



1

Textile voyage

Perhaps the most iconic of all Indonesian textiles is the double red ship *palepai* of the Paminggir people, from the royal community of Kalianda in the Lampung District of southern Sumatra. **Thomas Murray** introduces an outstanding example in the collection of New York's Cooper Hewitt Museum

Kalianda is considered by all ethnic groups of Lampung to be the mother of Lampung *adat*, the customary law that guides all proper behaviour including the weaving of textiles, colour, iconography and their ritual use.

The Cooper Hewitt is fortunate to own a double red ship *palepai* that is one of the finest of this rare genre known. A superb example in every sense, it is clear from the fabulous rendering of the iconography the weaver 'understood' the language of the motifs she was encoding in the textile, and was not blindly replicating, as we see in later examples when the connection to the root culture has become attenuated. The depth of the dyeing of the indigo blue and *sepanang* (Brazil wood) red,

with natural white, is fabulous, and represents the three primary colours of the Austronesian cosmology, black, white and red, symbolising duality and blood.

A *palepai* is a long cloth measuring between 250 and 500 cm in length but never more than 75 cm in width, limited by the distance of the weaver's reach in passing a weft back and forth on a back-strap loom. The design is created using a textile patterning method known as supplementary weft. Beginning with a balanced plain weave that will hold the textile together structurally, the weaver introduces decorative weft threads that pass across the back of the textile as floats that dip to and fro creating a motif, being tacked down along the way and making little background geometric

diamonds, dots, and lines, with the main side featuring clean and clear drawing. In these textiles, the weaver is keeping track as she works sideways, perpendicular to the way the motif will be read when it is displayed. Pattern sticks may have been used in some cases but great credit must go to the genius weaver who could monitor the complexity of this fine cloth from memory.

Reviewing the iconography of this *palepai*, we see two symmetrical grand red ships with arching bow and stern elements, with diagonal linear extensions descending from the hull that may represent oars, like an old Roman galley. A tree of life motif is found in the centre of the textile, separating the two ships. Moving our eyes up from the bottom of the textile to the top, we encounter a pattern mid hull that could be a stylised water buffalo head, metrically repeating in alternating light and dark blue. Arriving at the main deck, there is a large central pavilion with a hooked roof, the palace replicated in smaller scale to both sides, with yet two other architectural structures furthest from the centre, all known to represent 'the house of the ancestors'. And indeed, ancestors may be discerned in light and dark blue, pale yellow and white figures



Photo: Matt Flynn

within these structures, including the roof, with the progenitor mother and father in larger size and red colour in the central house.

Royalty is signalled by the presence of many umbrellas, an old tradition acquired from India and dating to the arrival of Buddhism and Hinduism in Sumatra in the 7th century; symbolic but practical, the parasol served to protect nobles against the harsh sun. Also seen are two flagpoles with triangular banners in pale hues. There are two small boats with ancestors and umbrellas free-floating in space, as we rise to the upper third of the tableau.

There begins an upper deck, or roof, demarcated by a thick white horizontal line with trees of life rising in the centre and at each end. This level is populated by pairs of elephants in blue and red, peacocks and other birds, and little ancestors standing on small boats. Note another set of flags.

There are various theories about the meaning of this highly significant motif. In *The Ship of the Dead in Textile Art* (Basel, 1946) Dr Alfred Steinmann of the Zurich University Völkerkunde Museum noted a commonality in the Egyptian myth of a boat required to bring the dead across the River Styx to the next world. In her 1973 PhD thesis, Mattiebelle

Gittinger of the Textile Museum, Washington, DC felt that red ships could be interpreted as birds, with wings instead of bow and stern, supporting the greater community. Lampung scholars Garrett and Bronwen Solyom have proposed that what is presented is not a ship at all, but rather a depiction of a classical Austronesian house, possibly dating as far back as five thousand years. This has particular resonance in Lampung, where traditional homes have spiral elements extending from the terminals of the house which have been interpreted to be fern fronds—a fertility symbol because they grow with such vigour.

I myself have noticed that when the ship is folded in on itself so that only the arching bows are joined, the motif greatly resembles a tree of life, and I have also speculated that when pulled apart in a ‘Big Bang’ we have the replication of the Lampung creation myth—that the primordial tree grew up from the underworld into the upper world and then broke into hundreds of pieces, forming the first water buffalo, horses, birds, fish, rice paddies, and humans.

The current perception is that the two ships are significant because they represent two families coming together at a wedding. And

Double red ship *palepai*, Paminggir people, Kalianda, Lampung, south Sumatra, 19th century. Cooper Hewitt-Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, 1962-233-23

the ship, rather than transporting the dead, is more of a ‘life boat’ intended to ensure safe passage of individuals and the community through critical life stages—birth, puberty, marriage, attaining a rank in society and funerary rites, all part of the human condition.

Always rare, and normally found only in early museum collections, these cloths were restricted to the highest level of society, serving as a badge of royal affiliation. Their presence at a gathering of nobility indicated that the owner was a clan chief, head of a *marga*, had performed all the necessary feasts of merit rituals, and had been authorised by the ruler of the region, the Banten Sultanate of West Java, to be able to participate in the very lucrative pepper trade. From the spice came the wealth that supported the complex and costly ceremonies required to maintain the status permitting the use of a *palepai*, also known as a *sesai balak*, or ‘great wall’. ❖