

The Voyage of the Flowering Basket

Traditional Indian Patola Motifs in Contemporary Southeast Asia

By Kim Jane Saunders



Contemporary Indonesian textiles with the flowering basket design. Clockwise from top left: warp ikat selendang, southern Flores; Javanese screen print; East Sumbanese warp ikat hinggi; Savunese warp ikat sarong; Rotinese warp ikat sarong; Javanese batik sarong; Centre: Fragment of double ikat silk patola.

"For centuries, patola... the unique double ikats of Gujarat, India, have been famous for their matchless colour and craftsmanship. Their fame and influence spread beyond India to Southeast Asia, where they were exported. These gossamer-light cloths give the unmistakable feeling of something intrinsically precious, as if a gemlike mosaic had been transformed into fluid silk." Larsen & Bühler – *The Dyers Art* (1976).

These wonderful silk *patola* (plural) and *patolu* (singular) of India belong to a very rare group of textiles produced by a double *ikat* technique, found in only three locations in the world: Gujarat in western India, Tenganan in East Bali, Indonesia, and the Ryuku Islands of southern Japan. *Ikat* is a Malay term meaning to 'tie or bind'.

The complexity of true double *ikat* creation involves tying and dyeing both the warp and the weft threads and then skilfully weaving them together to produce the desired design. It is recognisable by a 'shadowing' or 'bleeding' effect from the dye onto the cloth, visible on both the warp and the weft threads. In India it takes two weavers to create *patola*.

The art of single *ikat* is documented on the walls of the sixth century CE Ajanta caves and the term *patola* appears in Gujarati literature in the 12th century. *Patola* patterns have been discovered in 16th and 17th century frescoes in southern India. Alfred Bühler notes that *patola* may have been traded as early as the 13th century. However, it was not until the 17th century that European documentation began. Tavernier records the Dutch East India Company exports of such cloths from India to the Philippines, Borneo, Java, Sumatra and other neighbouring countries, where they were used to cement local alliances and forge lucrative trading networks. During the Dutch colonial era in Java, *patola* were known generically as *tjinde* and were highly prized. During the 17th and 18th centuries, their export as part of the wider export of Indian trade textiles was at its zenith. Less expensive and



Traditional double ikat, silk patola fragment with flowering basket design and tumpal

complex imitation *patola* were made either by only tying and dyeing the weft threads or by printing or drawing the exquisite motifs onto cotton cloth.

Throughout the islands of what is now Indonesia, *patola* cloths and their imitations found their way into local communities where the designs were incorporated into locally produced cloth. In *The Patola of Gujarat* (1979) Bühler documents at least 50 traditional Indian *patola* patterns, ranging from dancing girls to elephants, tigers, flowers and geometric designs. However, two patterns emerge as the most popular. Firstly, the caparisoned elephant motif was the traditional choice for export. Secondly the *Chaabadi Bhat*, the eight-rayed flower or the flowering basket, which frequently appears in local cloth. Chelna Desai in *Ikat Textiles of India* (1987) notes that this design was favoured by Anavil Brahmins in India and was very popular with the Indonesian elite, possibly because it symbolised the eight-fold path of Buddhist teaching. On Javanese batik it appears as the *jilamprang* motif; on the island of Roti it is known as the *dua nggeo* motif and in the southern Philippines as the *sinalapa*



Dancer from Roti wearing contemporary warp ikat sarong and selendang with patola-inspired motifs.



Vendor in East Sumba wearing a warp ikat sarong decorated with patola motifs and displaying a contemporary warp ikat cloth decorated with caparisoned elephants

motif. Today, many locally produced warp *ikat* cloths used for clothing, rituals, gift exchange and trade still bear *patola* motifs. On the island of Sumba, Indonesia, the centre field of the traditional *hinggi kombu*, the kings' cloth, often had a geometric motif known as the *patola ratu* or kings' *patola*. In the subsistence whaling village of Lamalera in Lembata, the centre field of the bride cloths was traditionally decorated with *patola*-inspired motifs.

In Southeast Asia, *patola* cloths were considered sacred, auspicious and mystical, with the power to protect or inflict harm and were widely used in rites of passage ceremonies. Evidence exists of their use being restricted in the past, to royalty, nobles and magicians – on pain of death. The tripartite layout of the *patola* is also replicated in many locally made cloths in Indonesia. A decorated centre field, flanked with longitudinal borders and more ornate *pallaw* borders at each end, was often decorated with the ubiquitous triangle or *tumpal*. In some communities the *tumpal* represents the flowering bamboo shoot, like the tree of life, a symbol of fertility.

Many of the designs incorporated into the *geringsing* cloths of Tenganan, East Bali, bear a strong resemblance to *patola* motifs, possibly influenced by the Hindu-Javanese court textiles. Some of Tenganan's inhabitants, who produce naturally dyed, hand-spun, cotton double *ikat* known as *kain geringsing*, claim descent from Indian migrants. This

claim is supported by DNA tests as cited in *Textiles in Bali* (1991) by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Marie-Louise Nabholz Kartaschoff and Urs Ramseyer.

There is no doubt that patterns on Indian trade cloths and especially motifs from Indian *patola* have had, and continue to have, a lasting impact on locally produced cloths in Southeast Asia. It is most encouraging that these traditional patterns remain part of a dynamic weaving tradition not just in Southeast Asia, but also in India. The current *Patterns of Trades* exhibition at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, showcases some of these wonderful cloths, including 18th and 19th century *patola*. There is one piece of silk double *ikat* commissioned from one of the last Salvi weaving families in Gujarat, in 2005. It features the caparisoned elephant motif and is a copy of an old example in the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, the Netherlands. Interestingly, this design has been revived in East Sumba, Indonesia, during the last two years. Thus, albeit by a fragile thread, these traditional techniques and motifs endure today.



Hand-spun cotton, naturally dyed, warp ikat bridal sarong from Lamalera, East Indonesia with a patola motif in the centre field



A weaver from the traditional Bali Aga village of Tenganan, East Bali, weaving hand-spun cotton, naturally dyed, double ikat, kain geringsing on a back-strap loom

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