

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1990

Toba Batak Textile Inventions

Sandra A. Niessen
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Niessen, Sandra A., "Toba Batak Textile Inventions" (1990). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 614.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/614>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

TOBA BATAK TEXTILE INVENTIONS (1)

SANDRA A. NIESSEN

Department of Clothing and Textiles, University of Alberta, 115
Home Economics Building, Edmonton, AB T6G 2M8

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on fruits of looms worked by Toba Batak weavers in the Silindung Valley, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Silindung Valley weavings are characteristically bright and fashionable. They are described by the Batak themselves and by visitors from outside as the "least traditional" of Batak woven goods. They are also surging in popularity throughout all of Toba and increasingly making inroads into the market replacing the old-style textiles which are larger, of coarser yarn, and deeper/sober in colour. It is the modern style of Batak textile which today commands the highest prices locally. "Connoisseurs" of Indonesian textiles, however, usually will not even consider buying them. To the connoisseur, they are evidence of the decline that is occurring in the once wondrously sophisticated Indonesian textile arts.

In this paper I will examine some of the changes that are occurring in Silindung Valley textiles. This Valley of so-called "declining textiles" is precisely the location of rapid fashion change. The invention of new textiles is not infrequent. I believe that the vitality and dynamism of the Silindung Valley textile tradition forces us to reconsider what is meant by "decline" as it is used, for example, in the following quotation:

"To me, antique Batak textiles, especially those from Toba, represent the highest achievement of Indonesian weaving. Hence what now comes from this area is so heart-rending to look at. The contrast between modern and antique products is nowhere else so extreme ... Decline through European influence is especially evident in the imported regular yarn dyed in bright aniline colours... (Visser 1918-1919:21,22).

SILINDUNG VALLEY TEXTILE INNOVATIONS

To discuss Silindung Valley textile innovations, I will focus on the work of a single weaver/ikat-maker, Nai Ganda (ill 1), who inhabits the village of Hutagalung. She first told me about her textile inventions in 1986, and again in 1990 she showed me several more of her creations, hot off the loom.

Each of Nai Ganda's inventions is of a different order, but each exemplifies the "modern" features for which Silindung Valley textiles are known. I shall briefly review the inventions she introduced me to, both for their innovative features and to indicate the nature of current Silindung Valley textile fashions.

Nai Ganda's Ragi Botik (ill 2), Harungguan (ill 3), and Silinggom (ill 4) are examples of textiles which were popular at one time in the past. The Ragi Botik and the Harungguan once had

the larger dimensions characteristic of the shouldercloths of the earlier period (70 cm. X 180 cm.); the Silinggom was a hip-cloth. All, typically, were constructed from coarse yarn and coloured with the deep reds and blues produced from plant dyes. Nai Ganda rescued them from the oblivion of the almost-forgotten, and transformed them into a fashion appealing to local, contemporary Silindung Valley textile consumers. They represent the "modernization" of the old, the adaptation of the passe to the new context. Nai Ganda reduced their dimensions to present-day shouldercloth size (45cm. X 160 cm.) and brightened their colouring, choosing freely from the full chemical range available to her on the market. As a result, her products each lost any significance they might have retained in the context of customary law and ritual. They are worn only by women and only as fashion items. They are appropriate garb for church and other such modern rituals. They adorn the Sunday-best attire.

The new sarong-shouldercloth outfit Nai Ganda called Gundung Pahu (ill 5), borrows a motif normally found in the twined edging of Batak textiles and expresses it in the ikat or tie-dyed medium. In ikat, the pattern is unprecedented. Hipcloths are no longer worn, having been replaced by trousers and imported sarongs. The Gundung Pahu represents the successful attempt to corner the lost market of textiles for the lower body.

Another attempt to corner a lost market has been the production of yardage (bakal baju), to be cut and tailored into jackets, dresses, skirts, hats, and so on. Again, motifs from the Batak repertory are used to decorate these lengths of woven cloth. One bakal baju cloth that Nai Ganda made was an adaptation of the Simarpusoran pattern (ill 6). She warped this ikat pattern with a more liberal dose of plain warps thereby weakening the definition of the pattern. She called the new pattern "rain" (Udanudan) because it exhibits the chaos of raindrops.

Each of the inventions described so far affirms the established repertory of textiles as much as it departs from the "tried and acceptable": textiles forgotten in the past have reappeared in modern form (Ragi Botik, Harungguan, Silinggom); motifs in the twined medium have been adapted to the ikat medium (Gundung Pahu); the inherent capacity of an ikat technique has been exploited to produce a new design (Udanudan). The inventions are interesting, ironically, precisely for their lack of inventiveness. They may be more aptly described as involutionary than as a radical break with the known Batak textile inventory.

Furthermore, the new market context and the economic need of the weavers to corner the apparel market have introduced two new function categories to the repertory: the sarong and the bakal baju. The categories are new, but they attempt to recapture the market stolen from Batak weavers by foreign imports.

HYBRID INVENTIONS

Another kind of invention which I would like to describe is the hybrid ikat cloth, technically the most complex of the inventions, and the most exciting in terms of what it reveals about the dynamism of the Batak textile tradition. It demands an understanding of Nai Ganda's ikat technique which I summarize as follows:

Ikat, according to Dorothy Burnham, describes "the process by which a pattern is resist-dyed on the warp, or the weft, or both, before weaving begins." Precision in the ikatted pattern, she points out, comes from "careful measuring and counting of threads and fine precise binding" (Burnham 1980:72-73).

Batak ikat is the kind that requires careful, sophisticated precision. Ikat is found solely in the warp. First the ikat-maker winds the yarn on her warping frame (mangani), then she orders and literally counts out the warps (mamutik), after which she strategically places dye-resisting ties in the appropriate yarns and the appropriate place on those yarns (mangaliliti), and finally dyes the bundle. The critical steps which I will discuss in more detail are the counting of the warps, and the tying of the warps.

Mamutik: To count out the yarns of the warp which is to be ikatted, the weaver tenses her warped yarns in a frame. They are arranged tidily in the order in which they were warped. The cross that she inserted while she warped the yarn ensures that she is able to replicate this order. She then further orders the yarn according to the pattern which she wishes to make. The ordering consists of bundling together (a) the warp ends which will be incorporated in each ikat tie and (b) the warp ends which comprise a complete pattern unit. Because the units she is working on are all consistent in size, and repeat regularly, the weaver simply counts out the warps in a repeating mathematical rhythm. The count is aided and marked by weaving long wooden rods in and out of the yarn. The number of rods corresponds with the number of separate bundles of ties of which a pattern unit is composed. The warp ends which each rod picks up are earmarked to be tied off to make the ikat pattern (ill. 7, 8).

Mangaliliti (mengikat): Once the warps are ordered and counted out, the weaver ties them off in such a way as to resist the dye and form a pattern. It would be excessively arduous to separately tie each yarn where it is to resist the dye. Instead (and this is only possible because the patterns are regularly repeating) she ties, at the same time, all the yarns that are to resist the dye in the same place. This is accomplished by bundling together all the yarn on each of the wooden rods. The result is the same number of bundles as groups of warps in a single pattern unit (ill. 9). Essentially by doing this the weaver sandwiches together layer upon layer upon layer of the repeating pattern. When the ikatted yarns are finally dyed, and the ikat ties removed, the sandwich is unstacked, and the pattern fans out replicating itself in the horizontal plane. Then the ikatted

warps are ready to be warped in with the rest of the textile warps. Only when the cloth is woven, does the ikat patterning obtain its ultimate definition and express itself clearly.

While these are the very general principles of Batak ikat production, the conventions of Batak textile production invest additional critical rules governing how these steps are executed. Because the weaver is bound to make cloths that conform to design precedents, these technical rules are functions of the designs. To make the ikat of the Si Tolu Tuho is not to make an approximation of the design, but to follow exactly the design process, knowing how many warp ends the ikatted warp of the textile will consist of, how many warp ends there are per tied bundle, how many bundles comprise a complete pattern unit, and precisely how a pattern unit is tied off. Depending on the cloth a weaver makes, she knows how many wooden rods to use to "count" her warp, how many warps each must "pick up", and in what order.

Nai Ganda's textile inventions which I have designated "hybrids" utilized the conventions of two distinct textiles. In the cloth called Si Bolang Rasta na Marpusoran, Nai Ganda counted out the warps as though to make a Si Bolang Rasta, but tied off the warps as if she was making the ikat of a Simarpusoran textile. Her hybrid as its name Si Bolang Rasta na Marsimeoreor (ill. 10) suggests, combines features of the Si Tolu Tuho na Marsimeoreor (ill. 11) and the Sibolang Rasta. The cloth arranges the ikat of the Sibolang Rasta as if it were a Si Tolu Tuho, viz. in three bands across the cloth, and adds the vertical ikatted stripes (Simeoreor), typical of the Si Tolu Tuho textile. The finished ikat is warped according to the conventions of the Si Bolang Rasta juxtaposing more regular warp with the ikatted warp than does the Si Tolu Tuho (hence the lighter colour of the cloth).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE INNOVATIONS

While such innovations may not appear to be revolutionary to weavers in textile traditions that emphasize individual creativity, they must be evaluated in terms of their own tradition. Batak weavers enjoy a different latitude for creative expression. The textiles they make are all named and are designed according to conventions which are associated with that name. A weaver's individual creativity must not blur her cloth's category. A cloth must be of a recognized and distinguishable type for it to have any social value. In such a context, therefore, the mixing of categories is a significant and radical step to take, and it does not happen with great frequency. An innovation is approached with caution on the market. It may catch on and it may not. The weaver takes a financial risk by producing one. The cloth will have no social significance at first, and initially at least, it will be merely a fashion item. The Silindung Valley, where the most Batak fashion-textiles are made, is the likely place to find such radical innovations as Nai Ganda's hybrids.

In spite of their radical nature, the hybrid textiles are also aptly characterized as involutory. Even in their newness, they acknowledge established textile types and utilize the same technology. They represent variations on established themes rather than whole new themes.

However, the innovations inspire a whole new understanding of the Batak textile tradition. In stark contrast to "tradition" as a monolithic something that does not change but only erodes, the Batak textile tradition appears to be a set of abstract possibilities, some of which have been selected by weavers and by historical circumstances. The Batak textile tradition reveals itself as self-generating, each cloth presenting a fresh set of design and technical possibilities. Tradition, in this sense, becomes a cognitive corpus, clues about which are the finished textiles. Viewed diachronically, the repertory of Batak textiles is a parade of some of the possibilities inherent in that tradition. Impulses from outside, such as new yarns and colours have been selectively incorporated and manipulated by that tradition.

If one were to search for a more concrete definition of tradition in the form of a set body of information, the Batak textile tradition would be more likely to reside in the weaving techniques than in the repertory of finished products. The Batak textile tradition corroborates Junius Bird's Andean finds (1960): textile techniques are a stable body of phenomena, conservative in nature, and slower to change than the products which they make. This observation also has profound implications for popular conceptions of "declining" Indonesian textile traditions. "Decline" has tended to be an evaluation of finished products. An evaluation of Indonesian textile traditions by technique would undoubtedly yield a different story and decline in this dimension would represent a more profound kind of loss.

Although not always explicitly, decline is usually perceived by connoisseurs in aesthetic terms. Aniline dyes and machine-spun yarns are anathema to "good" textile traditions. The present evaluation of "decline" has left aside questions of aesthetics, preferring to allow the Batak aesthetic to speak implicitly through the products that the weavers make. I believe that the discussion of Batak textile innovations reveals what Silindung Valley Batak textile consumers look for and enjoy in their textiles. We would be hard put to justify ranking the aesthetics of the connoisseur above that of Batak weavers and consumers. The more interesting and constructive task is to explore the weaving tradition in its own terms.

Within academe, in recent years, there has been much discussion of the values that North Americans and Europeans have invested in the material objects of politically subordinate cultures (see e.g. Price 1989). Much of the discussion has reconsidered our conceptions of history and put them in the context of political and scientific developments in our own

culture (see e.g. Wolf 1982, Dominguez 1986, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The discussion has shown up our search for "authenticity" and "traditional societies" as a mirage of our own projection. "Traditional" societies, Dominguez has noted, "are assumed to be rooted in the past but to undergo little historical change from within" (1986:549). Furthermore, we have valued what we perceive to be the "authentic" more highly than the products of societies which we perceive as having lost their traditional character. Ruth Phillips (1989) writes that "One of the most damning features of the representational practices of Native American art history is that its standard periodization contains no "modern" era at all...It is as though Native American artists, in keeping with predictions of their imminent disappearance, had been rendered invisible through much of the twentieth century" (1989:10). These words apply equally to the Indonesian textile art traditions. It is time for a new and broader strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

While Silindung Valley weavers use their wits, will, and energy to take up a position in the national and international playing fields of apparel, a certain kind of international attention to their talents and woven products has plummeted. Silindung Valley weavings in the collectors' world are shunned as modern, hence no longer traditional. Museum collections attest to this trend. Silindung Valley textiles are no longer collected, and with that oversight we are losing an opportunity to investigate the adaptation of a dynamic art tradition to radical outside influences.

Silindung Valley textile inventions force us to confront the too-easy use of the terms "traditional" and "modern" as these have been applied to third-world arts. In the Batak world, the textile "tradition" is not being replaced by innovations, but is, rather, reinforced by it. In other words the "modern" actively preserves the "traditional". The inventions have underscored the necessity of looking beyond the products to the cognitive framework which allowed their realization. It has been necessary to reinterpret "tradition" as the combination of techniques and design, and the set of woven possibilities this combination generates, plus historical accident which has selected the products, bringing some to prominence and others to oblivion.

The Batak textile tradition is dynamic rather than static. It has adapted rather than declined; it is surviving.

FOOTNOTES

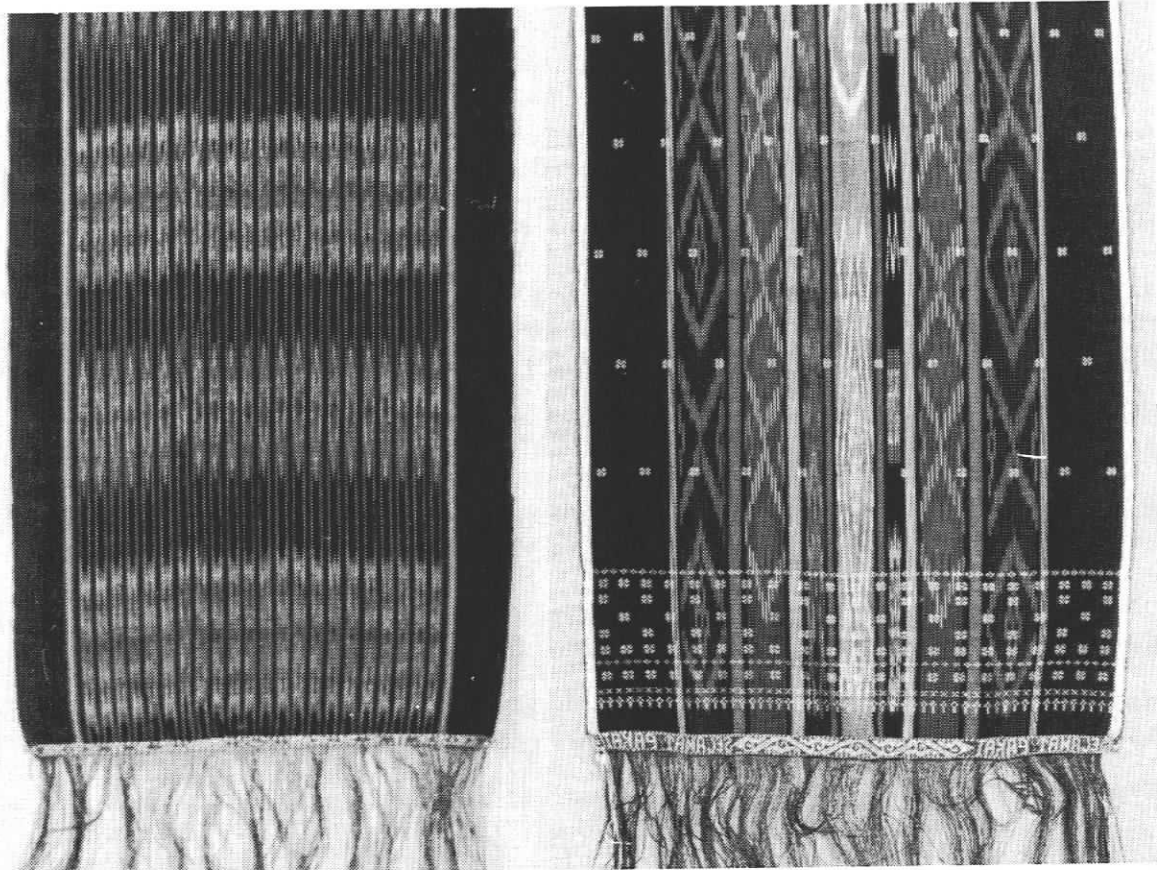
1. The field research for this paper was conducted in 1986 under the auspices of LIPI and with the sponsorship of Universitas HKBP Nommensen in Medan, North Sumatra. Funding for the research was generously provided by WOTRO-ZWO of The Netherlands. In 1990, a return visit was made possible by a SSHRCC grant (1989), and a Killam Post-Doctoral Fellowship (1988-1990)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baizerman, Suzanne. 1987. "Textile Tourist Art: Can We Call it Traditional?", paper presented to the Symposium "Current Issues in Ethnographic Costume and Cloth: Middle America and the Central Andes of South America", Haffenreffer Museum, March 1987.
- Bird, Junius B. 1960. "Suggestions for the Recording of Data on Spinning and Weaving and the Collecting of Material", in The Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers, no. 22, Spring. pp.1-9.
- Burnham, Dorothy. 1980. Warp and Weft: A Textile Terminology. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum.
- Dominguez, Virginia. 1986. "The marketing of heritage". Review article in American Ethnologist 13(3).
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger (eds).1983. The Invention of Tradition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, Ruth B. 1989. "Native American Art and the New Art History", in Museum Anthropology 13/4: 5 - 13.
- Price, Sally.1989. Primitive Art in Civilized Places. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wolf, Eric R. 1982. Europe and the People Without History. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press.



ill.1 Nai Ganda is an ikat-maker in the village of Hutagalung. Here she is untying her newly-dyed ikat yarns

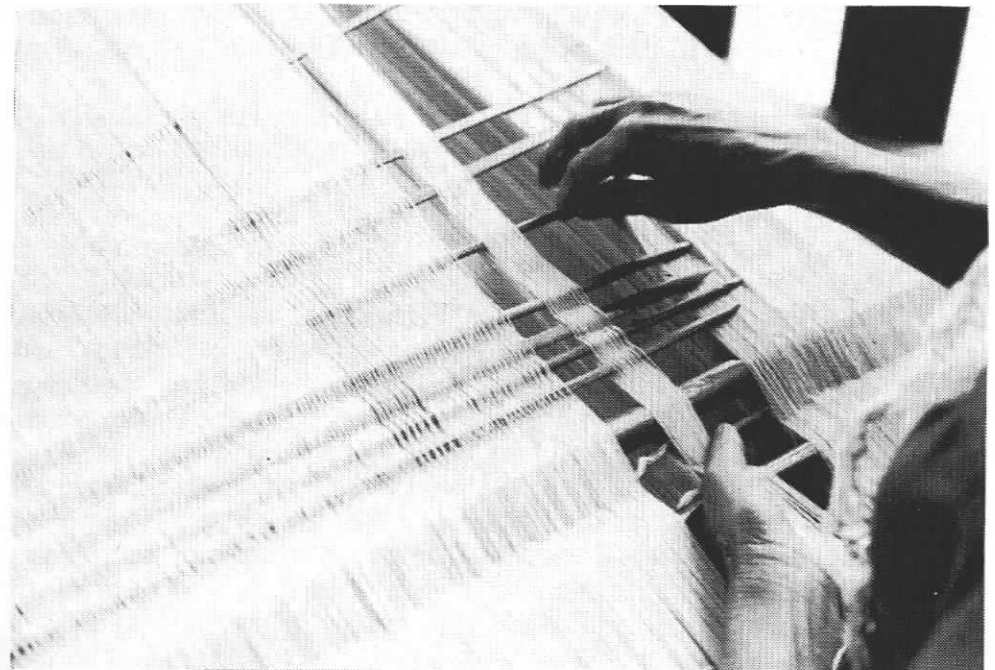
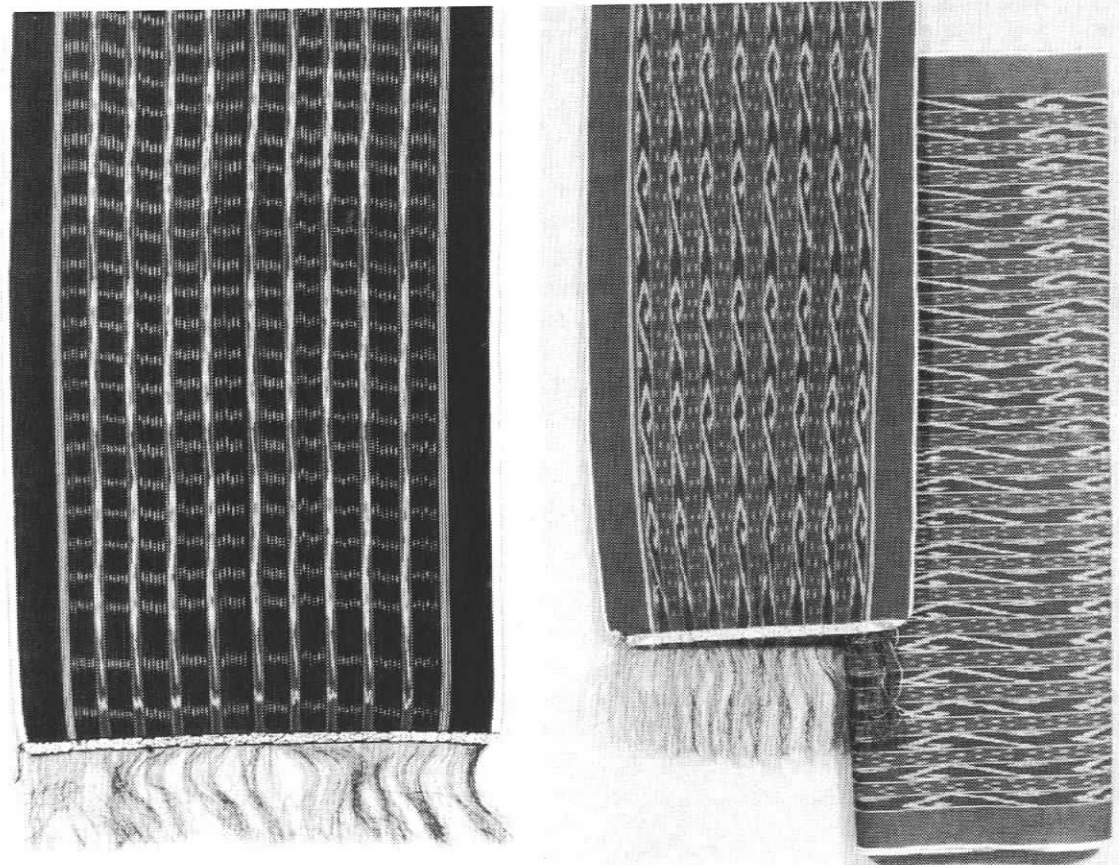


ill.2 ▲

ill.4 ▼

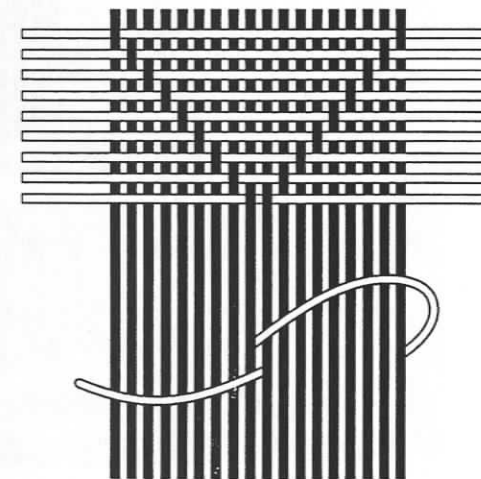
ill.3 ▲

ill.5 ▼



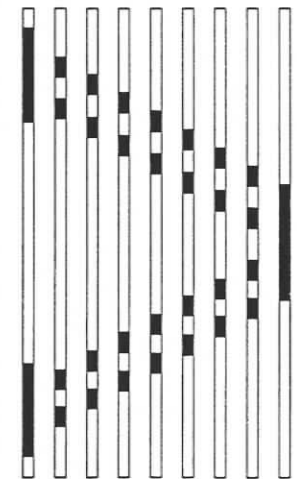
ill.7

Mamutik: The ikat-maker inserts the rods to count the warps.

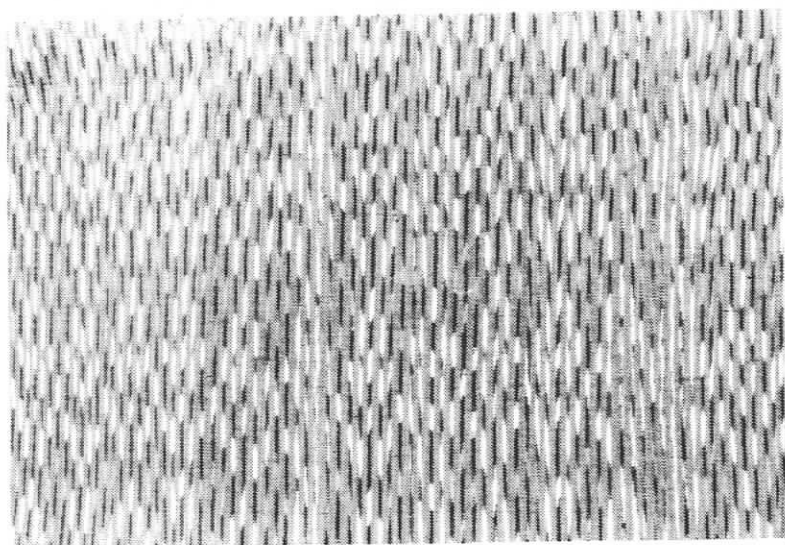


ill.8 Mamutik
The rods are used to count the warps.

The string marks off motif units.

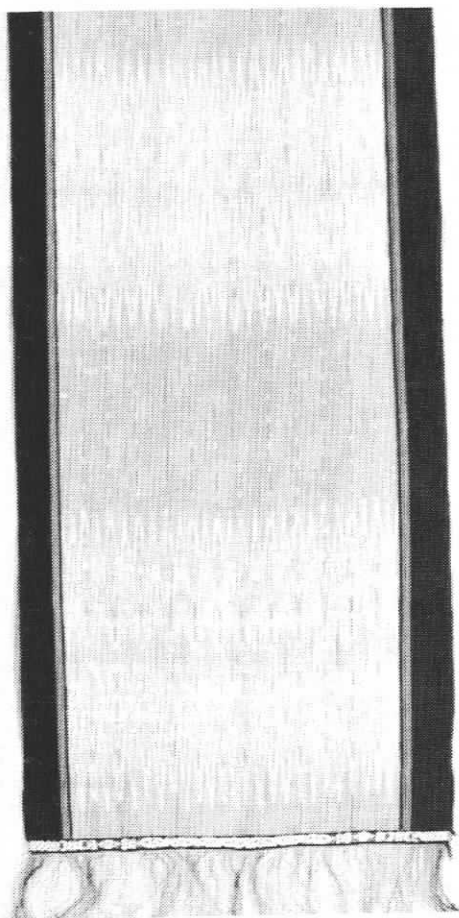


ill.9 Tying off the warps
Each vertical stripe represents all the warps picked up by one of the wooden rods.

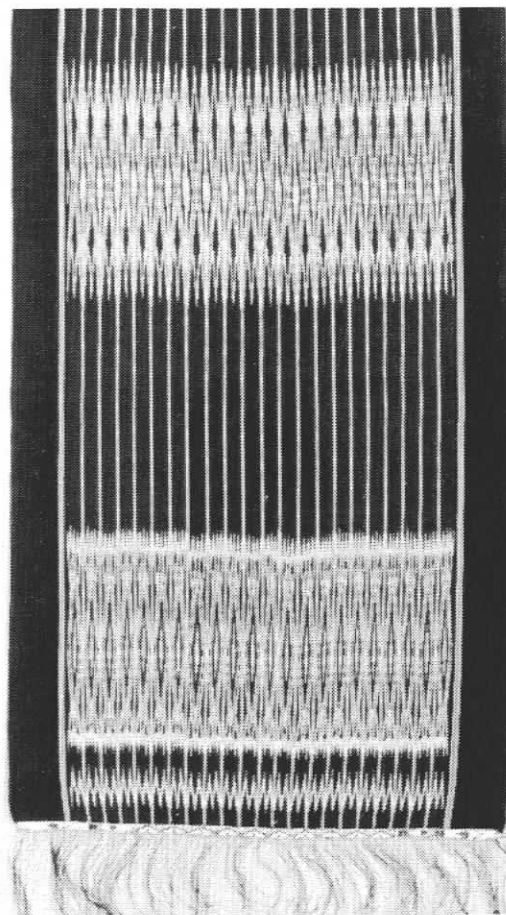


ill.6

Udanudan (rain)
widely-spaced
Simarpusoran ikat



ill.10
SiBolang Rasta na marsimeoreor



ill.11
Si Tolu Tuho