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Unravelling the Thread of *Ikat* Textiles:  
Study of Gender Role within the Craft Practice in  
a Remote and Disadvantaged Region of Indonesia

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1 August 2017

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Creative Industries and Cultural Policy  
in the Centre for Cultural Policy Research  
School of Culture and Creative Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

Textiles of Sumba are regarded as central in almost every aspect of Sumbanese life, not only as hereditary tradition. Sumbanese textiles hold a cultural, economic, and social value for Sumbanese people. Moreover, Sumba is classified as one of the remote and disadvantaged regions, which generates the question of how much textile craft, as a part of cultural expression, is able to contribute to the development of this island.

In relation to Sumba textile craft and its contribution to the development of the island, its strong relationship with women as the main actors in the practice cannot be ignored. The relation between women and creative practice in the rural area of eastern developing country, which usually still embrace the patriarch to varying degree (Blackburn, 2004), is rarely discussed. Meanwhile, historically, textile in Sumba been primary produced by women, thus putting women in the central of study is interesting. In addition, the potential of textile craft to contribute to women's issues in Sumba is a novel subject to study.

Taking into consideration the distinctive relationship between women and Indonesia textile culture, exploring how each influences and affects the other is necessary. It helps to investigate the contribution of the culture and creative sector in this remote and disadvantaged region, mainly to the issues of women and gender.

## CONCLUSION

The research aims to explore the development of craft as one of the creative sub-sectors in a remote and disadvantaged region of Indonesia. By examining the role of gender in the development and how this sector transforms with its growth, this research evaluates how the culture and creative sector is able to contribute to development especially related to women issues in this remote and disadvantaged region. Nevertheless, unanticipated findings appearing during the fieldwork cannot be ignored. Although the research still uses the same perspective and focus on women and *ikat* fabric engagement, men's appearance and the shifting roles of *ikat* crafter actors has caused the research to be reframed.

Fieldwork for this research mainly took place in the six craft-making centre in East Sumba located in Preiliu, Lambanapu, Patawang village, Waimarang, Kanatang Village, and Mauliru. These different locations show significantly different conditions in the development and the gender position in the *ikat* craft making activity. The area inside city territories such as Preiliu, Lambanapu, and Mauliru show the transformation of craft making shifting into an industrial model with huge involvement of men. In contrast, the number of male craft makers in the periphery of city area such as Kanatang, Patawang, and Waimarang is lower. There they are still practicing *ikat* in the more traditional manner and did not get much influence from market demand and modernity.

The research findings show that men have begun to play an important role in the *ikat* craft. Men have the same amount of contribution with women and can be found in almost every position of this crafting process. Men have even become the craft maker group leaders in some region, especially in the area of Waingapu city. Along with the number of male craft-makers that have significantly increased, the appearance of men as a group leader of craft makers is also noticeable. Men also act as negotiators in the business and marketing. These circumstances indicate that the participation of men is strongly related with the economic value and the shifting of traditional *ikat* craft making practice into more industrial practice. In addition, the traditional customary law that

previously prohibited men's involvement in the *ikat* practice can be adjusted, possibly due to male domination in family and community decision-making.

Contrasting to that, female participation is less influenced by the economic value of *ikat*. In the past, women have seen *ikat* craft as their natural cultural obligation. Presently, women are making *ikat* textiles mostly for their economic value. However, many interviewees expected that the next generation of women would value *ikat* textiles more for their identity and have a main career outside *ikat* craft practice as a main source of income and *ikat* craft would only be conducted in their spare time as an alternative income. Both the women who live in a big city and those living in a remote traditional village prefer careers outside the *ikat* craft realm. In the future, this could be a problem for *ikat* knowledge preservation and regeneration.

This major shift in the value of *ikat* and in the roles of *ikat* practitioners is understudied by previous research. This gap may not be discussed or noticed by previous studies because most of them focus on the *ikat* craft making process rather than the actors, or particularly on different gender positions among *ikat* crafters. Another possible explanation for these contrary findings is because most studies only focus on the men or women who are active in the craft making, so they fail to capture the shifting of the craft maker in the general society of the Sumbanese.

The results of this research also support the idea that *ikat* craft making may be regarded as a way to build women's empowerment and independence in a region still practicing a traditional South East Asian culture. *Ikat* craft making makes women more active beyond their role in the household and family. The making process usually done in-group also makes Sumbanese women more socialized and able to develop their social character, that previously tended to be more timid. *Ikat* has the potential to give them an alternative income to support their household and the education of their children. *Ikat* is not only able to empower women as individuals but also makes women able to support the development of the whole island. Observation of their ability to support their family and participate in the development of Sumba Island shows that

Sumbanese women have huge independence and capacity in Sumbanese society.

One key finding of this research is the emergence of new actors in *ikat* previously identified as women's work. The men's appearance is considered as challenging the women's position in *ikat* practice. However, the presence of men is not replacing women *ikat* crafters from *ikat* practice. Their appearance in fact is able to support and complement the deficiencies of women *ikat* crafters. For example, in performing heavy work and expanding the trade chain.

Some difficulties are also found in the *ikat* craft development. The appearance of imitation fabrics that flood the market, cultural value degradation in the motifs of *ikat*, exploitation and cultural appropriation by outsider of Sumba, and also intellectual property problems happen in the *ikat* craft practice. These problematic events could affect the *ikat* development and be unfavourable for Sumbanese society.