

Sidemen Songket Weaving as a Representation of Cultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Bali

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ABSTRACT

This research is important to uncover how cultural commodities are used as instruments of legitimacy in colonial identity-building projects. The purpose of this research is to analyse the existence of Sidemen Songket Weaving in the context of Balinese cultural politics during the Baliseering era in the early 20th century. Through the imagination of Western Orientalism, the Dutch Colonial Government attempted to construct Bali as a pure cultural entity by protecting it from the influence of missions and Islamic preaching. This research uses historical methods that include heuristic stages (observation, literature studies, and oral traditions), verification, interpretation, and historiography. The results show that Sidemen Songket Weaving functions as a tool of colonial political representation to strengthen social stratification, class, and caste. Songket Weaving is transformed into a symbol of strength, wealth, and power, where ownership automatically attaches privileges. These findings indicate that the Dutch cultural preservation policy is not neutral but rather has political motives to control society's social structure. In conclusion, Balinese cultural politics has shifted the intrinsic function of Sidemen Songket Weaving into an instrument of identity politics that perpetuates feudalism under colonial control. This finding confirms that cultural objects are often engineered to maintain hierarchies for the sake of power stability.

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INTRODUCTION

This study is motivated by two primary considerations. First, the author identified a significant lack of local historiography concerning Balinese clothing traditions, particularly the weaving tradition of Sidemen *songket*. Existing Balinese historiography, produced by both local and Western scholars, has predominantly concentrated on political and cultural dimensions. Political historiography in Bali largely traces the feudal period of the ancient Balinese kingdoms and the influence of the Majapahit Kingdom, whose political rivalries persisted until the island was violently subdued by the Dutch following the *Puputan Klungkung* in 1908 (Howe, 2005; Robinson, 1998). This dominant historiographical orientation has consequently marginalised discussions surrounding material culture, especially traditional textiles and clothing practices, despite their central role in shaping Balinese social identity and cultural expression.

Cultural historiography, meanwhile, has primarily examined Western Orientalist practices embedded within Balinese cultural policies, particularly through the colonial *Baliseering* project. This body of scholarship seeks to reveal that the glorification of Balinese culture was, to a considerable extent, a colonial construction shaped by the ambivalent policies of the Dutch colonial administration (Nordholt, 2007). Both local and Western historians acknowledge that the Western imagination initiated by European Indologists profoundly influenced perceptions of Balinese culture (Vickers, 2005). Bali was constructed as an exotic and exceptional cultural entity that deserved preservation within a carefully curated colonial framework (Gauda, 2007). The depth of European engagement with Balinese traditions, along with efforts to establish a distinct cultural image of Bali, ultimately shaped Dutch colonial policy toward the island (Putra, 2011; Santhi et al., 2025). This historiographical tendency demonstrates that Balinese culture was not merely documented but actively interpreted and reconstructed through colonial perspectives.

Second, the Sidemen *songket* weaving tradition examined in this article represents one manifestation of the “social skin” of Balinese society. Its symbolic significance became increasingly pronounced when the Dutch colonial administration infused it with political and cultural authority during the *Baliseering* project. In this sense, *songket*

weaving may be understood as an extension of the body, although not physically part of it (Nordholt et al., 2008). Traditional clothing not only mediates the relationship between the body and the external social world but also serves as a marker of social identity. Clothing, therefore, carries the burden of visually representing, defining, and communicating identity within a broader socio-cultural structure (Aryantika, 2021; Dwipayana, 2005; Soekiman, 2011). The symbolic dimension of Sidemen *songket* thus extends beyond aesthetics into the spheres of social representation and cultural meaning.

More importantly, within the context of *Baliseering*, Sidemen *songket* weaving underwent a process of politicisation that produced forms of hegemony and social discrimination (Adi, 2021; Geertz, 1980). During the feudal era of the Balinese kingdoms, *songket* textiles had already been socially stratified through motifs associated with hierarchical status distinctions. Under colonial rule, these textiles became increasingly restricted to aristocratic elites. In contrast, the Dutch colonial government, operating through an indirect rule system, sought to preserve the existing social hierarchy as a mechanism for maintaining political stability. The reinforcement of local aristocratic structures functioned as an essential strategy for sustaining colonial authority over Bali. One manifestation of this preservation of the status quo was the *Baliseering* policy, which transformed Sidemen *songket* weaving into a symbol imbued with prestige and authority. This article, therefore, examines how Sidemen *songket* weaving became deeply intertwined with the political and cultural dynamics of Bali, while simultaneously contributing to a broader understanding of the historical development of Sidemen *songket* as a representation of Balinese culture during the Dutch colonial period and its enduring influence on Balinese social and cultural structures.

METHOD

This study employs a historical methodology consisting of four interrelated stages. The first stage is heuristics, namely the process of data collection conducted through literature review, oral history, and field observation. Observational activities were conducted by visiting the *site of memory*, recognised as the place of origin of Sidemen *songket* weaving. Oral history practices involved collecting testimonies from the second and third generations of families associated with the pioneers of Sidemen *songket* production. At the same time, the literature review focused on tracing archival materials, scholarly articles, academic journals, and newspapers relevant to the research topic (Budiawan, 2014). This stage was essential for constructing a comprehensive historical foundation regarding the emergence and development of Sidemen *songket* weaving within Balinese society.

The second stage is source criticism, which involves the critical examination of historical sources throughout the research process. In historical methodology, source criticism encompasses the evaluation of written, oral, archaeological, visual, and other material sources capable of providing insight into past events and social conditions (Kuntowijoyo, 2013). This process is particularly important because it enables historians to assess the credibility, authenticity, balance, and interpretative possibilities of each source. Through source criticism, the researcher can identify potential biases, inconsistencies, and contextual limitations embedded within historical records. Such an approach ensures that the historical reconstruction presented in this study is grounded in reliable and critically verified evidence.

The third stage is interpretation, which is the analytical process of assigning meaning to historical sources to understand and explain past events, conditions, or phenomena. In historical research, interpretation requires applying analytical reasoning and critical judgment to examine sources contextually and comprehensively (Sjamsuddin, 2016). This stage does not merely involve describing historical facts, but also seeks to uncover the broader social, cultural, and political meanings embedded within those facts. In this study, interpretation was used to analyse the historical significance of Sidemen *songket* weaving and its relationship to colonial cultural policies, identity formation, and social stratification in Balinese society.

The fourth stage is historiography, which involves writing and reconstructing history through the critical analysis of historical sources. Historiography also examines how historians have produced, interpreted, and represented historical narratives across different periods and intellectual traditions (Kartodirjo, 1985). This stage enables researchers to understand the theoretical and methodological frameworks that shape historical writing, while simultaneously identifying gaps, underrepresented perspectives, and unexplored dimensions within existing historical literature. Through historiographical analysis, this study seeks to position Sidemen *songket* weaving not only as a material cultural product, but also as a historical representation of colonial power relations, cultural identity, and social transformation in Bali.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Genealogy of Sidemen *Songket* Weaving: From Sriwijaya to Waturenggong

The art of weaving, particularly *songket*, is believed to have originated in Palembang during the Sriwijaya Kingdom. Cultural interactions facilitated by traders from China, India, and the Middle East significantly influenced the ornamental characteristics and aesthetic composition of *songket* motifs (Al Qurtuby, 2003). The intricate and time-intensive production process, combined with the luxurious use of gold-thread embellishments derived from cross-cultural exchange, positioned *songket* as an exclusive textile reserved primarily for aristocratic circles (Reid, 2019). The use of *songket*, therefore, became closely associated with symbols of prosperity, prestige, and political authority. In this context, textiles functioned not merely as clothing, but also as markers of social hierarchy and cultural distinction.

The weaving tradition that emerged through early interactions among Sumatra, China, and India eventually spread to Bali. Several Chinese chronicles from the fifth century, for instance, referred to Bali as “Poly” (Notosusanto, 2008). This reference indicates that commercial and cultural exchanges during the early Christian era extended beyond the Sumatran region, including Bali, which already had considerable strategic and economic significance. Such historical evidence demonstrates that Bali had long been integrated into broader maritime trade networks connecting various regions of Asia. These interactions became an important foundation for the diffusion of artistic traditions, including textile production and decorative weaving techniques.

Several archaeological discoveries further confirm the existence of trade relations between Bali, China, and India. First, porcelain fragments dating approximately one hundred years after the Common Era were discovered in the Gilimanuk area of West Bali. Second, ceramic shards were uncovered at several natural harbour sites along the northern coast of Bali, indicating active maritime exchange networks. Third, historical narratives surrounding King Jaya Pangus—one of the most prominent rulers of Ancient Bali known for producing numerous inscriptions—describe his marriage to Kang Cing Wei, the daughter of a Chinese merchant. Their story remains deeply embedded in Balinese collective memory and is commemorated at several sacred sites, reflecting the profound influence of Chinese culture on Bali (Ardini et al., 2020). Fourth, the worship of the Queen of the Port figure at several northern coastal sites reveals the existence of a symbolic association between trade, prosperity, and Chinese influence, as she was believed to be a Chinese queen capable of bringing wealth and abundance (Lieftrinck, 1927).



Figure 1. Portrait of a *Songket* Weaver in Sidemen
Source: Personal documentation

In addition to the arrival of Chinese traders, merchants from India and the Middle East also played an important role in shaping the development of Balinese weaving traditions. These traders introduced gold, which was later processed into gold thread and incorporated as ornamental decoration in textiles, ultimately contributing to the

creation of Sidemen *Songket* weaving enriched with gold-thread layering. Although Sidemen *Songket* shares historical connections with the Palembang *songket* tradition during the Sriwijaya era, it developed distinctive characteristics that set it apart from its Sumatran counterpart. The uniqueness of Sidemen *Songket* lies primarily in its motifs, which emphasise abstract geometric patterns featuring repetitive zigzag lines combined with *Tumpal* motifs, moon motifs, *wayang* figures, and Balinese-style carvings that embody distinctive Balinese philosophical values (Idayati, 2024; Tenaya, 2021). These aesthetic elements demonstrate how Balinese communities localised external influences and transformed them into a unique cultural expression rooted in local cosmology and artistic traditions.



Figure 2. Goesti Gede Djilantik, Former Regent of Karangasem, and Goesti Bagoes Djilantik, Regent of Karangasem, Reading a *Lontar* Manuscript

Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden

The popularity of Sidemen *Songket* weaving increased significantly during the reign of Dalem Waturenggong, who ruled the Gelgel Kingdom of Bali in the sixteenth century. During this period, the right to wear Sidemen *Songket* fabric was restricted exclusively to members of the aristocracy. This exclusivity was closely tied to the caste-based social order in Balinese society, in which textile use reflected hierarchical distinctions and social status. Consequently, only individuals belonging to certain caste groups were permitted to wear *Songket* fabrics. In this context, Sidemen *Songket* functioned not only as a cultural artefact but also as a visible representation of political legitimacy, aristocratic identity, and social stratification within the Balinese kingdom.



Figure 3. Portraits of the Kings of the Kingdom of Bali

Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden.

Balinese-ization and the Imagination of Western Orientalism

In the 1920s, a process known as *Balinese-ization* or “Balinization” began in Bali. Through this process, the Dutch colonial government sought to transform Bali into a “living museum” that preserved Balinese culture through a romanticised image intended to appeal to foreign audiences, although this vision did not always align with the aspirations of the Balinese people themselves, who sought to determine their own destiny (Atmadja, [2013](#); Noorwatha, [2020](#)). This policy reflected the broader framework of Western Orientalism, in which Bali was imagined as an exotic cultural landscape that needed to be preserved and carefully curated. Within this context, Balinese culture became not merely a living tradition but also a colonial representation shaped by Western aesthetic and ideological interests.

As a cultural policy, *Balinese-ization* re-established styles of dress, architecture, dance, and speech considered “traditional” by the Dutch colonial administration (Wijaya, [2007](#)). According to the colonial perspective, Balinese people were expected to dress in an authentically “Balinese” manner. At the same time, modern construction technologies—regardless of their comfort or practicality—were regarded as aesthetically undesirable and therefore discouraged. The enforcement of social status codes embedded within customary law was also tightened under this policy. Such regulations demonstrate that colonial power extended beyond political control and penetrated deeply into the cultural and social dimensions of everyday life. In this sense, *Balinese-ization* served as an instrument for preserving a colonial imagination of Bali as a timeless, culturally pure society.

The Dutch had practised what Henk Schulte Nordholt describes as the “politicisation of clothing” since the era of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) in Batavia (Nordholt, [2007](#)). Clothing served as a social marker that could signify identity, hierarchy, and cultural affiliation. Following the complete Dutch occupation of Bali in 1908, colonial authorities expressed shock at the highly revealing attire traditionally worn by Balinese women, particularly the practice of going topless (Covarrubias, [2008](#)). This encounter encouraged the Dutch colonial administration to imbue clothing with a stronger spirit of authority, especially through the symbolic use of Sidemen *songket* weaving. Consequently, *songket* fabric—which had already reflected caste distinctions during the feudal era—became increasingly restricted to individuals belonging to particular social classes. At the same time, the implementation of the *Balinese-ization* policy during the colonial period further reinforced these hierarchical distinctions.



Figure 4. A Woman Weaving in Boengkoelan, North Bali

Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden.

Songket and the Politicization of Culture

Within the context of Bali's cultural renaissance, Sidemen *songket* weaving increasingly served as an instrument of Dutch colonial political representation aimed at reinforcing Balinese society's caste-based social hierarchy. Sidemen's *songket* weaving served as a social marker, signifying an individual's status and class within the broader social structure.

In this sense, Sidemen *songket* symbolized strength, wealth, and political authority, so that ownership of *songket* inherently reflected elements of privilege and prestige. The reinforcement of this local social structure gained greater momentum following the implementation of the Dutch indirect rule system after the Dutch gained complete control of Bali in the aftermath of the *Puputan Klungkung* of 1908 (Mandasari, 2022; Wibawa et al., 2020). Consequently, *songket* weaving became not merely a cultural artefact, but also a medium through which colonial power relations and social distinctions were reproduced.

The aftermath of the 1908 *Puputan Klungkung* marked the beginning of the Dutch colonial government's systematic efforts to construct and preserve Bali as a distinct cultural entity. This policy was closely linked to the Western Orientalist imagination initiated by European Indologists, who viewed Bali as an exotic civilisation that needed to be preserved within a romanticised cultural framework. To reinforce the caste-based hierarchy of Balinese society, Sidemen *songket* weaving was institutionalised as a social marker of an individual's status and class in everyday life (Juliantara, 2021; Pradnyasari et al., 2023). The Dutch colonial government, which at that time possessed full political authority over Bali, implemented the cultural and educational policy known as *Baliseering* (*Balinese-ization*). Through this policy, the Dutch sought to preserve Bali as a "living museum" while simultaneously reshaping Balinese culture in line with an idealised image considered attractive to foreign audiences, though not necessarily aligned with the aspirations of the Balinese people themselves.



Figure 5. Meeting of the Kings of Bali in the 1940s

Source: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV), Leiden

As a cultural policy, *Baliseering* encouraged the revival of "traditional" forms of clothing, architectural styles, dance, and speech etiquette. According to the Dutch colonial perspective, Balinese people were expected to wear "Balinese" attire that appeared orderly and conformed to regulations imposed by the colonial administration. Within this framework, the Dutch designated Sidemen *songket* fabric as the embodiment of the "social fabric" of Balinese society (Putraka et al., 2023; Sueca et al., 2026). Clothing, therefore, became more than a cultural expression; it became an instrument for regulating social order and reinforcing hierarchical distinctions. Through the politicisation of dress, the colonial administration sought to maintain social stability while simultaneously preserving an image of Bali that corresponded with Western cultural imagination.

In 1910, a colonial official issued a decision to "uphold the concept of caste as the fundamental foundation of Balinese society." Through this policy, the colonial government legalised and reinforced the caste hierarchy, along with a series of regulations governing caste relations and caste privileges that had previously never existed in such a rigid, formalised structure. The restoration of Balinese kingship and the return to "tradition," as reflected in portraits of Balinese rulers, prominently featured Sidemen *Songket* weaving made from Banyumas *Cendana* thread, a material that was extremely rare and highly expensive at the time (Henk et al., 2005; Wibawa et al., 2020). As a result, Sidemen *Songket* weaving increasingly came to symbolise power, wealth, and authority, while ownership of *songket* itself became associated with social privilege and elite status. The strengthening of these local social structures occurred

simultaneously with the implementation of the Dutch indirect rule system, through which colonial power relied heavily upon traditional aristocratic hierarchies to maintain political control over Balinese society (V.E. Korn, [2017](#)).

CONCLUSION

The Dutch colonial presence in Bali, although numerically limited, succeeded in establishing domination over the island through a combination of political diplomacy, military intervention, and cultural engineering. The emergence of the *Baliseering* policy reflected the influence of European Indologists who viewed Bali as a unique cultural entity that needed to be protected from external influences, particularly the spread of Islam and Christian missionary activities. Behind the discourse of cultural preservation, however, lay broader political and economic interests connected to colonial stability and the expansion of tourism. Within this framework, Sidemen *songket* weaving became part of a larger colonial project of cultural representation, in which clothing was politicised as a marker of caste, authority, and social hierarchy. The Dutch transformed *songket* into a symbolic instrument that reinforced obedience, social stratification, and the colonial ideal of *rust en orde*, thereby demonstrating how material culture could function simultaneously as a cultural artefact and a mechanism of colonial power.

This study remains limited in several respects. The discussion primarily focuses on the historical and political dimensions of Sidemen *songket* weaving within the context of Dutch colonial cultural policy. At the same time, broader comparative perspectives involving other textile traditions in Indonesia have not yet been fully explored. The research also relies heavily on historical literature, colonial archives, and visual documentation, which are often shaped by colonial perspectives and may not fully reflect indigenous Balinese perspectives. In addition, the study does not comprehensively examine the contemporary transformation of Sidemen *songket* weaving in the context of present-day tourism, global markets, and modern Balinese identity construction. These limitations indicate the need for more balanced approaches that integrate local oral histories, ethnographic perspectives, and postcolonial critiques in future studies.

Future research is recommended to explore Sidemen *songket* weaving through comparative and interdisciplinary approaches that connect history, anthropology, cultural studies, and political economy. Comparative studies involving other Indonesian weaving traditions, such as Palembang *songket*, Sasak weaving, or Batak *ulos*, would contribute to a broader understanding of how textiles function as instruments of identity, power, and social negotiation across different cultural contexts. Further studies may also examine the roles of tourism, globalisation, and digital media in reshaping the symbolic meanings of Sidemen *songket* in contemporary Bali. Attention should likewise be directed to the perspectives of local weavers, women artisans, and younger generations to understand how traditional weaving practices continue to survive, adapt, and acquire new meanings in modern society.

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