

Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles



Lamak (shrine hanging or offering cloth) Bali, Indonesia, early to mid-20th century, cotton, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, donated by Colin McPhee

by Yvonne Tan

Bali has been a major source of fascination for the West since the late 19th century and is culturally distinct. It is the only island in the Indonesian archipelago to have resisted the forces of Islam which overran the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of neighbouring Java from the 15th century onwards. Bali remained independent, and went on to practise a composite belief system based on a dominant Hindu cosmology and its views of the world. The religion which integrates ancestor worship, animism and magic, has had a deep influence on Balinese culture and traditions, and is reflected in the island's unique textile tradition.

In the 1930s, the anthropologists

Margaret Mead (1901-1978) and Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) converged on Bali to document its artistic and cultural practices, fearing that they might soon be lost to encroaching Western influence and modernity. Between 1936 and 1938 they recorded rituals, dance and trance in Balinese life cycles using still photography and film, and published their pioneering fieldwork in *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* in 1942. Textiles had not been an area of their research. However the study of ritual exposed them to the important role fabrics played during Balinese rites of passage. They decided to collect ceremonial cloths and subsequently donated them to The American Museum of Natural History, New York.

A number of rare and exquisite textiles from the Mead-Bateson Collection – supplemented by samples from American collections – have been gathered for the exhibition, *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles* at the Bard Graduate Center, New York. Designed to offer insight into Balinese weaving traditions, the show considers the making and use of textiles as ceremonial objects in the island's culture and explores their role as symbols of continuity. The samples on display moreover, are intended as material records of the 1930s, an important period in Balinese history.

In Bali, much spiritual value is attached to cloth. It is an activity invested with power since the textiles produced demarcate key stages in the human life cycle. Their making is not taken lightly. When, how, where and by whom cloth is made are critical considerations. An auspicious day is usually chosen for the actual weaving; the new moon and the full moon, for instance, are not considered auspicious times. Weaving is a ritualised activity, and those making items associated with deities undergo a purification ceremony called *marwinten*.

Balinese society makes a fine distinction between male and female activity. The use of weapons such as



Ngurah Hendrawan and Ni Gede Diari. Cepuk (ritual cloth), Nusa Penida, Bali, Indonesia, 2017, cotton, Bard Graduate Center. Photograph: Bruce White

the *keris*, or dagger, is identified with men. Textiles are the preserve of women and when the circumstances are right, *sakti* or 'spiritual power' is conferred on the weaver. Cloth appears frequently in Balinese mythology and legend, and it is customary for weavers make daily offerings to gods and deities. The lunar goddess Dewi Ratih, who lives on the moon, is often depicted spinning because she is believed to have given the knowledge of weaving to humanity.

Women traditionally use the *cag cag*, a body tension or backstrap loom for weaving. It may be a continuous or discontinuous warp setup with a backstrap or harness, breast and cloth beam, beater/blade, reed, lease bar, heddle rod and heddle strings, and a shuttle that carries the bobbin. The wooden harness which rests on the

weaver's lower back, is attached to the loom with cords. The *cag cag* integrates the weaver's body with the loom, providing the force needed to keep the warp as taut or relaxed as required. Weaving in Bali today remains a skill that is passed down through the generations, usually from mother to daughter who has probably inherited a *cag cag*.

Balinese cloths feature primarily as apparel. Traditional cloths are known as *bebali*, a generic term for whole lengths of fabric woven to certain dimensions to serve as garments. These pieces of cloth for daily wear which are uncut and unsewn to preserve their *sukla* or 'purity', are extremely versatile. They are utilitarian, often feature soft dye colours and might be draped on the body in several ways.

Today women wear the *kebaya*, a long blouse which is a modern confection, with the *sarong*. Female apparel is generally complemented by accessories such as the *anteng*, 'breast cloth'; the *selendang*, 'chest, waist or shoulder cloth'; the *sabuk*, 'waist binding belt'; the *kamben*, 'inner hip wrapper' and the *saput*, 'outer hip wrapper'. Men wear the *udeng*, 'head cloth' wrapped around their heads; they have on their torsos modern shirts and on the lower body, the *kamben*, 'inner hip wrapper' and *saput*, 'outer hip wrapper'.

Items of clothing adhere to gender distinctions and are adapted for male and female wearers. The *kamben*, 'inner hip wrapper' which is worn by both men and women, is distinguished by its texture and motifs for either sex, and by the manner in which they are worn. Men wear it with the right side wrapped over the left; while women wear the *kamben* with the left side covering the right.

Many Balinese cloths fulfil religious purposes and are said to possess protective properties. *Kain tenunan* 'woven cloths' are simple utilitarian textiles in lines and checks, some of which are sacred cloths for men. The *poleng*, a sarong in large black and white checks is associated

with spiritual power, protection and masculine virtues. It is today a 'uniform' for the mandatory *pacalang* or 'security guards' present at ceremonial events. In Bali shrines they are considered physical embodiments of deities and spirits; they too need to be protected, and have *poleng* draped over them as well as over guardian figures in temples.

Special occasions call for elaborate and expensive cloths worn by royalty and the elite. Prominent among them is the *kain songket*, luxurious brocades that symbolise privilege and power. They carry geometric or floral patterns, embellished by sheer gold and silver yarns shimmering on brightly coloured silk. Because of their extravagant nature, they are said to be an aristocratic art and the handiwork of women from the highest castes.

Songket appears in two *saput* 'outer hip wrappers' for men. One with metallic supplementary weft borders, and the other in metallic thread and *endek*, a weft *ikat* that is tie dyed, or resist patterned, and popular in Bali. These silk songkets are of a deep red dye, superstitiously believed to emanate from human blood. Today it is recognised that the colour comes from the bark of the *Morinda citrifolia*, known locally as *mengkudu*.

Dyes in Bali have symbolic meanings and are believed to possess medicinal properties. Mastery of the art however reflects the dyer's knowledge and expertise. He or she depends on dyes produced from barks, root and leaves of plants, referred to as *warna alami*, 'natural dye colours'. Indigo, known as *nila* from the Sanskrit, is extracted from the leaf of the *Indigofera tinctoria*; yellow comes from the *nangka*, 'jackfruit' tree, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*; and brown from the *pohon mahoni*, mahogany. Another source of red dye is the *Caesalpinia sappan* or sappanwood, called *secang*.

The *kain prada*, 'gilded cloths' are exclusive fabrics, worked with applied gold leaf in geometric and floral motifs intertwined into the fabric. During ceremonial occasions they often feature in the *selendang*, the woman's shoulder, waist or hip wrapper and also in the head cloth and hip wrappers for men. *Kain prada* previously associated with metalwork, had been a traditional male preserve although women are now adept at making it.

At certain times in the Balinese calendar, textiles are considered a second skin. During liminal life phases such as birth, maturity, death and deification, their shape, form and appearance reflect the social hierarchy of the Hindu caste system: The requisite *pakaian* or 'clothing' worn by observers present embody three levels; *pakaian agung*, 'highest', *pakaian madya*, 'middle' and *pakaian sederhana*, 'for everyday or lowest purposes'.



Geringsing (protective cloth), possibly Tenganan, Bali, Indonesia, before 1956, probably 20th century, cotton, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, donated by Frances Kent Lamont and Charlotte Austin Kent in memory of their father and mother William Winthrop Kent and Jesse Adams Kent

The *gedogan*, or *wangsul*, are continuous tubular warp cloths that feature in various ceremonies associated with birth. For every new mother a three-day ceremony called *nelubulanin* is conducted when the baby is 105 days or three Balinese calendar months old. An uncut continuous cloth, the *wangsul* – imbued with a form of ‘power’ by its weaving technique – is then draped over the mother to release protective energies. Like other Balinese textiles, the *wangsul* has multiple functions. Its dominant use is as circular baby slings which need to be new and therefore ‘pure’, because they are used to bond mother and child. *Wangsul* might also be used as shawls, diapers or even pillows for the child. Occasionally deities are also carried in a brand new *wangsul*.

Some ritual cloths have healing properties. The *cepuk* is used in a variety of ceremonies, draped on human bodies as well as over shrines. All *cepuk* have a basic structure of a border lining all four sides to frame a body of repeated weft ikat patterns. Indeed the cloth has been described as resembling a human face – with a *kepala*, ‘head’, and features including eyebrows, lips and smile. The *cepuk* bears evidence of Bali’s place as a repository of Indian textile traditions brought by ancient trade routes. Its motifs are derived from Indian double *ikat patola* prototypes from Gujerat, among them the *jelamprang*, ‘eight rayed rosette’.

Cepuk is used protectively during liminal events such as puberty when a girl starts her first menstruation and when a boy deepens his voice. Red and yellow are the key colours; the boy wears a *cepuk sari* of red and yellow with a white sash, and the girl, a *cepuk lubeng luvwe* of red and yellow. On their necks they have three colour threads of red, white and black, called *tridatu*, symbolising the Hindu deities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Geringsing cloths are perhaps the most sacred of all Balinese textiles. They are identified with the Hindu goddess Indra and are exclusive to the Tenganan Pageringsingan area of Bali. Worn as waist or hip wrappers by men and women during special rituals, they are said to possess healing properties and offer protection from disease and evil spirits. They are therefore used until they disintegrate. A continuous circular warp which is ritually appropriate, they symbolise the role of creation, and are taken off uncut from the loom. They usually

sport magnolia flower patterns and involve a complex dyeing method lasting well over a month to allow the yarns to be soaked and dried. It prepares them for their reddish-purple colour when they are immersed and repeatedly dyed again thereafter.

Geringsing feature in many Balinese ceremonies. It is normally used as a head rest during tooth filing, a rite associated with puberty. Called *metatab* or *potong gigi*, ‘cutting of teeth’, it is supposed to remove the last vestiges of ‘untamed’ behaviour as the individual transits into adulthood. He or she is elaborately dressed – lying on a platform sandwiched between cloths including the *geringsing*, *cepuk*, *bebali* and *songket* to stabilise and protect the body. A priest or priestess presiding over the rite then files down the teeth.

The *lamak* are sacred banners that hang from poles in temples and shrines. They are associated with the Galungan, an important ‘new year’ festival which occurs twice yearly in celebration of the 210-day cycle of the Balinese Hindu calendar. These long narrow cloths of handwoven plain cotton, are often several metres in length. The *lamak* has contrasting geometric and triangular motifs of white on indigo. Two inverted triangles usually feature at the very top below which sit a stylised ‘pyramid’ followed by symmetrical motifs on the *lamak* body. They culminate in a *tumpal*, ‘interlocking’ border pattern.

Water plays a significant role in wedding nuptials and features in a bathing or cleansing ritual. The couple concerned are required to immerse themselves in the river dressed in their finest new clothes. The bridegroom is supposed to be 20 to 30 feet away from the bride, when he removes his *kamben* ‘inner hip wrapper’ and lets it drift downstream to her. She catches and washes it after which the couple leave the water to be dressed in more new clothes. Together they return to the groom’s house, their hands bound with a string to signify their union.

Death ceremonies involve the use of *kasa putih*, ‘white cloths’ as cremation shrouds supposed to carry the deceased to heaven. The shroud layers are hierarchically arranged; *kasa putih* lining the bottom, over which lay a red *kain cepuk*, then a *kajang kulit*, ‘skin shroud’ and *kajang sari*, ‘sari shroud’ to establish safe passage to the next world. In cremation ceremonies, textiles worn by mourners correspond again to the rules of caste. Only the highest caste is privileged to wear motifs of *patola* designs and the lowest, very simple patterns.

While the role and functions of many cloth samples in the exhibition have remained basically unchanged, the circumstances prevailing in present-day Bali are very different from the 1930s. Modern weavers now prefer to use partially mechanised treadle looms which have now replaced many *cag cag*. And despite efforts to revitalise traditional weaving, textile production in Bali has become a competitive and lucrative industry. These circumstances lead us to appreciate the objects on display as unique objects and source materials, and particularly as *pusaka*, ‘heirlooms’ which attest to the living and unchallenged textile tradition of Bali.

● *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles*, until 8 July, at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York, bgc.bard.edu.

● *An eponymous book accompanies the exhibition* by Urmila Mohan, University of Chicago Press, ISBN 9781941792131



Gedogan or *wangsul*, (tubular continuous warp cloth), Ibu Ayu Ngurah and Ida Ayu Pidada, Batuan, Bali, Indonesia, 2017, cotton, private collection. Photograph: Bruce White

ROSEBERYS
LONDON

Fine Art Auctioneers & Valuers

ASIAN ART
Inviting Consignments
Monday 21 May



ZHANG RUITU
(follower, of Chinese 1570-1644),
landscape, ink on silk, hanging scroll.
Inscribed with part of the poem
by Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei,
signed and with artists seal.
Sold December 2017 £123,000

+44 (0)20 8761 2522
70/76 Knights Hill,
London SE27 0JD
www.roseberys.co.uk

For a complimentary valuation
please contact Head of Department
Bill Forrest
billforrest@roseberys.co.uk

At Asian Art
Newspaper
we love our
print issue...

... however,
sometimes you
will want to
read on the go

*The Courtesan Hanazuma
Reading A Letter*
by Kitagawa Utamaro
(1753–1806),
Edo period
(1615–1868)



From September we have introduced PhoneView, which makes it even easier to read on whatever device you choose

Our digital edition is only available through our website,
so if you would like to try it out, take advantage of
our free 3-month trial*

It's the same as the print issue – which now includes PhoneView
software to make it even easier to read on any device

Contact Heather Milligan at info.asianart@btinternet.com, quote 3MTrail

*Only available for new digital subscribers

asianartnewspaper.com