

Outreach

Development of Indonesia's Outlying Areas



RE-WEAVING THE PAST

INDONESIA is home to a vast assortment of traditional handwoven textiles, most of which are not as well-known as batik. Each region offers its own unique variety with vibrant colors and intricate patterns. Today, many of the lesser-known textiles such as the Silungkang *songket* and Dayak Iban *ikat* have begun to disappear. A group of youths in Sawahlunto, West Sumatra, have revived the Silungkang *songket* by creating new motifs and preserving the region's hand-weaving technique. This August, the Sawahlunto government will hold an international *songket* festival. Meanwhile, the ASPPUK (Women in Small Businesses Assistance Association), a non-profit organization in Kapuas Hulu, offers guidance for Dayak Iban weavers, to help them return to natural dyes and preserve their age-old weaving tradition. *Tempo English* reports.

THE SILUNGKANG SONGKET'S COMEBACK

A group of young people in the village of Lunto Timur, Sawahlunto, West Sumatra, have enhanced the traditional Silungkang *songket* fabric using natural dyes and new motifs. Their products have been exhibited abroad.

FITRIA Yuria Agustin, 21, describes her daily afternoon ritual at her neighbor Anita Dona Asri's house in Lunto Timur as 'productive window shopping'. At Anita's house, Ria—short for Fitria—is exposed to various color threads.

Every day Ria weaves these colorful threads into Silungkang *songket*, Sawahlunto's traditional hand-woven textile, using a hand loom. It takes Ria between one and seven days to weave a two-meter-long *songket*. "It depends on the motif and dyeing technique," she said.

Ria can produce simple motifs for day-to-day wear, if requested, within hours. But complicated motifs require extra hours. "My whole body aches from working the loom. But it's no big deal."

Ria enjoys weaving because the work allows her to chat and banter with nine other women around the same age in the group, also *songket* artisans. Dona, their mentor, does not object to their chit-chat. "Kak Dona is like an older sister to us," said Sri Putri Siska Mulyanti, 24, who also practices weaving at Dolas *Songket*, Dona's Silungkang fabric brand.

In August, Dona's residence is particularly busy. The Sawahlunto International *Songket* Carnival (SISCA), themed

'Heritage for Sustainability', will soon be held on August 25-27, and orders are piling up. The event, initiated by Ali Yusuf, Sawahlunto's mayor, was first held in 2015. SISCA organizes parades demonstrating creative fashion designs using the Silungkang *songket* as the primary material. There will also be a *songket* exhibition, a children's fashion show, and a *songket* conference.

According to Ali, SISCA events in the previous two years successfully drew in both local and international visitors. SISCA's first event in 2015 received an award from MURI (Indonesian Museum of Records), because it was attended by 17,290 people wearing the Silungkang *songket*. "We want people to fall



in love with the Silungkang *songket*. This is why we're promoting (the fabric) through various means and events," Ali told *Tempo English* at the Forum and Expo of Indonesian Innovations 2017 in Jakarta last month.



Dona demonstrating her weaving technique for a visitor at European Development Day in Brussels, Belgium



A group of Songket weavers in their workshop.

Songket textiles on display at Dona's boutique.



THE Silungkang songket is not only promoted through carnivals. The Sawahlunto government also organizes free songket-weaving training for youths under the age of 30. Apart from preserving the region's traditional textile, the training program is aimed at decreasing the unemployment rate.

The training is held every day in a number of places, including in subdistrict and municipal offices, so that more people can participate. In these courses, participants learn about the handloom, motifs, songket techniques, and dyeing.

Since 2015, 300 individuals have taken part in the training program. Dona, who is a trainer in four municipalities, including Lunto Timur, said an increasing number of young girls have joined in. "The industry's economic potential is motivating them to weave the songket," said Dona.

But of the 300 or so participants, only 167 people chose to become songket artisans by trade. Many of the youngsters are impatient when it comes to operat-

ing the loom. "Yet patience is the key to successful weaving."

Still, her achievements have encouraged many of her students. Dona, who has learned songket weaving since she was in third grade, was the only Indonesian entrepreneur invited to participate in the collaborative forum for international development at the European Development Day (EDD) in Brussels, Belgium, June 7-8. At the EDD, she exhibited Silungkang songket fabrics and demonstrated her weaving skills on a handloom directly from Sawahlunto. She received an invitation from the EDD after she applied through the Institution for Research and Community Ser-

vice (LP2M).

Ria, who learns weaving from Dona, says because of her mentor's achievements, she is now determined to learn more about the Silungkang songket and to one day become an entrepreneur. The high school graduate was once tempted to work at an office in order to get a monthly salary. "Kak Dona taught me that the Silungkang songket business depends entirely on our own self-motivation."

To explain her 'madness', Ria said once she is absorbed in weaving and fulfilling orders, she can produce up to five pieces of fabric in two days.

According to Ali Yusuf, Silungkang songket can be profitable as long as the artisan is serious in developing the craft. A capital outlay of only Rp14,000 is sufficient for buying the threads needed

ket will only gain more enthusiasts.



DONA'S love affair with the Silungkang songket began in the late 1990s, during the monetary crisis that hit Indonesia. Her parents' songket business had gone bankrupt and Dona was asked to weave songket to help pay her school fees. "My dad paid me Rp10,000 for each sheet I made and sold," she said.

Years later, she realized that apart from increasing the family's income, her parents had wanted her to become a skilled songket weaver. Dona began paying for her own education in middle school, and continued to do so as an education student at the Padang State University. While studying at the university, she brought a hand loom to her boarding house in Padang, West Sumatra, and weaved in her spare time. Each sheet of songket she wove while a university student was sold for Rp150,000 in Sawahlunto. As it turned out, Dona's income from weaving was sufficient for paying all her tuition and living costs.

After university, Dona refrained from becoming a teacher, as she felt challenged to develop her craft. In 2014, she established the Dolas Songket, a brand once used by her parents. Dona also opened free weaving classes for young girls at her home. She only began receiving payment from Sawahlunto's Department of Industry, Cooperatives, and Small-Medium Enterprises, as one of Sawahlunto's dozens of trainers. "What's important is that more and more people will become songket artisans. That would be enough for me," she said.

Dona encourages her students to modify the Silungkang songket, to make it more attractive. The region's songket was dominated by black, red, blue, silver, and gold, but Dona has added more colors, to make the textile more appealing to young people and visitors from elsewhere. If one takes a peek at the Do-



las Songket Instagram account, one can note the modern-day Sawahlunto songket in pinks, purples, toska greens, and grays.

While most Silungkang songket artisans opt for synthetic dyes, Dolas Songket's colors are made from natural substances. Dona and the Dolas Songket team created new colors using a fixative process, or by concentrating fibrous materials such as mangosteen peels, *suri-an* (mahogany) tree bark, *Mimosa pudica* leaves, turmeric leaves as well as coconut fiber. Dona learned dyeing techniques while participating in LP2M's training program in Padang.

According to Dona, the quality of natural substances is superior to synthetic substances. In addition to its uniqueness and variance, fabric made of natural substances are stronger, softer, are not prone to discoloration, and are comfortable to wear. Natural fabrics also sell for a much higher price. A songket wrap dyed with synthetic dyes is sold at Rp400,000, while a piece of fabric dyed with natural dyes is usually sold at Rp1.2 million.

Weaving class for weavers in Lunto Timur village, West Sumatra.

On the other hand, natural substances produce muted colors which are not as bright and vibrant as synthetic colors. "We're still trying to find ways to make up for the shortfall," said Dona. The availability of raw materials also poses a challenge. Mangosteen, for example, cannot be obtained all year round.

Besides developing natural dyes, Dona also encourages both herself and her students to create new motifs. She has created tens of new motifs, most of which are simpler than the traditional motifs. These new motifs are sought after by young people.

Dolas Songket motifs inspire Sri Putri, though she does not deny that natural dyeing techniques are complicated and more time-consuming. "But, the difficulties are challenges to overcome," said Sri Putri, who studies at the University of Bung Hatta in Padang.

After her success reviving Dolas Songket and bringing the Silungkang to Europe, Dona wants to popularize the textile through fashion shows and hopes to collaborate with renowned designers. "I want the Silungkang songket to join the ranks of Indonesia's icons, like batik," said Dona. ■

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A RETURN TO AN OLD TRADITION

The Dayak Iban Tribe has been weaving for centuries, but many weavers have abandoned the practice of using natural dyes. The Women in Small Businesses Assistance Association is helping Dayak Iban's weavers return to their ancestor's tradition.

ELISABETH Insen goes out to the field every morning to tend crops in her small farm in the Labian village, West Kalimantan. When she arrives home in the afternoon, she takes out a wooden backstrap loom, lays out strands of different color threads, and begins to weave.

The threads are colored using natural dyes from plants that she grows in her own backyard. Insen also makes coloring pastes that can be stored for up to one month. "I don't always make new dye batches. I usually make them in large amounts so I can use the same colors repeatedly," she said.

The 30-year-old only started using natural dyes in 2015, after her weaving group of 13 women received training from the Women in Small Businesses Assistance Association (ASPPUK). Insen, who is head of the group, said in the old days her ancestors always used plant coloring. But these days, weavers are finding it more convenient to use chemical dyes. "It's easier; we only need to buy it in a store. But the colors bleed easily," she said.

Insen learned that using natural dye increases the value of handwoven fabric. She used to sell the largest fabric at no more than Rp300,000-500,000. But



with natural dyes, one sheet of fabric can be sold at almost Rp2 million.

Weaving is a skill that has been passed down from one generation to the next in the Dayak Iban Tribe, said Insen. But making a full-size cloth takes time. The largest fabric takes around three months to finish, while smaller ones take up to one month.

Although weaving is only a side job for Insen as well as other women in her group, mostly farmers, the increased value of their textile has helped them earn more. Additionally, the ASPPUK assist the weavers to market their finished products.

"I also sell some of the leftover natural color paste I have at my house. Our monthly income has increased significantly," she said.

Insen has participated in exhibitions held in several cities, including Ponti-

Weavers dyeing threads with natural coloring.

anak and Jakarta. She hopes to produce more handwoven fabrics and to be able to promote Dayak Iban's traditional textile to the world.

"The ASPPUK facilitators have brought some of our fabric overseas. I hope it'll be more well-known," she said.



ASPPUK's program in Kapuas Hulu began in 2015, said Darmanto, the association's program officer. The program was aimed at developing natural dyes using local resources. The non-profit organization, which focuses on helping women become entrepreneurs, has similar programs in 17 regencies.

“Kapuas Hulu is rich in natural resources that can be used for dyes and the Dayak Iban tribe once had a strong tradition of using natural dyes,” he said, adding that the tradition has gradually disappeared because now weavers prefer synthetic dyes.

ASPPUK, whose main concern is economic empowerment, reached out to weaver groups in Kapuas Hulu, all made up of women. Handwoven textile, said Darmanto, impacts the Dayak Iban people’s economy considerably, although weaving is still considered a side source of income, with farming as the majority’s primary income.

“(The program) connects their livelihood to their culture. If we don’t start cultivating natural dyes, the Dayak Iban’s tradition will be lost,” he said. The Dayak Iban’s motifs are inspired by natural elements, which are then translated into geometric shapes.

Darmanto explained that one of the reasons weavers prefer synthetic dyes is that plants used to produce natural dyes have become scarce. To harvest these plants, one must go deep into the forest.

ASPPUK facilitators conducted training for women weaver groups in Kapuas Hulu and taught them how to cultivate plants for natural dyes in their own backyard. Alan Keba, a facilitator, said to help the weavers, the association provided them with a catalogue of natural dyes.

The women learned to grow plants such as the *Indigofera tinctoria*, to produce blue dye, and *Morinda citrifolia* for red dye. In the past, Dayak Iban weavers would use primarily black or brown for their textile, but now the colors have grown more diverse.

“We also help them grow plant mordants that they can use to lock colors on fabric or threads,” he said.

Furthermore, weavers received training for processing natural dyes and turning it into coloring paste that can last longer and are reusable. Men in Kapuas Hulu, seeing how the women have learned to produce natural dyes, realized that they can also use these dyes for painting or for dyeing other products. The men learned from wom-



Weavers making natural dyes from plants.

Dayak Iban handwoven textile.



According to Darmanto, the largest handwoven fabric, the *kombu*, which is roughly the size of a single bedsheet, can sell for Rp1.2-3 million. “Naturally dyed textile is the trend now, so demand is increasing,” he said.

DESPITE this increasing demand, Dayak Iban’s traditional handwoven textile cannot be mass produced. A weaver can only make eight handwoven scarves in a month, while a *kombu* can take up to three months to make, and a medium-size cloth takes between one and two months.

The ASPPUK has assisted over 200 weavers in five villages in Kapuas Hulu to market their handwoven fabric in exhibitions and through partner organizations. According to Darmanto, Dayak Iban weavers have participated in several international events as well, including the New York Fashion Week. Now, they have opened a stall in Sarinah, Jakarta’s oldest shopping mall, and at the Jakarta Souvenir Center (Smesco).

The program will end in 2018, but Darmanto hopes that the strides already made will be sustainable even without ASPPUK’s facilitation. “That is why, in addition to training, we teach them the importance of conservation, not only of their weaving tradition, but also of plants used to make natural dyes.”

en weavers who participated in the training program and began producing pastes themselves. Now, some use natural colors are used to paint people’s house. “They also sell the dye separately for extra income,” said Darmanto.

Although weaving with plant-based color requires more work on the weavers’s part, the added value of textile dyed with natural dyes convinced them to return to their old tradition.