

Wearing the Cloth of Kain Tenun Tais: a Gender Differentiation and Status Symbol of the Bunaq Ethnic Group in West Timor-Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socio-cultural significance of *Kain Tenun Tais* within the Bunaq ethnic group of West Timor, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach supported by descriptive statistics from a survey of 40 randomly selected respondents knowledgeable about the weaving tradition, the research explores the historical and contemporary roles of *Kain Tenun Tais* in Bunaq society. Findings reveal that the woven cloth serves as both a symbol of ethnic identity and a medium for preserving traditional knowledge, particularly through the oral narratives known as *Tei Gugul Hiliq*, which guide the creation of motifs and patterns. The designs, colors, and thread arrangements function as markers of social status, lineage, and gender, with certain motifs reserved for individuals of noble descent or specific ceremonial roles. The weaving process reflects a balanced gender partnership, where women are responsible for weaving while men contribute by preparing threads, constructing looms, and participating in ceremonies. Overall, *Kain Tenun Tais* functions as a living cultural artifact that embodies historical continuity, spiritual beliefs, and the social structure of the Bunaq community, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of identity and values.

Keywords: Cloth, Identity, Weaving, Colors, Motifs, Patterns, Gender, Social Status

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INTRODUCTION

Textile is a significant art form across Asia, embodying tradition, culture, religion, ethnicity, and identity (Bose, 2024). In Southeast Asia, textile production communicates social identity related to gender and social status. This is highlighted by Weiner and Schneider (1989:1), who observe that cloth functions as a symbolic expression of social, economic, and political life, capable of denoting variations in age, sex, rank, status, and group affiliation through its construction, color, and patterns.

The study focuses on the socio-cultural role of *Kain Tenun Tais* among the Bunaq ethnic group of West Timor, Indonesia. This traditional cloth acts as both a marker of ethnic identity and a social differentiator, encoding gender and status distinctions through its colors, motifs, and patterns. It also supports the perpetuation of Bunaquesse ethnic identity and traditional weaving practices, especially during rituals and public ceremonies.

Among the Bunaq, the *Kain Tenun Tais* symbolizes ancestral heritage from *Bein Mone* (male ancestors) and *Bein Pana* (female ancestors) of the *Deu Hoto* clan, legitimating identity through its production and functions. Gender roles shape textile use—men primarily farm while weaving is women's domain, specifically responsible for producing two pieces annually. Clothing styles and *Tais* wearing methods further communicate social roles and hierarchies (Abad, 2006; West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Cloth functions as symbolic culture that conveys personal and group identities within ethnic communities (Geertz, 1973). It also acts as a binding mechanism for communal identity and social roles (Gordon, 2011). The exchange and use of textiles involve complex social

transactions that embed power relations, transitions, and social status codification (Leedom, 1992).

Social control is reflected in textile conventions, where bodily presentation through cloth is regulated by societal norms and hierarchies (Douglas, 1996; Giddens, 1997). Southeast Asian textiles reflect these dynamics, where motifs and colors signify social status and gender distinctions (Lefferts, 1992; Howard, 1998). Moreover, many societies enforce clothing restrictions based on rank or role, perpetuated through socialization and cultural heritage (Maxwell, 2003; Terwiel, 1983; Hitchcock, 1985; Fox, 1980).

Textiles also hold spiritual meanings in Southeast Asia, representing cosmic dualism and the universe's order. Color symbolism aligns with gendered cosmological concepts, with red and black distinguishing male and female realms respectively (Gittinger, 1990; Maxwell, 2003). Special patterned cloths are often used in rituals for protection or communication with spirits, as in practices among the Batak and Iban peoples (Gordon, 2011; Graham, 1987).

The stratification theory of Max Weber (1958, 1974) is used to frame the significance of textile symbolism in social hierarchy. Status groups, distinguished by honor and prestige, differ from economic classes but can overlap with them. Status symbols like particular cloth motifs or colors denote social rank, and are often restricted to elites such as *rajas* or emperors—as exemplified by dragon motifs in dynastic China (Maxwell, 2003; Gordon, 2011).

Beyond social stratification, textiles also reflect gender roles and family affiliation through motifs and production practices (Hamilton, 1994; King, 1985). The technical skill in weaving is valued socially and economically, especially for women, affecting their status and marriage prospects. Ritual uses and gift exchanges of textiles mark societal ties and transitions, reinforcing communal bonds and maintaining cultural continuity (Gittinger, 1975; Niessen, 2009).

In Southeast Asia, textiles maintain gender and social distinctions across numerous ethnic groups. Men's and women's traditional textile items differ in motifs, construction, and usage, with weaving largely a female domain. In many societies, ritual textiles embody gendered symbolism, social control, and cultural cosmology. This complements the complementary male and female roles in society and ritual, illustrated among the Bunaq through their *Kain Tenun Tais* (Maxwell, 2003; De Jong, 1986; Vischer, 1979).

In conclusion, the *Kain Tenun Tais* of the Bunaq ethnic group serves as a complex cultural artifact encoding ethnic identity, gender differentiation, and social status. Its production, motifs, colors, and methods of wearing reflect longstanding symbolic, cosmological, social, economic, and political meanings, illustrating textile's multifaceted role in Southeast Asian societies and specifically within the Bunaq community of West Timor.

The objectives of the study were to situate *Kain Tenun Tais* within the cultural context of the Bunaquesse ethnic group, examine its relationship to Bunaquesse identity, analyze it as a symbolic representation of social status, and investigate its function as a gender signifier. Specifically, the study sought to answer: (1) What are the colors, motifs, and patterns of the *Kain Tenun Tais*, and how do these reflect Bunaquesse worldview, religious beliefs, and environmental relationships? (2) Which designs signified wearer gender and life events, and what were their symbolic meanings? (3) How did *Tais* determine social stratification and reflect the wearer's wealth, status, and prestige?

At the time of the study, little written information existed on the Bunaq ethnic group, revealing a gap between oral history and documented knowledge. Existing historical and cultural accounts inadequately represented the importance of the traditional cloth in Bunaq identity formation. While many studies examined Southeast Asian textiles, few focused on the *Kain Tenun Tais* and its social functions within Bunaq society. The researcher aimed to raise awareness among the Bunaq of Makir village in West Timor about the cloth's cultural heritage significance, particularly its role in defining status and gender stratification.

The study concentrated on the village of Makir, located centrally on Timor Island near the border between East Timor and Indonesia. Makir was identified as the only remaining Bunaq community actively practicing traditional weaving rituals and cotton cultivation, while other Bunaq groups had shifted to imported materials and abandoned these customs. This justified the choice of Makir to preserve the weaving tradition before it was lost.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the role of *Kain Tenun Tais* as a signifier of social status and gender stratification within the Bunaq society. To support the qualitative findings, descriptive statistics were also drawn from a representative survey of Bunaq individuals familiar with traditional weaving practices.

Data were collected through secondary sources, key informant interviews, questionnaires, and participant observation. Key informants included women from weaving families, tribal leaders, and clan members from aristocratic, elite, and commoner groups. Questionnaires were administered to 40 randomly selected individuals (5 men, 35 women), mostly aged 28–38 years. Almost all women respondents were experienced weavers, with most having 5 to 10 years of weaving practice and some up to 30 years. To complement survey data, six elderly women were interviewed separately. The researcher also engaged in weaving activities and rituals to gain deeper insights.

Data analysis involved transcription, coding, and thematic categorization focusing on gender and social status stratification. Visual tools such as tables and cognitive maps were used to present coded data. Triangulation, participant feedback, and observations validated the findings.

The study revealed how *Kain Tenun Tais* colors, motifs, and patterns conveyed layers of meaning related to Bunaq cosmology, social hierarchy, and gender roles. The textile functioned as a living symbol of the community's identity, social distinctions, and cultural continuity, sustained particularly through the active weaving and ritual practices preserved in Makir.

Despite similarities with broader Southeast Asian textile culture, the Bunaq social dynamics and socio-political context created unique meanings for *Kain Tenun Tais* that set them apart from other ethnic groups. The decay of antique cloth and limited historical records posed challenges but also highlighted the necessity of preserving oral traditions and current weaving practices.

Ultimately, the study underscored the vital cultural role of *Kain Tenun Tais* in reflecting and reinforcing Bunaq social structures, gender roles, and ethnic identity, emphasizing the need to safeguard these traditions amid modernization pressures and cultural shifts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Division of Labor in the Weaving Process

Tais making also involves complementary tasks between men and women. Weaving is the primary task of women while the men assist in preparing the tools needed for Tais-making. The men provide the woods and ingredients needed for making a Tais such as the esaq (palm leaf rib), nenuq (thread coloring), and ma' (bamboo) while the women provide the goq (cotton), kira (small stick), and bián (small plate) for the preparation of the thread for weaving. The men also prepare the Pil Bekaq (traditional carpet) and the Bian Gol for spinning the thread while the women prepare the goq and rene gol - a traditional basket that contains the cotton.

The women pick the cotton and spin these into threads until they produce a piece of Tais. The women hold the Tais when someone is born or dies in the family. It is also the task of women to bring the Tais in a Rene or Uhus. Hence, the tradition of the Tais starts and ends in the woman's hands.

The traditional weaving of Kain Tenun Tais is founded on the stories narrated in the poems of "Tei Gugul Hiliq". As the weavers spin cotton to produce thread for Tais using Kira and Bian (a traditional tools used by weavers for spinning a thread), they sing the "Tei Gugul Hiliq".

The "Tei Gugul Hiliq" rite is held near the Mot Mone and Mot Pana at night or daytime depending on the announcement of the Deu Gomo (tribal leader) or the Ama Desa (Barangay Captain) in the village. The weavers follow certain rules related to rites such as wearing a Tais, bringing their own cotton, and a local carpet that identifies their clan status. Both men and women participate in arranging the tools needed during the rite.

Tei Gugul Hiliq is a doctrine that is in the form of poems intended to keep the Bunaqs aware of the lives of their ancestors. The poems emphasize that weaving is the tradition of the Bunaq ancestors that they should keep it their hearts ("Kes li'as Bei gie rele zol – I ege zen roe rimil no" or As Kes Li'as Weaving is our ancestor's tradition - Keep it always in our heart). This indicates the importance of Tais weaving as a cultural heritage from the Bunaquesse ancestors and the centrality of weaving in the lives of the Bunaqs. For the Bunaqs, to weave is to give respect to the ancestors. In making the Tais, therefore, the Bunaquesse women have the role of perpetuating their cultural heritage.

During the rite, men and women wear different colors of Tais according to their gender, with the combination of a blouse (for women) and a shirt (for men). The women wear the Tais with combination of black color; while the men wear Tais of brown color with various combinations of black. The two colors of the Tais symbolize the respective roles of Bein Mone and Bein Pana of the clan as male and female lord authorities in the family and the continuation of the Tais tradition of spinning the thread. The most significant point in the ritual of spinning the thread is the consistency of pulling the cotton up and down to produce the thread as they sing the Tei Gugul Hiliq or the poems narrating the genealogical life stories of their ancestors from one generation to the next. The participants to this ritual promise to perpetuate the legacy of their ancestors by continuing their weaving practice to ensure long life and the continuity of their clans. Since the tradition of weaving a Kain Tenun Tais is considered a task of women, the rite of "Tei Gugul Hiliq" also conveys the importance of the women in the Bunaq society.

Tais making is considered to be essentially women's work. The Bunaquesse men merely assist the women in producing the thread by Gugul Hiliq (spinning the thread). The right hand

symbolizes masculinity known as Heten (right), which depicts the tasks of men to ensure his family's survival. The left hand refers to femininity known as Suel (left). Suel portrays the responsibilities of women to do the household chores.

Kain Tenun Tais as Signifier of Feminity and Masculinity

As an expression of material culture, the Tais is customarily used by the Bunaqs to cover their bodies. However, the design, color and motifs used also serve as distinguishing marks of gender for the Bunaqs. The Tais used by the men is called Tais Mone, (Mone means Men), and the Tais used by the women is called Tais Pana (Pana means Women). Regardless of the motif, the Tais mone is traditionally twisted-worn along the loin by a man with the design of long dress and the combination color of red and black.

A Bunaquesse man may choose a desired motif of Tais depending on his social status in the Bunaquesse society. The Tais belt called *doq tiq* (a traditional belt made of a piece of cloth) tied up in a man's loin complements the Tais. The Bunaquesse man also wears a small piece of cloth called *lesu* (a colorful traditional hat) to cover his head. He also wears a *selendang* (a small piece of Tais) on his shoulder down along his loin. In the past, the Bunaquesse men only wear the Tais. Nowadays however, they combine the Tais with modern clothes.

Moreover, the Tais Mone is worn following the pattern of Tais Mone Es. The word Es refers to the pattern of Tais Mone that conveys the function of *Nolaq* (wide) and *Legul* (long). In Bunaquesse culture, the phrase *Nolaq o Legul* symbolizes gentleness and accountability for one's actions, which are expected from the man. Hence, a Bunaquesse man is always required to be *Mone Ganal o Jelo* (a responsible man) to his family. This also extends to his involvement outside his family such as in politics and business. The words *Nolaq o Legul* indicates the expectations from the Bunaquesse man to take care of his family members and clan, to participate in politics (as *barangay* captain, district government official, etc.), and to engage in livelihood activities or trade.

The Bunaquesse women, on the other hand, wear the Tais Pana. Tais Pana is a sarong with an average length of around one to two meters. As a sarong, it is a long dress without any peculiarity in it (as compared with the Tais Mone). It covers the body from the breasts down to the feet. The size of the Tais Pana mostly depends on the woman's body. Its colors are a combination of black, yellow, and brown.

As part of the Bunaquesse tradition, the woman is required to wear a *selendang* (a small size of Tais) to cover her head or to put on her right and left shoulder covering the breasts. The woman's *selendang* has various colors and motifs designed similar to the Tais Mone, with a range of one meter. In addition, the Bunaquesse woman also brings a colorful *rene gol* (a traditional basket made of palm tree), which contains *Molo o Pu* (betel vine and areca nut). The *rene gol* is designed with some motifs of Tais such as flowers, eagle, or butterfly, which indicates her clan of origin or *Deu Hoto*.

The Bunaquesse woman's dress is called Tais Pana Na'ut, which means to cover the body tightly. Unlike the symbol of Tais Mone as *Nolaq o Legul*, the word Na'ut refers to *Til o Baraq* (*Til* means narrow; *Baraq* means short). For the Bunaqs, the phrase *Til o Baraq* symbolizes fertility and respect. The Bunaqs call them *Pana Maktaran o Loi Bul*, which symbolizes skills and knowledge in supervising the households. *Til* is an indication of the role of the Bunaquesse women to be always "close" to their family members, doing household

tasks. Baraq emphasizes the limit on the Bunaquesse women's involvement in politics. Women in the Bunaq society cannot be a leader except as Bein Pana in the Deu Hoto.

Kain Tenun Tais as A Basis for Social Stratification

Because cotton trees grow everywhere, the Bunaqs from different social status groups have access to such. Because of this, the cotton tree and the weaving of the Tais serve as equalizers of social positions for the Bunaqs and as a symbol of the identity of the Bunaq people as a whole. Nonetheless, the patterns, motifs, and colors of the woven Tais serve as means to distinguish the Nai, the En Soi, and the Renu from each other. The colors black and brown are soil colors in the lowlands where the Nai and the En Soi grow rice. The color red, on the other hand, is associated with the chivalry of their ancestors.

The motifs of butterfly, eagle, and gecko, on the other hand, are representations of superiority because these animals are considered belonging to the upper world in the Bunaq myth. Hence, they become the signifiers of ownership of lowland rice fields, superiority, authority, prestige, and wealth of both the Nai and the En Soi.

On the other hand, the Renu depend on the nature's produce for survival. Hence, the colors blue and green that symbolize cotton trees and natural products of nature freely given to all people, and the flower, which is a natural product of nature, came to symbolize the lower status of the Renu. The comb is a representation of the rake, a tool use to cultivate the soil. The survival of the Renu depends on what the soil (nature), which they cultivate, will produce. Hence, comb like the flower becomes the motif for the Renu as these symbols depict their dependency to nature.

The complexity of the dyeing or coloring process serves as a determinant of the worth of Kain Tenun Tais. The color and its brightness become the basis for determining the value of the Tais. Black thread is produced by soaking the cotton thread in the boiling leaves of the Tau' tree. Brown and red threads are produced by soaking the threads in the boiling roots of the Nenuq tree. The Tau' and Nenuq trees only grow in the fertile soil of the lowlands owned by the Nai and En Soi and are not readily available. As such, only the Nai and the En Soi can afford to use these in making the Tais.

Green and blue threads are produced by soaking the cotton threads in the boiling bark of Gewang tree and the leaves of the Lontar tree, respectively. These trees do not require fertile soil and are found everywhere; hence, the Renu cloth is cheaper and always available.

The motifs used in designing the Tais also depict status differentiation. The zoomorphic motifs are mostly found in the Kain Tenun Tais used by the Nai and En Soi family. Based on the Bunaq's myth, the toko'h (gecko), mape (eagle) and una (butterfly) are animal motifs that represent man's bravery, loyalty and unity. These animals belonged to the Upper World of the Bunaq legend. It is a Bunaquesse belief that animals that can fly or live in high places are superior than animals that live on land. The superiority of these animals is linked with the authority and privileges of the Nai. The En Soi have similar motif with the Nai because of their inherited social status, they have the privilege to become the assistant of the Nai in administering the community. This does not imply that because Nai and En Soi have similar zoomorphic design, they are of equal footing in the society. In public events or clan celebrations where the Bunaquesse are expected to wear the Tais in accordance to their social status, the

Bunaqs can distinguish the Nai from then Soi. This can be explained through the proposition of Geertz that culture has to be appreciated from the “native’s point of view”.

The motif of gecko, eagle and butterfly implies no distinction on the social status of the Nai and the En Soi from an outsider point of view. However, for the Bunaquesse they can differentiate the social status of the wearer because they know each other. They are aware of the family background or clan history of the wearer of the Tais as this is part of the story, in the Tel Gugul Hiliq. Hence, these are reflected in the in motif of their Tais. On the other hand, the geometric motifs that depict nature such as Hotel Gubuk (Flower) and Sawe (Comb) are seen in the Kain Tenun Tais of the Renu family. These motifs are considered part of nature, tools for agriculture, and commonly found in the Bunaq’s environment.

The pattern of the thread weft of the Kain Tenun Tais can also mark social status distinctions. The weaver has no authority to cut the thread weft because this privilege is given only to the male Nai and En Soi. Three kinds of thread weft are associated with specific status groups. These are the Tais Saren, Tais Goroq, and Tais Gulo.

CONCLUSION

The *Kain Tenun Tais* of the Bunaq ethnic group in West Timor serves not only as a textile but as a vital cultural artifact embodying the community’s identity, social hierarchy, and gender roles, with its colors, motifs, and techniques symbolizing ancestral heritage, social status, and economic relations. The weaving process reflects complementary gender roles, especially highlighting women’s artistic expertise, which grants them social recognition. As both a visual language and social tool, the *Tais* sustains tradition and reinforces societal stratification. To preserve this profound cultural heritage, future research should focus on formal documentation of *Tais* motifs and weaving methods, explore the impact of community-based workshops and education programs on cultural transmission, and assess strategies to support local artisans through fair trade and sustainable market integration, ensuring the *Kain Tenun Tais* continues to strengthen Bunaquesse identity and social cohesion across generations.

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