

Fashionable Tradition

Production and Consumption of Hand-Woven Textiles in Bali

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Introduction

A feature article titled “One Indonesia through national dress” in *her world*, a monthly magazine for urban middle-class women, presents the views of two prominent Indonesian designers on the importance of *busana nasional*, or national dress, for national unity.¹

According to Edward Hutabarat, the national dress draws on a repertoire of regional dresses (*busana daerah*) that are already recognized and accepted by a large segment of the society as part of the symbols of national culture (*budaya nasional*). Creating the national dress is therefore a process of unifying a variety of forms and materials featured in the traditional clothing of different regions [*her world*, November 2003, p123]. In this vein, Hutabarat for example combines a *bodo* (a sleeveless jacket for women in South Sumatra) with *songket* (brocades) woven in Palembang, or a *kebaya* in Sumatran style with Balinese weaving. Such mixture of various elements of traditional textiles makes up the national dress in result. Hence he claims, “with national dress, we can unify this nation through *art and beauty*, without speeches!” [ibid.]. Another designer, Adjie Notonegoro, also stresses that national dress contributes to the unification of the nation as well as to the preservation of cultural heritage.

Such statements may sound rather familiar in Indonesia, where *kain kebaya* has long been established as national costume (*pakaian nasional*) for women, in contrast with regional costume (*pakaian daerah*) or traditional/ceremonial costume (*pakaian adat*).² As early as in 1960, the importance of national costume was acknowledged as a means of playing down outward differences of various groups within the multi-ethnic nation, and to promote a sense of unity among Indonesian nationals [Soeprapto 1960]. Under the New Order regime, this

¹ This article also names a few other designers including Prayudi and Nelwan Anwar as those who consciously popularize the notion of “*busana nasional*”.

² See Taylor [1997] for the process of the historical formation of *pakaian nasional*.



message became even clearer. At the same time, the diversity of cultures maintained by ethnic groups within the nation was allowed certain space for manifestation through their distinct dress styles along with local architecture and cultural performances [Schefold 1998], although such cultural features were carefully framed as those of the regions (*daerah*) rather than of the ethnic groups (*suku bangsa*).

Importantly, however, the contention of the contemporary designers mentioned above are somewhat different from the established views of national costume in two points. Firstly, as we see in the use of the word *busana* instead of *pakaian*, their notion of national dress is subsumed in the world of fashion. A few samples of their creations presented in the above article are full of glamour and clearly meant for very special occasions. At the same time, Hutabarat advises women to incorporate some “ethnic” elements (*unsur etnik*) into their daily wear so that they learn to appreciate their own culture. Following the idea of *mix and match*, it is suggested, we can coordinate a full skirt of batik material with a simple top from MANGO and a bag from DKNY [hanyawanita.com, 21 July 2004].

The second point of difference is that these designers no longer endorse the dichotomy of national and traditional. Hutabarat, in particular, consciously blurs the boundary by incorporating representative elements of traditional (i.e. ethnic) costume into his innovative designs and claims its outcome to stand for the national dress, as seen in the above. The national dress in this renewed context, therefore, does not embody the national unity by way of showing a single, unified appearance, but rather encourages individual choices and experiments in terms of its forms and materials. By the same token, traditional costume becomes subject to modification and redefinition, thus comes under a direct influence of fashion.

In light of on-going discussions about a persistent conceptual distinction between fashion and anti-fashion, this case can be taken as another example of “fashionalization”, i.e. the appropriation of traditional, non-Western dress by a fashion process [Niessen 2003]. On the one hand, the ethnically distinct, traditional costume or its components become fashionalized by serving as a cultural resource for “design inspiration for domestic fashion experts, much as an imagined “Asian culture” can inspire Western designers of Asian Chic” [Leshkovich & Jones 2003:293; see also Aragon 1999]. On the other hand, the permeation of Western-style clothing into the everyday sphere has affected local clothing system throughout Indonesia and



increasingly displaced traditional textiles as daily wear even in rural villages [eg. Nakatani forthcoming]. This process also caused a rapid decline of hand-loom and batik industries in Java and elsewhere in the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s [Hardjono 1990; Hill 1992; cf. Owen 1981; Sekimoto 2000].

In fact, many of the prominent Indonesian fashion experts voice their concerns with the fall of interest among the consumers for locally produced textiles; for them, it means a loss of cultural heritage. It is thus important, in their view, to modify (*modifikasi*) the conventional style and to make it *fashionable* for the purpose of challenging a widely-held perception that traditional textiles are out-moded and rustic.³ For example, Mariana Sutandi, a designer and the founder of Parang Kencana, tries to make batik more widely acceptable by introducing motifs and colours that go along with “fashion trends” [*her world* June 2003, p98]. Another designer, Yani Soemali whose clients are mainly married women of a relatively young age, is reported to design batik and Balinese cloths in such a way that the wearers do not have to feel confined in their movements and yet appreciate distinctive features (*ciri khas*) of Indonesia [*Kompas* 25 April 2004].⁴ Likewise, there have been many more attempts of reinterpreting and renewing motifs, techniques and materials of batik as appropriate for contemporary fashion, and such efforts have been welcomed by the urban elite consumers as well as in the overseas market.

From the pages of Indonesian women’s magazines in recent years, we can discern an increasing concern with the fate of traditional textiles as “national heritage”. Unlike batik, however, hand-woven textiles are deemed less susceptible to changes in terms of materials, techniques and usages. In an article reporting the contents of discussions at the ASEAN Textile Forum held in Jakarta in July 2002, it is pointed out that the traditional textiles such as songket and ikat are more likely to be tied to the historical and religious contexts, thus resistant to external attempts of modification [*dewi* January 2003, p112].

³ Importantly, women who actually carry on wearing batik or other traditional materials in their daily life are *not* regarded as fashionable. Rather, they represent backwardness and unsophistication, for “their wearing of batik sarongs is characterized as simply utilitarian and habitual, rather than a self-conscious style” [Leshkovich & Jones 2003: 293; cf Nakatani forthcoming].

⁴ Yani also combines jeans with a long *kebaya modifikasi* (modified *kebaya*). It has been debated whether *kebaya* can be worn together with jeans or not. Both Hutabarat and Notonegoro, acclaimed for their radical reinterpretation of *kebaya*, are against such combination [*her world* November 2003]. A Balinese designer, Cok Abi, criticizes Hutabarat for being too conservative on this point [interview, 13 August 2004]. Interestingly, however, Cok Abi himself is reluctant to transform Balinese hand-woven brocade, *songket*, into Western-style dress. He feels a pity for cloth and its intricate motifs [ibid.]. This attitude resonates in the remarks of some other designers dealing with hand-waxed batik [eg. Mariana Sutandi, in *her world* June 2003; Harry Dharsono, in *Femina* 4 December 1979].



Such inflexible aspects of traditional weaving may have been responsible for two, different kinds of outcome. On the one hand, their boundedness with the cultural context of a particular region or ethnic group limits the circulation of locally made textiles; when these textiles lose cultural and economic appeal for both producers and users who share the same culture system, the production of such textiles inevitably declines.⁵ On the other hand, their exclusiveness may be regarded as the benchmark of ensured authenticity, thereby attract the attentions of foreign connoisseurs as the potential target of collection [Moss 1994].

In this paper, I shall discuss the persistent production and consumption of a particular type of hand-woven textiles in Bali, which in fact follows neither of the above paths. This type of cloth is deeply embedded in local cultural norms and hardly attracts commercial attentions from outside Bali. Yet its production and consumption are subject to external forces such as economic change, the formation of national as well as regional identity, and a dynamics of contemporary fashion as will be made clear in the following sections.

The history of songket

The cloth in question is called songket; it is supplementary weft ikat with gold or silver thread, which creates additional patterns across the entire width or in the limited parts of the cloth. This heavy, glittering cloth is woven on a traditional handloom called *cagcag* and constitutes the special ceremonial attire in the form of wrap-arounds, men's hip cloths, women's sashes and men's head cloths. The occasions in which songket is worn include large-scale weddings, tooth-filing rites (Balinese come-of-age ceremony), and also social functions such as formal parties.

Traditionally, the songket making and its use had a near-exclusive link with the nobles: the three upper-classes (*triwangsa*) in the local system of hierarchy. Especially those using expensive, imported materials such as pure silk and gold threads could be made and worn only by those particularly privileged among royal and aristocratic families. According to some experts' accounts, a knowledge of court-related textile arts such as red dyeing and songket weaving could have been transmitted from India via the kingdom of Srivijaya, when the early rulers of Bali were adopting the Indian forms of state organization and its culture [Ramseyer

⁵ Volkman reports one such case among the Mandar in Southwest Sulawesi [Volkman 1994].



and Nabholz-Kartaschoff 1991:34]. At the turn of the 16th century, under the reign of the Satria Dalem who had settled in Gelgel, a variety of courtly forms flourished. Arts and crafts such as painting, wood-carving, gold and silver work constituted a strictly male domain, while the hand-weaving of brocades was allowed to aristocratic women [ibid.: 35-36].

In one of the centres for songket production, where I have carried out research since the early 1990s, it is reported that the number of local weavers even among the noble families was very limited before the World War II. Those who wove songket did not so for their own use as much as for selling to the rich, foremost the rulers of various princedoms, who placed orders. After temporary interruption during the Japanese occupation period and the aftermath of the Revolution, the production of songket resumed at the end of 1950s and rapidly expanded during the 1970s and 1980s [Nakatani 1995, 1999]. This situation ran contrary to the overall picture of the steady decline in handloom weaving in other parts of Indonesia [Hill 1980, 1992].

Songket as a source of prestige and an emblem of Balinese identity

The rapid growth of songket production can be explained from both ends of demand and supply. The increase in demand was stimulated by a number of factors. Firstly, the development of tourist industry gave rise to the expansion of urban-based middle-class with access to a sizable income. This population, regardless of their position in the traditional hierarchy, started to adopt songket as their ceremonial wardrobe. It was made possible due to a rapid economic change and a gradual erosion of strict rules regulating inter-caste relationships. This tendency was further accelerated by the public encouragement of the then Governor of Bali, Ida Bagus Mantra, in his efforts of promoting traditional handicrafts, for the Balinese residents to use traditional textiles [Ramseyer and Nabholz-Kartaschoff 1991:37]. His call helped challenging the conventional norms surrounding the use of songket and making it available to those who could afford it. As a result, this sumptuous cloth became a particularly appealing option for the urban well-to-do, precisely because of its historical link with aristocratic prestige and its expensive price. By clothing themselves and families with



songket at ceremonies, they could demonstrate their economic standing in “respectable” ways.⁶

The second factor, still related to the first, is the position of songket as an important component of regional or traditional costume. With the initiative of the New Order government, there has been a more or less established scheme of cultural geography, in which each of the provinces has a specific style of traditional clothing. This is typically a set of wedding costume worn by a bride and a groom among the relatively dominant or better-known ethnic groups in the region. Apparently, however, it is not such a straightforward endeavour to select only one out of numerous possibilities as the most representative style. In the case of Bali, where the majority of its residents are Hindu-Balinese, two types of pakaian adat have been acknowledged [Djamadil 1976].⁷ The one is worn by the main subject of the ceremony such as the bride and groom at a wedding, while the other is for the attendants of the ceremony. For women, the former style consists of a cloth covering from the waist to the ankle and an over-cloth with a shorter width, both tightly wrapped around the lower part of the body with a long and narrow waist cloth, and of another cloth covering the breast and the left shoulder; the latter style requires a wide wrap-around, a lacy kebaya on top and a short sash around the waist (see Figures). In most of the pictorial depictions of these styles, songket is used for a wrap-around, a hip-cloth or a sash, although other locally made textiles such as *kain prada* (cotton fabric decorated with bronze pigment paints or plastic gold foil) or *endek* (simple weft ikat) can be alternatives.

Given the high frequency of temple rituals and life-cycle ceremonies, always requiring the participation of a large part of the community, the Balinese never lack in opportunities for putting on pakaian adat. Formal receptions and graduation ceremonies (*wisuda*) provide additional opportunities.⁸ Among the Christian Balinese, too, songket is endowed with a special status. One of my Balinese friends who was born to a Christian family had a wedding in the church; she as a bride and all of her close relatives wore kain songket. She also has a

⁶ Anak Agung Ayu Ketut Agung, author of *Busana Adat Bali*, makes it clear that those who have gained an established social position are now free to choose the clothing that used to be the prerogative of the nobles [A.A. Ayu Ketut Agung 1997].

⁷ Two editions of the atlas, a reference book for school children, by the same publisher print these two versions in each [Chaldun 2001, 2003]. In the Governor’s Office, too, two pairs of manikins are clothed differently to display these two sets of pakaian adat.

⁸ On the occasions when people of different regional background will gather, such as the functions sponsored by the rotary club, local women are supposed to wear national costume. Although the Balinese pakaian adat resembles the national kain kebaya, in the latter women throw a shawl (instead of a waist sash) over the shoulder and choose batik or some other cloth rather than songket.



small collection of various songket, which she bought on every occasion that could legitimize the purchase, such as the weddings of her sisters.” Why do you like songket so much?”, I asked; her reply was: “It’s so beautiful, and it’s Balinese”.

Songket as a source of a living

As already mentioned, the production of songket started again at the end of 1950s when the improvement of road networks and other infrastructure made it easier to obtain the imported materials and to market the finished products. In the village under study, some local traders assumed a role of brokers by providing materials to local weavers and selling finished cloths in Denpasar and other cities. The initial stage of the revival of songket production was seemingly dominated by aristocratic families; yet a large number of women, who had experienced hand-weaving during the Japanese period through the forced production of cotton cloths, gradually got involved both as brokers and weavers, regardless of their status. Therefore, on the side of the production, too, the traditional, exclusive link between songket and the aristocracy was put to an end.⁹

The village women, both young and old, increasingly engaged themselves with this hand-weaving industry, which soon became the second largest source of employment after agriculture. This process coincided with the rapid monetization of the village economy and the increasing dependence on non-agricultural income.¹⁰

It must also be noted that the increased level of income through songket weaving has brought about further changes in the village lifestyle. The women commonly claim that their family cannot live without their earnings from weaving. While true in most cases, it is also evident that their income does not only provide for daily necessities but also finances the improvements of houseyard walls, kitchens, and tiled terraces and/or subsidizes grand-scale ceremonies. Young, unmarried daughters, in particular, have gained access to a sizable income at their disposal, though many of them pay for the higher education of their (most

⁹ According to Christian Pelras who conducted research in 1961, songket weaving was still very much confined to the circle of priestly and aristocratic women at the time [Pelras 1962].

¹⁰ As noted elsewhere [Cole unpublished: 162-65; Edmondson 1992:6], the expansion of the civil service leading to an increase in the number of local administrators, school teachers, medical specialists, and police personnel since the late 1960s, greatly increased the flow of cash into the local economy. At the same time, the commercialization of the agricultural sector, i.e. the shift from subsistence-dominant production to market-oriented production was in progress. The perceived needs for cash income can be linked partly to family desires for improved education for their children, and to increasing use of modern medical facilities that required payments in cash.



often male) siblings. Life-cycle rituals of their relatives and neighbours provide them with a good opportunity for *mapayas*, or dressing up. They find pleasure in presenting themselves in a brand-new kebaya in combination with a good kain, selected with care for the occasion.

Now a question arises; do these women ever put on the songket cloth which they weave themselves? They do, in fact, though such occasion is extremely limited. Songket is far more expensive than, for example, Balinese simple ikat, mainly due to the imported materials and a lengthy period required for the production. Most women weavers cannot afford using their own product, because they then have to pay for the materials. As I have argued elsewhere, the songket cloth is equivalent to “cash crop” in the eyes of the producers, for they must produce as many as possible within the shortest possible time in order to maximize the profit [Nakatani 1999]. However, as in the case of the urban area, large-scale weddings and tooth-filing rituals are deemed “once-in-a- life-time event”, which is special enough for wearing songket. Especially the tooth-filing is the most legitimate occasion in which all the weavers I knew prepared for their own cloth.¹¹ But due to their economic circumstances, most of them sold it off after the event. Also, they explained, to keep the cloth would only make it “out of fashion”, then it would be more difficult to sell it later.

Fashion and tradition

Despite the substantial development of songket production, the circulation of songket remains largely confined to the local market within the Bali province. Unlike songket from Palembang, Balinese songket cloths are not to be found in the sections of traditional handicrafts in Jakarta department stores, nor do we see them in the artshops in Kuta, where various textiles from all over Indonesia are piled up for foreign tourists. Significantly, I argue, this situation enables the producers of songket to share, with its urban consumers, the genuine aspiration for wearing it themselves. Such a continuum of interests between producers and consumers cannot be possible, for example, in the case of silk batik, in which the magnitude of distance lies between the rural artisans and the targeted consumers in the metropolitan Jakarta and beyond.

¹¹ With regard to weddings, there was still a tendency that the villagers of commoner’s status refrained from dressing too lavishly.



With regard to the sphere of consumption in Bali, we see two concurrent forces that constitute a contemporary arena in which the position and meaning of songket is negotiated and reevaluated. The first involves a dynamics of fashion. As I mentioned briefly, the motifs and colour schemes of songket cloths are subject to the “trends” in town. During my long-term research in the early 1990s, I observed a rather quick turn-over of different motifs and patterns; at one point a particular combination of motifs was produced everywhere, which was later replaced by another. The brokers who hired many piece-rate weavers under them as well as those who operated as independent weavers were keen to keep up with the changing tastes of urban consumers, so that their products could sell well.

Such situation still continues, but among the wearer of pakaian adat, a pursuit of fashion seems even accelerated. The case in point is the unprecedented popularity of a fine kebaya, made of the imported, expensive lace material. This phenomenon undoubtedly corresponds with the nation-wide enthusiasm with *kebaya modifikasi*, such as those designed by domestic designers introduced in the beginning of this paper. In Bali itself, there is a London-educated Balinese designer who strategically concentrates on designing fashionable kebaya.

In the past few years, however, the increasing use of almost see-through materials for kebaya has sparked public discussions on the appropriateness of such costume in temple ceremonies. Many argue that such kebaya is much too sexy and provocative, thus obstructs the male participants of the ceremony from concentrating on holy thoughts. There is also a counter-argument that the real problem lies in the fact that men’s mind is so easily disrupted by “bad thoughts”, thus those who wear “*baju transparan* (transparent blouse)” should not be made responsible for it. Yet the majority seems to agree that people should consider the occasion and choose their outfit appropriately.

Although this precaution is simply common sense in any society more or less, the case is instructive as an indication of on-going tension between fashion and tradition. In the case of Bali, where the most prominent occasions for wearing pakaian adat are religious and life-cycle ceremonies, the choice of materials and colours within the given set of forms has been made an issue since the early 1990s. Such stated concerns with “appropriateness” in reference to the framework of tradition and religion are the second important factor, determining the position of pakaian adat in general and of songket in particular.



An apt example is the “guidance” by the various sections of the regional government concerning the appropriate colours of costume at temple ceremonies. In 1992, for instance, the regional office of the Department of Education and Culture at Badung Regency circulated an official notice that the teachers and pupils attending a certain ritual should appear in white and yellow, these being holy colours symbolizing the Supreme God in Balinese Hinduism [Dinas Kebudayaan 1994, cited in Kagami 1995]. The similar requirements were made on different occasions since then and we now see many Balinese voluntarily complying with this newly emphasized norm. In a large-scale ceremony which attract thousands of worshippers from all over Bali, the temple ground is filled with people in white tailored jacket (called *safari*) or white kebaya, white head-cloth and yellow hip-cloth covering the kain worn underneath. A booklet specifying the forms of pakaian adat, published in 1997, also makes it clear that the costume for a temple ceremony should be in white and yellow, while the choice of the cloth for life-cycle rituals is said depend on the individual taste [A. A. Ayu Ketut Agung 1997].

This move of regulating the appropriate colours for the ritual wardrobe was suspected as a partial reason for the temporary decline in the songket sales at the time. The producers quickly responded to this new situation by creating white- or yellow-based cloths with minimal supplementary weft, but there seems an established view by now that songket is too showy to be worn at temples. Although the special position of songket as the representative of traditional textiles of Bali has not eroded, its usage has been circumscribed to particular types of ceremonies and social functions that take place outside the temple grounds.

While endorsing white and yellow as the right colours for the temple worship, the authorities, especially those related to the Hindu Religious Council, openly criticize the use of black costume at death rituals, which became a widespread practice also in the course of the 1990s. Despite their assertion that the association of black colour with death is not substantiated by Hindu doctrines, people increasingly opt for black shirts and black or dark-coloured kebaya and kain when attending the funerals. To date, this practice is spread to even remote villages.

Accordingly, it seems that the typological classifications of different ceremonial occasions and the accompanying choice of appropriate costume, though more or less identical in forms but different in colours and materials, are being established. People therefore wear songket at weddings and tooth-filing rites, white and/or yellow cloths with simple ornamentation at



temple ceremonies, and black or dark-coloured cloth at death rituals [see also Kagami 1995]. The latest addition is the increasing presence of male guards wearing a hip cloth of checked pattern in black and white, called *poleng* in large-scale temple ceremonies and cremations or in the context of neighbourhood watch of *desa adat*. The *poleng* has been commonly used to clothe the stone-made guardians at the entrance of the temples and other types of sanctuaries, or to decorate a certain type of shrines. Believed to be endowed with a magical power, this black-and-white cloth has recently gained an increasing popularity among the youth, who find it “fashionable”.¹²

Conclusion

As we have seen in the previous sections, the development of songket production as a home-based industry and the expansion of its market within the province were facilitated by a number of related factors: changing regional economy, penetration of the money economy into the villages, the lifting of historical sanctions regulating its production and consumption, and the growth of the tourist industry. Especially the last two factors explain a steady increase in demand for this traditional, sumptuous cloth, because those who gained access to tourist income were willing to pay for the additional value attached to it, that of being associated with aristocrats and Balinese collective identity. On the part of the village-based weavers, the songket making provided a good source of income, but it was also regarded as a respectable job for women, including those unmarried, because of its former link with the aristocratic women.

It can be argued, somewhat paradoxically, that songket truly became a “common tradition”, shared by all Balinese, by virtue of breaking away with tradition – a set of norms that had confined it to a limited sphere. Coincidentally, the growing income thanks to the development of tourism in the region, supported people’s increasing aspiration for being fashionable; people can now afford adding a variety of cloths to their ceremonial wardrobe, including songket, the former prerogative of the nobles. This is not to suggest that the Balinese were not interested in fashion in former times. From the various accounts of foreign observers during the Dutch colonial period and after the Independence, we see both men and women being overtly conscious of their appearance, also on the ceremonial occasions. What is new,

¹² Ida Bagus Suratnaya, a high school student who argues that the use of *poleng* motif should be counted as a part of “national culture”, describes its recent popularity among the Balinese as “*ngetrend*” [Ida Bagus Suratnaya 1998: 29].



however, is the fact that the choice of costume in different occasions has been much more closely and narrowly defined. Within such limited terms of reference, the individuals and groups strive to display their prestige and taste by means of accommodating the latest fashion trends.

Such concern with fashion primarily among the urban population, backed by their economic strength, is the very condition for sustaining the sales of songket within the regional market, because people were willing to buy new songket for different rituals. Therefore, locally produced songket appealed to the consumers not only because it was traditional but also fashionable. The excess of the fashion elements, however, possibly leads to a predicament of this cloth, for the consumers might be tempted to purchase more exotic and less expensive cloths instead of songket in order to keep up with the rapid turn of trends. As well, within the perspective of tradition, a mounting awareness of the Balinese identity as closely tied up with Hindu religion may give rise to the further redefinition of pakaian adat, which proposes the use of more religiously meaningful textiles. Whether or not songket can maintain its privileged position in the Balinese clothing culture in the years to come, remains to be seen.

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