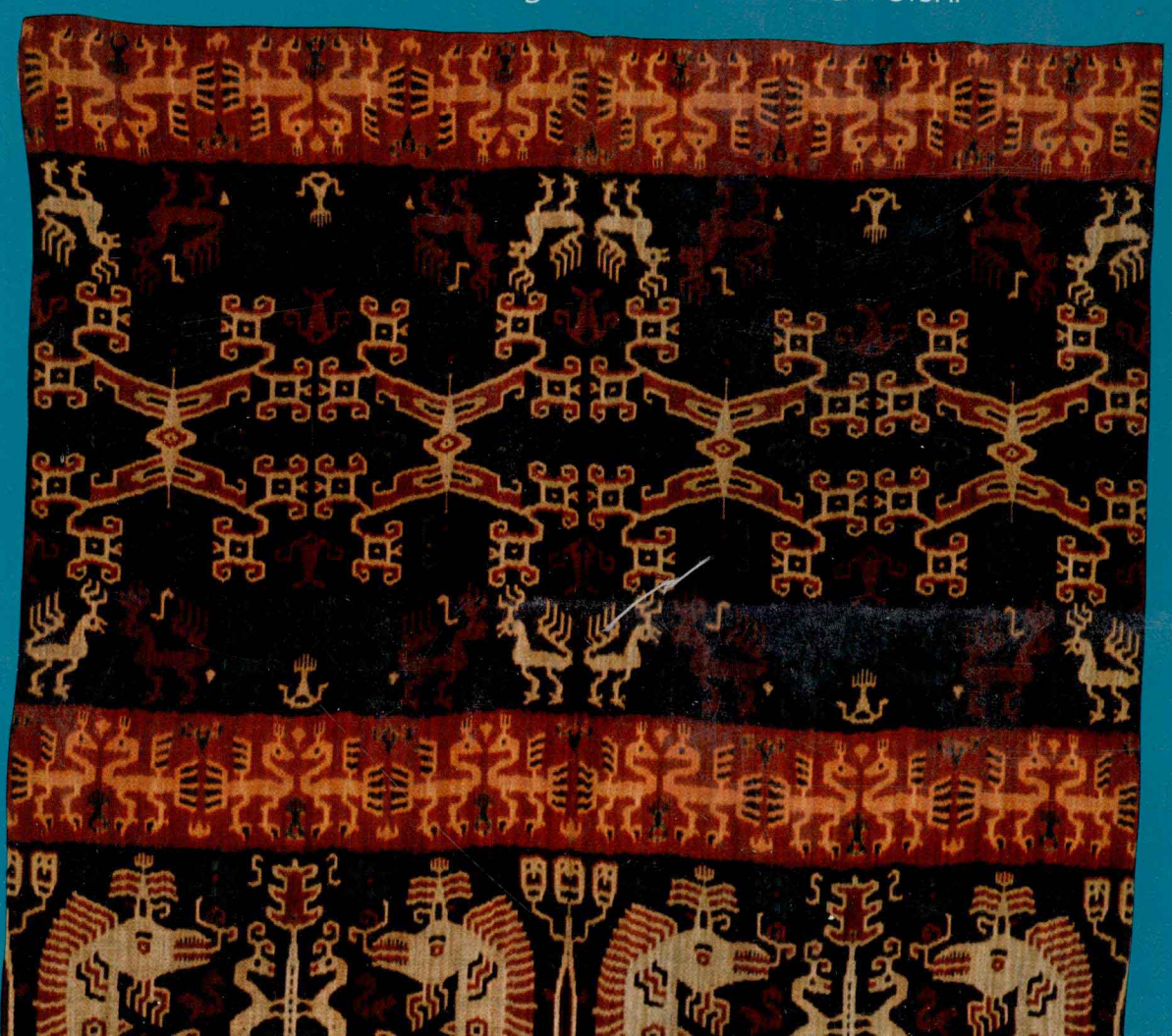
THE WORLD OF INDONESIAN TEXTILES

Wanda Warming and Michael Gaworski



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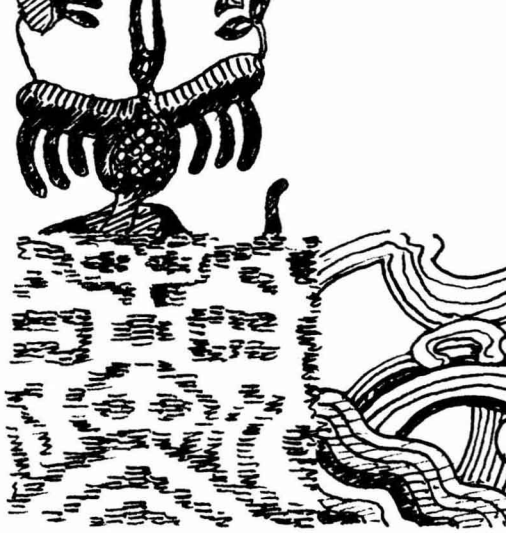

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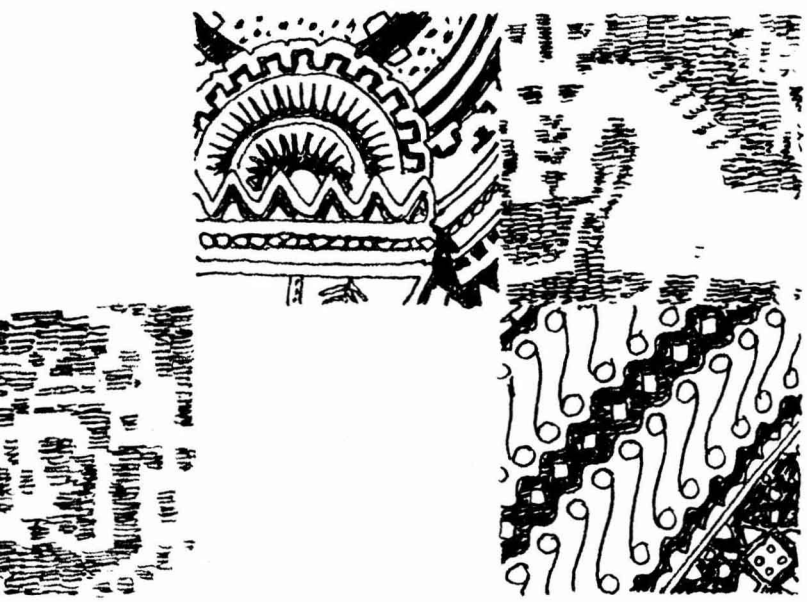
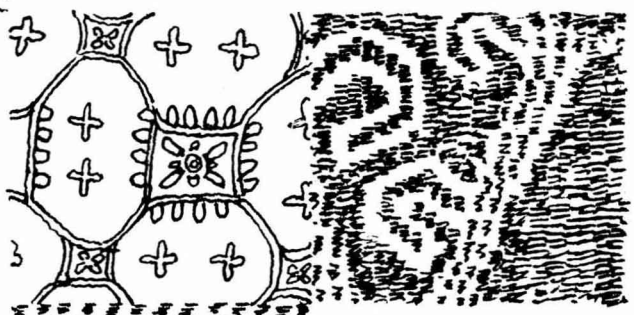


Text and photographs by
Wanda Warming and Michael Gaworski



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Introduction

Indonesians call their country *Tanah Air Kita* or "Our Land Water," a name that plainly expresses how, within the borders of the republic, there is more water than there is land. The 13,667 islands of the Indonesian archipelago stretch five thousand kilometers from the Malay Peninsula to Australia. Most of these islands are unnamed and uninhabited but they include Sumatra, Java, Sulawesi (formerly Celebes), most of Borneo (or Kalimantan to Indonesians), and half of New Guinea (known as Irian Jaya), as well as the smaller islands of Halmahera, the Malukus (the famous Spice Islands), and the Nusatenggara chain that includes the fabled island of Bali. Indonesia is home to more than 150,000,000 people, making it the fifth most populous country in the world. Ninety percent of all Indonesians live on Java, Sumatra, and Bali. These three islands contain some of the most densely inhabited regions on earth. Yet one could find few places in the world as sparsely settled as Borneo and New Guinea.

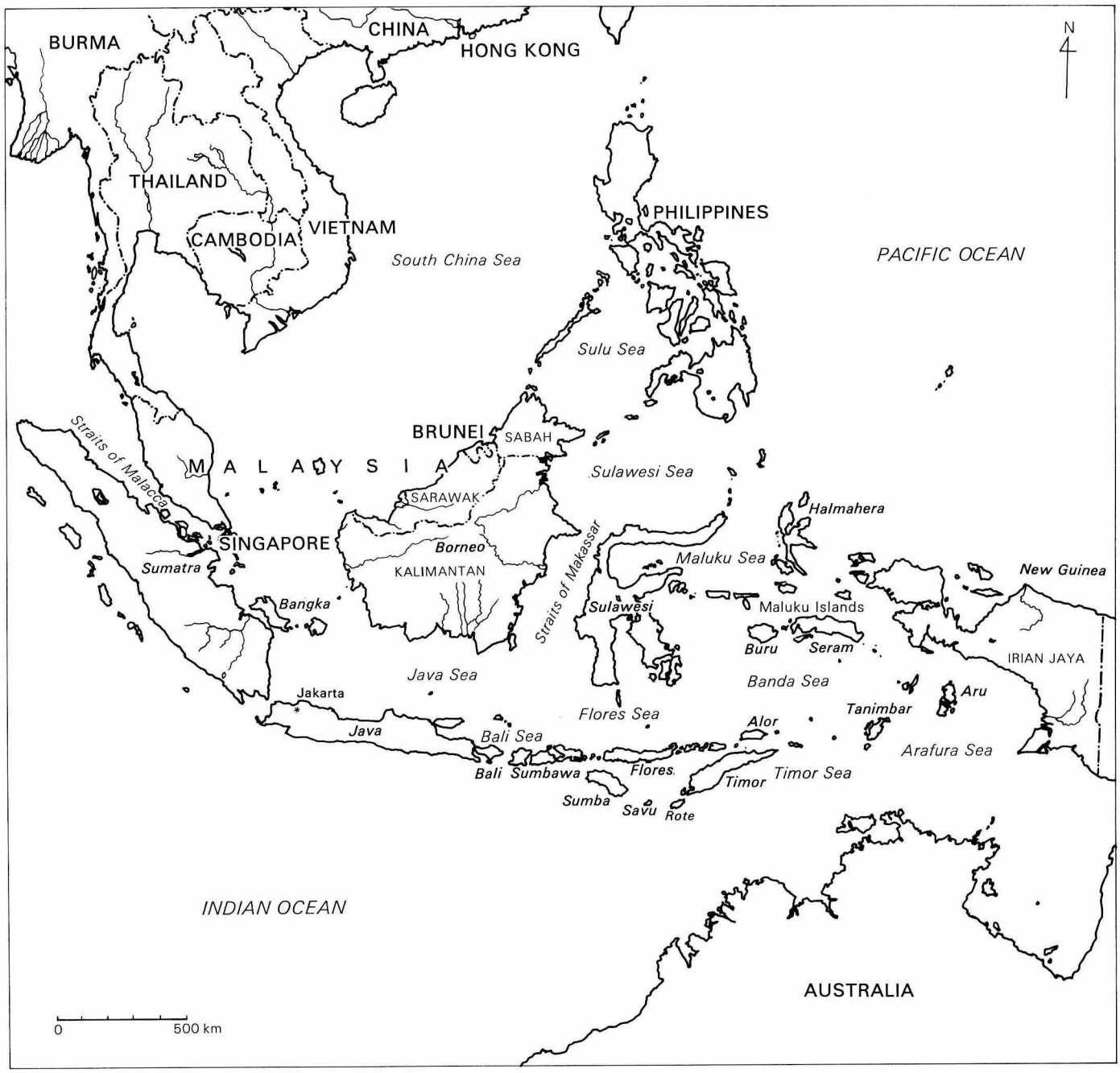
Indonesia is a land of contrasts and extremes. Tribes with a Neolithic culture live in villages of only a few houses while residents of giant metropolises like Jakarta lead a twentieth-century lifestyle. Three hundred tribal and ethnic groups speaking some two hundred languages coexist within its boundaries. Only in Indonesia are the four major religions of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism represented, but many tribal peoples still adhere to animistic beliefs. This diversity is reflected in the arts and crafts—the variety of textiles in particular matches that of other aspects of the country. The motto of the republic is a hopeful "Unity in Diversity," but it is often the diversity that leaves the strongest impression on a visitor. From island to island, and often from region to region, the character of the people, their native dress, architecture, and language change.

When we first visited Indonesia in early 1972, we traveled over land and sea eastward through Sumatra, Java, Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, and East Nusatenggara. Each island was a unique adventure. Going from Moslem Java to neighboring Hindu Bali is like entering another world, although the two islands are only an hour's ferry ride apart.

At that time, visitors were rare east of Bali and our trip eastward to Timor Island was a lesson in patience, a trait of utmost importance while traveling in Indonesia. Transportation became unpredictable at best; whenever possible we traveled by cargo boats that carry passengers on their decks, but to reach islands the cargo boats did not serve, we embarked on the single-masted sailboats that carry goods to the remote ports of Indonesia. Through the interiors of the islands most roads only exist in the dry season and to get from one village to another meant riding atop bags of onions or rice in the rear of a truck. These ancient vehicles broke down frequently in the rugged terrain, and where the trucks could not go, we walked.

In the isolated, less-developed East Nusatenggara islands of Flores, Sumba, and Timor, the locally made textiles captured our attention. From one region of East Nusatenggara to another, textiles show great differences and communicate the character of the people who weave them. Elsewhere we had seen the animal-patterned blankets of Sumba used as wallhangings, but arriving in Sumba we were amazed to see turbaned Sumbanese men actually wearing these cloths wrapped around their waists. The bold patterns decorating the cloths matched the flamboyant spirit of these rugged horsemen.

In outer islands like Sumba and Flores, inns are found only in a few towns. We often had to depend on the hospitality of village families and isolated Catholic missionaries. Staying in the countryside gave us an opportunity to see the



Map 1. Indonesia.

crafts, particularly weaving, at close hand. We often spent the days waiting for transportation studying Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of the nation, and talking to people—conversation is not a lost art in Indonesia. A motivation to learn more about the textiles, their production and motifs, was an incentive to visit out-of-the-way villages and get to know the weavers.

This initial introduction to the weavings of East Nusatenggara led us to a more in-depth study of the textile traditions of Indonesia. Subsequently, we returned to Indonesia five times and traveled to all the major islands to research textiles, their roles in each society, the techniques, and the meaning of the motifs.

For a land of its size and cultural richness, Indonesia is relatively little known outside of Southeast Asia. Textiles play an integral role in many Indonesian societies, and to understand this role, one must view them in the context of the different cultures that make them. But textiles must also be seen against the larger historical backdrop and to do this it is necessary to understand the forces that shaped the lives of the weavers. Indonesians have been greatly affected by various waves of migrations and by outside cultural influences, and these have all had an effect on their textile arts. Historical and cultural trends are covered in more detail in the text, but the following summary introduces

the major sources of the rich diversity seen in Indonesian textiles today.

Fossils found in Java indicate that man first appeared in what is now Indonesia between 400,000 and 120,000 B.C. By 20,000 B.C. hunter-gatherers with Australoid features were living in the archipelago, and during the Mesolithic period (10,000 to 2000 B.C.) other groups of hunter-gatherers arrived. In approximately 2500 B.C. a substantial migration from the Yunnan area of southern China introduced a Neolithic culture to the islands. These Mongoloid peoples brought with them techniques of rice cultivation, animal husbandry, and pottery making, and probably at this time the islanders' indigenous bark garments were first decorated with simple motifs. Among certain peoples, this Neolithic culture later evolved into a Megalithic phase characterized by the building of large stone monuments that were connected to religious practices. Among the peoples where such Megalithic features survive today are the Bataks of North Sumatra, the Torajans of central Sulawesi, the inhabitants of Nias Island, and the Sumbanese.

Between the eighth and second centuries B.C., migrants from what is now northern Vietnam came to the archipelago, bringing with them a way of life referred to as the Dong-Son. The Dong-Son culture had a tremendous impact on many Indonesian peoples and its effects are still evident today. Most scholars believe that the backstrap loom and the dye-resist method of textile decoration called warp ikat were introduced into Indonesia during the period of Dong-Son influence. Until this time people had worn plain or simply decorated bark garments. The Dong-Son migrants also introduced metalwork, especially the technique of bronze lost-wax casting. They brought with them decorated bronze kettle-drums that were used in various rituals. Indonesian tribes borrowed many motifs that appeared on these drums, including the "tree of life" and "ship of the dead," and a characteristic style of geometric ornamentation.

Another culture, known as the Late Chou, had less of an impact on the tribes of Indonesia but had an influence on some tribes of Borneo, particularly on their nontextile motifs. The Late Chou designs tend to be asymmetric, while the Dong-Son patterns are geometric and symmetric.

The motifs brought by the Dong-Son people, and to a lesser extent the Late Chou, mixed with

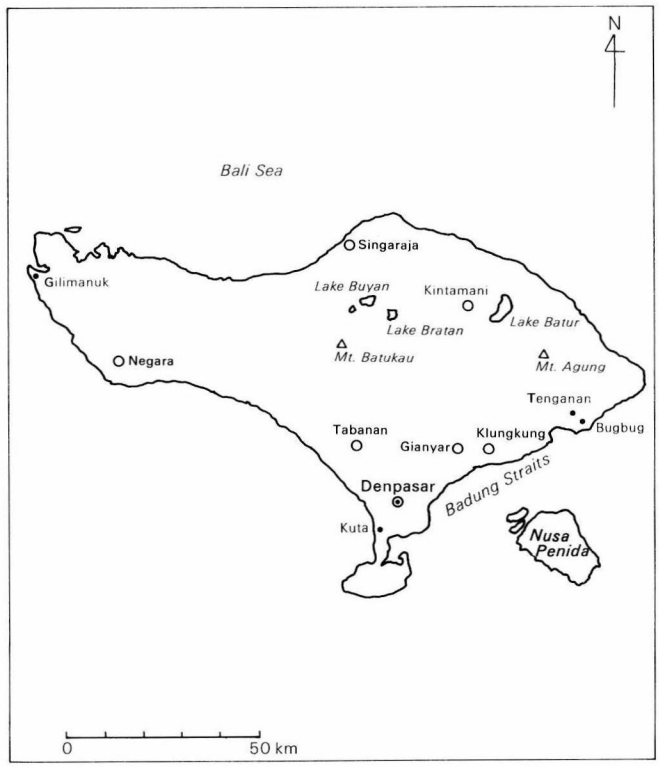
Map 2. Sumatra.

the indigenous Neolithic-Megalithic animal and human figures to create a unique style of ornamentation that is still seen today on warp ikat textiles, particularly among the Torajans, the Bataks, the Timorese, and the Iban Dyaks of northwestern Borneo (now Sarawak, a state of Malaysia).

Indian civilization had a great impact on Indonesia, especially on Java and Sumatra. By the second century A.D., Indian traders had already made contacts with the coastal peoples of Java and by the fifth century they had established a Hindu kingdom there. In the seventh century, a Sumatran kingdom, Srivijaya, was beginning to assert itself. Srivijaya became a great center for the study of Mahayana Buddhism, which was the dominant religion of India at that time. Eventually, Srivijaya would extend its sphere of influence up the Malay Peninsula into northern Thailand. In the mid-ninth century, the kingdom of Mataram, which also owed much to India, was gaining power in Java.

What imprint this period of Indian influence left on the textiles of Indonesia is somewhat unclear. Some scholars argue that the technical knowledge needed to make batik cloth was introduced into Java from India at this time, but others dispute this point. The greatest legacy

Map 3. Sulawesi.



Map 4. Bali.

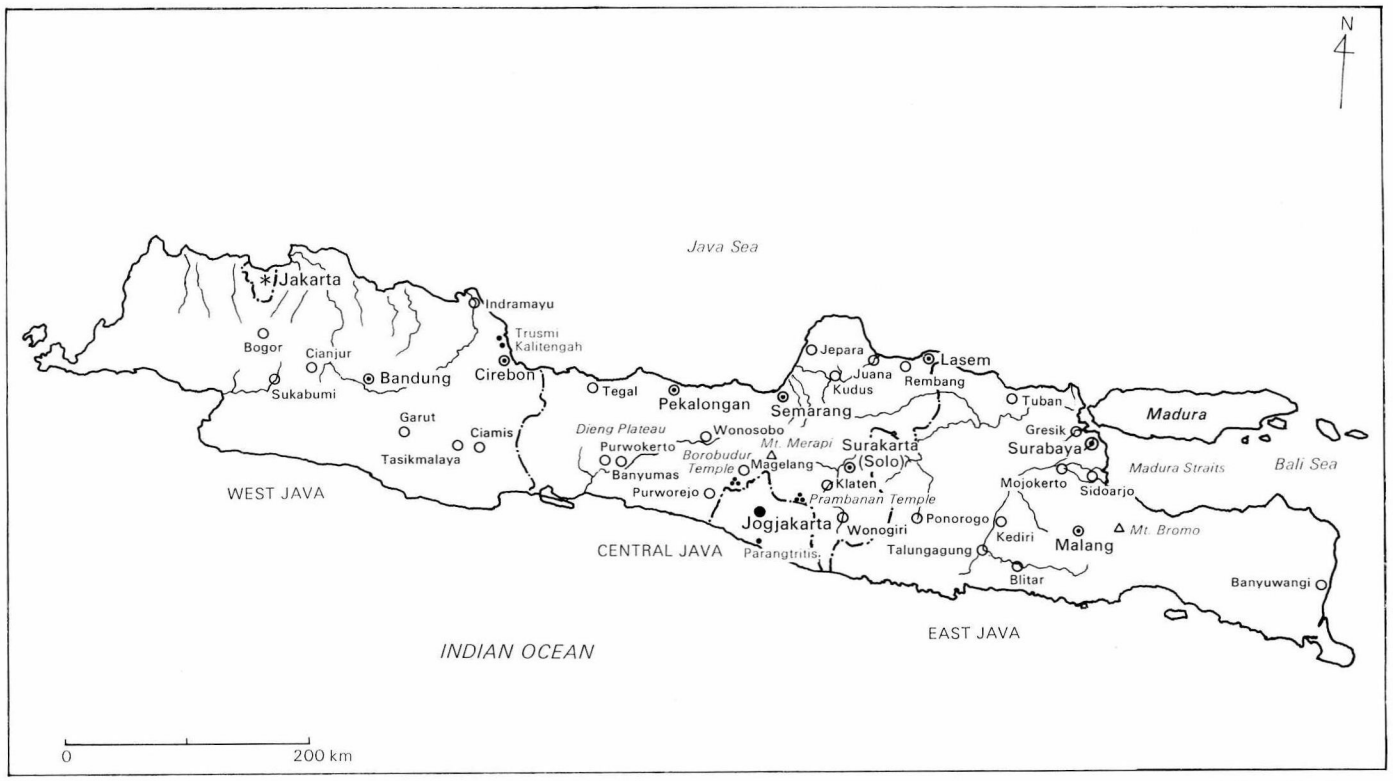
left by India was upon religion. Buddhism and Hinduism eventually blended with the native Javanese animism to form a unique combination. Temple architecture in Central Java, especially that of the temples of the Dieng Plateau, Borobodur and Prambanan, is testimony to the great civilization that flourished as a result of Indian influence.

From the tenth to the fifteenth centuries A.D., a succession of strong kingdoms in East and Central Java made their presence felt in the other islands of the archipelago. In the fourteenth century, the kingdom of Majapahit dominated many of the islands that are today part of the Republic of Indonesia. Again, the influence of these aggressive Javanese kingdoms on the arts and crafts of other islands is unknown. Local kings may have paid tribute to the Javanese, but the isolated tribal peoples were probably left in relative peace.

The next important influence on the archipelago was Islam. Islam originated in the Middle East in the seventh century A.D. and was brought to Indonesia in the fifteenth century by Indian and Arab traders. They were instrumental in spreading the faith in East Java. The remainder of Java, as well as many parts of Sumatra, later adopted Islam. Today Indonesia is more than ninety percent Moslem. These traders also introduced new techniques of fabric decoration, such as weft ikat, supplementary weft weaving, and tie-dye along with sericulture. Because Islam discourages the portrayal of living things in the arts, the more naturalistic textile motifs of some areas, most notably Central Java, were modified and stylized.

In the early 1600s, the Dutch began to build an Indonesian colony that was to remain under their control for the next three hundred and fifty years. Their interest was primarily economic, and they generally did not interfere with the indigenous cultures they had contact with. Only a few areas of the archipelago, the Malukus and northern Sulawesi in particular, were profoundly affected by the Dutch presence. The Maluku islanders and the Minahassa of northern Sulawesi adopted Christianity and their cultures underwent radical change. But in most other areas of the archipelago, the Dutch stayed in the background and relied on Chinese middlemen to conduct their business. Although Dutch motifs were borrowed and adapted to the textile patterns of Java and East Nusatenggara, the Dutch policy of noninterference in local affairs generally tended, in the long run, to preserve native arts and crafts.

Certain traditional textiles are no longer produced in Indonesia, but most techniques, including the making of bark cloth, continue to be practiced. In this book we primarily cover the



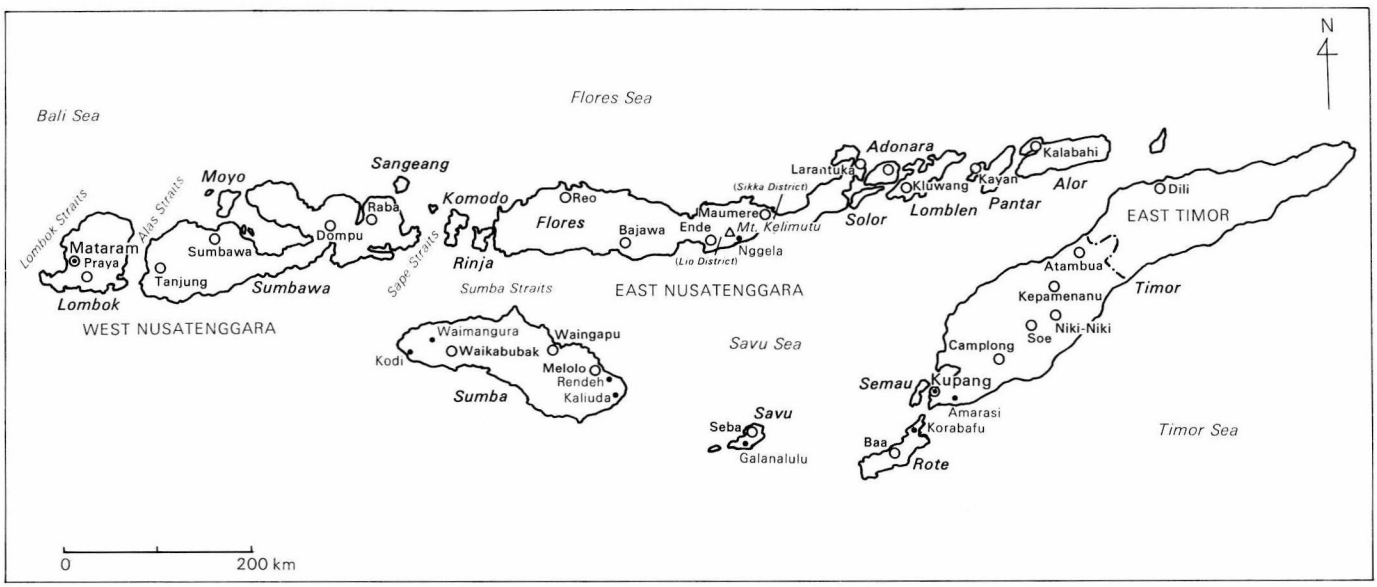
Map 5. Java.

techniques and motifs of contemporary textiles. But a few textiles that are no longer made are too important to ignore. The most notable examples are the woven ship cloths and the embroidered *tapis* skirts, both of which were once made in southern Sumatra. Also, the motifs and layout of the Indian patola cloth have been so widely adopted on Indonesian textiles of the past and present that we have devoted a section to this subject in chapter 3. Irian Jaya or New Guinea is culturally different from the rest of the archipelago and is therefore not covered in the text.

The important methods of contemporary textile decoration fall into two categories: dye-resist, in which a resist is used to block the dye and create the pattern, and woven techniques, in which the patterns are produced in the weaving process. Ikat-decorated textiles (the warp or weft threads are bound with fiber before dyeing to create the pattern), tie-dyed cloths, and batik (cloth patterned with wax) are all dye-resist techniques. Warp ikat and batik are perhaps Indonesia's most outstanding achievements in the field of textiles. Warp ikat textiles, which are made by certain tribal peoples, date back to Neolithic times and are covered in chapter 1 (technique) and chapter 2 (motifs and uses). Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to the important technique of batik and chapter 6 covers the different motifs that decorate batik cloth. Other dye-resist patterned textiles, such as weft ikat, double ikat, and tie-dyed cloths are described in chapter 3. Woven techniques such as supplementary weft decoration in which extra threads float over and under the background cloth to give the motif, supplementary warp, and specialized methods involving embroidery, tapestry weaves, and beading decorate some outstanding Indonesian textiles, and these are described in chapter 4.

No single volume could ever hope to deal with all the technical and design variations that make Indonesian textiles of such interest to both craftsman and collector. In our discussions of the different weavings, we have taken a middle road, providing both broad surveys of textile traditions and motifs, and basic explanations of techniques and materials. Our organizing the book by craft and not by region made the most sense, for techniques tend to show less regional variation than motifs and can therefore be dealt with without dragging in endless qualifications and exceptions. We have, however, tried to underscore the whole geographical picture, and within these chapters we rather freely island hop around the archipelago to present outstanding examples of textiles with a distinct local character.

Much as we wanted to, we were not able to go everywhere. But we were able to observe each major technique of textile decoration in at least



Map 6. West and East Nusatenggara.

one area of Indonesia, and the methods described here are generally those we saw. We stayed in small villages with weavers and their families, who never seemed to view our intrusion as a disruption of their daily lives. Between the social rituals of chewing betel nut, smoking clove-scented *kretek* cigarettes, and drinking glass after glass of hot tea, weavers would bring out their equipment and demonstrate how they made their dyes. Village elders were called upon to tell stories and show us their family heirlooms. Sometimes it was necessary to seek out the few remaining practitioners of particular techniques in larger cities. We talked to people in the marketplaces, stopped women in the streets, and boldly knocked on doors. To see certain techniques, we had to visit larger workshops. In West Sumatra, Java, Bali, and Sulawesi, factory owners interrupted their work to demonstrate how they made their textiles. The pride Indonesians take in their weavings coupled with their natural hospitality made our research easy.

A surprising number of textiles in Indonesia are still woven at home for personal use. In the islands of Indonesia, weaving is traditionally the work of women and textiles are considered to have a feminine nature. Only when cloths are produced in workshops do men begin to take a part in their creation. The techniques of textile production and the knowledge of the motifs are traditionally passed from mother to daughter.

The weaver creates her cloth from materials found in her surroundings and may produce textiles patterned with complex techniques using only simple tools. She may grow cotton in her backyard and spin it into thread herself. Her basic tools are made of readily available materials such as bamboo poles, the ribs of coconut leaves, and fiber from trees. Those implements that must be made are put together by her husband or the village carpenter. She gathers or trades for the dyestuffs and makes her own dyes. It is these textiles, wholly created by the weavers, that play the most important role in the life of the societies that make them.

However, as Indonesia progresses, the trend is for the production of these textiles to move from the home into workshops. Some types of cloth, such as batik, have long been made on a commercial scale as well as on the individual level, while other types of textiles such as weft ikat and supplementary weft weavings are just now moving to the cottage-industry level.

When the creation of a particular type of textile moves to a commercial level, undeniably much artistry is lost in the transition. The only alternative, however, is often that the technique will disappear altogether. We felt it was important to describe the textiles that are made in workshops, since a great deal of craftsmanship may go into their production and the techniques and tools employed are often not so different from those once used in the home.

The textiles of Indonesia are interesting not only for the richness of their patterns but for the meaning they often have in their society, particularly among tribal people. Their basic use is as a garment, but people view certain weavings as ritual objects that are necessary aids in carrying out their customs. Textiles may be required for