

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Susan Rodgers, Anne Summerfield, John Summerfield. *Gold Cloths of Sumatra: Indonesia's Songkets from Ceremony to Commodity.* Leiden: KITLV Press, 2007. x + 137 pp. \$39.00 (paper), ISBN 978-90-6718-312-3.

Reviewed by Monni Adams

Published on H-AfrArts (November, 2008)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

Hangng by Golden Threads and Moral Fiber

The long, large island of Sumatra on the western end of Indonesia has numerous accessible coasts open to traders by sea. In past centuries, native peoples along certain coastal areas developed a form of luxurious textile through interaction with foreign merchants trading for courts in India or China. Over time, this long distance trade brought refinements of materials to Sumatra, such as gold-wrapped thread and silk, and introduced complex designs and patterning. It is likely that Mughul traders of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from northern India had the greatest lasting cultural impact, eventually converting the native Minangkabau communities on the western coast to Islam. Other settlers coming from the Malay Peninsula established Muslim communities on the east coast of Sumatra in the region of Palembang. Fine gold cloth weaving continues to flourish at these two centers.

Weavers use a simple backstrap loom to create the most admired cloth, widely known as *songket*, with its gold-wrapped threads forming designs on red, purple, or beige cloth made of cotton or silk. (In craft milieu, this decorative technique is known as supplementary weft.) Over a long history of usage, songkets became an integral part of the *adat* (inherited wisdom) for many coastal peoples within and outside the centers of weaving, used, in particular, by Muslims in ceremonial costumes worn by both men and women.

Songket weavers produced golden cloths as broad or

narrow flat panels, which were then draped on the body or folded into various styles of head wraps. These shimmering luxury cloths, highly prized by Sumatrans for their beauty, were also displayed on ritual occasions to indicate the wealth and high social status of the owners. The complexity and perfection of design and technique reached an apogee between the 1850s and 1920s, during a prosperous era in Sumatra fostered by the Dutch colonial policy of developing coffee plantations and copper mining. Songkets dating from that era, in particular those made by the Minangkabau, have been featured in recent years in a number of international museum exhibitions, winning these "antiques" a place in the international art market (p. 8).

Gold Cloths of Sumatra served as a catalog for an exhibition of Sumatran songkets in 2007 at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, organized and cocurated by Susan Rodgers, Anne Summerfield, and John Summerfield. Rodgers, a professor of anthropology at Holy Cross, is well known for several books on arts in Indonesia. She wrote four chapters for this work; while Summerfield and Summerfield, longtime specialists on Southeast Asian textiles, together wrote one. All three authors shared the sixth and last chapter, which moves from the broad historical context to the careers of individual cloths, an innovative account inspired by the biographical treatment of objects recommended by Janet Hoskins's book *Biographical Objects: How Things*

Tell the Stories of People's Lives (1998). The beautiful cover shows a finely structured songket with two decorated sections of a man's sarong from the early nineteenth century, probably from the Palembang area. The exposition of history and technical points are clear and pleasurable to read. On every page, fine textile examples, scenes of weaving, or orderly shops illustrate the discussion. In addition, the text fulfills the promise of the subtitle, "from Ceremony to Commodity." The three authors go beyond the focus of earlier studies of the nineteenth-century Minangkabau masterpieces to show the geographical spread of production and the cultural significance of songket for people Sumatra-wide.

Initially, in chapters 1 and 2, Rodgers sketches the textile's historical development, showing how changing trade conditions and weavers' responses affected the weavers' art. Rodgers reports that the number of Minangkabau weaving villages diminished in the latter part of the nineteenth century, although songkets continued to be produced by women in their free time at home on hand looms through the 1920s. Since then, the production of songkets has intensified, shifting from home looms to shop floors in the Minangkabau weaving village of Pandai Sikek (West Sumatra) and in the Palembang area (South Sumatra). Entrepreneurs set up weaving pavilions employing young people, both girls and boys, as weavers, making cloth in a range of prices and more easily available to Sumatrans wanting to furnish their ritual events with "heritage" songkets, even if they were employed far from their home villages. The emerging middle class also supports the market for gold-threaded songkets standing for adat, helping to maintain this traditional form as a living textile art.

Far from being on the edge of disappearance, songkets are being produced in large and profitable quantities today, many at fine quality levels. The market currently does not depend on a foreign clientele, but caters to internal commerce with Indonesian and Malaysian buyers. The political upheavals in the mid-1960s weakened the strict tie between songket and the adat rituals of high status families, with the consequence that anyone who could afford the market price could grace their family rituals with songket displays.

Rodgers's illuminating observations in chapter 3 focus on how the government's policy (the New Order) under the Javanese chief executive Suharto, (1965-98) contributed to the survival of textiles as ethnic markers. National political unity was promoted with a focus on Java, the island with the largest population and center of lead-

ership. Symbols of Javanese arts (e.g., batik, shadow plays) came to stand for national unity. The diversity claimed in the national slogan "Unity from Diversity" was honored in purely cultural terms. Local ethnic arts were labeled as of "ancient origins," while societies like Minangkabau were reconceptualized as "quaint, folkloric, and touristic," thus distancing these local loyalties from ongoing national political processes (pp. 40-41).

Chapter 4 by Summerfield and Summerfield provides fascinating discourse on what lies behind a songket textile. Some of the issues they explore are technical, others aesthetic. How do skill and materials affect the quality of textiles? How does cultural tradition influence a beholder's judgment of beauty? What makes a textile superior? They further examine categories of subjective evaluation to explain differences of opinion between foreign collectors and members of the culture of origin. They also note that Minangkabau patterns were linked in the past to proverbial references, carrying a moral burden. Design names were drawn from nature. Design shapes were linked to proverbs intended to teach proper Minangkabau behavior.

In chapter 5, "Commerce and Creativity: Sumatran Songket Business Families, Marketing and Innovation in Contemporary Songket Weaving," Rodgers points to the internal "economies of desire" that encourage various non-weaving peoples of Sumatra to seek fine songkets for their adat ceremonies (weddings, boys' initiation within Islam, installation of new chieftains), practices that can be traced to at least the 1870s (p. 64). She judges that songket weaving in the two regions, the Minangkabau highlands and South Sumatra, produce much heritage art of great integrity, evincing artistic creativity while still upholding familiar features of composition, technique, and design. This combination of historicism and innovation inspired Rodgers to conduct fieldwork among the weavers and entrepreneurs at the two major production centers: Pandai Sikek in West Sumatra (1995 to 2006) and in the region of Palembang, South Sumatra (2003 to 2006). She focused on weaving emporiums managed by old-line weaving families. What is striking among the shopkeepers in these two areas is their fine-grained pride in the quality of their products and the leeway they allow their weavers to exercise their skill in creating their own variations of heritage designs. Ironically for all the claims of upholding tradition, customers in both regions actually favor buying those with slight new variations.

For many readers, the most exciting part of this textile history will be the last chapter, the biographies of

thirty illustrated textiles and the people who made them. This chapter includes occasional personal accounts of experience of individual weavers, such as the young Pandai Sikek woman who after settling in her husband's village elsewhere, set up a weaving enterprise. Although she produced songkets of high technical quality, she became a target of opprobrium in her home village, not for the usual faults of bad weaving like skipped patterns, rough weave, or off-kilter motifs, but for a fault in the moral domain-breaking tradition by introducing the skills of her home village to the women of her new residence.

This beautiful book conveys a treasure of learning,

while refining readers' judgments and tastes on the golden cloths of Sumatra. It is comprehensive, with all aspects of songkets traced within historical settings, from broad periods of earlier trade with the courts of India and China, through the changing textile scene of the turbulent twentieth century, and, finally, to the micro-histories of existing individual cloths. Each chapter is followed by generous comments in the notes, and the book ends with a well-selected set of references. The study itself stands as a model for researchers working in other geographic areas but interested in the effects of historical conditions and local entrepreneurs on the rise, decline, and revival of traditional textile production.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrarts>

Citation: Monni Adams. Review of Rodgers, Susan; Summerfield, Anne; Summerfield, John, *Gold Cloths of Sumatra: Indonesia's Songkets from Ceremony to Commodity*. H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. November, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=22971>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.