

Jill Forshee. *Between the Folds: Stories of Cloth, Life, and Travels from Sumba*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001.

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Sumbanese textiles have compelled the attention of European collectors for centuries because of the bright images of stallions, pythons, roosters, and headhunters which dance across their surfaces, and have been hung on walls and tables in Dutch colonial homes. The world that produced these noble cloths was investigated first in 1969 by Marie Jean Adams, who emphasized the systems of symbolic and aesthetic coherence that could be found in these pictorial representations.<sup>1</sup> Now, thirty years after her important work, Jill Forshee has written a beautifully rendered and brightly illustrated volume about the confrontation with modernity that people in the eastern part of the island are experiencing. She mixes intimate life histories with accounts of economic and historical shifts, market pressures, and the new perspectives gained by traveling traders. Her account is particularly telling for what it tells us about the relations between subjects and objects, tourism and trade, and the ways which gendered labor has been transformed by new commercial possibilities.

While much has been written on Indonesian textiles, there is no single volume that to my knowledge achieves the depth and sensitivity that Forshee shows in her descriptions of how cloth is part of people's lives. Rather than emphasizing technical aspects of production, or the use of cloth in ritual, she presents a series of portraits of individuals, accompanied by images of the textile they have designed, which sets up a creative tension between the creator and the cloth. Why is the motif of angels adopted by a devout Christian (Biba?) Why does a reclusive noblewoman (Madai) specialize in massive, intricate images of crayfish? Why is the innovative "narrative cloth" which tells a story along its length produced by a half-caste man (Luka), dabbling in what is usually "women's business"? The connections are not necessarily direct or obvious, but after reading about these people's lives in detail, they emerge as convincing.

East Sumba is a very hierarchical, rigidly structured society, where a substantial number of people—many of them textile workers—are still considered the permanent dependents of noble families. Slavery was supposedly outlawed on the island over a century ago, but Sumbanese still casually refer to these people as slaves or—more euphemistically—as "children of the house." Because of her careful readings of meanings hidden inside cloth motifs, Forshee is able to see subtle signs of resistance, critical commentary, and even subversion of hierarchical privilege in certain weaving patterns. She notes that cloth itself expresses ideas of vulnerability, softness, and malleability which "parallel ambiguities of social life, where much is hidden between the folds." (p. 37)

The hidden meanings that she focuses on often concern sexuality and the regulation of the body, since indigo dying is a sexually segregated activity. Men now take part in drawing designs on warps and binding the warps to resist dyes, but they are afraid of the potent poisons in the dye pots. Women are said to use the dyes to bewitch men, or

<sup>1</sup> Marie Jeanne (Monni) Adams, *System and Meaning in East Sumba Textile Design: A Study in Traditional Indonesian Art*. Cultural Report 16 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monograph Series, 1969).

to poison the fertility of other women (especially co-wives). The womb-like clay vessels which store the liquid must always be kept in a secluded place, and the manipulation of herbal substances used in the dyes gives power to the older women who control its secrets.

Thus, the crayfish depicted on the secluded woman's cloth seems to speak in her stead, telling stories of transformations to another world that give her a kind of "wry self-satisfaction" (p. 96) in spite of her generally submissive demeanor, and allow her to refuse to be photographed or represented in a visual form by others. While she herself does not want to be captured on film, she is a gifted mimic, and may produce hilarious caricatures of the ungainly motions of tourists and foreign visitors. In this way, she can achieve a brief inversion of power relationships which otherwise seem to bind her in a rigidly controlled milieu. She uses her withdrawal and silence to coerce others into respecting her separation, and she has achieved her own version of renown as a "doyenne in design and weaving." (p. 93) Forshee emphasizes the extent to which most women's worlds are circumscribed, rarely extending beyond a small hamlet, a river, and the dye shack, but their aspirations remain wider, and their aesthetic innovations can be important even within the structure of conventional designs.

She also tells stories of women who are more rebellious, like Madai's younger sister, Ana Humba, who has continued to refuse marriage up to the relatively advanced age of twenty-eight to preserve her own freedom of movement and a more "modern" lifestyle. She was the first member of her family to convert to Protestant Christianity, which she chose because of the value it places on individuality and education ("As a Christian I can pray directly for myself," [p. 90]) Her contacts at a Chinese-owned hotel in the regency capital were used for both textile trading and liaisons with Sumbanese noblemen employed on other islands, always in the hope of eventually eloping with a suitable husband who would support her desires to live on Java or other, more developed, islands. The book ends with her final arrival in Jakarta, while people back in the village gossip and speculate about her real reasons for being there.

The most compelling character in the book is probably Luka, a relatively young man born to an aristocratic father and a slave caste mother, who has become an innovative textile designer and trader. He produces long narrative pieces which became increasingly violent as he grew embittered by deteriorating relations with his colleagues: battle scenes grew larger and more elaborate, along with images of slaughtered water buffalo shedding pools of blood. Luka's innovative narrative cloths combine savage exotism with modern storytelling, and have captured the imaginations of several European and Japanese collectors who have commissioned additional pieces. Infected by the glamour of travel to tourist havens in Bali, Luka begins to covet foreign approval and a foreign girlfriend, and learns to market his Sumbanese heritage as an asset in both commercial and sexual conquests. The "tales of bravery" he records on his cloths are also used to lure young European women to share his experiences.

A substantial portion of the book deals with encounters between Sumbanese and foreign visitors—tourists, textile merchants, and others—and what each side learns about the other. The Sumbanese tend to see foreigners as wealthy and powerful, but also rootless and immoral, sometimes bordering on mentally unstable. Foreigners, in turn, may seek a kind of spiritual connectedness which they associate with ancestral tradition, and which they hope to separate from commercial interests. At times, their

habits verge on the bizarre, as in the story of an "eco-tourist" who insisted on camping in front of villagers' houses and refused their offers of hospitality in order to preserve her view of herself as living "in nature." Her Sumbanese neighbors were deeply disturbed by her unsociability and suspected her of practicing a form of solitary witchcraft as she crouched over her own small stove, scorning the communalities of the collective hearth.

Other tourists, on the other hand, inspired the creation of a museum-like textile installation within one of the traditional houses, and gave certain designers the confidence to be more emotional and entrepreneurial in their cloth work. Forshee argues that "an international audience for their cloth inspires people with an enlarged social field in which to create, compete, and display. Local concerns resonate with new audiences in radically different contexts, wherein the artistic inventiveness visible in cloth is enhanced by the performances of those promoting it." (p. 197) The global stage is not all commercialization and betrayal of traditional values. It can also motivate new forms of creativity and personal expression.

Personal history is here fused with the wider social history of trade, colonialism, and conquest: Sumbanese cloth has borrowed assiduously from foreign imagery for some time. Dutch heraldic lions are taken from the colonial court of arms and used to celebrate the nobility of Sumbanese aristocrats. Chinese dragons from porcelain ware are re-imagined as the python deity of fertility, and the central field of many of the finest cloths is inspired by imported silk *patola* cloth from India. Now, new designs include motifs taken from printed fabrics and tourists' shirts left behind on a hot day. They also incorporate religious iconography (a wedding in 1999 featured a large cloth with an image of the Virgin Mary), commercial symbols, and patterns taken from foreign coins and buttons. In capturing the magic images of distant powers, Sumbanese cloth makers are forging more powerful connections across the seas which they hope will allow their cloths to travel beyond their own world.

This encounter suggests the conclusions that Forshee develops in her final chapter: she looks for the individuality which lies shrouded under the cover of "traditional" activities and lifestyles. While many studies of art and artists have stressed the biographical dimension of artistic expression, the field of textiles is one where there are few signed works of art, and the distinctive craftsmanship and personal touches of each cloth's creator are usually obscured by the anonymity of the marketplace. Forshee's research restores a sense of authorship to people who, even on the island itself, are often nameless and unidentified. As someone who has also been fascinated by the hidden biographical significance of ordinary objects,<sup>2</sup> I found this exploration particularly sensitive and telling.

Forshee's perspective also helps us to see how the local and the global meet each other in the subjectivities of particular lives: while Luka aspires to travel far away with a European woman, he finally decides to marry on Sumba with a woman with the same divided status as his own. While Madai is intimidatingly skillful and inventive at her loom, she refuses human contact and chooses to speak more and more rarely. Ana Humba, dreaming of romance and adventure in the capital city, is also likely to meet

<sup>2</sup> See Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (New York & London: Routledge, 1998).

with more disappointment and betrayal when she ventures away from the protection of her family and friends. And yet each of them emerges as an individual, whose cloth reflects a personality and a distinctive artistic style, and who deserves the recognition of the "auteur" so rarely seen in the world of textile scholarship.