

## **Introduction by Peter Chin**

Jill Forshee's essay takes us into the world of nature spirits, magic protection through textiles during war time, encoded secrets embedded in the design, execution and use of woven cloths. She describes some of these cloths as "relatively conservative and unembellished" but at the same time, they are potent in a metaphysical manner, delving into the tension between ambivalence and certainty. This is very close to the way I think of certain moments in *Woven*, that are pared down, yet vibrating in the incessant dance between opposites.

## **Ambivalence and Certainty: Textiles of East Timor (Timor Leste) through Time**

by Jill Forshee

Across Southeast Asia, designs in local textiles convey messages through generations—signifying clan, social rank, gender, ritual functions, social alliances, and crucial lineages descending from spiritually omnipotent ancestors. In the eastern Indonesian archipelago, many ethnic groups maintain a cosmology centered upon clan homes and ancestral connections.

This essay focuses upon East Timor, which gained national independence from Indonesian rule in 2002. Prior to 1975, the region had been a Portuguese colony since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. My research incorporated the Lautem district at the easternmost end of the country.

Textiles from this region appear relatively conservative and unembellished, when compared to the more vividly graphic and technically complex weavings of West Timor or of other Indonesian islands. Following predictable patterns, motifs are often small, sometimes indistinct, and conform to bands or stripes along the warp of a cloth.

Yet the ambiguous nature of many designs also reflects a particular aesthetic discretion, a subtlety of forms employing discernment in a field of ambivalence. An ongoing “tension” between ambivalence and certainty requires weavers to balance or reconcile opposing forces. These might include antagonistic land spirits (*tei*) or threats from invasive human forces.

These are not boldly graphic, declarative fabrics like the regalia of East Sumba—asserting power and ferocity through images of skull trees, horses, lions, and recognizable forms in high relief against backgrounds. By contrast, designs in the Lautem region of East Timor appear regimented, nondescript, and almost mundane. However, a subtle but tangible quality suffuses these cloths, reflecting cultural thought, aesthetic and moral principles, and a distinct political history. Through living with uncertainty, weavers strive to counteract obscurity and

maintain their grounding. They apply a steady skillfulness to elucidate and incorporate the dynamism of life and experience.

Lautem textiles reflect cohesion, flexibility, and the potency of cultural knowledge and expression. They enfold qualities that maintain assurances through life, come what may. While their designs may not appear as actual pictures (based in realism), the spatial placement of symbolic shapes and the juxtaposition of colored bands intensify their visual significance.

Bright colors accentuating many Lautem fabrics are not necessarily a concession to modern commercialism. Historically across Timor Island, weavers have included vivid hues in traditional weaving—originally inspired by the intense colors of Indian and Chinese trade silks and later available as chemical dyes. Today, weavers employ brilliant synthetic colors to further enhance natural (plant dye) tones in a complex and discrete interplay of sequenced designs.

Metaphorically, the act of weaving and “emplacing” symbolically stable bands and shapes into cloth secures and domesticates the perilous uncertainties of life. Such unstable conditions were magnified through decades of political upheaval during Indonesian military rule, as many became dispossessed from their homes.

Through these tumultuous years, thousands of Timorese people went into exile in the mountains. Others feigned compliance with Indonesian military forces while maintaining clandestine involvement with local resistance fighters. This sort of everyday duplicity became a survival tactic as people were forced to navigate perilous political conditions.

One weaver described this period as a time when life required acts of trickery or “conjuring.” She noted a folkloristic idiom in the Tetun language, “*rain fila*.” This refers to a calculated maneuver of wearing one’s clothing backwards and inside out. This disarray of garments produces visible reversals of order—often facilitated in specific geographical contexts through helpful land spirits. A disruption in “the order of things” then confuses human adversaries as *rain fila* renders a person invisible and offers protection from harm.

Such protective qualities inform devices in weaving designs. In the relationship of simple colored bands, some Lautem fabrics assert deliberate “borders.” An example appears in the *upulakuar* (roughly meaning “pulling together opposites”) style, where three relatively wide red and black bands frame each other and run the length of a cloth. [See photo]. These bands stabilize the larger design field, while lending themselves to reversals in how a weaver chooses to sequence them. An *upulakuar* section might contain a red band bordered by two black bands, or the reverse. These might shift at a weavers’ discretion, often in response to a desire for balance and security in a woman’s life. Several weavers spoke to me of this, and of other devices they used for protection or benefit—too numerous to explain in this short essay. Thus textiles might convey and

sometimes reconcile life's uncertainties—defining shifting places of refuge and even seeking retribution from wrongs.

Nonetheless, Timorese people seek joy and community through the worst of times and do not carry out all of life in fear and retreat. Shifts in designs and uses of cloth can also indicate sociability and fun. These mark and celebrate all of life's passages.

Susan Rodgers noted that history often has a physical, tactile form in Southeast Asia (1995: 27). Across East Timor, history is embedded in cloth—in motifs, colors, juxtaposition of forms, and new pictorial references. By registering influences through time while tracing relationships between social groups, textiles embody potentials of social life. These potentials connect to a wide spectrum of human experience and to a number of possible worlds. Or to what the Timor scholar Herman Seran describes as "...a serialized story that never comes to an end" (1996: 260).

Jill Forshee received her doctorate in Social-Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley (1995). Her publications include *Between the Folds: Stories of Cloth, Lives, and Travels from Sumba* (2001) and *Culture and Customs of Indonesia* (2006). She has written numerous journal articles and book chapters over the years about textiles and cultures in eastern Indonesia and East Timor. Forshee spent 2009-10 carrying out field research in Indonesia, funded by a Fulbright Senior Research Scholar Award. Between 2011 and 2012, she continued her research in East Timor under the auspices of the UCLA Fowler Museum. Drawing from this research, she contributed chapters to *Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia* (2012, Fowler Museum) and *Textiles of Timor: Island in the Woven Sea* (2014, Fowler Museum). Jill is currently collaborating on future museum projects, focusing upon the effects of global influences on the traditional textiles and lives of people in island Southeast Asia. She lives in Berkeley, California.

#### References Cited

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