived from the terms Teo (hanging) and Timbu (flower). Weko, on the other hand, portrays little yellow blossoms. These two motifs remain in forming meaning for the user. Teo Tumbu is known among the Lio people as decoration, such as flowers or *sirkam*, which are placed on Mosalaki's wife's bun or hair.



**Figure 5.** Kelimara Motif      **Figure 6.** Mola Motif

The Kelimara motif is a mountain motif. Kelimara is a combination of the words Keli (mountain) and Mara (love). Kelimara is a mountain motif that brings life to people through the Most Merciful's love. This mountain motif, according to the weavers, represents acknowledgment from the ancestors that God is in the highest position and can see everything below or on earth. Meanwhile, the Mola symbol with dotted white lines represents the journey of humans who must work hard to reach their objectives. The dotted line represents the twists and turns of a person's path as they overcome obstacles to fulfill their aspirations and love.

Kelimara is a sarong (called *lawo* by the Lio people) with a mountain motif as the main theme. This mountain image is believed to symbolize the Creator's love bringing birth to humanity. The Kelimara motif is worn by the bride and groom during wedding rituals, and each pattern has connotations for prayers for the bride. The basic motif is that Kelimara is shown as a mountain and occasionally shaped like traditional homes, indicating that the Creator loves and blesses the bride and groom, while the traditional house symbolizes the ancestors' protection of the bride and groom.

The motifs of mountains and valleys was chosen for *ikat* woven Limara for the mountains were an area for people to seek sanctuary from the war that took place at the time. They walked down to the valley to hunt for food and anything they could find to survive; thus, the mountains were also a sign of the utmost reverence to the creator, accordingly the mountain was chosen as the theme for the *ikat* woven Limara. The Timbu motif is symbolized by a spear or an arrow and has two meanings: as a battle equipment and as a direction.

The complexities of human life are also shown in the shape of curved mountains or hills to represent humans living on mountains or hills, with territorial boundaries denoted by curved motifs on each hill. These mountains or hills appear highly fertile since they are covered in trees. Humans who live in these highlands are always climbing and descending hills. Each little hill or summit has a *kanga* (*tubu*) where people can perform traditional rites or give offerings to their ancestors or forefathers. Keli or hills include designs that mimic people or humanity. This demonstrates that humans who live on the hill will, of course, climb the hill once they reach the peak or *keli* (personal comm., 16/11/2023)..

#### 4. The Shifting Social Meaning of Ikat Woven Clothes in the NTT Society

When we talk about ikat woven clothes, we also find ourselves faced with the reality of one of Indonesia's cultures. In social situations, people agree on numerous regulations, customs, language, and, then signs and symbols as their shared identity. The motifs and decorations on the customary ikat woven clothes of the NTT people vary broadly. *Ikat* woven cloth is gradually being designed into a number of unique and functional handicrafts, instead of merely used as a sling cloth for local tribal rites or being converted into garments. The regional government has compelled regional civil employees, both at the provincial and district/city levels, to wear regional themes on Thursdays of each current week, or at particular official occasions, in a bid to revive the home ikat woven industry. In fact, because they are rich in artistic value, these handmade products have a high selling value. For example, ikat cloth has a very deep meaning for the people of North Mollo, and the symbols contained in ikat weaving are a symbol of a person's social status, which is very influential and is something that cannot be separated from life because ikat is one of the most important elements in society in the life of the North Mollo people. Factors affecting the change in meaning of ikat woven clothes (Turu, 2022).

Symbols on *ikat* cloths share extremely profound meanings in the lives of North Mollo people since the ancient times. The Lulat Kollo motif can only be worn by rulers and their descendants, as well as nobility; ordinary people are not allowed to put on it. A person's social standing refers to their position, function, and responsibility in society (Turu, 2022). According to Linton (1940, p. 45) that a person's social standing is a collection of rights and duties in society. People with high social standing will be positioned higher in society's structure than those with low social status.

According to Pols and Berding (2022, p. 38), education is a process or action that aims to change human habits (behavior). Behavior is a person's response or activity, as well as something that a person does. Education represents one of the reasons affecting changes in the meaning of ikat woven cloth in North Mollo. With so many North Mollo people having formal education, this is a justification for not having the time or an opportunity to learn and manufacture *ikat* woven products anymore. They also believe that the learning and weaving process is only carried out by mothers or daughters who live in villages or towns and villages, and that ikat woven cloth and the symbols included in it are only viewed as symbols of beauty or works of art to beautify the appearance.

#### D. CONCLUSIONS

Nearly all the woven cloth products locally manufactured with varied ornamentation and motifs are subject to local knowledge values and

symbolic meanings that have a spiritual and mystical aspects. Many motifs on the cloth developed identify each regional area in NTT. In general, *ikat* cloth motifs are symbols that serve as communication tools; for example, Ende-Lio motifs associated with traditional rituals are represented by cloth motifs that hold important meaning in the community's life system as symbols for regulations that must be implemented. Similarly, in another region, North Mollo, NTT, the popular *ikat* woven product motif widely used for blankets and sarongs named as Pauf. Pauf is produced with conventional spun thread or embroidered thread using the Sotis or Lotis technique, and designed exclusively for males to wear. In Pauf, there are two interpretations of the rhombus-shaped symbols on Lulat Pohok and Lulat Kollo, which symbolically reflect social interaction between society and the ruler or king. The study of the *ikat* woven cloth of the Ende-Lio and North Mollo patterns from their symbolic meanings is an intriguing project involving cultural anthropology, textile studies, and innovative discovery. There is still an array of prospects for further study which will lead to a deeper understanding for the rich cultural legacy reflected in both motifs, such as the historical studies on *belis* requiring the ikat woven cloth to fulfil marriage bride price

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