



The ikat archipelago

Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition 'Fibres of Life' (15 September–26 November 2017) and the publication *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago* offer the world an overview of the ikat styles found across the islands, and the first comprehensive work of reference on the subject

For both exhibition and book, HKMAG's passion for Asian art is married to that of Peter ten Hoopen, whose collection is built upon an uncommon collecting philosophy. Many collectors select only the most impressive pieces in their field, but his aim is to illustrate not just individual masterpieces, but also the culture from which they were born. This requires complete geographic coverage of the cultural continuum of the chain of islands—the 'ikat archipelago'—an ambition more typical of museums than private collections.

HKMAG has supported his approach, considering it the most appropriate way to deal with a material culture that is vanishing rapidly because the belief systems that informed it are changing. Ikat used to represent a vital societal element: a cloth without which one could not marry, send anyone to the afterlife, or properly receive a taken head. The old animist ways, the ancestor worship, the role of totem animals are fading as a result of conversion to monotheism, and economic pressures make it harder than in the past to spend months or even years on one ritual textile. On many islands this has negatively affected not just the quality of ikat, but also created concern for its history, as it has come to be seen as



2

1 Man's shawl, *senikir*, Kisar, 19th century or older. Mestizo people, designed for trade on Flores. Warp ikat in fine hand-spun cotton, 0.63 x 1.95 m (2' 0" x 6' 4"), 1 panel

2 Ceremonial sarong, *ba'a boba*, Halmahera, Moluccas, circa 1930. Used by Sahu people but made by Butonese. Warp ikat in fine hand-spun cotton, supplementary weft and supplementary warp, 0.75 x 1.15 m (2' 5" x 3' 9"), 2 panels

3 Sarong, West Alor, Solor & Alor Archipelago, peninsula called Kabola or Adang after its spoken languages, circa 1910–1940. Warp ikat in medium hand-spun cotton, 0.58 x 1.19 m (1' 10" x 3' 10"), 2 panels

something of a past one has outgrown. Both exhibition and book show Indonesian ikat culture through a close reading of examples from over fifty weaving regions, giving a brief introduction to the conditions, beliefs and customs of the peoples who created them.

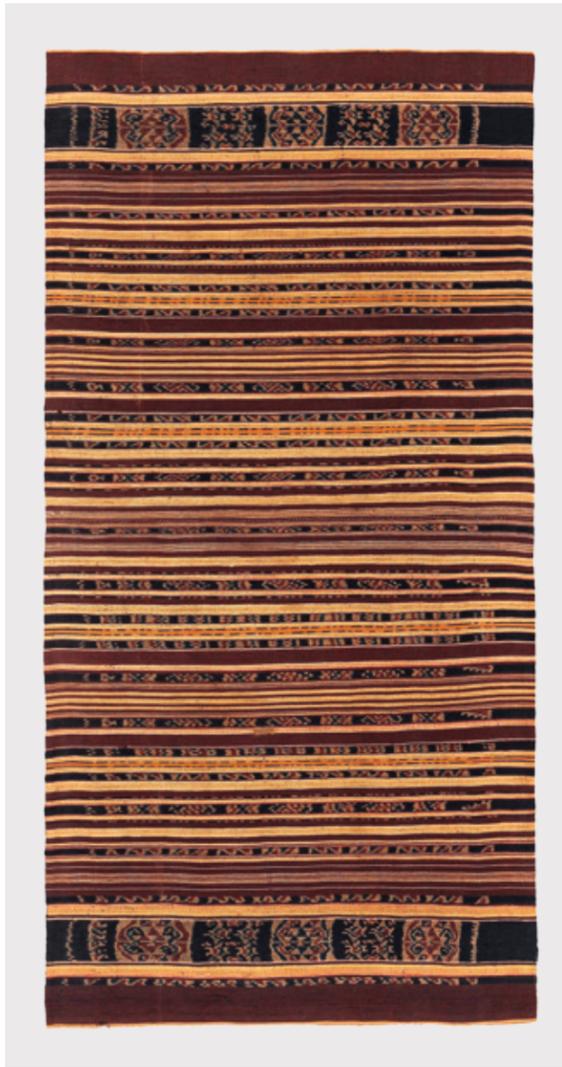
The aim of 'Fibres of Life' is to share a large number of representative specimens, mostly heirlooms, *pusaka*, and a summary of what is known about them, to provide impulses for further research. What knowledge is preserved about ikats and their use in the archipelago consists mostly of missionary records and scientific fieldwork. The coverage is thin: many weaving regions are covered by only one or two sources and several regions have not been studied at all. Much traditional knowledge is being lost without any record. The more remote island regions have few records and it will require concerted effort if any trace of



3

their culture is to survive. Sometimes the traces consist of only half a dozen or fewer specimens. Ten Hoopen's collection is relatively rich in such examples.

Many collectors dislike mystery pieces, the orphans of cultural history. But ten Hoopen has adopted several such objects not knowing where they are from, and is determined to find out. While careful not to chisel his findings in stone, he presents a few, as he calls them, 'coherent sets of clues inviting further research'. One such concerns a type of man's shawl presumed to be from Flores that puzzled both Ernst Vatter in 1928 and Roy Hamilton in 1994. On the basis of his research of the motifs used by the three distinct populaces on the small Moluccan island Kisar, ten Hoopen argues that this kind of cloth was most likely made by the last remaining mestizos on Kisar for the trade with Flores (1).



4

4 Sarong, Kewatek, Adonara Solor & Alor Archipelago, 19th century. Warp ikat in medium hand-spun cotton, pinstripes in silk, 0.71 x 1.33 m (2' 3" x 4' 4"), 2 panels



5

5 Sarong, Moluccas, Wetar (?), early 20th century. Warp ikat in fine hand-spun cotton and an unknown fibre, probably lontar palm, 0.65 x 1.19 m (2' 1" x 3' 10"), 2 panels

6 Man's blanket, *hinggi* (detail), East Sumba, probably Kambara, early 20th century. Warp ikat in fine hand-spun cotton, 1.35 x 2.55 m (4' 5" x 8' 4"), 2 panels

Due to conservation-focused collecting and scholarly documentation we now have a compact overview of the archipelago's ikat styles that shows the wisdom of the 'age before condition' approach. This allows us to see further back in time than condition-obsessed collecting, and in wider perspective. Displays of virtuosity always delight, but even in poor condition an inexpertly made textile from a remote island can have more presence than a perfect piece from a larger island.

Ten Hoopen produced his overview using an array of sources, including research in the field, museum depot visits, and readings in an extensive library, including all the great names of ikat research past and present, several of whom also contributed to the book by checking and enriching chapters, or providing region-

specific information about provenance, techniques, social function and symbolic meaning that few, if any, others could have provided. Other sources of expertise were found in passionate fellow collectors, whose advanced knowledge of narrowly defined areas is too rarely called on. This collaborative, communal, aspect of the book's creation has made *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago* into a compendium of what is known, with numerous pointers to the literature, enriched by his own research and insights, and illustrated by emblematic pieces from his collection.

Beyond the material and the immediate visual gratification offered by beautiful textiles, perhaps the greatest wealth of this collection is its level of documentation, which few museums can afford, but passionate individuals can. Many



6

descriptions of the cloths are mini-essays, densely packed with information from multiple sources. Additional scholarly value is created by integration of the book with the author's website, www.ikat.us, which presents a large and continually expanding store of additional information, including close-ups of motifs and micro-photography of the yarn—most of it old hand-spun cotton which looks wonderfully organic. Ten Hoopen was the first to develop this aspect in a systematic manner, shooting thousands of microscopic images, and adding a whole new layer to what we know about ikat textiles from the Indonesian Archipelago.

He explains his collecting philosophy and how it has shifted over time as a result of new insights in the final sections of *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago*. He also considers the future of ikat dyeing and weaving in the region, which in his view is a rapidly fading art suffering from commercialisation and declining socio-cultural importance. He also raises uncomfortable questions about the cultural impact of collecting. His approach, with an emphasis on documentation, helps answer some of these questions and may well point to a morally sustainable way forward. As Steven Alpert concludes his foreword: 'It is hoped that Peter ten Hoopen's precise cataloguing techniques and his deep devotion to the textiles illustrated in *Fibres of Life: Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago*, particularly those from lesser-known islands, will enhance our appreciation of these particular traditions, and by so doing, support their continuance.' ♡



7

7 Man's shawl, *semba*, Ende, Flores, 19th or early 20th century (before 1930). Warp ikat in fine hand-spun cotton, 0.97 x 1.87 m (3' 2" x 6' 1"), 2 panels