

Taksu and the Power of Balinese Textiles

By Seema Shah

On a recent visit to New York, I chanced upon an exhibition on Balinese textiles at the Bard Graduate Center (BGC). Titled *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles*, the exhibit's focus is the making and use of Balinese textiles as ceremonial objects in various life-cycle ceremonies and as symbols of cultural resilience and continuity.

Aptly described as "a Hindu island in a Muslim sea" by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the people of Bali practise a unique form of Hinduism, which although rooted in the Shiva-worshipping sects of southern India, has morphed into a composite belief system of ancestor worship, animism and magic. Intricately woven cloths are regularly employed in a wide and complex range of ritual activities. Curator Urmila Mohan seeks to explore these rituals and ceremonies that mark the transitions in a person's life from birth to death, accompanied throughout by spiritually infused textiles.

The pieces on display are unique and exquisite, assembled from collections in the United States and include items brought to the American Museum of Natural History by one of the 20th century's best-known anthropologists, Margaret Mead. Along with fellow anthropologist Bateson, Mead conducted research in Bali in the 1930s, documenting everyday practices such as child rearing, dances and rituals as well as rites of passage. Although textiles were not their focus, detailed notes describe the use of cloth in ceremonies and the highly ritualised nature of weaving.

This exhibition highlights the significance of Balinese textiles both from a historical as well as contemporary perspective. Organised in three sections: beliefs, offerings and life ceremonies, the exhibition is laid out across three rooms. A backstrap loom is on display and projections illustrating the weaving process greet the visitor. Video clips from various rites of passage bring to life the beliefs associated with the displayed textiles. The visitor is encouraged to ruminate on the role of these cloths as documented in the 1930s, and in their production and relevance today.

To fully comprehend the process of cloth production in Bali, one has to not only appreciate the materials and

techniques, but also look closely at the makers' belief system. Weavers and dyers usually start their work on auspicious days, worship deities and make offerings to invoke the protection of invisible powers. The blessings of lunar goddess Dewi Ratih (Fig 1) are usually invoked to ensure they do not make mistakes. All this translates into the creation of cloths imbued with *taksu* or charismatic power, connecting the weaver to the work and ultimately the user.

The *geringsing* or double *ikat* cloths are believed to be endowed with healing properties and are used even when reduced to a rag. Woven on traditional backstrap looms in a way that they form a continuous circular warp, *gedogan* cloths (Fig 2) are considered *sukla* or pure, and are offered to deities. In order for them to be used for other ritualistic ceremonies such as toothfiling, the warps are cut in the presence of a priest or priestess.

Cloth also acts as a mediator between the invisible (*niskala*) and the visible (*sekala*) worlds. This abstract philosophy of dualism is represented in the black and white, checked *poleng* cloths that we see everywhere in Bali. Whether draped around shrines and guardian figures in temples or donned by security guards officiating at ceremonies, these sacred textiles are believed to be gifted by Siwa to the monkey god Hanoman.

Life Ceremonies

According to Mead's field notes, "...everything in Bali is an offering: the temples, works of art, theatrical performance – all these are offered to the gods". *Rantasan*, piles of cloth arranged on a wooden tray, are offerings of garments to the deities, especially at ceremonies related to rites of passage. The birth of an individual, the attainment of puberty, marriage and funerals, are accompanied by ceremonies to ensure that he or she transitions easily from one stage to another.

The Balinese believe that in their first three months of life children are like gods, embodying a purified ancestral spirit. The infant is shown great honour and is carried everywhere by family members. At the end of the infant's third month when the child's feet touch the earth for the first time, a *nelubulanin* ceremony is conducted. Images of the cosmic turtle and *nagas* or snakes are drawn on the ground onto which the infant's feet are placed, thereby welcoming the soul into its body. All cloths that the babies are dressed or wrapped in are new or family heirlooms. Mead attended several such ceremonies and collected cloths such as the one seen here (Fig 3).



Fig 2. The *Gedogan* is set up to form a continuous loop on the loom and is removed intact once woven



Fig 1. The goddess of the moon, Dewi Ratih, from the Hindu epic Mahabharata, believed to have given the knowledge of weaving to humanity

Puberty ceremonies often end with a tooth filing, symbolizing an individual's transition from youth to adulthood, represented by the filing of the sharp upper canines and incisors. I especially enjoyed watching the video clip showing a young Balinese woman undergoing this ritual, with the sacred cloth *cepuk* acting as a protective cover. The *cepuk* (Fig 4) is also believed to open a devotional connection to the ancestral spirits. Its pattern is created through the resist-dye technique known as *ikat*. All *cepuk* have the same basic structure: a border on all four sides framing a centre field that is made up of a repeating pattern. This textile features a pattern called *bintang kurung*, or caged star, in which the ritual participant is



Fig 3. Auspicious wrapper for a nelubulanin (baby's three-month ceremony).



Fig 4. A contemporary *cepuk* draped as protection over an initiate during a toothfiling ceremony

symbolized by the pattern within the diamond motifs. The diamond-shaped pattern acts as a *kurung*, or cage, which protects the initiate during toothfiling. Its specific pattern, however, depends upon the wearer's status. Deities or trance mediums are clad in *cepuks* similar to the highly prized Indian double *ikat patola*. Similarly, tradition dictates that a high-caste individual wear these during ceremonies, while simply patterned *cepuks* adorn lower caste members. Such cloths, accompanied by the ritualistic drawing of magical *aksara* or letters on the initiate's teeth by the priest, protect him or her through this transition into adulthood.

Balinese cosmology dictates spatial orientation and moves people toward the land and away from the sea. It's only during cremation rituals that processions go to the sea, where the soul of the deceased is released. The belief is that the human body is made up of the five elements and

the cremation process ensures the deceased individual's return to these elements or *pancamaabhuta*. Cremation shrouds or *kajangs* such as the one seen here (Fig 5) are multilayered and adorned with ritual objects. The *kajang* on display was a rare find; they are usually burned at the funeral. The woven cotton cloth has sacred and religious images (*sodasaksara*) as well as writings drawn in accordance with the kin group to which the deceased belonged. The figure drawn on the cloth portrays the astral body of the deceased person, mediating between the perishable human body and the non-perishable soul. The turtle and two snakes symbolize the earth. The power of these letters and their associated sounds are released



Fig 5. The *kajang* is part of a multilayered shroud that covers the body of the deceased



Fig 6. Female and male *ukur kepeng* (funerary figures)

through the burning of the shroud, thereby carrying the spirit to the heavens. The *ukur kepeng* or astral body (Fig 6) is made of Chinese coins and pinned onto the shroud by close family members.

Margaret Mead anticipated that European influence and modernisation would eventually signal the demise of traditional art forms. Traditional cloths (Fig 7) are fast disappearing in Bali as chemical dyes replace vegetable dyes and weaving on backstrap looms becomes a rarity. The island's older artisanal textiles are in the hands of global art dealers and museums and despite attempts by fair trade groups such as *Threads of Life* to revive traditional weaving and dyeing methods, most cloth production in Bali is geared towards meeting the demands of tourists. This elegant and unique exhibition is an opportunity to understand the spiritual beliefs of the island people that goes beyond touristy picture-postcard images.

The exhibition is ongoing until 8 July 2018 at the BCG, New York.

For further information on Balinese textiles see Mohan, Urmila. 2018 *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles*.



Fig 7. *Langse* is a traditional cloth used to dress Hindu shrines. Usually made of palm leaves, this rare example is woven

Seema Shah is a textile enthusiast and collects traditional Indian cloths that are repositories of cultural beliefs. She is currently living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

All photos courtesy of the Bard Graduate Center