

Striking patterns. Global traces in local ikat fashion design

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In its latest exhibition the Museum der Kulturen Basel is presenting a fascinating panoply of ikat art from eastern Indonesia and East Timor.

The designs of these textiles from eastern Indonesia and East Timor include, among others, surprising motifs such as Indian flowers, European roses, angels, airplanes and elephants. Some of the cloths have a soft golden hue, others shine in bright synthetic colours. One can interpret these features as early traces of globalization, with some of them reaching back as far as the sixteenth century.

Once again the Museum der Kulturen Basel, in its capacity as a competence centre for textiles and textile techniques, is putting on an exhibition that draws on its rich stock of textiles, complemented by exhibits from the collection of the anthropologist Willemjin de Jong. On display are also new pieces acquired by the exhibition's curators Richard Kunz and de Jong on a research trip to Indonesia and East Timor last year, following in the footsteps of Alfred Bühler who visited and collected in the region back in 1935. At the same time the two experts gained insight into the present situation of ikat weaving in eastern Indonesia and East Timor.

Ikat describes a special patterning technique in which the yarn is tied and dyed before weaving – the Indonesian term "ikat" means "to tie". To produce multicoloured cloths, the tie-and-dye process is applied repeatedly. It is only after weaving that the complex patterns emerge.

The varied display includes a wide range of high-quality ikat cloths created by master weavers. Ever since ikat began, weavers have incorporated foreign influences and thus have actively been engaged in the process of globalization. It began as long ago as the ninth century with maritime trade and the export of textiles from India to the Indonesian archipelago. Trade in the area reached a climax in the sixteenth century under the impact of Portuguese and Dutch mercantile expeditions. This also explains why many of the cloths on display feature designs such as the Indian eight-pointed flower pattern, Portuguese cross-stitch patterns as well as various Catholic motifs. Since the 1970s the tourist industry has increasingly impacted on the art of ikat weaving. A telling example of this influence is the motif showing tourist couples taking selfies at colourful volcanic lakes.

"These master weavers incorporate their own understanding of modernity and fashion trends. They strive for individuality but at the same time they accommodate to the taste of their customers", says Richard Kunz. Tradition is regarded as a facet of modernity. Kunz and de Jong's research trip last year showed that the art of ikat in eastern Indonesia and East Timor is very much alive and highly dynamic.

In many local communities ikat cloths still play a key role in social life. They are worn on festive occasions and provide important markers of prestige, one of the reasons why weavers are esteemed as accomplished artists. The exhibition includes portraits of six weavers in which they speak of their life and their work, enabling viewers a more personal access to the cloths on display.

The exhibition is complemented by contemporary artworks by Ito Joyoatmojo and Susi Kramer who have relied on the art of ikat from the island of Flores as a source of inspiration for their own creations.