

# Ikat textiles from Sumba, Indonesia

pulau  
pulow  
island

kuda  
kuda  
horse

upacara  
upacara  
ceremony

Sumba is one of the eastern islands of the Republic of Indonesia belonging to the group known as the lesser Sunda Islands or Nusa Tenggara, which is located above Western Australia. Its population of around 700,000 is of mixed Melanesian and Austronesian ancestry. The main language is Kambera, which is spoken on the eastern half of the island. *Ikat* textiles, like the one shown, were produced in the coastal regions of East Sumba. The traditional dress of Sumba is still widely worn, and consists of flat woven cloths known as *hinggi*, worn by men, and tubular skirts known as *lau pahudu*, worn by women. The *hinggi* shown here is patterned with the *ikat* technique. *Ikat* textiles are part of Asia's rich textile heritage and are produced from Central Asia in the west to the eastern islands of Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, mainland and insular Southeast Asia, and on the Indian subcontinent. In many of these places production continues today.

The term *ikat* comes from the Malay/Indonesian verb, *mengikat*, meaning 'to tie or bind'. In *ikat* the pattern is created on the textile threads using a resist dyeing technique **before** the textile is woven. This distinguishes *ikat* from other resist dyeing techniques, in which the fabric is dyed after weaving. The thread from which the textile is to be woven is wrapped carefully around a frame so that all the threads lie parallel to one another. Then groups or bundles of the threads are tightly wrapped in sections corresponding to the desired pattern. The bound areas resist the dye and remain their original colour when the yarn is plunged into the dye bath. After dyeing, the thread is rinsed and dried and the bindings are removed, revealing the patterns against a coloured background. As the cloth is woven, the pattern is fully revealed.

The *hinggi* is a large cloth formed from two narrow lengths seamed together. The cloth is fringed at each end and decorated with horizontal bands of figurative designs, which repeat in a mirror image on either side of a central band. Men wore *hinggi* as paired cloths, a hip wrapper and a mantle. Originally the cloths were woven as identical pairs that were worn together. Those worn by commoners were usually blue and white, and red dye indicated the cloth was made and worn by nobility. Noble women retained the secret of dyeing with red dye, which came from the bark and roots of a plant called *morinda citrifolia*.

The naturalistic imagery of the majority of Sumbanese textiles illustrates aspects of daily life as well as past customs. The horses seen on this cloth, for example, were a valuable status symbol on the island and owned by the nobility for transport and deer hunting. The marine shrimp refer to the rich sea life around the island. They alternate with skull trees that recall the custom of hanging the heads of those captured in war on a specially cut tree.

*Hinggi* were produced by coastal peoples exposed to influences brought by trade with India, China and the Arab world, as well as the Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch. Sumbanese textile motifs include imagery adapted from Dutch coins, flags and banners, for example the blue anchors shown in the third band. The motif in the central band of this *hinggi* is derived from one of the patterns of Indian *ikat* cloths traded throughout Indonesia.

Throughout Asia textiles are an important medium of artistic expression, but they also define an individual in many contexts, including social standing, wealth, family, clan or tribe identity, and gender. On the eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, textiles are produced by women for ceremonies marking important milestones in the life of an individual or a society, for everyday use as clothing and household textiles, or for the demands of the tourist industry. Large numbers of textiles are exchanged at important rite-of-passage ceremonies including birth, coming of age, weddings and funerals, as well as ceremonies associated with nature, such as those held to mark the harvest and planting of food crops. Throughout the region textiles were traditionally considered 'female' items in these prolific ritual exchanges, and equivalent 'male' items would include those made from metal and wood. Originally the production of fine textiles such as *hinggi* was the right of high-ranking women, but now any woman may weave this type of cloth.

**SUMBANESE**  
*Man's cloth (Hinggi)*  
19th century, Sumba, Indonesia  
cotton, dyes (warp *ikat*)  
312.0 x 151.8 cm  
Bequest of Rose Mulock-Houwer MBE,  
2007 (2007.692)



