

Traditional Handwoven Textiles of Alor Regency, Indonesia

By

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The Alor Regency of Nusa Tenggara Timur, Indonesia, consists of the Alor Archipelago, with the largest islands being Alor and Pantar. Approximately half a dozen ethnic groups from the Alor-Pantar language group, including the Adang, Kui, Klon, Reta, Kiramang, and Taruamang, and one Austronesian group, the Alurung, also called Alorese or Alor, weave textiles that serve as clothing, gifts, and ethnic and patrilineal identity markers. Several groups, such as the Kabola, produce bark cloth for traditional attire, but since this article focuses on woven textiles, bark cloth will not be discussed here.



Alor Regency Map

Woven textile production occurs in coastal areas, but exceptions to this cultural rule exist, specifically in the Adang settlement of Hulnani and the Alurung hamlet of Baoraja Atas in Northwest Alor Subdistrict. The primary material of Alor Regency's traditional textiles is cotton. Silk was a prestigious imported material. Previously, a few Alurung weavers produced silky thread by combining cotton with milkweed pod fibers but ceased making it since silk-like synthetic threads are now readily available in the local markets. Living on the coast, weavers lacked sufficient land to grow cotton, leading to barter trade with neighboring islands such as Lembata, where there was an abundance of

cotton. Weavers of each cultural group produce textiles reflecting patrilineage membership and neutral ones that can be traded or sold to other groups.

Settlements of the Alurung, also known as the Alor or Alorese, are in Northwest Alor Subdistrict, Uma Pura Hamlet of Ternate Island, Buaya Village of Buaya Island, and West, Southwest, and East Pantar Subdistricts of Pantar Island, and Alurung women traditionally produced warp ikat-decorated textiles for personal use and trade. The traditional attire for both men and women is the two- or three-paneled sarong. Men also use this garment as a hip wrapper over trousers or as a shoulder cloth.

Alurung tubular garments, *tenapi* in Alurung language, are named according to design layout and colorways. A *tenapi* may be composed of two or three panels. The most prestigious garment is a three-paneled *tenapi* decorated with patola-inspired patterning in the middle. The people of Alor Regency preserved the imported *patola*, or double ikat-decorated silk textiles from India, as sacred heirlooms. Examples are still found here presently. Historically, members of the ruling patrilineage of a settlement held the prerogative to wear the *tenapi patola bao lolong*.



Figure 1(left) – The women on the far left and right wear *tenapi patola bao long*, the highest-ranking *tenapi* of the Alurung. Alor Besar, Northwest Alor Subdistrict, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Yulianti A. Peni, 2020.

Figure 2 (right) - *Tenapi Patola Naga*, belonging to Mr. Kasim Ape, who is the eldest male of the Suku Uma Gita, of Alokai, Desa Levokisu, Northwest Alor Subdistrict, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Linda S. McIntosh, 2023.

Generally, weaves from Alor-Pantar language-speaking groups utilize weaving techniques to produce designs, but those living near the Alurung produce warp-ikat decorated textiles. For example, Reta women of Ternate Island, Northwest Alor Subdistrict, Blegar women of East Pantar Subdistrict, and, as mentioned above, Adang women use the warp ikat technique to create designs. Their textiles resemble those produced by the Alurung. Regarding the traditional attire of other Alor Pantar groups, men wear a two-paneled fringed textile as a shawl or a hip wrapper but generally replace the hip wrapper with trousers. Some men utilized a loincloth in the past. Women's traditional clothing is a tubular sarong, and the ceremonial sarong reflecting patrilineage membership consists of four panels.

Presently, Kiramang weavers of South Alor Subdistrict (former Batulolong kingdom) utilize complementary warp technique, while Kui weavers of Southwest Alor Subdistrict apply complementary warp and discontinuous weft techniques to form the patterning while weaving. Taruamang weavers of East and Northeast Alor District, especially in Kolana and Maritaing, also use supplementary warp, complex weft twining, and slit tapestry along with the decorative methods just mentioned. Weavers from all these groups apply weft twining to finish men's textiles.



Figure 3 - A Kui man wears a *nawon*, or Kui man's wrap, to a festival in Alor Besar, Northwest Alor Subdistrict, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Yulianti A. Peni, 2020.



Figure 4 – *Ken Suku Ler*, collection of the Museum 1000 Moko, Kalabahi, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Linda S. McIntosh, 2019.

Women's tubular sarongs of the Kui, Klon, and Kiramang are known as *ken*. In Kui language, a man's loincloth is called *emel*. Kiramang men's two-paneled wraps are called *non*, while the Kui refer to this garment as *nawon*. The Taruamang language-speaking people have distinct names for their traditional attire. *Keng limi geweng* describes a man's two-paneled fringed wrap, whereas *keng mei geweng* is the term for a woman's tubular garment. The loincloth with fringe is the *kubul bias*, and the ones with split woven warp ends are called *kubul kir-kir pakar*. Taruamang loincloths are recognized for having the most intricate adornments, created with numerous techniques. However, weavers have ceased using complex weft twining to decorate these narrow textiles. Men also stopped wearing these weavings as loincloths, but now men and women use short examples as shoulder cloths. It appears that Kiramang weavers also applied slit tapestry in the past.

A Taruamang man's two-paneled wrap that serves as a coffin cover or shroud will have its fringes cut. Alurung textiles with designs inspired by Indian trade textiles can serve as funerary textiles among many groups in Alor Regency. For example, Adang and Abui families will keep a *tenapi patola bao lolong* for these purposes. Relatives attending a funeral may be surprised to learn that the deceased's family possessed one.



Figure 5 – Taruamang (or Wersing language-speaking) women wearing *keng mei geweng* at a wedding, except for the woman wearing a blue shirt. She is wearing a *Kui ken*, Maritaing, East Alor Subdistrict, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Linda S. McIntosh, 2019.



Figure 6 (left) - Taruamang attire

Figure 7 (right) – A Taruamang (or Wersing language-speaking) loincloth or *kubul kir-kir pakar*. Complex weft twining and discontinuous supplementary weft techniques form the bands of patterning at the ends. Collection of the Museum 1000 Moko, Kalabahi, Alor Regency, Indonesia. Linda S. McIntosh, 2019.

Although there has been a decline in the production of handspun cotton and natural dyes and the number of women weaving in Alor Regency, handwoven textile production for personal consumption and sale continues. The weekly markets of Alor Kecil and Baolang settlements feature Alurung textiles for sale, and the markets of Kalabahi, the regency's capital, have vendors selling textiles from different parts of the regency. Besides the traditional uses of handwoven textiles, Alor Regency's populace consumes them as school and office uniforms and as clothing for other occasions. Some fashion designers from Jakarta have included handwoven textiles from Alor Regency in their collections. Hopefully, all of these markets will sustain production.