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Rustina Untari

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The making of “*asli*” Sumba woven cloth: how globalising “intangible heritage” impacts women’s roles

Rustina Untari, Radhika Gajjala and Ridwan Sanjaya

1 ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the production of “original”/“*asli*” commodity through a local/global dialectic in how “intangible heritage” is defined and how contemporary global market-facing Sumba weaving contributes to shifts and contradictions in gender roles as they are shaped simultaneously through local community needs and through a global facing westernised patriarchal business ethos. The increasing global north facing integration of global south production communities into the world markets for instance, leads to a masculinisation of management and global facing leadership while along with a feminisation of the local production process. Evidence for our observations were drawn from over 50 in-depth interviews and onsite observation during field visits to the site.

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Introduction

In contemporary Sumba weaving communities in Indonesia, woven cloth (fabric) and the process of production is globalised as a work of art. Even as the cloth continues to have local value through living local traditions, the impact of global demand for the unique artisanal product has resulted in shifts in the roles of women and men in the production process. Historically, this cloth has functioned in a use-value framework as both a wearable item and as a way to document community histories and tacit artisanal knowledge of processes that have been passed on from generation to generation of women within the community. Neo-colonial development frameworks and neo-liberal market frameworks, we argue, reorient the meanings around fabric through global/local dialectics and contradictions around “authentic” production branded as *asli*. Sumbanese women weavers are often narrated as leaders of weaving communities both locally and globally, and the narrative of women as central to the production process is implicitly part of the branding of the commodity as authentic (*asli*). Yet what we see in actuality are shifts and contradictions in gender roles as the community aspires to have the craft production process classified and protected by UNESCO as intangible heritage (*Pokasta News*, 17 April 2012). *Asli* is standardised and commodified. This renewed articulation of *asli* as authenticity relies on the commodification of women’s roles in the process.

These findings have implications for policy workers negotiating contradictions of local and global contexts for women’s empowerment. This article looks at case studies of Sumbanese fabric production in Lambanapu, located in Waingapo, the capital of East Sumba, in an effort to understand how this commodification of women’s roles simultaneously also displaces them from being leaders in the weaving small businesses that have emerged in response to global demand.

Concepts such as “commodification” (Hearn 2017) “authenticity” (Banet-Weiser 2012), “tourist gaze” (Urry 1992) and “intangible heritage” (UNESCO) are used throughout this article and are key

to the arguments we make. It is important to clearly state the definitions we use for these terms as they are key to our overall argument. Commodification is the process by which objects, people, ideas, processes and services are made marketable and for sale (Hearn 2017, 43). Authenticity as “produced” through the idea of *asli* on the other hand is based in discussions around how in contemporary marketing ethos we see a “transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 5). “Tourist gaze” is a concept from tourism studies and associated with the sociologist Urry, who defined it as “the pre-eminence of vision in organising the development of Western tourism since the end of the eighteenth century” (Urry 1992). Finally, the concept of intangible heritage that we use is drawn from the UNESCO online definition ²⁰ which includes “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants”.

Global South craft communities and women’s labour

Postcolonial feminist scholars such as Mohanty (1997) and Mies (1982) have noted how the shifts in relations of production resulting from “integration [of global south production communities] into the world market led to class/caste differentiation within particular communities, with a masculinisation of all nonproduction jobs (trade) and a total feminisation of the production process”. This article examines the context of Sumbanese hand-woven cloth makers and their integration into neo-liberal market logics to see how the unique and shifting conditions of the weaving communities of East Sumba impact gender roles within this community of production.

Sumba handwoven fabric and tapestries are desired by art collectors and textile enthusiasts globally. We note that it is through a production process considered unique to the Sumbanese context that “original”/*asli* Sumba woven cloth is validated as authentic. This cloth and the process of production both acquire monetary value in the global market space as authentic text and authentic commodity within the contemporary neo-liberal market ethos. The figure of the woman weaver is portrayed as powerful through the narration of the history of weaving communities in Sumbanese culture and mobilised visually and textually. Yet during our field visits, it became apparent that there were contradictory shifts happening in the roles of women within the producer communities. At the same time as women weavers and indigo dye producers were being extolled as keepers of culture, they were also becoming subordinated in the larger organisational structure of the small business.

Our theoretical observations in this article are derived from the many interviews we conducted in East Sumba. The cloth is now desired by tourists and art collectors outside of Sumba – in other areas of Indonesia and globally – who value both the tactile and visual aesthetics of the product. However, the unique production process for a handwoven and natural dyed Sumbanese woven cloth takes time (even though the majority of weavers no longer use handspun yarn) and is very labour intensive. This means that the handspun and natural dye – authentic or *asli* – product is exorbitantly priced. Predictably, the international demand has given rise to machine-made copies that use chemical dyes. As one of the Sumbanese residents we interviewed in 2018 noted,

now Sumba fabric is a trend in Jakarta, many people have high-quality fabric fabrication, but the market is not so big and not easy to sell (high value, low volume product). [There are suggestions now that we sell] low-value, high-volume products ... [that have used] chemical dyes.

However, at the same time as the lure of the commercial markets seem to suggest that a move to “high volume, low value” is a practical option towards better sales, international organisations and NGOs seeking to endorse and help market this product are particular about asserting that the authenticity of this product can only be endorsed if the production process is *asli*. Further, because of how global flows of value (economic and cultural) towards Global South contexts are reliant on both internationally endorsed visibility of modernisation and cultural heritage preservation through organisations such as the UN and UNESCO, the Indonesian government has also (as of 2013) been

interested in maintaining the authenticity of production process so that the craft of Sumbanese Ikkat might be included by UNESCO in its intangible heritage listing.

We therefore see a larger global facing move from (dynamic) epistemologies associated with women's communities and knowledges (Alcoff and Potter 1993) to static (flattened) standardisation, reproduction, recording and storing of knowledges. This shift occurs through a privileging of logics based in European language written text and visualised/commodified/branding aesthetics of authenticity (Banet-Weiser 2012). It is based in a privileging of an exact replicability of product that resonates more with mechanised processes than in production processes that rely on handmade crafting techniques. In addition, there seems to be an aspiration on the part of some advocates for the weavers and some Indonesian government representatives to have the craft classified and protected by UNESCO as intangible heritage. The guidelines for inclusion in this category also seem to have influence on the shifting production process. Framed through ideas of modernity and globalisation as the way forward for economic progress, there is a re-articulation of the tacit local community and natural ecology-based practices of *asli* production into a standardised reproduce-able template for authenticity. This renewed articulation of *asli* as authenticity subordinates and commodifies women artisans.

Authentic local craft

Sumba² a remote island in the Indonesian province of East Nusa Tenggara – Nusa Tenggara Timor (NTT) – closer to Perth, Australia in location and climate than to what is normally thought of as “Indonesia”. While economically it is a poorer region of Indonesia and weaving itself is not a significant portion of the region's gross national product, Sumba weaving is known and desired internationally.

Historically, women in East Sumba have played a leading role in artisanal communities around woven cloth of Sumba, doing the hand spinning of yarn, natural dyeing, designing motifs and weaving. Even when influenced by information and recommendations from men, local community members attribute design ownership to the women since they were in charge of the community memory and practice of reproducing the motifs in the woven cloth. In the process of making indigo (one particular natural dye used in the cloth production) no men were even allowed to be in the production² space as it is believed that the presence of men will corrupt the process of fermentation. This is a continuing practice and belief. Woven cloth was used in the everyday – in connection with community rituals and storytelling and for use value. Women have transferred this artisanal (tacit) knowledge from generation to generation. They have defined what “real” – that is *asli* – knowledge and practice of production of woven cloth and natural dye in their community is. They have held and preserved it across time. Thus, women have historically had a leading role in the production of woven cloth in Sumba.

At the same time, the role of women as leaders in weaving communities is receding as men become business leaders and designers while introducing new marketing practices. Even so, the narrative about authenticity – which also serves a neo-colonial tourist gaze – is produced through the telling of stories about how these women are keepers of *asli* knowledge. In modern parlance, *asli* has easily been translated to mean cultural authenticity, yet in articulating the process of *asli* to foster standardisation of process the concept is commodified while the process is modernised as tacit epistemologies are translated into propositional knowledge (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993).

The concept of *asli*, then, is used as a way to authenticate the woven product. *Asli* Sumba weaving is defined, by the local weavers we interviewed, as weaving according to the production process that has been taught from generation to generation. They described this process as including four criteria of authenticity. The basic material used should be cotton, taken from cotton harvesting in Sumba. A second criteria included (hand)spinning cotton into yarn. Then the yarn is dyed and the design set up through a tie and dye process unique to Sumba weaving. The dyes are made locally using plants grown in Sumba. Natural dyes made from plant colouring agents, roots, seeds, soil and others are

processed based on ancestral knowledge transferred from generation to generation. The motifs are also unique to Sumbanese art and similarly transferred.

Yet, because of the lack of sufficient cotton harvest locally and the decline of hand spinning in contemporary times, *asli* has now come to mean natural dyeing, reproduction of Sumbanese motifs and use of Sumbanese Ikkat tie and dye design process. ² Much of what is characterised as *asli* relies also on what is seen as women's work. Thus, even today the weaving process is authenticated by emphasising how particular parts of the process – particularly the process of producing indigo – is restricted to women only. Thus, while we toured indigo sheds in 2018, the men who accompanied us to the weaver group locations were not allowed to enter the indigo production area. Since two of the three co-authors of this article are women, however, we had the opportunity to watch the process while also talking to the women working in the shed.

These processes and stories about women and their tacit practices, as well as community traditions, are narrated (and even staged) as a way to attract tourism (*Jakarta Post*, "Telling Stories of Indonesian Fabric for Internet: Savvy Generations", 31 July 2018). For instance, the ClothRoads organisation, part of the Artisan Alliance network for developing world-based organisations working with artisans, noted on their website on 17 August 2018 that ⁸ when you purchase from ClothRoads, you help us to build and develop new markets that allow artisans and communities, especially women and girls, to flourish".

The epistemic foundations of how this knowledge is reproduced through community praxis are displaced. Thus, in a manner similar to yet different from (since there are contradictions that emerge) that of traditional midwifery in much of the Global North, the women's knowledge and expertise are slowly being displaced in a process of exoticisation and re-narration (for a westernised tourist gaze), where these women's skills will no doubt eventually be characterised as unscientific "old wives' tales" (Dalmiya and Alcoff 1993, 218).

In this paper we make the claim, by theoretically working through evidence gathered from our research site in East Sumba, that the contradiction of implicit devaluing women's knowledges as "old wives' tales" happens even as traditional knowledge and processes are considered essential for the authentication of local knowledge and processes as *asli*. The article therefore opens up questions for further consideration leading to the need for a critical evaluation of the process of commodification of *asli*. By critiquing the commodification in relation to women's roles, however, our goal is not to suggest that the process of natural dye or hand weaving is in itself problematic or to be eradicated in favour of machine-made products – rather our goal is to show how the attempts to fit in such processes into a consumer and marketing logic that privileges mass production creates other social issues and contradictions. The implications of labour shifts with regards to women and their position in relation to the production of Sumbanese woven natural dyed cloth must be taken into consideration. Trying to make *asli* into a globalisable process through guidelines from UNESCO definitions of "intangible heritage" might actually contribute to potential further marginalisation of the women in this community.

Unlike several other Indonesian islands, Sumba does not have a tropical climate or fertile volcanic soil. It is a land fragment that was separated from the main Australian continent about 20 million years ago (Fowler 1999, 107) and "consists of hilly and low-lying grassland, coastal terraces and limestone plateaus" (Vel 2008, 24). It is comparatively sparsely populated and the per capita income in 2005 was 18% of the national average in West Sumba, and in East Sumba it was 28%. Agriculture is the source of income for a majority of the population (87% in 2005) (Vel 2008), but most activities on the island are subsistence activities. Shifts we see now are continuations of what scholars such as Vel noted in the 1990s, including in the commercial sector where economic activities include construction, road construction, import of manufactured goods and export of agricultural and domestic small-scale industry-based products. Limited tourism observed in the 1990s seems to have expanded in 2018 and 2019, if not to the scale of tourism in Bali island. For instance, it is clear from our conversations with hotel management and their family members and tourists, and the tourist packages on offer, that Sumba locations are being positioned as more peaceful and environment friendly for

tourists wishing to be away from the bustle and crowds in Bali. The weaving communities and their performance of authenticity and culture are also part of the lure for tourists visiting East Sumba.

Another important difference between Sumba and the larger and more well-known islands of Indonesia (such as Java) is that the Sumba island was colonised for a very short while. Dutch missionaries successfully converted a majority of the island's population, but there was little commerce as the Dutch East Indies Company primarily kept watch over the island in the eighteenth century so that other colonisers would not move in. In this mostly subsistence economy, weaving of cloth continued mostly in a use-value logic until fairly recently when the island became more exposed to the global market. Cloth is no longer woven for everyday use but for traditional rituals that have survived the influence of Christianity and modernity. The creation of motifs had an interesting interplay of gender hierarchy, as Forshee (2000, 32) notes:

3. Historically, women have been the primary producers of textiles – although new design motifs apparently often came about through the suggestions of high-ranking men. As men encountered new images through interactions with outsiders, they introduced novel design ideas to makers of cloth. Thus, motifs from a variety of foreign fabrics, pottery, jewelry, printed matter, and coins were adopted into Sumbanese textiles. In present times, men increasingly create designs for fabrics, continuing their historical influence upon imagery.

The process of creating motifs and colouring the Sumba cloth is unique and draws on natural dye and ikat techniques. This article looks mainly at weavers in the Lambanapu region of East Sumba and observes the shifts in cloth making and dyeing processes that have occurred and continue to occur as the weavers respond to a global tourist market.

During our visit to the Lambanapu village, we focused on the two main groups of crafters that are well known in that region. We chose these sites based on connections made but also because we wanted to explore the gendered dynamics, with each of the weaving communities providing insight on gender and leadership. One group we focused on is a woman-led studio (henceforth referred to as studio OA) and the second was started by a male designer, KN. His mother has been now been assigned now as the group's leader as he has moved on to starting another group. But KN is still the main face of this group – and its global reputation is derived from his fame as a stellar artist/artisan. KN has gained a reputation internationally through his marketing efforts and collaborations with NGOs in Indonesia and the western world (henceforth referred to as PLH). The leader of the studio is a woman (Y) over 50 years of age and a recognised community elder. This group is run as a collective of mostly women dyers and weavers. Studio OA is also a place where Sumba traditional dance traditions are taught to the next generations. The leader of PLH is a man in his forties (KN) – and this group is very clearly structured around a male-centred hierarchy even as his leadership of this community is based in the expertise gained from following and learning from his mother. Yet, in both the groups he has founded the women are recognised and honoured as the only ones who are allowed into the indigo sheds.

Y and KN have continued their contact with us co-researchers via WhatsApp and other modes of communication – tirelessly clarifying details to the first author which she then translated into English so that the second author could also consider these as we together developed our research themes and analyses. We interviewed several designers, business owners and weavers who belong to these two groups.

We encountered many more tourists in Prailiu as this village also displays relics of the kingdom, including an ancient stone tomb. Weavers also display their products at the royal house and compound to sell to tourist visitors. Some weavers weave on location and exhibit their design and weaving process to the visitors. Since the royal house is very much involved in patronage at Prailiu, we interviewed one of the patrons of the crafters in the East Sumba community in depth both during our visit and after we left via Skype and WhatsApp. Her role as an English-speaking academic translator from the context was also invaluable to our research and writing.

Methods and methodology

Our methodology of co-researching and co-writing draws on feminist traditions of collaborative research (Visweswaran 1997). The co-writing here is a result of intense dialogue among the three authors and the other research collaborators (“subjects”) on site who are weavers and dyers in Sumba. The first author translated much of the input from the onsite collaborators (in both local Sumbanese language and Bahasa Indonesia) so that the second author could then rework these translations into academic writing in English. We faced complex access and translation issues which implicitly reiterate the problematisation of theory and praxis binaries (Mamidipudi and Gajjala 2008). Co-authors have had continued conversations with some of the lead practitioners and community members we interviewed as we were writing this article.

The first author has made several visits to Sumba Island (most recently in October 2019) and built a relationship with a local family through a colleague at her university who is part of this family. She has been observing this community for a few years and has been in continuous communication via Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, and mobile phone with various weavers. The second author has spent several years researching with members of a handloom NGO in India. She has been on several field trips to handloom weaving communities in south India and has co-authored with some NGO members on the issues raised by the revival of natural dye and attempts to preserve what was then – between 2003 and 2008 – the second largest livelihood in India. She has continued dialogue with some collaborators and continues to interview crafts people, small entrepreneurs, NGO workers and leisure crafters, weavers and spinners in India. In addition, she has been working on a project that involves extensive interviewing of do-it-yourself fibre crafters in the US since 2007. All this feeds into her methodology for understanding the context of weaving and crafting in East Sumba. Collectively, we interviewed 50 weavers, spinners and dyers and conducted several site visits that resulted in cultural observation and fieldwork in Lambanapu and Prailiu. The interviews were conducted in 2014, 2018 and 2019. Forty of the interviewees were women – 12 of whom were over 50 years of age, 20 were between 40 and 50 years old, while the rest were below 40 years old. The youngest woman interviewed was about 25 years old. Ten of the overall 50 interviews conducted for this research were with men, of whom two were over 45 years of age and five were around 40, while the rest were below 40.

Themes

After each day of fieldwork, research team members would discuss their observations and unpack themes. Some major themes noted include:

- (1) *The shift from domestic weaving to weaving for a small business which in turn has necessitated the shift from use value to global market value.*

In the 1980s the need for woven fabrics increased because there were both tourists who visited Sumba and Sumba people who traded woven cloth in Bali. The demand for woven products increased – yet weaving was only conducted as a part-time business while also balancing other household chores. Heritage and cultural activities (such as dance) also increased and were used as ways to build a welcoming cultural environment for tourists. With the associated global exposure and anticipated demand for woven products came increased involvement on the part of men. Weaving was now considered to be a global business opportunity. The building of relationships and networking with people from outside Sumba island led to the growth of woven cloth businesses. Thus, the demand and need for weaving now went beyond the local community. As the demand for the product increased, more men from the weaver community started to set up woven cloth businesses.

While men may have been involved in the weaving process before this modern global-oriented production and while international trade involving woven cloth existed in previous times – there is a particular significance of men’s involvement in contemporary global businesses and entrepreneurial ethos. Men’s roles in the weaving community – particularly in the global business-facing context – began to align more with western patriarchal expectations. Whereas in local family contexts the women and their traditional knowledge were respected (and older women’s knowledge revered), business management and leadership roles were increasingly being shifted into the male domain.

In our field work, we learnt from AN (the mother of a well-known Sumba cloth designer and businessman KN) that they started getting requests for weaving from outside of Sumba in the 1970s and 1980s. From that time on, threads made by factories have begun to be used in the weaving process because of insufficient local cotton. AN said she had received many orders for weaving which led to KN stepping in to help. After KN finished high school, he decided not to go to college and stayed at home to help his mother, learning and developing the weaving technique further. KN is now a leader among local weavers who have all worked to build their local weaving into small businesses. He networks with outside parties such as NGOs and commercial marketers. T is another weaving business leader who works in a collective. He noted the role of the church in providing assistance in the form of raw material (mostly yarn) to the crafts people.

In general, Sumbanese men began to get involved in the weaving business first by helping their mothers as children and/or helping their wives after marriage. After being involved in the processes, they took over business activities – particularly trade and networking with outside parties. The male/female roles in household financial management and business financial investing began to align with the ways most western patriarchal nuclear units deal with finances. Thus, women now manage household finances with the hope that money from the weaving business can be saved for their children’s educational needs, according to focus group discussions with women weavers in Sumba. As one member of the Sumba community we interviewed in July 2018 noted:

In Sumba, the one who regulates finances is a housewife while men act as breadwinners. But more men act as decision makers. For example, deliberations or *adat* negotiations are dominated by men. An example of *adat* negotiations is the determining of the amount of dowry that must be paid by the man to the bride. When it comes to business matters, the men usually play a lead role but the results are left to the women to be regulated accordingly.

Another (male) interviewee stated that:

In the household of Sumbanese people who generally manage finances are women [housewives]. In traditional meetings the role of deciding is a man but usually the man negotiates first with his wife at home.

Management of finances in the household is directly linked to women’s sense of responsibility for their children. Thus, as another woman interviewee told us:

Women manage house hold finance. They can save money because of the weaving they do - so they can support their children’s educational need.

This point was revealed in further conversations with other women weavers in Sumba during a focus group meeting we conducted in summer 2018. We were also told that if the woven produce does not get sold in time, they pawn the produce so as to immediately get money to pay for their children’s education.

(2) *Gender role shifts in the production process of the cloth contribute to potential shifts in cultural assumptions around gendered roles and process*

Before the outreach towards global markets, the whole process of designing and weaving the Sumba woven cloth was considered to be a household responsibility, with tasks mostly performed and organised by women. Men helped them to do some tasks such as digging up noni roots or

making wooden frames (to string yarns). At that time, woven fabric was made to fulfil the needs of traditional local ceremonies.

There are 42 steps in the Sumba weaving process. Generally, close collaboration between three to ten people is needed to complete one piece of woven fabric. But in the past every woman in the weaver community had the skills and ability to complete the 42 steps alone if needed. In the past, all of these steps were carried out by a woman alone. During some stages in the weaving and dying process, they were assisted by their children, for example for *menghani* (rolling threads on a wooden frame) which always has to be done by two people. However the marketing materials for an active social enterprise, Sekar Kawung, noted that in one particular weaving group called *Paluanda Lama Hamu* (a group that we have yet to interview at the time of writing) only two women have all the skills necessary to perform the whole of the weaving and dying process alone (Prijosusilo 2017).

(3) *The use of mobile phones and social media by several younger generation women and men*

Internet access is getting better on Sumba, although it is limited to certain telephone operators. Also, there are many cheap mobile phones, many made in China. The use of mobile phones and social media draws younger generations into the business and marketing side of the Sumba woven cloth business. Almost all of them have Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp accounts, and some also have YouTube and Vlog accounts to upload their activities. Since they use these tools in their personal social life for leisure, they seamlessly begin to experiment with marketing for the small businesses run by their families.

Implications of these three shifts for gender roles

These shifts work to move women's roles more to the margins of the small businesses while at the same time mobilising younger generations to be more actively involved in marketing through social media. Younger women with children work on social media marketing on the one hand and the task of making the indigo dye on the other (which is still restricted to women because of local beliefs that ban men from being involved) and to weaving mechanically onto a frame where the design has been pre-set. Thus, they exhibit technical proficiency in two tasks central to marketing and making within the organisation. The women know this and locally and individually feel empowered. Yet the contradiction is that when it comes to external communication – westward looking and in negotiating with outside markets – much of the women's labour is once again implicitly subordinated and made invisible as ancillary work. Thus, while their role in indigo dyeing is revered and highlighted both locally and in narratives to the global market, on a day-to-day basis women's weaving work is "outsourced" piecemeal. They cannot depend on weaving as a source of steady income and must have day jobs or recede into a domesticity restricted to home, spousal, child and elder care – even as they manage some of the income from the business to support this household responsibility.

The contradiction here is that the women seem – based on our observations and conversations with the women – to feel they do "own" the motifs. They feel the power based in the historical role of women in developing the motifs, even though they were developed in dialogue with the men who travelled out of Sumba and came back with stories about their adventures (Forshee 2000). The older motifs that are now standardised and globally recognisable as Sumbanese are acknowledged as being women's creations. Women's power then is drawn more from the past and from the maintaining of traditions than from the modern global and techno-mediated business growth. In the past, weaving and natural dye skills have relied on the transfer of tacit knowledge from generation to generation of women in the community. Yet the contemporary drive is towards standardisation of the design and (natural dye) colouring process in the pre-weaving stages of the *asli* process in order for Sumba woven cloth to be classified as an intangible heritage product under the UNESCO programme.

Attempts to get the cloth (and process) certified under the UNESCO programme are motivated by perceptions that getting Sumbanese woven cloth certified would not only brand it as something worthy of Indonesian national pride, but it would also contribute to the preservation of traditional ethnic Sumbanese community practices and knowledge by continuing to make weaving and natural dye processes viable as a livelihood for a portion of the population. What community dynamics – interdependent ecologies of social roles and processes of making the cloth – would shift and what would be viewed as authentic traditions? We saw the contestations emerge through discussions of whether all weavers produced *asli* (original, authentic) natural dyed Sumba woven cloth and how the consumer might recognise an *asli* product. Indonesian batik was recognised by UNESCO as a cultural heritage in October 2009, after various stakeholders in Indonesia spent time and energy strategically arguing the case that batik was authentically part of Indonesian cultural heritage. A certain standardisation of process needed to be revealed and maintained across the country in order to certify one way of batik making as the authentic Indonesian process. Thus, the struggle to get UNESCO to authenticate an intangible cultural heritage product reveals struggles around the definitions of the very terms “authenticity”, “tradition” and “culture”. For instance, Forshee (2000, 6) has pointed out that ³ eastern Sumbanese villagers cleverly play with notions like ‘ethnicity,’ ‘tradition,’ ‘primitivism,’ and ‘authenticity’ as they fashion culture in meetings with outsiders”.

Even as arguments are being made by local and national units for the certification of a product as “intangible cultural heritage”, the process of production must of necessity shift and become more understandable in the contexts of modern epistemological conditions of knowledge production. Further, there are various hierarchies of nation – economy and culture – that come into play in this struggle. The move to make a case for batik as cultural heritage product, for instance, was viewed not just as a nationalist move but as a very important economic move. As Steelyana (2012) notes, batik “is not only a cultural heritage but it also provides livelihood for millions of people of Indonesia”.

In the case of Sumbanese *ikkat*, informants that we spoke to told us that a few unsuccessful attempts have been made to classify it as intangible heritage through UNESCO. It is clear that there is national interest in describing Sumba *ikkat* as intangible heritage. Regardless of whether it is given the status of UNESCO cultural heritage product, Sumba woven cloth has come to represent Sumbanese culture through a particular kind of aesthetics based on weaving and natural dye processes and there is local Indonesian national move to categorise this process in the intangible heritage framework.

Conclusion

Our focus in this article was on gender role shifts and the contradictions around women’s role in production that emerge within particular East Sumbanese weaving groups. Through our research we began to understand that the impact of modern, globalising forces on local gender roles was complex and not simply a linear story of women’s empowerment. Whether linked with entrepreneurial aspirations of local weaver groups, the attempt to cater to the tourist gaze, economic empowerment and development or with preservation of intangible heritage by following UNESCO guidelines the shifts impacted women’s ability to engage in business leadership roles even as they were locally acknowledged to be the ones to carry forward the community’s traditional knowledge and production skills. Historically, Sumbanese weaving experts and leaders have been women – this is attested to through interviews (which could also serve as oral histories) of female and male members of the weaving groups. Previous researchers – whether anthropologists, development researchers or practitioners (such as the non-profit groups working in collaboration with weaver groups) – have also attested to the historical and contemporary importance of the women’s knowledge and skills in the weaving community.

The key findings from our research – the three shifts/themes – reinforce the observations of feminist scholars who have noted that current models of modern development programmes tend to reinforce western patriarchal norms for management, leading to the delegation of women’s labour as subordinate production and ancillary work. Thus, women in the community – however respected and honoured for their expertise locally and however much local control and responsibility they may have – lose voice in regards to the larger organisational decisions which tend to be global-facing as the men are placed in the position to be negotiators and managers of the businesses and organisations.

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Notes on contributors

Rustina Untari is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Economics and Business, and the Head of the Center for Women’s Studies, at Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang, Indonesia. She holds a PhD in Industrial Management from the Bandung Institute of Technology, Indonesia. Her research interests are small and medium enterprises, entrepreneurship, culture and creative industries, and industrial clusters.

Radhika Gajjala is a Professor of Media and Communication, and of American Culture, Studies at Bowling Green State University, USA. She has researched non-profit organisations and community partnerships with biracial communities in the US. Her research engages with themes related to globalisation, women’s labour, craft communities in the Global North and Global South, feminism and social justice.

Ridwan Sanjaya is a Professor in the field of information systems at the Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang, Indonesia. He has a Master’s of Science in Internet and E-Commerce Technology and a PhD in Computer Information Systems from Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. His research interests are in internet technology, systems information and creative industries.

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