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THE SHIP & THE TREE

Adat Textiles of South Sumatra

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A rich textile tradition has existed for many centuries in the Lampung region of southern Sumatra. In this area, where many cross-currents converged and were absorbed, customary law, or adat, acted as a powerful unifying and constraining force. Traditional iconography remained intact across generations, while a dynamic maritime trade connected Lampung with a cosmopolitan world of ideas and material culture far beyond her borders.

The Lampung district is located on the southernmost tip of Sumatra, one of the world's largest islands. Across the narrow Sunda Strait lies western Java, with which Lampung shares a long history of economic and cultural intercourse.¹

A region of torrid equatorial heat, it is a perfect environment for the growing of spices, particularly pepper. The wealth generated by trade in this historically precious commodity led to the creation of an exceptionally rich artistic heritage. It is through these surviving artefacts that we may gain insight into Lampung *adat*, the customary law which regulated all aspects of society under the aegis of ancestral authority.² *Adat* represents a fusion of ancient Neolithic culture with later Dong son, Indian (Hindu and Buddhist), Chinese, Islamic, and ultimately European influences.

Textiles played a significant role in *adat* ceremonies. They



1. Wedding ceremony in Lampung in the 19th century, with a *kayu ara* or tree of life (left), made using textiles. Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden.

were required at life-crisis transitions such as births, puberty rites, marriages, attaining a rank and funerary rites. These ceremonies often

included the construction of a *kayu ara*, a tree-like structure from which were suspended textiles, woven rattan mats and baskets (1).³ After the passage from one life phase to another the tree would be 'destroyed' and the goods plundered by small boys of the *suku*, the sub-unit of the greater clan (*marga*). This re-enacts an Austronesian creation myth of the second millennium BC, still repeated throughout Indonesia, which tells of a tree of life that grows between the lower and upper worlds. It is destroyed by some





great cataclysm, with pieces of the tree forming the first humans, rice paddies and water buffaloes. One variation of this myth has it that two birds in the branches bring about this destruction.⁴

One of the primary cultural expressions of Lampung *adat* was the *pepadon* system. This featured potlatch-like 'feasts of merit', whereby, through ritualised gift exchange, individuals could advance their social status and acquire titles. Among the Abung, the system granted individuals the right to sit on elevated seats, known as *pepadon*.⁵ Such benches have impressive carved back-rests, called *susaka*, which display powerful iconography, including such themes as paired animal totems and the tree of life (5).⁶

The major centres of *pasisir* (Malay, 'coastal') weaving were at Kalianda and Semangka Bay. Kalianda is considered a primary source of Lampung *adat* and although we do not know for certain, we may speculate that the custom of *palepai* use and iconography originates there. Among the coastal Paminggir people, the clan chief was permitted to display a *palepai*, a long (3m), narrow supplementary weft textile, typically depicting a ship (or ships) with arching curvilinear bow and stern. Trees are an important recurring icon, often appearing to the sides, as well as in the centre, of the ship (2).⁷ Another form of *palepai* shows rows of ancestor figures, possibly representing generations.

Tatibin (3) are iconically and proportionally similar to *palepai* but are smaller (1-1.5 metres). They are associated with the peninsula between Semangka Bay and Kalianda. Collectively

both *palepai* and *tatibin* equated with, and substituted for, the *pepadon* 'seat of authority'.⁸

The *tampun*, structurally related to the *palepai* but square rather than rectangular, was never more than a metre in size. As this difference suggests, the *tampun* played a different role in Lampung society. It functioned as a 'token' textile, conveying symbolic meaning, but otherwise serving no practical purpose. *Tampun pasisir*

(cover, 4) circulated exclusively among the noble class, unlike *tampun darat* (Malay, 'inland') found in the interior (6), which were used at all levels of society. They can be distinguished from each other by significant stylistic differences, *darat* being known for tribal iconography, including trees of life and giant hornbills perched on boats. One *pasisir* genre features very finely woven *wayang*-style (shadow puppet) narrative scenes, often occurring on ships. Kalianda, also a *pasisir* community, wove *tampun* that more resemble *palepai* in their graphics.⁹

During life-crisis rituals *tampun* were used in many contexts, including covering offering bowls, wrapping gifts, as seat cushions during weddings and pillow covers upon which the head of the dead came to rest. The transfer of textiles, a symbolic medium embodying values of both a spiritual and temporal nature, was the nexus of life-crisis ceremonies, whose formal structure was governed by *adat*.

At weddings, for example, bride-givers and bride-takers offered corresponding gifts of a female or male nature. Symbolised (and partially realised) by weavings and weapons, cloth and steel, this theme can be traced to the earliest of creation myths. Among the Serawai in Sumatra, for instance, the bringing together of spear and *tampun* at the time of marriage created a tree of life; upon their separation the tree was destroyed but the husband and wife were united and the clans joined, forming an extended lineage.¹⁰

The most prestigious gift involved the pairing of a *tampun* with



2. Left: *Palepai*, single red ship with trees of life, Kalianda, 19th century. Private collection.

3. Top left: *Tatibin*, Semangka Bay Peninsula, 19th century. 0.39 x 0.89m (2'11" x 1'3 1/2"). Private collection.

4. Top right: *Tampun pasisir*, Kalianda, 19th century. 0.86 x 0.91m (2'10" x 3'0"). Note the union of trees and curling bow and stern elements. Private collection.

5. Centre: *Pepadon* 'seat of authority', showing a mountain/tree motif, Abung people, 19th century. Private collection.



6. *Tampun darat*, Lampung interior, 19th century. 0.47 x 0.46m (1'6 1/2" x 1'6"). Philip Dedrick Collection.



7. *Lampit*, rattan ritual mat, Lampung, 19th century. 0.84 x 0.94m (2'9" x 3'1"). Private collection.

8. Bird-headed ancestor figures on a boat, after a bronze drum, Dong son culture, Vietnam, ca. 100 BC - 200 AD. After F.A. Wagner, *Indonesia, the Art of an Island Group*, London 1959.



a woven rattan mat (*tikar*), especially a *lampit* (7) distinguished by iconography of boats and trees burned into the rattan with hot pokers. This custom is very similar to one found among the Tai peoples of Thailand and Laos and bespeaks an early, unified Southeast Asian culture with a common origin.¹¹

Tampun, *palepai* and *tatibin* were woven from hand-spun cotton, and sometimes locally produced silk. Metal-wrapped yarns, mirrored glass, and flat foil strips were often incorporated. Yarns were mainly dyed red-brown with *mengkudu* root (*morinda citrifolia*), red with *kaju sepang* (*caesalpinia sapan* L.), yellow with turmeric (*curcuma domestica*) and blue with indigo (*indigofera*). Other possible colour sources have been described in the literature.¹²

Tampun and *palepai* structure has been described as "continuous and discontinuous supplementary wefts in a plain weave foundation". In this woven structure pattern and colour changes may be manipulated by altering the floating wefts which are tacked to a plainweave background. The width of *tampun* and *palepai* was dictated by the arm-length distance required for the weaver to insert wefts in the selvedge.¹³ A back-strap loom with a discontinuous warp required the use of a fine-toothed reed to help separate warp yarns. This technical advance offered many advantages over earlier 'continuous warp' back-strap looms found elsewhere in tribal Indonesia.¹⁴

With new technology, no doubt, came new iconography. It is important to note, however, that despite the new loom, iconography of a more archaic tradition persisted. The conservative nature of ancestor worship explains the existence of archaic customs and symbols in Lampung textiles.¹⁵

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

It is believed that an Austronesian expansion occurred sometime between 4000 and 2000 BC. Settlers from south China travelled by boat and arrived in south Sumatra, bringing with them a stone tool-using tradition, the custom of erecting stone monuments and a creation myth featuring the tree of life. Since then, many other influences have enriched the art and culture of south Sumatra.

During the subsequent Bronze Age, the Dong son culture, first discovered in Vietnam, was grafted onto the existing Megalithic society. The strikingly graphic curvilinear decorative elements which appear on *tampun* and *palepai* depictions of both ships and trees of life have been attributed by many to this source. Bird-headed ancestor figures on boats (B) are found as design elements on bronze ritual drums dating 200 BC to 100 AD that have strong affinities with Lampung textile iconography.¹⁶

Artistic conventions and cosmological constructs of a Hindu/Buddhist character were integrated into the pre-existing animist belief system during the period of what is now termed the Indo-Javanese civilisation, which includes the Srivijayan kingdom of Sumatra. A tree of life featured prominently in Indian scriptures and myth, and was frequently seen in surviving stone architectural bas-reliefs at temple sites.¹⁷ Significant trade by sea was carried in large ships, as seen in a famous representation at the 8th-9th century Buddhist temple complex at Borobudur.¹⁸ At this point, the ancestor boat iconography which had persisted from the Bronze Age took on enriched social significance.

Lampung's proximity to Java assured another strong current of influence which had multiple implications for *tampun*. This was the adoption of the *wayang* shadow-puppet theatre, with its profile portrayal of human forms rather than the frontal depiction of ancestors



associated with the Austronesian motif group, seen consistently in *tampun darat* of the interior. This is not to say that the *wayang* style is necessarily later than the frontal style. Although shadow puppets are most often associated with the Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the tradition is probably much older, dating to pre-Aryan tribal culture.¹⁹ It should be noted that a device used in the puppet theatre to announce the opening and closing of acts was named after its iconography: *gunungan* (the mountain) and *kakayon* (the tree), whose significance with respect to *tampun* is discussed below.

The Chinese too have a long mercantile history on the Indonesian *pasisir*. Their endless knot and floral configurations, incorporated into Lampung textiles, were copied from imported trade porcelain.

The influence of Islam since the religion's arrival in the region some four hundred years ago has been largely limited to the coast.²⁰ This was a function of economic trading zones, the ship once again being the vehicle for the transmission of a new religion. The tree of life also occurs in an Islamic context. One example can be seen in the triangular border device known as *tupai*, woven by the strictly devout people of Aceh in north Sumatra. In addition, the role of Muslim traders in the transport of foreign trade goods (and ideas), such as imported Indian trade cloth, cannot be overemphasised.

The impact of trading patterns on taste is evident in *palampore*, mordant resist textiles created for the European trade on the Coromandel Coast of India. A favourite subject is a tree with great blossoms emerging from a mountain of rocks (9).²¹ Some of



9. Above: *Palampore*, Coromandel Coast, India, late 17th-early 18th century. Private collection.

10. Below: *Palepai*, double red ship, Kalianda, 19th century. 0.81 x 3.40m (2'3" x 11'0"). Private collection.

11. Bottom: *Palepai*, single blue ship, Kota Agung, 19th century. 0.56 x 2.69m (1'10" x 8'10"). Private collection.

the textiles, which are a class of chintz, found their way to the south Sumatran market, where they were exchanged for pepper and exhibited at feasts of merit. The tree of life's return to Lampung in this form could only underscore the potency and universality of the subject.

SHIP & TREE TYPOLOGIES

Kalianda (and neighbouring Jabung) were known for 'red ship' iconography, which appeared in *tampun* (4) and *palepai* (2, 10). The double red ship may express the duality of the cosmos, whereas the extremely rare single red ship may be interpreted as a resolution of that duality, appropriate at the occasion of a marriage.²²

The most frequently published type of blue ship *palepai* is associated with Kota Agung in the Semangka Bay region (11). The *palepai* in (12) and (13) are also from Semangka Bay, but seem to have stronger graphic resonances with those of Kalianda, the boats being blue rather than red. These may originate in Putidoh on the Semangka Bay Peninsula, whose boat-style *tatibin* (3), have a greater stylistic affinity





12. Top: *Palepai*, double blue ship, Semangka Bay, 19th century. 0.56 x 2.67m (1'10" x 8'9"). Bruce Parsons & Lourdes Neugart Collection.

13. Above: *Palepai*, single blue ship, showing strong stylistic affinity with the single red ship *palepai*. Semangka Bay, 19th century. Private collection.

with the Kota Agung type of blue ship *palepai*.

One form of the tree of life from Kalianda (2) displays geometric branches which have been interpreted by many authors as a 'stacked ship' schemata.²³ (All categories and names used here are anecdotal and are not intended to reflect Lampung use). The placement of the trees at both ends of the *palepai* have provoked

comparisons with *tampai* (with possible tree of life associations) found in the end borders of many textiles other than *tampai* and *palepai*. The 'stacked ship' style, also found in *tampai* (16), is reminiscent of 'trees' made from the horns of ritually sacrificed buffalo, seen in villages throughout tribal Indonesia (15). A variation of this motif style appears on double red ship cloths and might be called the 'attenuated stacked ship tree'. This form most commonly appears as a device separating double ships, and in their end panels (10).

The form of the tree of life that intuitively suggests the greatest age may be termed 'archaic-natural'. It often appears on the single red ship *palepai* from Kalianda (14). Alternatively, this may be the most recent style, on account of its fully articulated artistic expression.²⁴

What may be called the 'Christmas tree' style occurs as a





decorative element on *palepai* from Semangka Bay. Gittinger has noted that this form of tree always rises from a boat and only birds appear in its limbs.²¹ This is true when the tree appears as *palepai* border elements (17), but when it arises from the centre of the ship's deck, ancestor figures may appear in the branches (12).

The 'stacked ship' seen in Kalianda is also found in Semangka Bay (12, 13). *Tutubin* from this area present a very simple treatment of the tree, with some references to the boat element, the 'minimal' tree of life (3). Kalianda produced many *tampun* with the tree of life motif. They are characterised by a rectilinear treatment of curves, like that often associated with Dong son period decorative elements.

Tampun pasisir of the *mayang*-style type occasionally show tree structures of a very different character to those described above (cover). Gittinger refers to them as "floral configurations of ornate linear plants". They often appear as part of the background to a wedding scene taking place on the deck of a ship.²⁶

Trees of life appear in a variety of forms in *tampun darat*. The example in (6) follows coastal models more closely than most. Gittinger has named this variation the "tree with bowed limbs". They always feature pairs of birds in the branches.²⁷

A word of caution: it is important to note that cloth migrated over time. Due to the gift exchange of textiles during marriage rituals, we cannot be certain that where a weaving was found is where it was made. Any attribution of type to geographic location must therefore be broadly interpreted.

14. Left: *Palepai* fragment, 'archaic-natural' tree, Kalianda, 19th century. Private collection.



15. Left: Sacrificial buffalo horn tree of life, East Timor. Photograph after R. Cinatti, *Motivos Artísticos Timorenses e a sua Integração*, Lisbon 1967.

16. Below: *Tampun*, 'stacked ship' tree, Kalianda, 19th century. 0.43m (1'5") square. Note the phallic form 'penetrating' the cosmos. Private collection.

CONCLUSION

The literature on the subject includes a number of significant theories regarding ships and trees. Earlier this century, Schnitzer equated *palepai* with the *pepadan* seat of authority,²⁸ while Steinmann wrote of the boat as the "ship of the dead", following the model of the Egyptian myth.²⁹ More recent researchers – Gittinger, Holmgren and Spertus, and Maxwell,³⁰ see a "life boat" that carries one safely through life-crisis transitions. Gittinger suggests that the great difference between the red ship and the blue ship *palepai* is due to independent development. She feels that the blue ship is a true boat, while the red one





17. *Palepai* fragment, 'Christmas tree' style, Semangka Bay, 19th century. Private collection.

originally depicted a bird with out-spread wings, which over time came to resemble a ship. Holmgren and Spertus propose that the classic Kalianda *tampan* (4) may be a Lampung interpretation of *gunungan/kalayan*, the highly symbolic shadow puppet theatre device. They further suggest that the *wayang*-style *pasisir tampan* is akin to the early narrative scroll paintings known as *wayang beber*.

Tree iconography was interpreted by Steinmann as a cosmic tree and by Hoop²¹ as the sacred tree of the tribal village. Gittinger is more specific, stating that the tree is the *kayu aru* (1), a ritual construct present at life transition ceremonies. Others, including Taylor and Aragon, have interpreted the tree as stacked ships, or buffalo horn accumulations.

In interpreting the *tampan pasisir*, Holmgren and Spertus consider the "linear plant" tree found

on the upper deck (seen to the right on the cover illustration), to be of particular importance. They marshal evidence comparing it to the Borneo Ngadju Dayak tree of life (*sanggaran*), whose name is derived from the words for 'kill' and 'killing place'. These apparent opposites refer to the polarity of creation and destruction. A second tree can be seen to occupy the space between two men and under a roof.

A *tampan pasisir* in the Holmgren and Spertus Collection shows an alternative iconography,²² with a small female figure, probably a young girl, substituted for the tree between the men. The tree/female association refers to fertility. Finally, they suggest that the boat represents the 'ship of state' with depictions of a chief and other nobles, the clan, warriors, musicians and so on.

Turning to the novel iconography of the tree separating two ships (12), we see actual human figures stemming from an 'attenuated stacked ship tree'. I would suggest that we have here yet another interpretation of the branches of the tree of life, beyond the 'stacked ship/buffalo horns' mentioned above. It seems clear that this diagram evokes generations of clan ancestors, going back to the time of creation. It may well be that in former times this particular association was so strong that it sprang to mind when the Paminggir viewer looked at the multi-valanced tree of life icon in its otherwise purely geometric form.

Throughout the process of examining these *tampan* and *palepai*, a thought-provoking issue has kept recurring: if *pasisir* weavers were capable of depicting a ship with such accuracy (*cover*),



18. *Tampan*, Kalianda, 19th century, 0.52 x 0.43m (1'8 1/2" x 1'7"). Curvilinear designs are commonly associated with Dong son influence. Private collection.



why the scrolling finial elements observed on the bow and stern of *palepai* ships? Many authors have written about the way in which the tree of life is constructed, discussing the boats that make up its branches. In the example shown here, the branches of the tree of life are interpreted as an ancestral genealogy. Clearly it is possible for the Paminggir psyche to hold at least two symbolic perceptions simultaneously.

Abandoning all caution, I propose hypothetically deconstructing the ship. If the decks of the ship are removed, the arching elements of the bow and stern come together in a manner strongly

reminiscent of the tree of life. Compare the line drawings (20) with (2) and (19). Assuming this is no coincidence, we may reverse the process and, in pulling apart the tree, a schematic diagram of the upper, middle and lower worlds is revealed symbolically in the boat architecture. We observe the realms of humans, birds and animals. This is consistent with the Austronesian creation myth which refers to the tearing apart of the tree of life. More than the 'ship of state', we see here a possible schemata of creation and the cosmos.

Notes see Appendix

19. Above: *Tampan*, Kalianda, 19th century, 0.48m (1'7") square. Private collection.

20. Right: Schematic drawings of the ship (see fig. 2) and the 'collapsed' ship or tree of life (see fig. 19).



