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E-B
Environment - Behaviour
Proceedings Journal

APAF2025Yogyakarta
https://s.id/apaf2025
Asia Pacific Art Forum
Inaugural Symposium 2025
ISI Yogyakarta Indonesia, June 23, 2025

e-IPH
e-International
Publishing House Ltd.,
United Kingdom

Organized by: Institut Seni Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia,
Australian Indonesian Art Forum, Project 11 Melbourne, & 16 Albermarle Project Space Sydney

Resilient Women of Toba: An ethnography of female Ulos weavers at Lake Toba, North Sumatra, Indonesia

Dewi Sartika Bukit[1*], Kristian S[2], Riki Maulana[1], WN. Dias Prabu[2]
**Corresponding Author*

[1] Project Eleven Fundation, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[2] Kultura Collectiva, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

dewiebukit@gmail.com, tianhite@gmail.com, rikimaulanara@gmail.com, 87diasprabu@gmail.com
Tel: +6285640125793

Abstract
This study explores the status and role of women in the ulos tradition through an ethnographic approach. Five female ulos weavers from five villages around Lake Toba, North Sumatra, Indonesia, were examined as representatives of local weavers' voices and lived experiences. The findings reveal that women hold a central role in the production of ulos, yet their contributions remain largely anonymous. The study underscores the paradox between the indispensable role of women weavers and the limited financial rewards and social recognition they receive. This reality highlights the need for greater acknowledgment of these women and their cultural significance.

Keywords: Ulos; Batak; women; ethnography

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v10iSI39.7683

1.0 Introduction

Ulos is not merely a piece of cloth but a symbolic object and an existential marker of the Batak people. Without ulos, something profoundly valuable in Batak culture would vanish. Without ulos, the cultural heartbeat of the Batak would cease to exist. For this reason, women weavers are indispensable, as women are the primary makers of ulos in the Batak land. Through ulos and the act of weaving, Anna Linceria Siahaan, Hirim Samosir, Elida Panjaitan, Pinta Uli Hutapea, and Rohana Togatorop not only sustain their households but also open new opportunities for their children and nieces/nephews to become students, civil servants, teachers, and more. However, while the world around them moves forward, opening and transforming, these women remain hidden behind their weaving—anonymous, without recognition, and without accolades. What fault lies with Lince, Hirim, Elida, Pinta, and Rohana? Ulos continues to hold value in the eyes of the community, yet they and countless other women weavers remain faceless. While ulos endures through factory production, producing cheap and abundant textiles, the work of women weavers faces extinction, with no successors, overshadowed by social media chatter, the constant turnover of gadgets, and the allure of local soap operas and Korean dramas (Wahyudin, 2025).

2.0 Literature Review

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v10iSI39.7683

2.1 Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research is inherently a collaborative endeavor (Thornton, 2009). During our fieldwork, we extensively talked with Anna Linceria Siahaan, Hirim Samosir, Elida Panjaitan, Pinta Uli Hutapea, and Rohana Togatorop, documenting their lives through photography and video. This process allowed us to build intimate and personal relationships with them, without compromising their autonomy or personal interests. Thus, ethnography becomes not only a researcher's narrative of experiencing another culture (Kleden, 1998) but also a form of personal and social engagement (Sansi, 2015).

2.2 Previous Research

Previous ethnographic research on ulos was conducted by Dutch-Canadian anthropologist Sandra Niessen, whose work was published in three books: *Motifs of Life in Toba Batak Texts and Textiles* (1985), *Batak Cloth and Clothing: A Dynamic Indonesian Tradition* (1993), and *Legacy in Cloth: Batak Textiles of Indonesia* (2009). In 2013, Niessen, together with MJA Nashir, also produced the film *Rangsa ni Tonun*, based on the ancient manuscript of the same name, which explores the "sacred Batak weaving tradition", in particular, the spinning techniques that have now vanished from ulos production in Batak lands. Building upon that intellectual tradition, this research seeks to make a new contribution, one overlooked in Niessen's work—by uncovering the role of women weavers as key actors within Batak weaving traditions. In other words, this ethnographic study is also a demographic exploration of women weavers around Lake Toba and their existence as individuals who take on weaving as a vocation, a sacrifice, and a means of sustaining family life and Batak culture.

The studies by Mohamad Morni et al. (2024), Herwandi et al. (2023), Kari et al. (2017), and Legino (2017) explore local art, motifs, and cultural sustainability through textiles and design, focusing on Malay and Minangkabau heritage, traditional craftsmanship, and environmental or cultural resilience. Similarly, “Resilient Women of Toba: An Ethnography of Female Ulos Weavers at Lake Toba” highlights women’s roles in sustaining traditional weaving, emphasizing cultural identity, resilience, and community-based craftsmanship. Together, these studies reveal how traditional textile arts, from batik to ulos, preserve local wisdom, environmental adaptation, and cultural continuity, particularly through women’s creative and social resilience in heritage preservation.

3.0 Methodology

This study employs an ethnographic approach. Accordingly, it focuses on uncovering and documenting stories and information about ulos and the women who weave it, directly from the field. Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews and close observation, supported by photography and video recordings.

4.0 Findings

Through ethnography, we obtain an ideal multiperspectival method for understanding how Anna Linceria Siahaan, Hirim Samosir, Elida Panjaitan, Pinta Uli Hutapea, and Rohana Togatorop interpret their calling to weave in a world that obscures their existence. Therefore, it is essential to amplify their voices here.

4.1 Voices from Behind the Ulos

4.1.1 Anna Linceria Siahaan

Anna Linceria Siahaan was born on April 17, 1962, and resides in Meat Village, Toba Samosir, North Sumatra. From childhood, she was familiar with the sound of spinning wood and the smell of thread. Lince began learning to weave in elementary school, apprenticing under older weavers in Meat. It required patience, effort, and time, but she eventually produced flawless ulos. Her devotion to weaving led her to abandon formal education. She explained: "This is my daily life—working on ulos for everyday needs and to pay for my younger sibling's schooling." For her, family obligations outweighed pursuing higher education, a decision that shaped her identity as a weaver devoted to preserving ancestral heritage. At 63, Lince was still weaving and remained unmarried: "I have not married until now. For me, it does not really matter," she said with a smile. In her village, weaving ulos has become a rare skill. Most weavers, young and old alike, have shifted to weaving songket. In Batak, Lince remarked: "Sai godang do pargabus dison, alai molo tu kebutuhan sehari-hari, na gampang mandapot parhasilan i do tenun songket ma." ("There are many weavers here, but for daily needs, the easiest way to earn an income is by weaving a songket."). Despite this, Lince continues weaving Ulos Ragi Hotang, viewing it as an act of cultural preservation. Though complex, she believes that if one works sincerely, the work will be completed and ready to sell at the market or through middlemen (touke). She admitted that weaving was physically demanding: "Ah, my back really hurt—at least when I was learning. But now, I am used to it; it is nothing anymore," She said firmly. Weaving involves several stages:

1. Mangirit — winding the thread into small rolls for easier use, as shown in Fig.2.
2. Mangani — arranging the threads on the loom according to the desired pattern.
3. Manggabe — threading and assembling the warp.
4. Manarop — tightening the threads to sharpen the motif.
5. Mangunggas — drying the thread, traditionally under the sun, as shown in Fig.1.
   Unlike others, Lince uses her stove as a drying method:

"It is too hot under the sun. Better to use the stove—cooler and less tiring."

Fig.1: Mangunggas Process
(*Source: Author's personal documentation)*

Her life as a weaver even took her abroad. She was selected for a residency at the Australian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne, an experience she described with humor and pride: "If I die, this lady (the interviewer) will be the one at a loss, not me. I have already tried real Australian eggs—because the ones in Indonesia are fake!" she laughed, showing her unique sense of humor. Although weaving is full of challenges, Lince remains proud and happy. She never fears ulos disappearing, believing that Batak customs will endure. Her hope is simple: that ulos prices will not decline while the cost of thread continues to rise. This, she insists, is crucial not only for her livelihood but also for future generations: "Let young women here weave songket. However, if they understand it in time, they should also weave ulos. Even if they need to learn again."

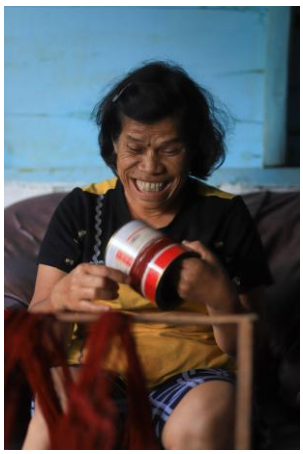

Fig. 2: Anna Lince doing the mangirit process
(*Source: Author's personal documentation)*

4.1.2 Hirim Samosir

Hirim Samosir, now 56, hails from Siregar Aek Nalas. After marrying, she settled in Onan Ganjang, Humbang Hasundutan, with her five children. She began learning to weave at 14, shortly after finishing junior high school. Coming from a low-income family, weaving became her way of helping her household. "What choice did we have back then? Weaving was all we knew. I taught it as a child because my parents could not afford anything. I joined in to help with the ulos," she recalled. There was a period when Hirim stopped weaving. After all her children had completed their education, her body ached everywhere. She decided to take a full year of rest. However, in August 2024, an unexpected opportunity changed everything: she was selected for a residency program and dyeing workshop at the Australian Tapestry Workshop. "Honestly, I could not believe it. At my age, going to Australia felt like a dream. However, it really happened. Moreover, it is all thanks to the ulos," she said with a soft laugh. This experience rekindled her passion. She returned to weaving with renewed energy, as if her life had been restored. Hirim realized that her long journey had begun with the ulos—and would always return to it. She knows well that weaving is physically demanding. Her body aches, her back stiffens, her eyes strain. However, for her children, she endured it all. She left home at six in the morning for Balige without breakfast to sell ulos for school fees. "Back then, when my children were in school, I worked day and night. I could finish four ulos a week. I would take them to Onan every Friday and sell them at the market. People said all kinds of things, but I did not care. What mattered was that my children could go to school, could become someone," she said firmly. Today, Hirim weaves not just out of love for the ulos, but also out of necessity. She wants to remain independent and not rely entirely on her children. Remarkably, even after a year-long break, her body no longer aches when she weaves.

"It is strange," she said, smiling. "Before, my whole body hurt. However, when I started again, all the pain disappeared. I even feel happy because I can earn my own money." As long as her hands remain capable, Hirim is determined to keep weaving.

4.1.3 Elida Panjaitan

Elida Panjaitan has been engaged in weaving since the age of 18. Now 45, she has spent 27 years living from thread and ulos. The type of ulos she most often produces is Ragi Hotang, one of the intricate traditional weavings of Toba. Interestingly, although her parents were also weavers, Elida received little direct instruction. She learned independently, beginning with the central part of the Ragi Hidup ulos, known as ulas pucca. "I taught myself, even though my parents were weavers. The first thing I made was ulas pucca, the middle part of Ragi Hidup," she explained. The time she needs to complete a piece depends heavily on the type of thread. With ordinary thread, an ulos can be finished in 10 days. However, with fine thread, known as thread 100, the process can take up to 21 days. She purchases all her materials herself from local thread agents in the market, not from factories or ulos distributors. "Once the materials are ready, the ulos must be finished. When weaving manually, it cannot be postponed. If there is time, it must be worked on continuously, or it will be damaged," she said. Most of the ulos she produces are made to order. However, even without orders, Elida continues to weave Ragi Hotang. "I keep making Ragi Hotang because there will always be buyers. This ulos never goes out of style," she said firmly. The presence of machine weaving, however, has put traditional manual weavers under pressure. According to Elida, a single factory can produce ten ulos daily, while she can only finish one ulos in three weeks. The price difference is significant as well. Machine-made ulos sell for around IDR 300,000 to IDR 800,000, whereas her handmade pieces can reach IDR 4.5 million. "At first glance, they look similar. Machine ulos may seem beautiful, with clear colors, but the fabric is stiff and thick. Handmade ulos is thinner, smoother, and elastic. Anyone who understands will notice the difference," she explained. In Pintu Batu village, three weaving factories have operated over the past decade.

However, Elida said there is little connection between traditional weavers and the factories. "Most of the workers are Javanese, so we do not have any special relationship. We know of each other," she said. Regarding the next generation, Elida does not force her children to weave. She supports four children with her weaving income. One is studying Pharmacy in Medan, while the others are still in school. "If they want to learn weaving, I will teach them. Nevertheless, if not, I will not force it. I know how painful weaving can be. If there are other job options, it is better not to weave. However, if there are no alternatives, they can learn," she said honestly. For Elida, the Ragi Hotang from Pintu Batu is special compared to other regions, such as Meat. The Pintu Batu patterns are more layered and intricate. In meat, the designs use four or five lidi (thread separators), whereas in Pintu Batu, it can go up to 12 or 13 lidi. "The difficulty is in arranging the patterns. Both involve assembling threads, but the count is different. It is simpler in meat, more complex in Pintu Batu," she explained. Daily, Elida sits at her loom for 12 to 16 hours. Despite the difficulty, weaving is the path she has chosen. "If I did not weave manually, how would my children live? From this work alone, they can go to school. So I strive to make the best ulos, learning, learning, and learning," she said. Sometimes customers compare her handmade ulos with cheaper machine-made ones. Some bring machine-made ulos worth two million rupiah to compare with her work. "Once they see the difference, they understand. Handmade ulos are always better," she said. Elida hopes handmade ulos will be valued more, so that traditional weavers can survive. "If the quality is good, handmade ulos will always be sought after. I believe machines cannot replace it. The patterns might be copied, but the quality cannot," she said firmly. She is confident that the Ragi Hotang weaving tradition in Pintu Batu will endure, even as the number of weavers declines. "There have always been people continuing it, whether children, in-laws, or newcomers learning. So I am sure Ragi Hotang Pintu Batu will continue to exist," she concluded.

4.1.4 Pinta Uli Hutapea

Pinta Uli Hutapea, born September 14, 1957, currently resides in Simorangkir Sitahuan, North Tapanuli. As presented in Fig.4, Pinta Uli has been involved in thread dyeing since she was a young girl, and fully dedicated herself to it after marrying in 1980. Through this work, she financed her children's education and their weddings. For Pinta, dyeing thread is a livelihood and a way of life passed down through generations. She learned the craft from her mother, who would now be nearly 120 years old if still alive. This skill is traditionally passed from mother to daughter, ensuring the family's dyeing enterprise continues uninterrupted. In her village, only Pinta's family practices this craft. What her mother started, she continues. Although her formal education ended at junior high, the family skills became her primary foundation. According to Pinta, the work methods have not changed much over time; what has changed is the choice of materials and colors. Previously, colors were limited to black, white, red, and yellow, derived from natural sources. Today, chemical dyes offer a much broader palette. Natural dyeing is time-consuming—she could only process about one kilogram of thread per day at a rate of IDR 500,000 per kilogram. She can process up to 30 kilograms daily with chemical dyes, charging IDR 250,000 per kilogram. Her family has always purchased pre-spun thread rather than spinning it themselves. In the past, they sourced thread from Balige, where many artisans focused on dyeing. Today, dyeing centers have spread to other areas, including Tarutung, where Pinta and her family not only dye thread but also arrange gatip patterns according to orders. Popular motifs include bintang maratur, sibolang rasta, and other variations requested by weavers.

The type of thread has also changed. Previously, they used benang putar, fine but not as delicate as the imported Indian thread, which is now commonly used, which Pinta calls benang seratus, as shown in Fig.3.

Fig.3: Pinta Uli opened the import thread
(*Source: Author's personal documentation)*

This finer thread is more expensive and is purchased from distributors in Jakarta, whereas benang putar typically comes from Bandung. Pinta's clients are spread across Tapanuli Raya, including Porsea, Balige, and Siregar Aek Nalas. Her husband assists by making looms and fulfilling many orders from Lake Toba. There are differences in loom design between Tarutung and Toba. Toba looms are built for wider fabrics, while Tarutung looms are typically comfortable for widths under 90 centimeters. Wider fabrics can cause strain and chest discomfort, so many Tarutung weavers weave two pieces that are later joined into a single sarong. This is the work chain that Pinta has maintained to this day. The colors she creates bring the thread to life, and the threads come alive again in the hands of weavers. As long as weaving continues, she believes her work will remain valuable and worth carrying on.

Fig.4: Pinta Uli Portrait
(*Source: Author's personal documentation)*

4.1.5 Rohana Togatorop

Rohana Togatorop was born in 1961 and currently lives in Huta Nagodang with her husband, from the Aritonang family. She works as a weaver, specializing in Ulos Harungguan. Rohana began weaving in her second year of high school. At that time, she first wove Ulos Sibolang, using gatip—a method of threading to create graphic patterns on cloth—under the guidance of her mother. Before mastering ulos weaving, her parents only allowed her to weave baby carriers so she would not damage real ulos. Once considered skilled enough, she was entrusted to weave Ulos Sibolang, which she sold at the market.

Over time, Rohana mastered various Batak ulos types, including Ulos Sibolang, Sitolu Tuho, Bolean, and Sadum—traditional weavings common in Muara, where she now lives. She continues to weave these types, though production is increasingly order-based. About seven years ago, she began focusing on Ulos Harungguan, a shift prompted by a training program initiated by the village head. The change has had a significant impact, increasing the income of Huta Nagodang weavers, as Ulos Harungguan commands a higher market value. Unlike other ulos sold to agents, Ulos Harungguan is marketed directly to buyers, including via social media. Rohana's woven ulos have even reached markets beyond Sumatra, including Kalimantan and Jakarta. Creating Ulos Harungguan is time-consuming. If done by one person from start to finish, it can take up to a month. However, in Huta Nagodang, weavers work in groups, dividing tasks such as pattern creation, dyeing, winding threads, and final weaving. This collaboration allows a piece to be completed in just one week. According to Rohana, Ulos Harungguan is not new. It has long existed, though few knew of it. She learned the craft from her parents, who had been taught by a woman from Tarutung named Boru Tobing. After Boru Tobing passed away, the knowledge was passed down through generations until it reached Rohana. Ulos Harungguan holds a special place in Batak custom. Traditionally, it

could only be worn by someone who had reached the saur matua status—having grandchildren from both a son and a daughter. Today, the rules are more flexible; anyone who can afford it may wear it. It is used as a ulos saput, ulos hela, or shawl for married men.

Harungguan means "collection," reflecting how this ulos combines multiple Batak motifs, including marhapisoran, mangiring, sibolang, bintang-bintang, tolu tuho, sadum, and suri-suri. It is often called the "king of ulos" as presented in Fig.5. Ulos Harungguan sells for approximately IDR 1,500,000 per piece, including sirat, making it ready to wear. It is made from benang seratus purchased from Tarutung. Unlike Tarutung weavers, who often rely on color variation in a single motif, Huta Nagodang weavers create entirely new motifs, producing more varied designs.

Fig.5: Ulos Harungguan
(*Source: Author's personal documentation)*

Almost all weavers in the village now work on Ulos Harungguan. Huta Nagodang was once known for high-quality Ulos Sibolang; the phrase "Si Bolang Huta Nagodang" became a market guarantee. The superior quality comes from unique dyeing methods, weaving techniques, and motif styles, allowing their ulos to sell quickly despite higher prices. For Rohana, weaving is not just work—it is a way of life passed down through generations. Through ulos, she and other weavers in Huta Nagodang preserve tradition while adapting to modern demands, including marketing innovations.

5.0 Discussion

Listening to these "voices from behind the ulos," weaving appears not merely as a technical skill, but as an existential practice that sustains life. For Batak women, weaving becomes a means of maintaining value within their families and communities, even though it is carried out in solitude, through repetitive labor, and from a position of social invisibility.

The resilience of these women does not emerge from ideal conditions or free choice; rather, it is shaped by structural constraints and continuous life demands. From year to year, they endure and adapt, fulfilling their roles as the backbone of the family—not as an option, but as a necessity. What they demonstrate is not spectacular heroism, but a form of everyday steadfastness, consistently built through the paths their lives require them to take.

From these women's stories, an important lesson emerges: women's strength does not necessarily originate from sufficiency or privilege. Instead, it grows from an intimate relationship with harsh living conditions. Ulos is not merely a cultural product; it functions as a medium of resilience—a site where endurance is woven, nurtured, and transmitted across generations..

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the lives and work of Batak women weavers, revealing weaving as both a livelihood and an existential practice. They dedicate decades to creating ulos, intricate traditional textiles, often under physically demanding conditions and with little formal training. Weaving sustains families, preserves cultural identity, and provides women with independence, pride, and social value, even amid economic and social challenges. Machine weaving poses competition, but handmade ulos retain unique quality, artistry, and cultural significance. The research emphasizes the critical role of women weavers in maintaining Batak traditions and family economies. It calls for recognition, documentation, and support through programs, patronage, and commissions, ensuring that both the craft of ulos and the women who sustain it continue to thrive.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The absence of sufficiently established prior research or comparative studies, both theoretically and methodologically, limits the possibility of broader comparison and the generalization of findings. Therefore, future research should pursue interdisciplinary collaboration to deepen and expand the scope of inquiry. In addition, this study is intended to serve as a working framework for economic and political stakeholders in Indonesia, particularly in North Sumatra, to inform more equitable approaches to the production and distribution of ulos that are more attentive to the rights and roles of women weavers.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgements are extended to the women weavers and their families for their willingness to share their life stories. Appreciation is also expressed to Project Eleven, Melbourne, Australia, for providing financial support to the weavers through the residency program at the Australian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne, Australia. Further thanks are extended to the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) for its financial support of this research. In addition, appreciation is conveyed to the Australian National University for its willingness to collect and exhibit the women weavers' ulos works, photographic works, and the book produced from this research.

Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to the study of anthropology and women's studies.

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