

TRADITIONAL SILK SARONGS Of Mandar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

by Robert L. Welsch



Married noble women attending a royal wedding wearing blue *baju bodo* and red sarongs that mark their noble birth. Majene, 1986.

Although nearly everyone has heard about Indonesian batik, few have ever heard about an even older textile tradition found among the Mandar people of Sulawesi, the large spider-armed island in eastern Indonesia formerly called the Celebes. Nearly one-half million Mandar live on the west coast of South Sulawesi. Together with their more numerous neighbors, the Bugis, Mandar people are known throughout Indonesia and Malaysia for their hand-woven textiles, especially their cotton and silk sarongs.

The English word "sarong" is derived from the Indonesian or Malay word *sarung*, which refers to a single piece of cloth sewn into a tube and worn as a kind of

skirt. Wrapped around the waist, it is fastened without pins or belt by rolling a few inches of fabric under at the top or with a neat tuck at the side. This simple, loose-fitting garment has been the traditional clothing of both men and women throughout Indonesia and much of Southeast Asia for centuries, and probably came to

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Indonesia from Hindu India early in the Christian era.

In the public side of daily life, sarongs have now largely given way to trousers for men and dresses for women. But comfortable cotton sarongs are still the most popular kind of casual clothing around the house and as sleep wear. For Muslims (90 per cent of all Indonesians are Muslim) cotton sarongs are the garment of choice for daily prayers. They are the preferred clothing at a *kenduri*, or *selamatan*, a ritual meal with friends and neighbors to thank God for good fortune or

black cloth with a high collar, long sleeves, and buttons down the front. Jacket, sarong, *songko*, and sandals continue to be mandatory formal wear in Mandar as it has for centuries.

To complement their silk sarongs, most Mandar women prefer to wear a traditional style of blouse, either the loose-fitting *baju bodo* of gauze or the tight-fitting *baju poko* of velvet with a high collar. To finish the formal costume, they put their hair up in a tight bun and wear gold jewelry, particularly a distinctive



Muslim men praying during services for Lebaran, the major religious holiday, wearing formal attire that includes a variety of different sarong motifs. Majene, 1986.

to pray for the dead. And on Fridays, Muslim men nearly always wear a white or light-colored cotton sarong and a black cap, a *songko*, to attend sabbath exercises at the mosque.

On festive occasions, such as weddings and Islamic holidays, Mandar people like Muslims everywhere in south Sulawesi put on their finest attire, which inevitably means their best silk sarong. These hand-woven silks may be bold plaids; small, discrete checks; vibrant stripes; or solids with geometric or floral designs. Whether the colors are brilliant or subdued, silk sarongs add luster and a daring array of hues to an already spectacular display of color.

In spite of the tropical climate, the well-dressed Mandar man wears a jacket or blazer over his silk sarong at any of these formal occasions. Nowadays such jackets usually follow Western styles, but this is simply a

kind of earring or heavy gold post, called *dali* in Mandarese, which is usually set off with honeysuckle flowers.

Traditional Mandar silks are finely woven taffetas. The most typical motifs are simple plaids on a black, dark reddish-brown, or red background. Mandar plaid motifs (called *sure*) are symmetrical and spaced at regular intervals on the solid background. Some designs incorporate an additional design element (the *tole*) that is usually simpler than the *sure* and serves as a counterpoint to the main motif. The spacing and arrangement of the motif in the body of the sarong is the same along both the warp and the weft, which produces the plaid.

One distinctive feature of every sarong is its back panel ("head," or *pucca*), which contrasts with the body of the sarong. This panel preserves the *sure* along the warp, but substitutes alternating thick and thin

white lines along the weft. Sometimes, depending upon the motif, the background color of this panel differs from the main background as well. The presence of the *pucca'* panel is the distinctive feature that distinguishes fabric woven for a sarong from ordinary cloth.

The subdued traditional colors of the background were formerly obtained from vegetable dyes, especially indigo (from which black, dark blue, light blue, and grey were obtained) and several tree resins which provided reddish hues. Although imported aniline, or chemical, dyes have been available since at least the early 19th century, Mandar weavers preferred natural dyes, which unlike many of the aniline dyes were colorfast and tended not to fade even after many years.

To the casual Western observer, Mandar plaids may resemble Scottish tartans, but Mandar motifs have no historical connection with their European woolen counterparts and represent an independent local development.

The numerous motifs available are not associated with particular families as Scottish tartans are, but mark rank, privilege, and social position. Each of the nine or ten oldest motifs have dark or subdued color schemes that Mandar associate with respect and authority. More recently introduced pastels, tiny checks, and brilliant solids suggest less authority and a youthful lack of responsibility. Thus, they are preferred by young people, especially unmarried men and women who are trying to attract the attentions of the opposite sex. Older people tend to wear somber colors, befitting the authority and social position that comes with age.

Several motifs are reserved exclusively for men and women of the nobility. This noble privilege was jealously guarded in the highly stratified and status-conscious Mandar society. In the past if a noble saw a commoner wearing one of these designs he could, with impunity, rip the sarong off the offender in the middle of the road or wherever he happened to be.

Nobles were not limited to these aristocratic motifs, but could wear any design they desired, depending upon their mood and the self-image they wanted to project. A middle-ranking noble might choose to wear bright and flamboyant colors at a commoner's wedding, but prefer a more respectful sarong at a wedding in his own family where he was one of the hosts. Similarly, he might wear festive colors to attend a *malolang* (a kind of bachelor party at the bride's home the night before a noble's wedding), while the groom, as guest of honor, would be expected to wear a more somber motif.

In a similar way, the blouses women wear with



Two young men in ordinary formal attire: silk sarong, jacket, *songko'*, and sandals. Majene, 1986.

their sarongs indicate their marital status and position within the community. Only unmarried women should wear the velvet or velveteen *baju poko'*, though if they prefer they may wear a bright red *baju bodo'*. Red is considered the most alluring color for women, and any young woman wanting to attract the attention of young suitors will always choose to wear red. By the same token, married women should wear a blue gauze *baju bodo'*, while widows should wear white, and divorced women deep green. Each of these blouses should be worn with a sarong appropriate to the woman's rank and social position.

For men, the way the sarong is tied indicates marital status and social rank. Ordinarily, the sarong extends from the waist to the ankles. Single men should wear the *pucca'* panel on their right side. Older and married men should wear it centered at the back. Office holders in the government of the traditional Mandar kingdoms (or their representatives) wore long black trousers and tied their sarongs so they covered only their midsection. Different ranks within the government were entitled to tie their sarongs in slightly different ways as a prerogative of their status. To further indicate their official role they carried a large *kris* (sword or knife) tucked in their sarong, and wore a special gold-rimmed cap (*songko' biring*). These styles of dress were forbidden to commoners with one excep-

Sarong vendors in the open-air market (*pasar*) at Tinambung, the major silk-weaving center in Mandar. Tinambung, 1986.



Mara'dia (prince) arriving at a royal wedding wearing traditional high-collared jacket and *songko'* of high office, with sarong around his midsection. He is holding his kris (wrapped in his sarong). Majene, 1986.

tion: when a man marries. As the groom, even a commoner is entitled to wear the gold-rimmed *songko'* and tie his sarong around his midsection. This is because on his wedding day the groom is said to be "*raja*, or prince, for the day."

Since the formal abolition of traditional kingdoms by the Indonesian government in the 1960s, these codes of dress are less strictly observed than before. Nowadays commoners even wear the motifs of nobility, usually in an attempt to give the impression of a somewhat higher status than they might be entitled to,



Women in a royal wedding procession. Majene, 1986.

though it would still be considered presumptuous and in poor taste for any commoner to do so at a noble's wedding. Nevertheless, while there is somewhat more flexibility in formal attire than previously, the careful observer can still see what impressions people are trying to make with the sarongs they wear and how they wear them.

Mandar silk sarongs achieved their excellent reputation throughout Indonesia because of several extraordinary qualities. Their dark colors do not run and can be washed. In addition, well-made Mandar silks were so fine that a finished sarong could be pulled through a diameter as small as a wedding ring and afterwards folded up into a small bundle that could fit into a pocket. The best of these, nearly always made for the

local nobility rather than for export, were so tightly woven that they could even hold water.

Mandar sarongs are hand-woven at home on back-tension looms, whose basic design has changed very little in over two centuries. The design includes a wooden back brace that rests on the weaver's hips and allows her to apply tension to the warp threads that are strung between a breast beam (in her lap) and a warp beam (near her feet). By leaning backward or forward she can apply just the right amount of pressure to the fabric and thus control loom tension.

The loom relies upon a "comb" to keep the warp threads at regular intervals and in the proper order. For cotton sarongs these combs usually have 30 to 40 openings per inch, but for fine silk they may have more than



Young noble women dancing at a royal wedding, wearing traditional sarongs, *baju bodo*, and gold jewelry. Majene, 1986.



Kindo Buki prepares a skein of silk yarn for dyeing. Manjopai village, 1986.

Young woman twists three filaments of silk (right) to make a single strand of 3-ply yarn (on the bobbin in front of her). Other bobbins of silk yarn are soaking in the bowl. Camba-camba village, 1986.



70. Using a bamboo bobbin case as a shuttle, the weaver passes the weft thread through the warp and taps it tightly into place by striking the sword or beater against the comb. After shifting the warp, the process is repeated, with the weft shot through from the other side to produce an extremely tight weave.

These combs are hand-crafted exclusively in Napo, a Mandar village that has long specialized in producing combs for weavers throughout Mandar. The teeth in the comb are made from a wild-growing cane that is very finely split. The split cane is cut into two-inch lengths and tied into place with fine cotton thread to give the desired spacing between the teeth. Although similar combs are made elsewhere in South Sulawesi, Mandar weavers insist that only combs made in Napo have the high quality they require for their weaving.

Mandar import raw silk from overseas, but process the silk yarns themselves, using several simple hand-crank machines that resemble spinning wheels. This five-step process does not actually spin the silk but twists the silk filaments together to make a serviceable yarn. From two to five filaments are wound and lightly twisted together onto small bamboo bobbins and soaked in water overnight. Then the silk is transferred onto a large bamboo spool and wound into neat skeins, which are then boiled to produce a soft, lustrous, white yarn. After drying, the yarn is ready to be dyed.

The thickness of silk fabric is determined by the number of silk filaments that are twisted together to make the yarn. A two-ply yarn produces a very fine, wispy fabric, while a three-ply yarn yields a heavier but more durable silk. Because the three-ply yarn requires more raw silk, it has a soft but crisp feel and makes a gentle rustle as one walks. These heavier silks, the most popular in Mandar today, are the more expensive.

The warp, which is about five yards long and two feet wide, is strung by hand. Each strand of yarn must be threaded through the comb and around the various separator rods. Taking 8 to 12 hours to complete, this task is usually done by teenage girls or young women, because it demands a good eye to insert the thread through the fine openings of the comb. If the motif is a complex one, the weaver changes colors frequently, paying extremely close attention to the exact number of threads of each color so as not to introduce an error in the design. The warp is a fixed arrangement of threads that are attached to both the comb and the separator rods; thus, mistakes in the design cannot be corrected once the warp is complete.

Four yards of the warp are wound carefully around



Above: Kanne Nauri, one of the last surviving Mandar dyers, using indigo to dye silk. To obtain a true black color, the silk must be dipped in the ceramic vat of indigo and dried each day for at least ten days. Camba-camba village, 1986.



Above, right: Young girl making the warp. Here she threads the silk yarn through the comb. Pambusuang, 1986.



Right, center: Kindo Buki weaving a silk sarong with a traditional Mandar motif. Manjopai village, 1986.

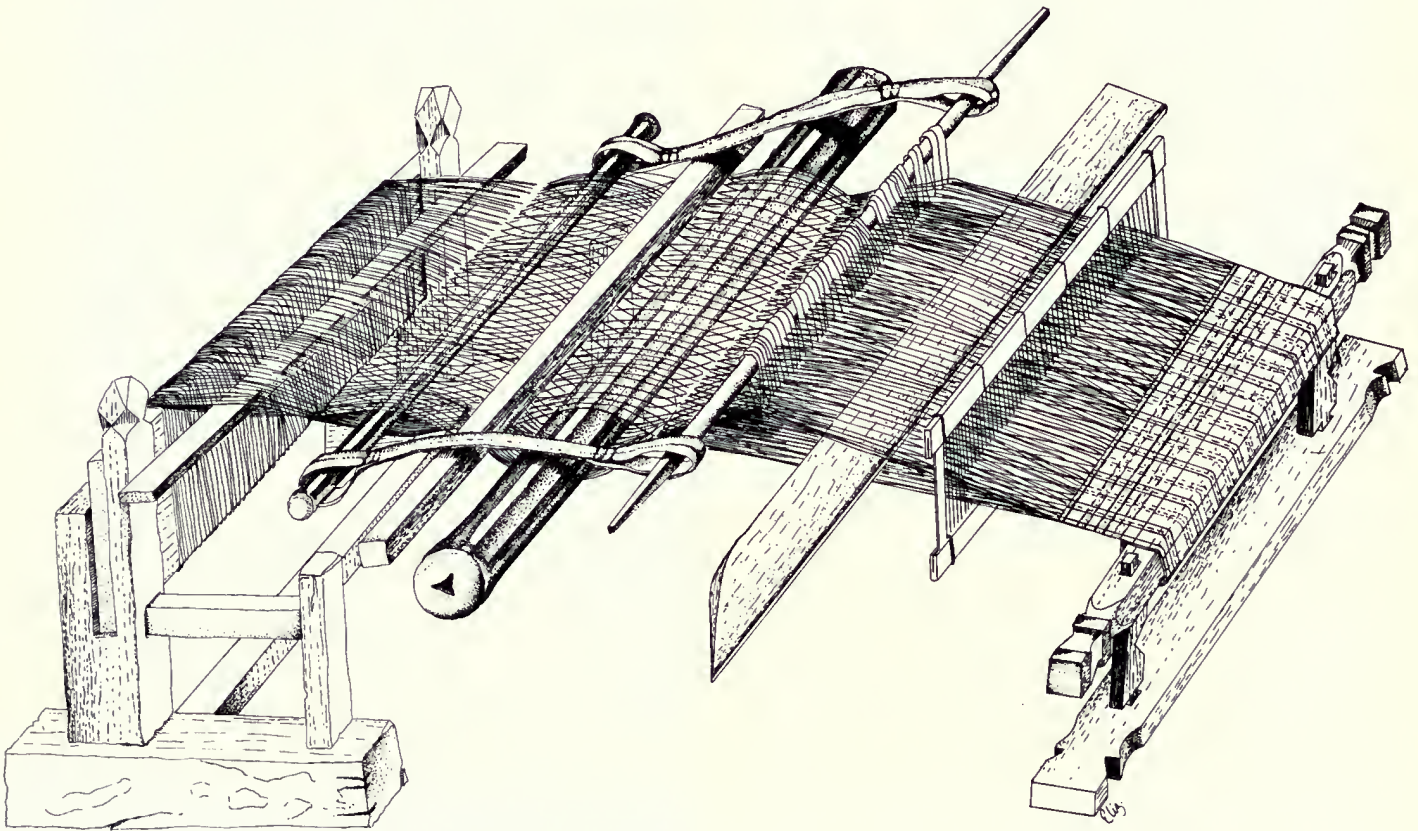
Below: Amma'na Ika weaving a silk sarong with a brightly colored modern motif. Luaor village, 1986.



the warp beam and placed in a frame on the floor at the weaver's feet, while the other end of the warp is attached to the breast beam that sits on her lap. Seated on the floor with her feet stretched out in front of her, the weaver shoots the weft thread first from right to left, taps it into place with her comb and sword, adjusts the heddle (which guides the warp threads) and repeats the process from left to right. Here she sits for hours at a time to weave just a few inches of the fine shiny fabric that has delighted princes and been the hallmark of Mandar weavers for centuries.

ten days are required for even the most skilled weaver to complete a single silk sarong.

As tedious and difficult as weaving may seem, skill with the loom still represents for Mandar people the most delicate of all feminine arts. Moreover, since weaving is done in the home, using looms that can be rolled up and set aside when other matters beckon, it continues to be an extremely suitable economic activity for women with children and husbands to cook and care for. Indeed, women who can cook and weave with skill are still thought to make the most desirable wives.



Mandar back-tension loom (cat. no. 265700). Sketch by Elizabeth Enck.

Weaving is monotonous work but demands considerable precision, both to maintain the proper tension necessary for a consistent fabric and to ensure that the motif is reproduced again and again with the correct colors and spacing. As she works, the weaver stops periodically to moisten the warp, using a mixture of citrus oil and water, and to roll up the finished fabric onto her breast beam and unwind more warp from the warp beam. Although Mandar women weave with lightning speed and extraordinary dexterity, seven to

It is said that in the old days, the “tick-tick-tick” of a girlfriend tapping the thread into place on her loom, even if only heard from across the village, was enough to gladden any young man’s heart.

In the past, virtually all Mandar women were weavers. They made cotton sarongs for their families’ daily wear as well as silk sarongs for festive occasions. But by far the majority of their weaving was sold to merchants who exported them throughout the archipelago. Indeed, Mandar sarongs, together with

copra, rattan mats, and fish nets (also woven by Mandar women) provided the capital needed for inter-island trade.

For centuries, Mandar silk and cotton sarongs have played a vital role in the local economy, being sold by Mandar merchants and sailors by the hundreds of thousands to other Indonesian traders, who sold them in the *pasars*, or open air markets, in nearly every part of the country. More than a dozen Mandar sarong merchants even had agents stationed permanently in West Sumatra—where Mandar textiles were especially popular—to handle the lively and lucrative sarong trade.

to dozens of different ethnic groups in the archipelago. This active trade provided a market that could absorb every sarong that Mandar weavers might produce. Each ethnic group, however, had its own preferred designs, colors, and styles, which meant that Mandar weavers always had to weave the motifs and patterns that could satisfy their overseas consumers. Over the years, this has meant the introduction of many new motifs and a rich repertoire of designs, only a small portion of which can be thought of as traditionally Mandar.

Ironically, although Mandar people are best known in Indonesia for their high quality silk sarongs,



Author (right) at the wedding of Muh. Yamin Albar and Rahmania M. (center). Karama village, 1986.

Mandar merchants and sailors also took sarongs with them on their annual trading voyages that covered thousands of sea miles, from Singapore in the west to the Moluccas (or Spice Islands) in the east. This inter-island peddling trade brought sarongs and other Mandar products to local consumers, where they were exchanged for spices, *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber), pearls, and other local products in great demand in Singapore and overseas markets. These products, together with sarongs, were sold in Singapore to buy Chinese, Indian, and European goods.

Mandar textiles have always been closely linked to the inter-island trade of the Indies, being exported

these were formerly made in relatively small numbers. The raw silk Mandar use has always been imported from China via Singapore, Jakarta, and Ujung Pandang. During the colonial era, production of silk sarongs was small because the raw silk was difficult to obtain in large quantities and too expensive for most consumers. Within the last twenty years, silkworms have been introduced to Sulawesi, but Mandar weavers insist that the quality of local silk is inferior. Thus, the entire Mandar silk-weaving industry continues to rely entirely on an imported raw material.

The Indonesian economy has changed considerably in the 20th century, but weaving with tradi-



Women attending a noble wedding. The umbrellas in the background are emblems of royal blood. They are carried in the wedding procession to shade the wives of ruling princes (not shown). Karama village, 1986.

tional looms is still an important cottage industry that provides a small but much-needed income for about 25,000 Mandar women. Until the mid-1960s, cotton sarongs were the major product of this home-based industry. But under competition from cheaper factory-made sarongs, hand-woven cottons have all but disappeared. Local weavers, however, have rapidly adapted to this new commercial environment by increasing their production of silk sarongs to meet an ever-growing demand from all over the country. Silk weaving used to make up only a small part of the Mandar sarong industry (probably fewer than 10,000 sarongs per year); now it comprises virtually the entire

production, totaling more than a quarter million sarongs each year.

Despite many changes in the lives of Mandar people, weaving continues to play an important part in Mandar society. There are, perhaps, fewer weavers than a century ago, but if you walk down the back streets and alleyways of Karama, Pambusuang, or dozens of other Mandar villages, from nearly every house you will hear the distinctive “tick-tick-tick” of women busy at their looms and you can still see young girls threading warp, much as they have done for generations. **FM**