

The Pasola Festival in Sumba, Indonesia

By Michelle L Smith

Arriving in Tambolaka Airport on the Indonesian island of Sumba in March 2012, I was reminded of when Sir Stamford Raffles imposed a very unpopular law in the city of Singapore – one that restricted the bearing of arms, which meant that men could not carry their *keris* (a Southeast Asian dagger). There was only one sign here; it warned passengers arriving in Sumba that there is a ten-year jail sentence for carrying the *parang* (a machete-like long knife) in the capital city. Despite this, almost every man still carries a *parang* tucked into an *ikat* (tie-dyed) cloth around his waist.



A Ratu, or Merapu Priest, Sumba 2012

In Sumba's very rural society men carry the *parang* mostly to cut wood or coconuts, rather like us carrying a mobile phone today. If you leave home without it, at some point during the day you will regret not having taken it with you. In this society filled with men carrying long knives, I wondered whether headhunting still existed. The official answer is that people have not headhunted in at least 25 years.

Unofficially, I heard that men still cut off their enemies' heads, but they no longer take the heads home.

The residents of this sparsely populated island still live in traditional clan villages. The western half of Sumba is tropical and the tall roofs of the village houses stick out above the greenery, taking a westerner back to another era. If a village is modern, some of the tall pointed roofs are made of tin rather than dried grass. Each house has a large, raised stone slab in front for sacrifices to the *Merapu*, (ancestral spirits). *Merapu* priests are called *Ratu* who live



Nyale, edible sea worms



Clan warrior riding to participate in the pasola

with a proverbial mirror in front of their faces so they only see what is behind them and are thus able to communicate with ancestors and spirits. Nothing is done on Sumba without seeking the *Merapu's* permission, through the *Ratu*. This includes determining the date for the annual clan warfare, called *Pasola*.

Pasola is a jousting match between clans and takes place on horseback with blunt bamboo poles. Historically it was much bloodier than it is today. Hardwood poles with sharpened metal blades fastened to the end were used to ensure that a significant amount of blood soaked the soil. This was part of a blood offering to the *Merapu* in exchange for a good harvest. As a bystander, I found it difficult to figure out which side each horseman was on since nobody wore a uniform. The Sumbanese clearly had no trouble in determining friend from foe.

The *Ratu* determine the date of the *pasola*, based on when an edible sea-worm called *nyale* rises to the ocean's surface to reproduce. This happens only a few days a year, based on the moon. In the days preceding the expected arrival of the worms, everybody is banned from the water, including fishermen. When the ocean becomes milky, the *Ratu* enter the water to examine the worms, whose quantity, colour, length and size enable the *Ratu* to predict how the crops will fare in the coming year. This year the *Ratu* found the worms to be very short and thin and interpreted this to mean that there would be too much rain in the months ahead, negatively affecting the harvest.

While it was easy to locate some literature on the *Pasola* Festival before going to see it, none of the literature explained that there is more than one *pasola*, as each region operates its own game. I attended the main one in the town of Wanotaka. There were actually two games that took place on the prescribed day. The first one took place on the beach immediately after the *Ratu* finished all the rituals revolving around the arrival of the *nyale* worms.

Clan warriors on decorated ponies came down from the mountains carrying five newly cut bamboo poles. The first



West Sumbanese Village

match took place on the beach and ended abruptly after only 10 minutes of play when one warrior grabbed the poles of a rival warrior. This seemed to be against the rules of fair play. The victim was quick to draw his *parang* causing his opponent's clansmen to protect their man by throwing their poles at the man with the drawn *parang*. Thrown hastily out of anger and defense, these poles bypassed the targeted warrior and landed in the crowd of spectators where I was. We ran in every direction to avoid being hit or trampled while police carrying machine-guns ended the match.

The next was much larger and took place two kilometres down the road on a designated *pasola* field. It ended in a similar fashion. I do not know what sparked the violence, but the spectators began throwing stones. The police made the unpopular decision to get involved, which prompted the crowd to retaliate by damaging a police vehicle. The riot only ended after the police fired two warning shots into the air.

Sumba remains isolated from the rest of world because of unreliable transportation to and from the island. While waiting to return to Bali, I observed traditional dancers greeting an arriving aircraft. The passengers disembarked and stood around, obviously confused. One, a Belgian seeking assistance, said the flight had been scheduled to go to Flores, not Sumba, but the Minister of Health needed to go to Sumba, so they went there instead. The passengers learned this only when airborne. The plane's next destination was Timor and the passengers had to decide if they wanted to collect their luggage and to stay in Sumba or re-board the aircraft and go to Timor! Fortunately I did not have to make this decision.



Pasola referee with a *parang* and carrying a jousting stick

Michelle L Smith was an ACM docent and lived in Singapore for four years. She and her family have travelled extensively in rarely visited regions of the world.

All photos by the author



Story Vol. 2:
'MADMEE' (IKAT)

Understated Beauty

“Laotians call it madmee (ikat) and it is another traditional weaving technique practiced in Laos. In this technique yarns are tied and dyed according to a pattern before being woven to create the pattern. What struck me is how precise the work had to be done to perfectly align the pattern. Madmee often has a beautiful bleeding of colours, which lends its looks to water colour painting. I love its natural, understated appeal.”

Emiko Nakamura
Owner & Designer



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