Adat in the Office: The Creative Afterlife of a New Order Cultural Policy

Abstract: This paper explores the emergence of a new genre of garments in Eastern Indonesia: ‘traditional’ uniforms, made from locally hand-woven cloth, which are worn twice weekly by government employees in Kupang, the capital of the province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, or NTT). These uniforms, which emerged following a 1997 regulation, supported the emergence of a new, urban textile culture, and a partial decoupling of traditional clothing from adat, Indonesian customary law, even as they allowed adat to make inroads into government offices. National policy, the agitation of local elites, and the innovation and conservatism of artists and ritual practitioners, all contributed to this new form of artistic and cultural expression. While attention has been paid to the domesticating power of the state on local forms of cultural expression, this example shows how attempts at control can also push cultural expressions in unexpected directions.

Keywords: Indonesia, Textiles, Uniforms, East Nusa Tenggara, Cultural Policy

Much has been written about the uses of ‘culture’ (budaya or kebudayaan), ‘tradition’ (tradisi), and ‘custom’ (adat) in Indonesian politics and government. Ellen (1988), Pemberton (1994), and Picard and Wood (1997) described the ways that ‘culture’ was used as a tool for constructing an Indonesian national identity during the New Order period (1965-1998). In the Reformasi Era, which began in 1998, marginalized groups used ‘culture’ (sometimes conflated with adat) to pursue political power, deploying forms of cultural display and solidarity to authenticate claims to land or other resources (Davidson and Henley 2007).

While the state can, and often does, domesticate local forms of cultural expression, reverse effects are also possible: state intervention in cultural expression can unleash new forms of creativity. Government policies, the agitation of local elites, and the creativity or conservatism of rural artists and ritual practitioners, can all combine to create new forms of artistic and cultural expression, and to redefine the meanings of old forms of cultural display. The incorporation of localized cultural expressions into state spaces can also change how those spaces function, by introducing non-state ways of thinking into a new arena.
This paper explores these issues by looking at the emergence of a new genre of garments in Eastern Indonesia: ‘traditional’ uniforms, made from locally hand-woven cloth, which are occasionally worn by government employees in Kupang, the sprawling capital of the province of East Nusa Tenggara (Nusa Tenggara Timur, or NTT), located near the southwestern tip of Indonesian West Timor.

I passed through Kupang many times in the years between 2008 and 2012, in the course of my work as a writer and researcher with the Threads of Life Indonesian Textile Center, an NGO and small gallery in Ubud, Bali, that engaged with rural weaving communities. On those trips, Kupang served as a way-station, en route to more remote locations, where weavers, many of them old women, were producing textiles on backstrap looms, some using hand-spun thread and natural dyes, and mostly adhering to long-standing, localized conventions of style.

On one of those trips, I noticed that public employees around Kupang were wearing striking, unusual uniforms. Unlike their normal uniforms, made from factory-produced khaki cloth, these made from brightly colored, hand-woven material, and decorated with motifs from around the province. While rural people wore hand-woven cloth in the form of sarongs, these office-goers wore it as safari jackets and skirt suits, similar to their usual uniforms. I was accustomed to seeing these textiles in rural settings, worn as ritual costumes or draped over sacred implements in the performance of religious ceremonies. Now, here they were, in the big city, distinctly un-sacred, as office-wear.

When I brought this practice up with rural weavers around Timor, they complained. The government was encouraging them to weave poor-quality cloth, and sell it as cheaply as possible. In their view, this constituted an assault on their livelihoods, and on their traditions. Given the opportunity to weave for the high-value tourist market, which valued cultural continuity and would pay for it, those women gladly refused to weave uniform-style cloth.

But the uniforms I saw in Kupang were filled with creative reinterpretations of traditional themes, motifs, and designs. Clearly, some weavers were using the opportunity to experiment, innovate, and reinvent their art. I was astounded that the purpose of this creativity should be adorning the bodies of public servants. I wanted to know, who was weaving for this purpose? Was traditional cloth being reduced to mere fashion? Or, perhaps, did these uniforms permit the incursion of traditional modes of thought about cloth and garments into the state space?

In July of 2012, I took a week away from my regular work, and traveled to
Kupang to investigate these uniforms: their history, their political context, and their effects on the textile culture I had been studying in rural areas. I spoke with representatives from several government departments, weavers in the city and the nearby countryside, shopkeepers, tailors, and one traditional leader, the raja (king) of Amarasi, a district some 25km south of Kupang. That brief period fieldwork was situated in four years as a researcher with Threads of Life. Several of the informants interviewed for this article had spoken to me about textiles on previous occasions. All of the interviews cited here were conducted in or around Kupang, West Timor. While my informants sometimes discussed the culture of the entire province of NTT, they were all speaking within and about the Timorese context.

**Clothing and Continuity**

Indonesia’s New Order began with a military coup, in 1965. In the years that followed, the military government attempted to establish legitimacy and stability by drawing a line of uninterrupted continuity between the authorities of the past, and those of the present. To this end, the state supported traditional festivals and ceremonies across Indonesia (Pemberton 1994, 183). These ceremonies were intended to build a sense of ‘traditional timelessness,’ a pretense that there had been no change of era between the past and the present. As Pemberton (1994, 9) argued, the continuation of traditions served as evidence that New Order Indonesia was a space in which nothing happened, with the changes of history effaced for the sake of continuity. In this context, the idea that Indonesia’s traditions did not change, but were anchored in a deep and constant history, had important political implications.

Corralling Indonesia’s incredible variety of traditions into a single, stable, unifying national culture required a sustained and sophisticated effort. Cultural diversity was celebrated, but redefined, in the understanding that local practices were not independent traditions, but variations on a culture that was national in scope. The existence of different customs in different places confirmed that there was ‘culture’ everywhere, and that each village had its part to play, as a local expression of that totalizing system (Pemberton 1994, 12). Diversity that might have suggested political separateness instead proved the dynamism of unified, culture-rich Indonesia (Pemberton 1994, 205).

A prime example of this could be found in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah, a theme park in Jakarta that featured miniature versions of traditional houses from around the archipelago. Taman Mini defined Indonesia’s national culture as a collection of provincial cultures, in which cultural or political units such as kingdoms, villages, language families, and ethnic groups were supplanted by the modern political unit of the province. In Scott’s (1998, 11) terminology, Taman Mini ‘simplified’ Indonesian culture, reducing it to a small number of elements—especially architecture, performing arts, and handicrafts—
that could be compared across all the regions of the country. This simplification rendered Indonesian culture ‘legible’ to the state, and thus eligible for state control or interference. In the specific context of Indonesian culture, Pemberton (1994) called this process ‘Mini-ization.’

Textiles were key to the reorganization of Indonesian culture into an assemblage of distinct and related segments. The most visible of these textiles nationwide was batik, a type of cloth decorated by a dye-resist technique using wax. Among my informants in NTT, when worn within Indonesia, batik represented the island of Java and its people. When batik was presented as a gift to foreigners, on the other hand, or was worn during Indonesia’s 17th August Independence Day celebrations, they felt that it represented the entire nation of Indonesia, as a national cultural icon. Edy Latu, a spokesman for the NTT Provincial Development Planning Agency (BAPPEDA), explained to me how these different forms of cloth are worn in practice in the provincial offices in Kupang. ‘For national events, we wear batik. Because batik is our national cultural heritage, internationally known by people in foreign countries.’ He then pointed to the uniform jacket he was then wearing, made in a style of ikat originating in Belu, West Timor. ‘Local ethnic groups wear this. But Pak Ian, don’t be surprised if you see on television or in an official event that people wear batik.’

Both of these designations — batik as Java, and batik as Indonesia — obscured a great deal of diversity. Java was home to numerous styles of batik, associated with particular traditions and localities. Now, these many styles were cast as varieties of a single product. Presenting batik as the nation’s textile also obscured the existence of the dozens of other weaving and decorative techniques employed by weavers from Belu to Bukit Tinggi, subsuming them within the larger category of ‘Indonesian textiles,’ represented by Javanese batik. This was Mini-ization in action.

**Indonesian Government Uniforms**

The legitimacy of the New Order did not depend only on an image of traditional timelessness. It also relied on an image of modernization, change, and development. Even as the government promoted traditional cloth as a unifying and stabilizing element of national culture, it treated traditional costume as a vestige of the non-modern past, to be discarded on the way to a developed future. A display in Taman Mini Indonesia Indah on the development of isolated peoples presented mannequins in traditional dress as the ‘before’ image of development; in the ‘after’ image, figures wore khaki government uniforms (Pemberton 1994, 175). Given the friction between these opposing ideologies of tradition and development, the appearance of hybrid, ‘traditional’ uniforms was perhaps inevitable.

The uniforms worn by Indonesian civil servants took shape in the 1970s, when ‘uniform fever’ swept across the country (Sekimoto 1997, 321). The basic uniform was the
safari suit, in neutral colors such as khaki or gray. It was not long before these uniforms were seen to present other opportunities. ‘In the mid 1980s, the governor of Central Java, Ismail, instructed all the civil servants in the province to wear shirts made of lurik — striped hand-woven cloth once common among Javanese folk — to support the ailing small manufacturers of this fabric (Sekimoto 1997, 323).’ By the 1990s, civil servants in Central Java wore at least three different uniforms: ‘grey safari suits from Monday to Friday; shirts and blouses with local character, such as batik or tenun ikat hand-woven cloth on Saturdays; and batik-like shirts with the Golkar’s banyan tree motifs on every 17th of the month’ (Sekimoto 1997: 321-3).

In 1997, the provincial government of NTT introduced its own policy requiring employees to wear uniforms made from ‘traditional cloth’ to the office on Wednesday and Thursday of each week. The policy was introduced by Herman Musakabe, a general in the Indonesian military, who was appointed governor of NTT in 1993. As in Central Java, it was hoped the new market would support rural weavers. Adrianus Resi, a spokesman for the NTT Bureau of Organization who spoke to me in 2012, also listed the preservation of traditional culture as one reason for the policy, though the economic reason was given greater weight. The government defined as ‘traditional’ any cloth produced by hand, within the province, using motifs originating from the ethnic groups of NTT.

Musakabe outlined his intellectual framework for governing in several essays on public policy, which were published in 1993. In an essay entitled ‘Development of National Stability’ (Pembinaan Stabilitas Nasional), Musakabe laid out a vision of a social and political system based on three tenets: First, that national stability was a structure engineered from above, ‘in which community dynamics do not unfold naturally (wajar)’ (Musakabe 1993, 152). Second, that stability without stagnation required an active base of participation from below, spaces in which the people could communicate and interact with the state and one another in ‘dynamic conditions’ (Musakabe 1993, 153). Third, that national stability was the product of a comprehensive, integrated social system, encompassing ideology, politics, economy, culture, and security.

The 1997 uniform policy drew on the Mini-ization practiced across New Order Indonesia, creating a state-sanctioned category of cultural production – NTT traditional textiles – that could contain the myriad varieties of cloth produced in the province, demonstrate, through its diversity, the vitality of provincial culture, and establish the province as a cultural unit within the larger set of the provinces of Indonesia. The policy also aimed to leverage cultural assets into livelihoods for the rural poor, by providing weavers with new consumers. And by regulating cultural production, and inviting it into the politicized space of government offices, the policy exemplified the combination of politics, economy, and culture within an integrated social system controlled from above.
But ‘traditional’ uniforms broke with the ‘Mini’ concept of timeless, changeless culture. The state was not asking employees to wear sarongs and shoulder-cloths to work, but uniforms: traditional cloth, cut and tailored into safari suits. This new, hybrid garment called for new designs, and brought forth innovations in production and style. This was the space for bottom-up engagement to prevent stagnation, the third key concept of Musakabe’s National Stability. Spokesmen in the government today refer to the cloth produced under this policy as *kain NTT*. This new category of weaving is the icon of Mini-ized, provincial culture.

**Old Cloth, New Context**

NTT is a diverse province, with an extremely diverse array of textile traditions. Traditional clothing in NTT centers on sarongs, a term which could refer to fabric sewn into a tube, or left as an open sheet. Folded head-cloths, scarf-like shoulder-cloths, belts, bags, hats, elaborate jewelry, and other accessories may complete the ensemble. Of the many, many methods NTT weavers use to decorate their work, the most common was the dye-resist **ikat** technique, followed by a variety of supplementary warp and weft weaving techniques, such as *pahikung* in east Sumba (Forshee 2001), *songké* in western Flores (Allerton 2007), and *sotis* in Timor (Coury 2004).

Each ethnic or cultural group has its own sumptuary rules, restricting the use of particular kinds of cloth to particular groups of people (Gillow 1992). According to these rules, certain colors, motifs, or design structures may be limited to members of a particular caste, or a particular social rank. Emblems representing particular families or clans might be permitted only to members of those clans. Certain styles might be worn only by people who originate in a particular place, or within a particular kingdom. Some cloths are limited to certain ceremonial uses; for example, some motifs adorn only the bodies of the dead. Garments could indicate a person’s home district or kingdom, clan, class or social rank, marriage status, level of ceremonial accomplishment, or any number of other characteristics. These rules are classed as a part of local **adat**, or customary law. *Adat* is not firmly codified, but is something closer to an accretion of precedents, which bears on numerous areas of everyday life. In rural Indonesia, law, political authority, land rights, religious rituals, dances and songs, artistic styles, and what clothing should be worn, when, and by whom, may all be subject to highly localized systems of guidelines and rules, all of which are glossed as *adat*.

Every respondent I consulted in the course of preparing this paper—including government spokesmen and employees, weavers, and traditional leaders—agreed about one thing: the meaning of a traditional cloth, and the **adat** restrictions that applied to its use in a traditional context, vanished the instant that the cloth was cut. Sarongs, shoulder-cloths, and other traditional garments were made from whole cloth, uncut and rarely sewn, except to make turn sheets of cloth into tubes. Jackets and skirts, however, were constructed garments,
made from sections of cut cloth.

    When I mentioned cloth-cutting to Leo Nahak, the head of the NTT Provincial Museum in Kupang, he pointed to his own jacket, and laughed: ‘Even gender restrictions are thrown out!’ His jacket was made from an *ei worapi*, a type of tube sarong worn only by women.

    The *ei worapi* is itself a useful case study of innovation in textile use and design. It was developed on Savu island, which lies between Timor and Sumba. Savunese women's ceremonial garments were governed by a basic division between two female descent groups: the *hubi ae*, or ‘greater blossom’ lineage, and the *hubi iki*, or ‘lesser blossom.’ Each descent group was required to wear a particular type of sarong, following a prescribed set of guidelines, and incorporating motifs that described the clan and sub-lineage of the wearer in greater detail. With the introduction of Christianity, and a need for new rituals honoring the power of Europeans, Savunese weavers developed a third type of sarong that was ritually neutral—it could be freely worn by members of either the *hubi ae* or *hubi iki*—and could also use pictorial and vegetal motifs like the ones used in European art. That new kind of sarong, which emerged sometime in the last several centuries, was the *ei worapi* (Duggan 2001, 27-29).

    In the same way, cutting textiles for tailoring into jackets and skirts rendered them ritually neutral; they became unsuitable for village ceremonies, but appropriate for re-definition in a new context, such as the office. The *ei worapi*, a product of the friction between local and global religions, artistic styles, and forms of social organization, also exemplifies the messy and complicated history of innovation in traditional textiles in Southeastern Indonesia.

**Control of the Authentically Traditional**

    The uniform policy put the government in the business of defining what kinds of cloth did or did not count as legitimately ‘traditional.’ Adrianus Resi and Edy Latu, spokesmen for the Bureau of Organization and the Provincial Planning Body (*Bappeda*) in Kupang, described the rules like so: the cloth must be made in NTT, without the use of machines, and it must feature motifs originating within the province. The state’s definition did not touch on the materials used to make the cloth, such as chemical versus natural dyes, or on who did the weaving — that is, whether motifs specific to particular ethnic groups were produced by people belonging to those groups. The office rules did not limit who was permitted to wear what, and all of my informants told me that their favorite styles of cloth were different from the ones they grew up with. Pak Resi, for instance, who grew up in Ende, on the south coast of Flores, owned uniform jackets in styles from Sumba, Timor, and Savu, but not from his home district.
Sometime around 2010, another new type of textile appeared in Kupang’s fabric shops: bolts of lightweight, synthetic fabric, produced in factories in East Java, decorated with variations of motifs from around NTT. These motifs tended to be miniature, smaller than the original forms, and printed with an artificial roughness, suggesting the handmade quality of real ikat. It was light, and more comfortable than hand-woven cloth for wear in stuffy offices. And as a factory product, it could undercut the price of any homemade, hand-woven textile.

This was also the outcome when Central Java ordered its employees to wear lurik, in the 1980s. ‘Original lurik was quickly replaced by mass—produced cloth of a similar look from larger, modern textile factories’ (Sekimoto 1997: 323).

The NTT government disallowed the use of Javanese factory-made cloth for uniforms in 2011, citing not cultural reasons but economic ones. The government wanted its employees to continue patronizing local weavers. Despite this ban, when I visited Kupang’s textile shops in 2012, Java-made cloth with NTT-derived motifs was still widely available, at a cost of less than US $3 per meter.

I looked over some of this cloth with Ony Meda, a guide and translator who assisted me in this research. Pak Ony was of Rotinese origin, but had lived in Kupang for many years. He often led tourists to weaving destinations around Timor, and had a deep knowledge of Timorese textiles and rituals. ‘I feel sad,’ he said, examining some cloth with designs poached from East Sumba. ‘They are trying to destroy our culture.’

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘The people in Java who make this,’ he replied. ‘They steal our motifs. But they cannot steal our knowledge.’

For Pak Ony, the terms ‘culture’ and ‘knowledge’ implied much more than motifs alone. (In our conversation, he used the English terms.) To Ony, a cloth with a certain motif could be considered the legitimate cultural product only if it was produced in a particular way, in a particular place, and by a particular kind of person, who was heir to particular traditions transmitted in a particular way. To buy such a cloth, and to wear it, would embed the user in a web of relationships very different from the one embodied by the smooth, brightly colored, factory-made cloth we were looking at together in the shop. The new cloth, for Ony, stood in clear relation to the traditions from which it was derived: illegitimately appropriated, inauthentic, and dangerous.
I also discussed this factory-made cloth with Robert Koroh, the present-day raja of Amarasi, one of West Timor’s colonial-era kingdoms, located south of Kupang. He responded with a litany of objections. For one, the motifs had been appropriated without compensation to the ethnic groups where they originated. (Ownership of traditional motifs is a contentious issue in Indonesia, where copyright on such patterns and images technically belongs to the state (cf Aragon and Leach [2008]).) Pak Koroh was also concerned that these motifs were reproduced by machines, not by people. Even worse, the people running the machines did not belong to the ethnic groups with whom those motifs originated, and could not understand the motifs’ deeper meanings. The effect, in his opinion, was a dehumanization of the textile arts, and a loss of what was really important: the spirit of the weaver, her knowledge and care, embedded in the finished cloth.

Pak Koroh’s house was the first stop for most foreign visitors to Amarasi, the place to learn about local culture, and to buy traditional Amarasi textiles, which he gathered from local weavers and sold at a slight markup. He accepted only cloth that was made with natural dyes and conformed to inherited norms of motif and structure. He believed that his position as raja, in a democratic age, depended on a conservative interpretation of traditional culture, and on being the arbiter who decided what was and was not traditional. ‘No culture, no kings,’ as he said. This position placed him alongside many cultural specialists, who use their knowledge of the difference between ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ versions of tradition to give themselves some kind of power (Pemberton 1994, Adams 1995). According to Pak Koroh, the uniform regulation was a deliberate power grab on the part of the government, a co-optation of the authority and prestige of traditional leaders. This threat manifested in two ways: first, by establishing the government as an arbiter of what was or was not traditional; and second, by making space for innovation in textile production and wear.

**Behind Conservatism and Innovation**

The uniform policy stimulated demand for kain NTT, by requiring public servants to purchase locally-made cloth for additional uniforms. Khaki uniforms were cheap, and easy to procure; customers bought the cloth from shops on Kupang’s waterfront road, then carried it to Kampung Solor, a neighborhood a few streets over, where tailors in dozens of tiny plywood stalls cut and sewed it into jackets, pants, skirts, and blouses. In 2012, between the cost of cloth and the cost of tailoring, a khaki uniform jacket ran about US $5. Employees of the Indonesian government paid for these uniforms themselves, out of salaries that mostly sat between IDR 1-2 million per month (US $100 to $200, at the July 2012 exchange rate). A uniform jacket made from hand-woven cloth, by contrast, cost US $35-$75, or sometimes more, and the government did not subsidize the difference in cost. As a result, the new market for hand-woven cloth also placed an extreme downward pressure on price.

From at least the 1980s, trainers from the NTT Department of Industry and Trade
DESPERINDAG visited villages around West Timor, encouraging women to form weaving cooperatives (**kelompok**), teaching them to weave, and offering interested weavers free supplies of chemical dye. DESPERINDAG trainers instructed weavers to make their work less labor-intensive, by increasing the size and reducing the complexity of their motifs, and by using chemical dyes instead of natural ones. The goal was to create a high-turnover home industry of low-quality, inexpensive cloth, which would channel money to rural women. With the creation of the uniform policy, a steady demand for such cloth now existed. Stimulated by DESPERINDAG’S efforts, rural weavers began producing large volumes of low-quality cloth.

But West Timor’s rural and urban markets were poorly linked, and goods and information failed to flow properly between them. Rural markets were soon glutted with cloth made with a minimal input of materials, labor, and skill, which no one in the villages wanted to buy. Prices fell through the floor. Many rural weavers were disillusioned, and went back to their old practices.

I knew Katarina Neparasi Siga well enough, by the time of this research, to call her by her familiar name of Mama Kete. I had visited her several times before, in her home in Baun, the village capital of Amarasi, to buy textiles with Threads of Life. Mama Kete was a leader in a cooperative of weavers, called *Kai Ne’e*, which produced textiles of the highest quality for sale to dealers like us, as well as to a trickle of tourists and foreign visitors that reached her door.

Mama Kete told me that prices for *kain industri* (industrial cloth), as she called it, after the department that supplied the dyestuffs, were too low to justify the work. It would be impossible to make a living catering to that market. Even if she did produce cheap cloth, she had no access to Kupang; like many rural weavers, her cloth reached only rural markets, where low-quality work was not in demand. This lack of access was compounded by a lack of information. Fifteen years after the introduction of the uniform regulation, and despite numerous training sessions in which DESPERINDAG instructors taught Baun weavers to use chemical dyes and simplify their motifs, Mama Kete had never heard that the provincial government required its workers to wear uniforms of traditional cloth.

I asked Mama Kete how it would make her feel to know someone was cutting up her cloth. ‘I worked myself half to death to make it,’ she replied, with a laugh. ‘If someone cut it, my blood pressure would rise, and I would die!’ Her answer was given in jest, but clearly implied that something vital would be destroyed in the process of cutting and sewing.

She had no problem with selling to tourists, however, even though she had only the barest understanding of the way that her textiles would be used, so far from the context and traditions in which they had been woven. The tourist market, exemplified by Threads of Life,
treated her textiles as high-value ethnic artworks, rather than garments. What mattered to those buyers was the knowledge and labor that went into the cloth’s production, its aesthetic quality, and its fidelity to Amarasi’s textile traditions. Weavers with the skills to meet those requirements were few in number, and ever fewer had the marketing connections to put their work in front of the relatively small number of textile enthusiasts willing to pay top prices. Because this market was so small, compared to the hundreds of public servants in Kupang alone, and compared to the demand for cloth for rituals among villagers themselves, the demands of the tourist trade had a relatively small effect on the market at large.

Victoria Nai'sanu, another Amarasi weaver, lived in a cinderblock house in the village of Merbaun, where swirling winds and dust occasionally forced her to move her loom off her front porch, and do her weaving inside. She referred to herself in our interview as a poor person, eager to accept any commission, regardless of how it might differ from received notions of what was or was not traditional. Articles in bright colors were big sellers on the local market, as was cloth with stripes of shiny golden tinsel.

Mama Victoria, like Mama Kete, was unaware that public servants in Kupang were required to buy uniforms of traditional cloth. But she did show me a finished piece, commissioned by an employee of the sub-district government who intended to have it tailored into a jacket. The cloth was dominated by bright, Amarasi red—though reproduced in chemical dye—and included a traditional Amarasi motif. But the man had also asked Mama Victoria: couldn't she put some butterflies on it as well? And so she invented a new ikat pattern, a large butterfly with patterned wings and long antennae, and placed it at intervals between the traditional motifs.

Mama Victoria’s cloth spoke to local tastes, which derived from Amarasi traditions, but also diverged from them. How closely such cloth hued to tradition was not important to her, or to all of her customers, who found themselves free to ask her to produce any cloth they wanted to wear. This pursuit of weaving as a largely economic enterprise, a fashion one, connected to changing tastes, not stable traditions, seemed like an attitude more at home in the city than the countryside.

Pak Ony, Pak Koroh, Mama Kete, Mama Victoria, and the government spokesmen all attempted to define authentically traditional cloth, and each of them defined the qualities that made a textile more or less traditional in different ways. In interviews I framed this question around the ‘traditionality’ (ketradisionalan) of various kinds of textiles. What elements made a piece of cloth or a garment more or less traditional? Where, in the minds of various actors, did authentic traditionality reside?

According to government officials I interviewed, the state initially defined as traditional any cloth with motifs that originated from the territory of East Nusa Tenggara
province. More recently, that definition changed, taking the emphasis off of motifs and placing it on *where* the cloth was made (within the province, and not in Java) and *how* it was made (on a hand-powered loom, and not in an industrial plant). Mama Victoria, a rural weaver, also emphasized *how* the cloth was made, but her definition of the traditional excluded hand-powered ATBM (*alat tenun bukan mesin*, or non-mechanical looms), such as the ones used in Kupang’s urban weaving workshops. She insisted that traditional cloth must be woven on back-strap body-tension looms, like the one she used herself. But Mama Victoria accepted all kinds of innovations in color, motif, and the use of gold thread, that Pak Koroh would reject as non-traditional. For him, and for Mama Kete, in addition to the *where* and the *how*, it mattered from *what* the textile was made. While hand-spun cotton thread, already a rare product in Timor, seldom came up, natural dyes were, to them, at the core of a textile's traditionality. They also said that it mattered who made the textile, and that the weaver should belong to the ethnic group whose art she is producing, a compunction not shared by weavers in the city, who were busy making cloth in styles from the entire province. In short, different respondents defined the traditionality of a textile by *where*, *how*, from *what*, and by *whom* it was made. Left out of all definitions were questions of for whom the cloth was made, or how it was exchanged.

**Kupang’s Urban Textile Culture**

At the time of research in 2012, the majority of the hand-woven cloth used in Kupang uniforms was not produced in villages, but in Kupang, in large workshops employing dozens of women. I visited one such workshop, perhaps the largest in the city: The Ina Ndao Group Textile Production House, run by Ina Ndao, an entrepreneur from Ndao island, near Rote. (Unfortunately, Ina Ndao was ill the day I came to visit, and my tight schedule prevented me from coming back.) Eight women sat at workstations in the airy, warehouse-like space, using plastic raffia to create large, simplified *ikat* patterns on bundles of unwoven threads. Two more were chalking and cutting finished cloth, and tailoring it into jackets and skirts. Another woman was bent over a cloth, tracing the outlines of its motifs with lines of glue, over which she sprinkled generous handfuls of gold glitter. In the corner, unused that day, stood a handful of wooden ATBM looms, at which weavers would have worked while seated on a bench, raising and lowering the sheds with foot-pedals—a nearly industrial technology, compared to the body-tension looms used by home producers. Out the back, four more women in thick rubber gloves mixed chemical dyes in plastic buckets, and worked the color into partially finished textiles, holding their faces back from the noxious, eye-stinging fumes that curled from the dye baths.

In the shop hung long- and short-sleeved jackets, skirts, dresses, neckties, purses, and all manner of souvenirs and trinkets made from cloth woven in the workshop. Most of the cloth produced at Ina Ndao featured the black backgrounds and X-shaped flower patterns of Rote, a small island off of Timor that was the original home of nearly all the women
employed in the workshop; but I identified motifs from across Sumba, Savu, Flores, and Timor. Other weaving and decorative techniques besides *ikat* were on display, especially *pahikung*, a supplementary warp patterning technique from East Sumba (Forshee 2001), and *buna*, a traditional warp-wrapping technique that has become very popular in Timor in the last ten to fifteen years (Coury 2004). The patterns popped with bright chemical colors. Any of the jackets or skirts in the shop would have been deemed suitable for wear to the provincial government office.

Also hanging in the store was an odd piece, a Muslim prayer rug, woven with *pahikung*. That is, it was a cloth woven in a Sumbanese style, made by Christians from Roti, for use by Muslim migrants from Java living in Timor. The consummate hybrid object, it could not have been made in any earlier time or place, and it exemplified NTT’s contemporary textile culture brilliantly.

[Figure 2]

At the NTT Provincial Museum, I perused displays of cloth in the company of Zakeos Safis, a caretaker, and one of the workers to whom the uniform policy applies. ‘Cloth is identity,’ he said. ‘In the village, it is ethnic identity. In the office, it is NTT identity.’

He pointed me toward a red-and-white sarong on display in one of the museum’s glass cases. It had been woven by one of his relatives, in his home district in the old Timorese kingdom of Amfoan.

He was proud, he said, when he saw cloth from his home district worn by someone from another area; he said it aroused feelings of brotherhood (*kesaudaraan*) across the province. Other informants in government agreed with this view.

But the feeling was not uncomplicated. Sometimes, he said, people would wear uniforms decorated with motifs meant only for funerals, or with patterns previously restricted to members of the royal family. He did not dispute the right of non-royals to wear royal motifs, but admitted to being taken aback, every time, by the mismatch. Pak Safis was 48 years old, and conceded that the younger generation was unlikely to feel his discomfort. These days, he said, complex patterns were not about birth status, but money; fine motifs with many colors are more difficult to produce, and make the cloth more expensive. A person wearing such a jacket might inquire as to its place of origin, and perhaps even learn the meaning of the main motif. But more subtle knowledge, he said, fell by the wayside. In Amfoan, he told me, red and white stand for the physical bravery and spiritual purity of a hero; their use is a moral reminder and a mark of aspiration. That lesson is not transmitted when Amfoan cloth is sold as a jacket.
When I asked him about the cultural changes he had seen in twenty-plus years living in Kupang, he shook his head. ‘Culture doesn’t change (berubah),’ he said. ‘It slides (bergeser).’

The urban weaver Ester Koro, known as Ina Koro (no relation to Robert Koroh), moved to Kupang from Savu island with her husband in the early 1990s. Eventually she divorced him — a difficult proposition for a woman, under Indonesian law. The divorce cost her everything she had. But when she spoke to me, in July 2012, she had put all of her daughters through high school, and purchased land in the city and built a house for each of them. She also owned a boarding house, and a PlayStation center, where children could play video games by the hour. All this, she said, was paid for with her earnings as a weaver.

Ina Koro was talented weaver and a dynamic businesswoman, but she attributed much of her success to the government's uniform policy, which provided her with more commissions than she could fill. Even besides the commissions, she felt strongly supported by the government; local officials frequently brought her gifts of thread, she said, and offered her places at government-sponsored exhibitions. Overall, she felt that the uniform policy empowered her to live an independent life, and to provide a secure future for her children.

Ina Koro stressed the difference between the city and the village: in her village in Savu, nothing about textile usage has relaxed. Rules on lineage, gender, origin, and the like continue to determine who is allowed to wear what. ‘In the city,’ however, ‘nobody understands. They don’t care about meanings, class, about adat, the proper way to wear things. They only care about looking good (gagah).’ Public servants frequently asked her for unusual combinations of color and motif, which she was happy to provide. She compared the uniform policy to another government policy, requiring the use of motorbike helmets. ‘People wear helmets because it’s a rule from the government, but they might not understand why they have to. They don’t care about protecting themselves, just about not getting in trouble with the police. It’s like that with these government uniforms. They have to buy them because the government says so, but they don’t know what it’s for.’

She laughed as she said this, which surprised me. If the rules mattered in the country, I asked, how could they be made light of in the city?

‘You have to laugh,’ she said. ‘If you have a sour face (muka asem) you won’t do any business.’

The urban environment allowed weavers to work without the supervision of cultural experts or traditional leaders, limited only by the uniform policy, with its liberal interpretation of traditionality. Female entrepreneurs like Ina Koro and Ina Ndao used this freedom to experiment with textile traditions as fashion, leveraging their skills into economic
Urban consumers, also freed from traditional constraints on their clothing, were taking the opportunity to wear unfamiliar cloth. What did it mean to separate traditional cloth from ethnicity, social class, and descent group, and join it to a desire to look gagah: dashing, rakish, cool? Unfortunately, answers were incomplete, not least because the public servants who spoke with me were all male. (The NTT Department for Women’s Empowerment declined my request for an interview.) But it was clear that individuals—ordinary people, not just weaving masters or cultural arbiters—were extending their personal aesthetics to traditional materials, expressing personal vision through a medium normally governed by a relatively static, historical, collective consensus on appropriate form and use. “It’s like stepping out of prison,” Pak Nahak told me.

Adat Kantor: The Custom of the Office

According to Adrianus Resi, the spokesman from the NTT Bureau of Organization, the offices occasionally host ceremonies to greet dignitaries from the national government. These events often involve a gift of locally woven cloth — an adaptation of village host/guest exchanges, described here as a promotion of local products — and require participants to wear the traditional costume of their home villages, or occasionally cloth from Amarasi, the local kingdom of the Kupang area. Oddly, nobody I spoke to had a firm sense of where these decisions were made; at each occasion, rules were simply handed down from above. The process of determining the roles of these costumes was still ongoing, as precedents slowly accumulated. But the process was clearly influenced by a sense of appropriateness that originated outside the office, from the rules governing costume and ceremony in the adat communities from which government employees originated.

In the office, as in the village, textiles mattered. Official portraits hanging in Kupang’s government buildings showed the current governor of NTT, Frans Lebu Raya, posing in three different types of clothing. In one, he wore a white military uniform, with a peaked cap. In another, he wore the garb of Timorese royalty: blanket sarongs tied with cloth belts, shoulder cloths, elaborate golden necklaces and headgear, and folded head-cloths of silk batik. (Pak Lebu Raya is not from Timor, but from Lembata.) In the third, he wore a tailored safari jacket made of hand-woven, chemically-dyed ikat cloth, with motifs from central Flores.

Administrative levels below the province, such as the regency (kabupaten) and subdistrict (kecamatan), had their own rules concerning ‘traditional’ uniforms. Some, such as
North Central Timor (Timor Tengah Utara) district, required employees to wear cloth produced in the area, or with motifs belonging to their own ethnic or cultural groups. How this was enforced, and why, I have yet to discover.

More than one respondent described the evolution of these rules of dress as a new adat, or customary law; in addition to adat kampung, the customary law of the village, there was now an adat kantor, the customary law of the office. Office protocol and etiquette were not yet as developed as village adat. But one drew on the other. My informants used the term adat kantor somewhat humorously, much as Ellen’s (1988, 128) informants used the term budaya regimentasi, or ‘regimented culture.’ Budaya regimentasi spoke to the incorporation of local costumes and ritual performances into events in government offices, and the reduction of those local cultural expressions to simulations of themselves, frozen in traditional timelessness. Adat kantor, on the other hand, spoke to the fluidity, uncertainty, and consensus that contributed to the establishment of sumptuary laws in the office just as they did in the village.

In practice, even in villages these rules can change so quickly that experts are unable to keep pace. Leo Nahak, the head of the NTT Provincial Museum in Kupang, speaking of the textile-related rules in his own home village, told me, ‘I work with culture, but I don’t live in the village, and sadly I must admit that for a lot of things the people in the village know more than we do… Even if you’re an anthropologist, if you’re far from the village, it’s always different [than you think].’

While in Baun for this research, I stopped to chat with a group of four women as they walked through the village. Someone had passed away, they said. They were heading to the house of the dead man to pay their respects. These women wore blouses and long pants, not sarongs. They had hand-woven scarves, dyed bright chemical colors, draped over their necks. Three of the four scarves featured classic hook-and-lozenge Amarasi motifs. The designs on the fourth woman’s scarf, however, were Savunese. I asked her if local adat permitted this kind of looseness. She responded that she came from Savu originally, and had married in Amarasi. Technically, she conceded, the rules required her to wear her husband’s motifs. But what did it matter?

Conclusions

The East Nusa Tenggara uniform policy was, in some ways, part and parcel of the other cultural policies of the late New Order. It reduced the province’s textiles to a single category, ‘NTT cloth,’ and defined many diverse weaving traditions as variations on a theme. This provincial culture was set in relation to the cultures of the other provinces, as one of the constituent parts of a unified Indonesian national culture. This Mini-ization was supplemented by Governor Musakabe’s vision of National Stability, which added to the
timeless continuity of cultural practice the possibility of active engagement and innovation within a limited zone of disorder. The state stimulated production of textiles in ways that disregarded customary restrictions on who could make or use what kind of cloth, creating, in ‘kain NTT,’ a new, ritually neutralized category of textiles. And these moves produced a complex debate over the nature of tradition, involving people at all levels of society, from the offices of the government in Kupang to the dusty hillsides of Merbaun.

The policy gave support to entrepreneurial urban women, such as the weaver Ina Koro, and the workshop organizer Ina Ndao. And the growth of urban weaving, combined with the emergence of the government office as a kind of ritual space, signalled a new type of textile culture: an urban one. For perhaps the first time, a textile culture in Timor was being defined in the city of Kupang, and not in the rural villages, where restrictions on the production and use of textiles, and long traditions of interpretation of their colors and motifs, still reigned.

The policy produced a proliferation of new types of textile, from the low-quality cloth, with altered colors and motifs, produced in rural villages, to the innovations such as the glue-and-glitter cloth or prayer rug made at Ina Ndao, to the NTT-style cloth designed and produced in factories in Java, far outside the province.

Finally, the policy helped to produce adat kantor. Cloth, the state said, still mattered; who made it, and how, and where, still mattered. They just mattered in different ways than they used to. And in this sense, despite all the other changes linked to the policy, perhaps it could also be said to have served cultural preservation.

This was quite different from budaya regimentasi, and from the concept of the timelessness of cultural production. It spoke to the inventiveness of weavers and the adventurousness of consumers in Kupang. These were unintended legacies of the cultural policies of the New Order period. While the uniform policy did contribute to a sense of ‘NTT culture,’ and to feelings of brotherhood in regard to that culture, it also spurred a wave of innovation that brought modern weaving back into line with the creative weavers of the true past, instead of a frozen replica of timeless tradition. The ‘traditional’ uniforms were innovative. They allowed weavers to break conventions of form and design, and consumers to break conventions of class, rank, ritual, and gender. They also allowed adat to infiltrate state space. Whereas, under the New Order, the appearance of local or traditional customs in government offices was strictly controlled, these uniforms, even limited as they were to safari suits, brought with them a kind of disorder, and a different set of tools for containing that disorder, with origins in rural villages, not in Jakarta.

Leo Nahak, at the Museum, wore a jacket made from an ei worapi. The cloth’s design was a creative response to changing times and global influences. The jacket, cut and sewn, freed from its earlier meaning, was the response of a new generation of textile
artists to a new set of conditions. Pak Nahak’s choice to wear it, and joy in doing so, reflected an exuberant extension of individual choice into an arena long limited by tradition and conservative elites. A fast pace of change in the city; in the countryside, a slower pace. The culture doesn’t change. It slides.
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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Edy Latu, a spokesman from the NTT Provincial Development Planning Agency, in a uniform made from cloth from Belu, West Timor.

Figure 2: The *pahikung* prayer rug.

Figure 3: Factory-made cloth with versions of NTT motifs, in a Kupang fabric shop.

Figure 7: Three portraits of NTT governor Frans Lebu Raya.