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 have been gathered for the Mead-Bateson Collection – supplemented by samples from American collections – that have been catalogued for the exhibition, Fabricating Power with Balinese Textile 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 last 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. Whence, 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 maracana.

Balinese society makes a fine distinction between male and female activity. The use of weapons such as the kepis, or dagger, is identified with men. Textiles are the preserve of women and when the circumstances are right, safe or ‘spiritual power’ is conferred on the weaver. Cloth appears frequently in Balinese mytholgy 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 coy or body tension or backstrap loom for weaving. It may be a continuous or discontinuous warp setup with a backstrap or harness, breast cloth, breast beam, beater/blade, reed, lease bar, heald rod and heald strings, and a shuttle that carries the bobbin. The wooden harness which rests on the loom’s lower back, is attached to the loom with cords. The cog or cog wagon 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 cog cag.

Balinese cloths feature primarily as apparel. Traditional cloths are known as debub, 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 a mixture of brown mud and indigo and are often worn on the lower body, the kamben, ‘inner hip wrapper’ which is worn by men. The kamben, ‘inner hip wrapper’ and the saptar, ‘outer hip wrapper’. Men wear the sanger, ‘head cloth’ cloth wrapped around their heads; they have on their torsos modern shirt, and the lower body, the kamben, ‘inner hip wrapper’ and saptar, ‘outer hip wrapper’. Item 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 typically included in its tradition and motifs for either sex, and by the manner in which they are worn. Men wear it on 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 batik, ‘woven cloths’ are simple utilitarian textiles in lines and checks, some of which are sacred cloths for men. The poleng, a sari in long black and white checks is associated with spiritual power, protection and massage virtues. It is today a ‘uniform for the mandatory pasung or ‘security guards’ present at known local events.

In Bali there is a variety of cloth names that symbolise privilege and power. Dyes in Bali have symbolic meanings and are believed to possess magical properties. Dyes are made from plants and are called song. Song is a generic term for whole lengths of fabric woven to certain dimensions to serve as garments. The dye however reflects the dye’s knowledge and expertise. He or she develops a name for the dye, its color, root and leaves of plants, referred to as ‘natural dyes’.

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The gepak, or waxgul, are continuous tubular warp cloths that feature in various ceremonies associated with birth. For every new mother a three-day ceremony called nebulabanan is conducted when the baby is 105 days or three Balinese calendar months old. An uncut continuous cloth, the waxgul – 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 waxgul 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. Waxguls might also be used as shawls, diapers or even pillows for the child. Occasionally deities are also carried in a brand new waxgul.

Some ritual cloths have healing properties. The cepuk is used protectively during certain ceremonies, draped on human bodies as well as over statues. All cepuk have a basic structure of a border lining all four sides to frame a body of repeated wick that 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 Gujarat, among them the jelamprang, ‘eight rayed rosette’.

Cepuk is used protectively during litural events such as puberty when a girl starts her first menstruation and a boy deepens his voice. Red and yellow with a white sash, and the girl, who starts her first menstruation and a boy deepens his voice. They are said to possess healing properties. They are identified with the Hindu tridatu, symbolising the Hindu goddess Indra and are exclusive to the Tenganan Pageringsingan area of Bali. 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 Gujarat, among them the jelamprang, ‘eight rayed rosette’.

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Photograph: Bruce White

Grieving 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. 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.

Grieving feature in many Balinese ceremonies. It is normally used as a head rest during tooth filing, a rite associated with puberty. Called metotah 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 grieving, cepuk, kebhi 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 ‘nagual, ‘interlocking’ border pattern. Water plays a significant role in weddingcaptals 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 kamihem, ‘inner hip wrapper’ and lets it drift downstream to her. She catches and washes it after which the couple kneel to 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 kaat pari, ‘white cloths’ as cremation shrouds supposed to carry the deceased to heaven. The shroud layers are hierarchically arranged; kaat pari lining the bottom, over which lay a red kain aptul, then a kaping balu, ‘skin shroud’ and kaping obor, ‘vari 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.