



# SACRED CLOTHS

An exhibition in Fukuoka City brings us face to face with a mysterious tradition of death rituals and magically imbued imagery. Much of the credit for this indepth exploration of Toraja cloth, says **Thomas Murray**, is due to Japanese researcher/collector Keiko-San, whose passion and commitment have yielded remarkable results.

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED KEIKO KUSAKABE about ten years ago in Borneo at an ikat conference in Kuching. A friend told me of a Japanese lady who was a very serious student of Toraja textiles, and would I like to meet her? I was delighted at the prospect. During our initial conversation, I was struck by her deep and sincere commitment to documenting the cloth tradition of central Sulawesi. She was just starting out and understandably anxious about beginning her research at such a late date. Understandably she felt a bit intimidated by the work of the giants of the field who had come before her, among them the Swiss missionary Kryut in the early 20th century, and later the Dutch anthropologist Hetty Nooy-Palm, Professor K. Yoshimoto. and the Holmgren/ Spertus team in the 1970s and 1980s. But Keiko-san persevered, taking early retirement from her job as a teacher and spending half of each year for the next decade in the mountains, interviewing weavers and collecting textiles.

Nice work if you can get it! There is nowhere more beautiful in Indonesia than the peaks and valleys of highland Tana Toraja, the 'Land of the People', where brilliant green rice paddies dot the landscape and the justly famous cliff burials are dug out of the living rock. Still remote, even with the advent of paved roads and the incursion of limited tourism, there remain many isolated Toraja villages with clusters of *tonkangan*, the traditional *adat* house. These large boat-shaped buildings with sloping roofs have their sides decorated with curvilinear patterns and, at the front, a giant pole ascending to the roof peak covered with buffalo horns. These sacred animals are slaughtered only at funerals, with death rituals being the high point of a Torajan life, as observed by *dluk to dolo*, the way of the ancestors.

Accessible only on horseback or by foot, it is to these far reaches that Keiko-san pressed on. She overcame many obstacles, from learning the language to raiding her pension to make it possible financially, not to mention the resistance of a conservative community back home, including a doubting



husband who thought she had gone quite mad. Keiko Kusakabe has now answered these sceptics with an exhibition and catalogue, 'Textiles from Sulawesi in Indonesia, Genealogy of Sacred Cloths' held at the Fukuoka Art Museum from 1 November- 27 December 2006. Astonishing in sophistication of selection and authoritative in scholarship, it establishes her as a true expert in this rarefied field. It also cements the reputation of Etsuko Iwanaga, co-curator of the exhibition and primary author of the catalogue, as one of the leading Southeast Asian textile scholar-advocates active today. As curator of textiles at Fukuoka, Etsuko-san has three previous exhibitions, with catalogues – on Sumatran, Outer Island Indonesian and Cambodian textiles – under her belt, and more ideas in development. Layout for exhibition and book primarily followed textile patterning techniques, although Keiko-san and Etsuko-san each

2 brought a somewhat different perception of what was important thematically. Captions were written by one or the other, with their negotiation as co-curators adding strength to the final presentation. Most researchers and Western market collectors have pursued the bold and powerfully graphic Toraja funerary ikats, the *sekomandi* and the *porisitutu*, both of which were included in the show. But as these were already largely fished out of the market more than twenty years ago, for Keiko-san this was less a problem than an opportunity. By working around this limitation, she avoided being distracted by their pursuit. She could focus on other types and styles of resist-dyed cloth, including ikats in the form of ancient ceremonial sarongs; tie-dyed (*plangi*) banners known as *pori roto*; indigenous batiked and painted ritual cloths, *sarita* and *maa'*, including both a seamless *maa'* 3 and a very rare mud-dyed *maa'* / *sarita* transitional piece. She also uncovered a previously unidentified possible source of resist material, *damar*, the sap of a tree that gives a sharper edge than the soft fuzzy edge of a rice paste or beeswax resist that can crack, explaining some of the great variation in fineness of technique observed in *sarita*. Also included was a bark cloth *siga* (head wrap) patterned with painted talismanic designs indicating a successful head-hunter's status. The grouping of the *siga*, *maa'*s and *sarita*s may not be coincidental; all are created by painting with sticks, whether with pigments or in a resist material, and have a likely common origin in the desire to transfer magically imbued iconography to a transportable medium. Indian trade cloths, perceived as coming from the gods and also known as *maa'* 5, were on view to offer a more comprehensive view of the inspiration for indigenous weaving. Keiko-san's personal interest runs more to woven structures than to the dyeing side of textile manufacture; indeed one of her research conclusions is that ikat was probably introduced after the mastery of weaving, as a quicker, less labour intensive way to achieve a beautiful result and expedite cloth production. To this end her collection emphasises seldom seen costume and ritual cloths, often quite early, with

1 Rongkong Toraja ceremonial cloth, *tali tau batu*, Sulawesi. 0.30 x 3.35m (1'0" x 11'0")

2 Sa'dan Toraja ceremonial loincloth *pio sungkhi'* (detail), Sulawesi. 0.47 x 5.55m (1'6½" x 18'2½")

3 Sa'dan or Mamasa Toraja ceremonial cloth, *maa'*, Sulawesi. 0.41 x 1.30m (1'4" x 4'3")

4 Mamasan Toraja dancer's blouse, *bayu pa'r-anding*, Sulawesi. 0.86 x 0.50m (2'10" x 1'7½")



primary patterning achieved in the weaving itself. Fine examples of patchwork, appliqué and embroidered costume included two lyrical women's blouses from different regions showing just how strong an art form this really can be 6, 7. A dancer's blouse from Mamasa 4 achieves its beauty in a magnificent parallel to the most compelling of all Bolivian weavings, the Caroma 'Primary-Color Tunic' in an American private collection (Adelson & Tracht, *Aymara Weavings*, 1983, p.59). Beadwork is often a speciality craft of local communities in Torajaland, and Keiko-san's ceremonial hanging/ woman's accessory, *kandaure*, is perhaps the oldest unrestored example I have ever encountered. A fine supplementary-weft chief's loincloth 2 displays human and buffalo imagery in the particularly charming style specific to Toraja, most often seen on *maa'*. Another area of exceptional weaving explored in depth are *pote*, women's funerary hoods that employ a complex system of plainweave openwork with inserted spiral wefts, weft-twining, tablet-weaving, and braiding. Indeed, as her research advanced, Keiko-san became fascinated by the little-known and all too often overlooked tradition of tablet-weaving. She began with the better documented weavings of the coastal Buginese, who are known for sword belts with Islamic inscriptions that sometimes make their way into the mountains to be used as talismans, even by non-Muslim Toraja people. Local production is often equally brilliant, the technique often being used to generate bi- or tri-chromatic strips, and bands used to decorate edges of ritual shirts also serve as sword belts or as straps for ceremonial bags. Traditionally made of wood or buffalo horn, but now plastic, multiple 'cards' have four holes through which the warps pass, while wefts are passed through sheds created by turning the cards to generate shifting patterns, often reciprocal but in some cases visible on one side only. Both exhibition and catalogue offer a penetrating examination of this virtuoso weaving technique, including many fine examples. Beyond that, Keiko-san has discovered a novel variation of double-face weave called the 'Mamasan' method, after the region where she found it still in use. It was especially gratifying to her when this was confirmed as a significant find by the dean of scholarship in this field, Peter Collingwood of England, whom she credits as her *sensei*, or master. Something I had not seen before was a stylistically related but structurally



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different sacred shirt, created using loop manipulation braiding in the place of card woven decoration.

One of my favourite Toraja textiles is known as *tali tau batu*, meaning 'strap', 'person' and 'stone', a reference to fertility megaliths called *laso batu* (stone penis) found in the Rongkong area where they are woven. Sometimes called *pewo*, loin cloth, they come in two forms, of which the older is recognisable by its greater complexity and fewer areas of plainweave I. This kind of cloth, unique to Toraja, shares a structural relationship with the *pote* – plainweave openwork with inserted spiral wefts, but with ikat-like tie-dyeing where the resists are knotted into pattern slits in the pre-woven cloth before dyeing.

The book (in both Japanese and English), identifies four weaving centres – the Sa'dan Toraja, Mamasa Toraja, the Mangki of Kalumpang and the Rongkong area – and posits that all once shared the same pool of techniques and motifs, but that over time each ended up specialising, which affected the nature of the cloth and the emphasis in the final result. The typical features of each, including yarn density, colour arrangement of warp stripes, and patterns, are charted in informative graphs and essays, so that we learn, for instance, that only in Kalumpang is mud-dye used.

Etsuko-san explains that in the light of Keiko-san's research, the 'map' needs to be redrawn, based less on what we know to be regional weaving styles, than on examining very early material and trying to apply diagnostic criteria to arrive at a more complete picture of Toraja weaving. She points out that several pieces fall outside of known parameters, and she recommends that we look to Central, North and Gorontalo Provinces, with a deeper look at the Minahasa in particular being implied.

Only two textile types were conspicuous by their absence from the exhibition, and yet easily forgiven in light of their extreme scarcity, a *pio puang*, of which a detail was illustrated in the book (p.107, fig.3), with discussion of how it might have served as the prototype for the batiked geometric composition of a *sarita*, and a *papor-itonoling* (HALI 135, cover), probably the rarest and arguably the most visually compelling of all Indonesian tribal ikats to survive.

The importance of this exhibition and catalogue cannot be overstated. Through Keiko Kusakabe's almost messianic commitment to collect and document Toraja textiles, and her 'deep structure' study of both the society and the art of the loom, she has provided exceptionally valuable work. Her effort, combined with Etsuko Iwanaga's scholarship and insights into iconography and aesthetic organisation have produced gold. Together, they have gone far in decoding both the weaving techniques and the symbolic meaning of the sacred cloth of Sulawesi, giving new voice to the women weavers of Toraja.

The Keiko Kusakabe Collection –  
Textiles from Sulawesi in Indonesia –  
Genealogy of Sacred Cloths  
Fukuoka Art Museum, 11-6 Ohori Park,  
Chuo-Ku, Fukuoka City, Japan  
1 November – 27 December 2006



5 Ceremonial cloth, *maa'*, west India. 0.99 x 1.94m (3'3" x 6'4").

6 Toraja woman's tunic, central Sulawesi. 0.81 x 0.50m (2'8" x 1'8")

7 Mangki Toraja woman's blouse, Sulawesi. 0.80 x 0.49m (2'7" x 1'7")