

## LEGACY IN CLOTH: BATAK TEXTILES OF INDONESIA

Sandra Niessen

KITLV Press, Leiden 2009

568 pages, 900 illustrations

ISBN 978 90 6718 351 2

Price €54.90

Reviewed by  
Thomas Murray

**SANDRA NIESSEN** worked for thirty years on her Batak textile treatise, *Legacy in Cloth* and it shows; clearly, her time was well spent. This is a fabulous book that sets the bar so high for future scholarship and publishing aesthetics that it is safe to say there will never again be another monograph on her topic. In producing such a beautiful tome, she shut the door on her way out – none of today's scholars can ever replicate the timing or the depth of her research begun a generation ago.

Although a researcher

could write a thesis on traditional cloth patterns now being used in contemporary Batak couture, no one can go back in time to perform the quality and quantity of interviews that she has done with women old enough to remember the context of their textiles in pre-Christian beliefs, impossible now when so many of her informants are living with their ancestors.

Beginning in 1979 as an anthropology student, she conducted field research for almost three years spread over two decades in north Sumatra, in and around the mountainous region of Lake Toba. Home to the Batak people, this area is considered one of the strongest animistic cultures as well as one of the most beautiful locations in Indonesia. For a short time she lived on the west side of Lake Toba in the village of her weaving teacher Ompu Sihol, an old woman. Here, and in Tarutung south of the lake where she lived for eight months, she attempted to unlock the secret code of Batak textile production techniques: the spinning of the yarn, warping, dyeing, weaving, the symbolism of the motifs and ritual use. There was plenty to keep her busy, not only working on her language skills, but

also conducting surveys of weavers in other regions around the lake.

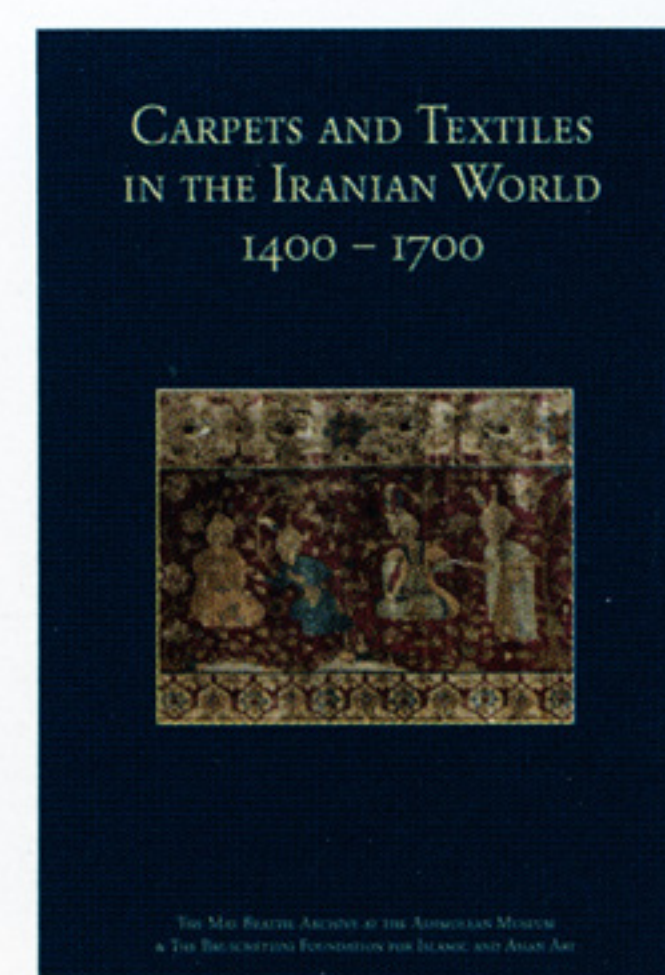
When she returned to the West, she tracked down and examined Batak textiles in every early colonial collection that she found in European museums; she has also researched all known publications and reviewed the notes of scholars and missionaries. And although she has written two other books and many articles on Batak textiles, those were teasers for what was to come.

Through a combination of persistence and inspiration, she wrote and revised her text until it was as comprehensive as possible. She has also assembled marvelous historic/ethnographic photos, as well as sourcing images of some very exotic and truly rare *ulos*, the generic name for Toba Batak cloths. Included in the illustrations are textiles found during that museum search, some with very early collection dates, while others were gathered during her field work. These are shared through the book's well-organised and intellectually rigorous chapters arranged in four parts. 'Design' includes Design Foundations, Early and Modern Design History, and nomenclature. The

second section addresses six Batak weaving regions, four around Lake Toba, Karo, and Simalungun. The 'Catalog' sorts the cloths using an effective taxonomy – blue textiles, warp stripes, plaids, stipple ikat, chevron ikat, lozenge ikat, weft patterning, and foreign textiles in the Batak repertoire. In part four, Niessen reveals the secrets learned about techniques, including fibre and yarn preparation, dyes and dyeing, warping and warp ikat, the loom and weaving, decorative warp and weft and finishing techniques.

Despite all the wonders described above, and as close to my heart as they are, if asked what I liked best about the book, I would mention two things: Niessen's acknowledgment list (she made notes on virtually every Batak person she spoke with!) and her almost Platonic inquiry into the current state of Batak textile scholarship and her justification for this comprehensive treatment.

There is a famous Batak saying, "If you ask five Batak people the name of a textile, you will get six answers!" It is a great and important contribution that Sandra Niessen has finally made it possible for us to know but one!



## CARPETS AND TEXTILES IN THE IRANIAN WORLD 1300-1700

Edited by Jon Thompson,  
Daniel Shaffer &  
Pirjetta Mildh

The Beattie Archive,  
Ashmolean Museum,  
in association with The  
Bruschettini Foundation,  
Oxford and Genoa 2010  
260pp., 220 colour & b/w  
illustrations, appendix, index  
ISBN 9781898113690  
Hardbound £50/\$80 + P&P  
Papers from the conference  
held at the Ashmolean  
Museum in Oxford in August  
2003, with contributions by  
13 leading scholars in the  
field. To be reviewed.



## EINE SAMMLUNG TEXTILEN AUS ANATOLIEN, DEM KAUKASUS, PERSIEN, MITTELASIEN, ZENTRAL- UND OSTAFRIKA

Johannes Wolff-Diepenbrock  
Lim & Asmuth Publishers,  
Cologne 2009

English and German texts  
192pp., 75 colour & 2 b/w  
illustrations, map, glossary,  
bibliography

ISBN 9783941765146

Hardbound, 400 numbered  
copies, €120 + P&P

A leading German kilim and  
textile connoisseur's record  
of his private collection.  
To be reviewed.

254 Catalogue 3.2

STRIPES IN WARP AND WEFT: THE BATAK 'PLAIDS'



Fig. Cat 3.23: COBAN,  
Hull 1000, 1100-1200. Collection 1000-1200.  
The cloth was collected by Dr. Bernhard Hagen at the  
end of the nineteenth century. This version has no twill  
patterning. The ikat patterning is unusual in this textile  
type and for Cat 3.23. Usually this design type has plain  
warp stripes.

STRIPES IN WARP AND WEFT: THE BATAK 'PLAIDS'

Catalogue 3.3 255



Fig. Cat 3.3: SILKIRAN,  
Hull 1000, 1100-1200. Collection 1000-1200.  
The textile was acquired by the museum in 1895 from  
H. Hennings.