



Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles: The Mary Hunt Kahlenberg Collection
Edited by Ruth Barnes and Mary Hunt Kahlenberg

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Four hundred pages long, in oversize format and weighing in at 3.5kg including its slipcase, in terms of physical dimensions alone this book is a hard-to-ignore contribution to the field of Indonesian textile studies. It illustrates and describes Mary Hunt Kahlenberg's personal collection of textiles. Ms Kahlenberg began her career as a curator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the first publication that she was associated with was the catalogue of an exhibition entitled "Textile Traditions of Indonesia", published in 1977. After leaving the museum she became a private collector and dealer. In her own words she "put aside selected textiles ... with the intention of building a collection of outstanding quality..", describing her areas of special focus as "Lampung, the Toraja area of Sulawesi and Java, along with Maluku".

The heart of this book is a series of 101 plates of selections from Ms Kahlenberg's collection. These have been photographed by Bruce White with outstanding clarity, making full use of the large format of the book, with close up views of many of the items that allow appreciation of their texture and weaving techniques, as well as their overall appearance. The color reproduction and detail in the photographs is outstanding and the photos repay close attention. In some ways a book like this one produced using the best of modern printing and publishing technology reveals more than a museum exhibit could do, without the constraints on proximity and lighting that limit so many museum displays of textiles today. The display of the items is also outstanding, with many pieces allowed to "hang", revealing shape and form, rather than flattened out.

Interspersed amongst the catalogue entries are a series of essays by leading authors in the textile field. Each essay heads up and introduces the catalogue entries that follow, providing some overview and context to the detailed catalogue entries that follow. Aside from the essays, the captions are also written by an impressively wide group of contributors, so that the book is in fact the work of twelve expert authors.

The Kahlenberg collection's particular strength is in early examples of textiles, with many pieces plausibly dating to the 19th century and earlier, and a few radiocarbon-dated pieces proven to be as early as the 15th century. While old textiles are relatively common in studies of north Asian textiles, where drier climates and the custom of burying the dead with luxury goods has permitted their preservation, early examples of Southeast Asian textiles are extraordinarily rare and correspondingly precious. An ikat sarong from Sulawesi that dates from the 15th century is like a glimpse into a looking glass world, where things are recognizable but also subtly different.

An introductory essay by Ms Kahlenberg sets out her criteria for assembling the collection, in particular highlighting that it is not intended as a comprehensive overview of Indonesian textiles, though most of the major textile producing areas are in fact represented in this book. Her co-editor Ruth Barnes's introductory essay describes the geographical area and scope, and some of the common themes that have emerged in Indonesian textile studies, especially regarding heirloom pieces of the quality represented by the Kahlenberg collection, including formal gift-giving arrangements during marriage ceremonies, life-cycle events and community rituals. She also refers to the continuing influence of early studies and interpretations of Indonesian textiles, mainly by European authors. These studies continue to set the tone and language of much modern writing on textiles, even though doubts have been creeping in over recent decades about validity of some oft-repeated claims. Ms Barnes cites Jager Gerling's 1952 work, which attempted to make sense of Indonesian ikat designs and introduced the idea of "linked ancestor figures". Despite the absence of any fieldwork-based evidence to support this notion this interpretation became standard for the bold and characteristic designs from Toraja. Some of Ms Barnes co-authors seemingly disregard her warnings and references to "linked ancestor figures" appear in the captions to textiles from both Lampung and Toraja, perhaps perpetuating a myth that belongs to the tribe of ethnologists rather than to Indonesian weavers.

A second essay by Ruth Barnes presents an overview of some of the radiocarbon dated items in the collection. As she rightly says, this is an exciting field, and one with considerable potential for future study as the amount of material required for destructive radiocarbon analysis is steadily diminishing along with its cost. Great caution is needed in interpreting the results however, which appear as time ranges and probabilities, with the attendant danger of misinterpretation. This argues for full disclosure of radiocarbon dating reports as standard practice, rather than a single "most probable" date that may be misleading.

The opening section of the catalogue deals with textiles from southern Sumatra, particularly Lampung, an area where the Kahlenberg collection is particularly strong. "Lampung" is particularly associated with ceremonial tubeskirts in glowing golden colors, decorated with ikat, embroidery and sequins. There are several fine examples here, but also textiles of other kinds that give a fuller picture of the diversity of this tradition, now largely vanished. There are also several examples of the well-known supplementary weft "ship cloths", including a 3 meter long palepai that may be the finest example yet published.

A series of luxurious silk shawls from Sumatra is followed by three examples of the elegant and austere textiles of the Batak people from the lake Toba region. Sandra Niessen's captions for these link fieldwork and historical research to provide convincing identifications and context.

An essay on Batik by Rens Heringa and the subsequent examples of this art from the Kahlenberg collection were an eye-opener for me. The presence of some convincingly "early" pieces of batik from Java allows some appreciation of the development of batik and the rapid changes that have occurred in style and design over the last two centuries. A two-hundred year old cloth from Java suggests that designs that are now only found on some Balinese double ikat cloths were once more widespread,

while cloths from Tuban preserve what may be some of the oldest batik techniques and styles. Design developments in the 19th and early 20th century trace social changes in Java society and the increasing influence of Islam on cloths. A different and interesting set of batik designs were produced for (and sometimes by) Straits Chinese people in Indonesia, incorporating Chinese auspicious motifs. In dealing with these motifs the author is on less certain ground than with the native Java motifs: the Chinese “ky’lin” (qilin) is confused with the lion dog (shizi). The “Stag” (actually deer) is not an ancestor figure for Chinese people but represents longevity, amongst other things.

The essays “Cloths for the Ancestors” on Balinese ritual cloths by Marie-Louise Nabholz Kartaschoff and “Triangle and Tree” by Traude Gavin on Iban motifs discuss some of the changes in thinking and approach that are taking place amongst scholars in the interpretation of textiles. The essay on Balinese cloths makes the important point that when considering the function and importance of a textile: the motifs are normally secondary to the form, materials and structure of the cloth. In fact little real understanding can be gleaned about the importance of a cloth to its makers except by studying its use in context, a theme that also emerges from Sandra Niessen’s writings and captions in this volume. The most lavish cloths sometimes have the most important roles to play, but not always.

The catalogue includes several fine Balinese textiles, including examples of the famous geringsing double ikat. However it was a spectacular “lamak perada” from Bali that caught my eye, both for its beauty and its interesting history. This piece of silk was made in China for export, decorated with subtle batik in Java and then overdyed in purple and gilded in Bali, resulting in a sumptuous and multilayered effect.

Traude Gavin’s essay on Iban cloths goes to the heart of some of the problems that bedevil current textile scholarship. She shows how two labels commonly used by textile writers “tumpal”, (meaning the row of elongated triangles at the ends of many Indonesian cloths,) and “Tree of Life” (a widely used description for pretty much any plant or tree-like motif), are in fact constructs from early Western writings that have no evidential link to the motivations of Indonesian weavers. The “Tree of Life” description in particular is weighted down with a baggage of Western and Asian myths that create spurious connections in the mind of the reader. Yet both descriptions persist in textile writings. The “tumpal” label is found in the captions throughout this volume, though this is admittedly a near universally accepted convention for which good alternatives are lacking.

A few fine Iban pua follow this essay. In keeping with the theme of the collection these are exceptional and unusual examples, such as a large cloth decorated entirely using the sungkit (supplementary weft) technique rather than the more usual ikat. They are fascinating, though the reader looking for an introduction to this field might want to look elsewhere for more typical examples first.

A group of early textiles from Sulawesi follow, some of which have been securely dated to the 15th to 17th centuries. A remarkable batik panel and a long cloth called an mbesa tali tau betu, an ikat tubeskirt and a supplementary warp tubeskirt all attest to textile making traditions that have been lost from Sulawesi (and in the case of the long cloth from the world of textile making in general). The ancient ikat tubeskirt suggests that the format and style still found in the Lamalera region may once have been more widespread in the Indonesian archipelago. The captions to these items are mostly exemplary, but I have some doubts about the caption for the solitary and unique batik that is dated to the 15th century, decorated with attractive but rather blob-like organic forms. The caption writer describes the motifs as “stylized ancestral beings” and the dots inside them as representing “internal organs”. How can the writer possibly know? Since the piece is unique and the caption will probably be referenced by other researchers for a century or more to come it would be better if such assertions were supported with evidence, or else clearly labeled as speculation if that is what they are.

The final two essays by Roy Hamilton and Toos Van Dijk deal with textiles from the island archipelagos stretching from Flores to Timor and the remoter islands of the Maluku Tenggara, the latter including some regions and textiles that have received less attention. The simple, symmetrical sarongs of this region, decorated with small geometric and figural motifs interspersed with ikat bands may represent one of the earliest textile styles from the Indonesian archipelago, though these areas too have been influenced by imported cloths.

Roy Hamilton's essay discusses the place of textiles as markers for identity in the island cultures, the importance of fine distinctions in local cultures and the question of the "ownership" of a particular design. Toos Van Dijk surveys the islands making up the Maluku Tenggara and attempts a broad classification of the styles of textiles from this region. The catalogue section finishes with several dark and forbiddingly beautiful tubeskirts from Tanimbar and nearby islands.

The multi-authorship of this impressive volume is an asset. The differences in approaches of the contributors throw up some interesting questions relating to current textile scholarship, however. This is perhaps most apparent in the captions to the Lampung textiles, where several authors have contributed to the same field. This is a difficult area for researchers since little remains today of Lampung's former weaving traditions, causing one caption writer to lament "when it comes to understanding their origins and meaning, there is confusion and frustration", and to present correspondingly tentative interpretations. Another writer is more confident, providing detailed iconographic explanations for embroidered designs. These iconographic explanations are impressive, but leave me with more questions about how they were gleaned and with what degree of certainty. Textile studies seem to be in the process of differentiating themselves from a branch of art criticism (and rightly so), but there is by no means broad agreement on how to proceed or what evidential standards to apply. In this respect we can say that "Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles" mirrors current controversies and the "state of play" of textile studies in general.

In conclusion, this is an outstanding work in the field of Indonesian textile studies that will be pored over and referred to for decades to come, perhaps longer. The outstanding illustrations and revealing scholarship make it a worthwhile addition to the library of anyone with an interest in Asian textiles, whether beginner or expert.

Chris Buckley/ January 2011.

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