

**Connections in Resist-Dyeing from Around the World**  
**A cultural inheritance: the transmission of traditional ikat weaving in the islands of Indonesia**

BUCKLEY, Chris: [chrisbuckley888@hotmail.com](mailto:chrisbuckley888@hotmail.com)

Wolfson College, Oxford University (member of the Common Room)

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**Abstract**

During 2014 I interviewed 26 weavers from the islands of Flores, Solor and Lembata in Indonesia, with the question 'how did you learn to weave'. I will discuss the results, which shed light on how a traditional weaving apprenticeship works, and how the 'contract between the generations' is forged. I will discuss how this contract is changing, and whether we can expect traditional ikat weaving to survive in the 21st century, and in what form.

Durante 2014 entrevisté a 26 tejedoras de las islas de Flores, Solor y Lembata en Indonesia, con la pregunta "¿cómo aprendió a tejer?". Voy a discutir los resultados, que muestran cómo funciona el aprendizaje tradicional de tejer, y cómo se forja el 'acuerdo entre las generaciones'. Voy a discutir cómo este acuerdo está cambiando, y si podemos esperar tejer ikat tradicional para sobrevivir en el siglo 21, y en qué forma.

**1. Research**

The question of how craft traditions (and human traditions in general) are passed from generation to generation has generated considerable interest in recent decades (Bloch 2005, Stark, Bowser & Horne 2008), in part because of a growing academic interest in culture, and in part because of a practical interest in supporting traditional communities and lifestyles. Weaving is widely understood to be passed from mother to daughter, and studies of weaving that have examined individual cultures support this view (Barnes 1989, Niessen 2009), but systematic surveys are lacking.

During 2014, as part of an effort to document ikat weaving traditions in village communities in the eastern islands of Indonesia (East Nusa Tenggara, ENT), I had the opportunity to hear the experiences of 26 weavers in 22 villages in eastern Flores, Solor and Lembata, mainly speaking Lamaholot and related languages. Each village that I visited had a distinct ikat weaving tradition, though sharing many common elements, especially technique, with its neighbors. I was able to record learning-to-weave experiences in a consistent way, amounting to a semi-quantitative survey. The results make an interesting comparison with a similar survey carried out in Southwest China (Boudot and Buckley 2015).

The importance of ikat in ENT extends well beyond the 'practical' aspect of providing textiles for making clothing. Ikat sarongs (Fig 1) in particular have important roles in rites of passage. They are exchanged as gifts ('bridewealth') between families during marriage ceremonies, along with other precious objects. Some types of ceremonial sarong may be worn on certain occasions, others are kept as heirloom items and may never be worn.

My interviews consisted of asking individual weavers to demonstrate their skills, and discuss how they learned to weave, and the main steps (*chaîne opératoire*) involved in the weaving process. This was carried out as part of an informal

conversation. The responses that are relevant to my topic are summarized in Table 1.



**Figure 1: Displaying a bridewealth sarong with ikat decoration in the village of Penikelek, Lembata. This**

sarong has been left unfinished (the circular warp has not been cut) at the back. It is never worn, but kept as an heirloom item and occasionally used in bridewealth gift exchanges.

Topic	Responses (categories)	Responses (numbers of weavers/details)
Number of distinct weaving traditions		22
Number of weavers providing data		26
Weaver's origin:	Same dialect and weaving tradition Different dialect and weaving tradition	25 1
Patrilocal/matrilocal		all patrilocal
Weaver's average age (my estimate)		58
Age when began to learn to weave (average)		16
Age when began to learn to weave (range)		10-20
Which person(s) did you learn weaving from:	Mother Grandmother Aunt Other woman from same village No-one/ 'self-taught'	17 1 1 1 6
Marriage related customs		Weavers make ikat-decorated bridewealth cloths for exchange between families, as well as daily-use items. Bridewealth cloths are standardized by tradition. Some weavers weave items of this type (as well as daily use items) for sale to non-weaving families or neighbouring non-weaving groups. Bridewealth items are generally woven by older, experienced weavers.
Templates used for recording textile designs (if any):	Old textiles	Weavers learn and remember ikat motifs, supplemented occasionally by referring to old textiles.
Domesticates (fibre sources):	cotton	All formerly grew cotton, now gradually being replaced by commercial yarns
Loom type		Simple, ground-level body-tensioned loom.
How the loom is made		Looms are passed from mother to daughter. Replacement components are made by male relatives as needed. The weaver's sword-beater is the critical component, made from a hardwood and requiring careful shaping. Other components can be made ad-hoc from materials lying around.

**Table 1: Survey results: responses of weavers to questions on the topic of 'how I learned to weave' and 'how weaving is carried out'.**

## 2. Results and Discussion

My conversations confirmed that weavers, who are all female, learn mainly, but not exclusively, from their mothers (17 out of 26 weavers). 6 weavers however described themselves as 'self taught'. I discuss this finding in more detail below, since it reveals something about the learning process in this particular area.

In all the villages that I visited in ENT the traditional pattern is that young women married within a small grouping of villages sharing the same dialect and ikat tradition. Family alliances stretching back for several generations and gift-exchange traditions mean that marriage outside these boundaries was extremely difficult and correspondingly rare. Despite recent social changes marriage within the dialect community still seems to be the norm. These boundaries ensured that there was no 'mixing' of ikat traditions between dialect communities. In rare instances where marriage took place between communities, a young woman would be expected to learn and conform to the traditions of her new host village.

Learning to weave is a lengthy process: though basic skills with a loom can be acquired in a month or two, learning the complete ikat process (in its traditional form) takes much longer, since it involves a complex sequence of interlinked steps that are seasonal. A novice weaver will need at least one year, and more likely several years to observe and participate in all of them:

- Cultivation of fiber (cotton) and dye/mordant plants, or locating and harvesting wild plants in some cases
- Spinning yarn (the most time consuming step)
- Design and layout of motifs, and the tying of ikat resists onto warp yarns stretched on a frame
- Preparation of dye baths and dyeing using natural dyes (complex) or modern synthetic substitutes (relatively simple)
- Warping the loom (a job requiring 2 people)
- Weaving
- Making the finished sarong or blanket

A novice weaver learns these skills gradually, mainly by assisting older weavers, beginning with yarn preparation. No formal 'teaching' takes place: the learning process consists of observing an older weaver and attempting to copy her actions, or by assisting (for example with dye bath preparation or warping a loom). Most of this interaction is non-verbal, but experienced weavers are quick to criticize or correct a novice if they observe her doing something wrong. The most complex actions (such as preparing a dye bath or warping the loom) are codified procedures that include a certain amount of ritual. The novice is expected to learn and follow these procedures precisely.



**Figure 2: Weaving a length of cloth decorated with ikat, that will form part of a sarong, in the village of Pamakayo, Solor. Weaving is a public, sometimes communal activity in this region.**

From my conversations it became clear that an unspoken ‘contract’ exists between older weavers and novices. The older weaver allows the novice to observe her weaving and provides occasional advice, and in return she expects help with tasks such as yarn preparation, dyeing and warping the loom. Older weavers tend to be somewhat impatient with novices and critical of their efforts. Novices are helped however by the fact that most weaving activities in ENT take place out of doors, with weavers working singly or in small groups, so that they have frequent opportunities to observe and converse with more experienced weavers. The dyeing processes are an exception: weavers tend to be secretive about their dye bath ingredients and preparation. This is linked to an element of competitiveness in the depth and intensity of color that weavers achieve using natural dyes, particularly reds and blacks.

I found a lot of variation between weavers in motivation for learning. Some experienced a strong parental expectation that they will learn to weave, but others found that they need to be ‘self motivated’. In most villages many women weave but not all do: some families purchase bridewealth sarongs rather than weaving them. The village of Lamalera appears to have the highest level of participation, linked to the fact that ikat production is of particular economic importance for Lamalera weavers, to the extent that it has been a ‘survival skill’ in the past (Barnes 1989). The self-motivation and the lack of formal teaching accounts for why some weavers describe themselves as ‘self-taught’: in par this signifies their pride in overcoming obstacles in order to learn. In this aspect ENT is different from Southwest China, where weaving takes place within homes or in the courtyard beside a home, rather than in a communal space, and there is (or was, until recently) a

community-wide assumption that all young women would learn to weave. Part of the motivation for many weavers in ENT is economic: there is a tradition of selling surplus production, which provides a useful source of cash (or bartered goods). In Southwest China, in contrast, the weaving of complex decorative items for a bride’s dowry had no direct economic benefit, since these items were not normally offered for sale. This situation has changed somewhat in the last decade with the appearance in China of weavers who produce decorated items for sale, both for sale to tourists and to families who no longer have daughters who weave. In this respect some weavers in Guizhou are moving towards a model that is similar to the traditional situation in ENT.

The economic aspects, and the presence of novice weavers who are self-motivated and able to guide their own learning will be key (I think) to the survival (or otherwise) of ikat weaving in ENT. Rural societies are undergoing extremely rapid change and it is not reasonable to expect novice weavers to learn a skill simply because it is ‘traditional’. Young women are obliged to participate in an economy that is cash-based, and must balance weaving against other demands on their time. Because the making of bridewealth sarongs can provide an income for some of its practitioners, the economic aspects can be crucial in determining whether the skills are passed on or not, and whether interest is sustained through the lengthy apprenticeship period. The most motivated young weavers who I met were those who had a realistic expectation of making some income from selling ikat to local families (and in some cases, to tourists and collectors). The economic aspect will also, I believe, be crucial to the success or failure of outside interventions aimed at ‘saving’ traditional craft skills.

### 3. Conclusions

While weaving in ENT broadly conforms to the accepted view of a tradition that stays within a community and is passed from mother to daughter, the details and dynamics of the transmission of ikat skills turn out to be complex. Learning takes place via a lengthy apprenticeship, which takes the form of an informal ‘contract’ between the generations, in which older weavers tolerate novices, in return for assistance with yarn preparation, warping and other tasks. Economic advantages from weaving are equally important to ‘maintenance of tradition’ in motivating younger weavers to learn. Both of these factors must be in place in order for a tradition to continue.

As regards outside interventions, training may help to address specific gaps, but is unlikely to substitute for the



lengthy apprenticeship that is necessary for the effective transmission of weaving. Outside interventions to support weaving and other traditional crafts will probably have the best effect if they focus on providing long-term, sustainable and visible opportunities to sell high quality weavings for cash.

two books: *Tibetan Furniture* (Thames and Hudson, 2005) and *The Roots of Asian Weaving* (with Eric Boudot, Oxbow Books, 2015). He lives in Hong Kong and in the UK.

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## 7. Author



Chris Buckley was educated at Balliol College, Oxford and at Wolfson College Oxford, where he received his DPhil in Chemistry in 1987. Since that time he has mainly lived in Asia, where he is an independent researcher in traditional cultures and crafts. His current interest is in how traditional knowledge is passed from generation to generation. He is the author of