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Weaver Stories: Organizing and Communication Dynamics Among East Sumba Ikat Weavers

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Abstract

East Sumba ikat weaving represents a significant cultural heritage, embodying artistic excellence and deep-rooted social values. Despite a formal organizational structure, weavers engage in independent craftsmanship while establishing intricate work networks based on necessity and trust. This research explores the dynamics of communication and organizational processes within informal weaving groups, applying Karl Weick's organizing theory with a particular emphasis on enactment, selection, and retention. This research uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach that involves ten experienced ikat weavers with a minimum of five years of expertise. The findings reveal that these weaving groups emerge organically, shaped by geographic proximity, social relationships, and the complementary distribution of skills among artisans. Although no formal hierarchy governs their interactions, weavers develop highly adaptive mechanisms for collaboration, including work exchanges and specialized labor arrangements. From an organizing theory perspective, enactment manifests as weavers actively construct their work environment through habitual interactions and experiential learning. Selection is evident in their strategic choices regarding work practices, favoring establishments and trust-based collaborations. Retention, in turn, ensures the transmission of practical techniques and organizational patterns across generations, reinforcing continuity in traditional ikat production. This study underscores the role of informal organizing as a resilient and adaptive strategy within traditional craft communities, enabling them to navigate socioeconomic shifts while preserving cultural authenticity.

Keywords: East Sumba, Ikat Weaving, Organizational, Informal Weaving Group, Weavers

1. Introduction

1.1 *Introducing the Problem*

East Sumbanese ikat weaving is one of the rich and profound cultural heritages, representing the local community's identity because it is often used in various socio-cultural events of the East Sumbanese community. Each piece of ikat woven cloth has high artistic value and symbolizes stories and traditions passed down from generation to generation. Making this ikat weaving is complicated and requires special skills (Ndima, 2007;

Prijosusilo, 2017). The complexity of making ikat weaving includes using natural materials from the forest, whose availability depends on the season, and making patterns that must reflect the local community's philosophy and the weavers' different skills, creating a dependency between weavers. Due to the various needs of weavers, weavers generally work individually in their respective homes. However, to complete a long and complex production process, a weaver often needs help from other weavers. Therefore, cooperation only occurs when they need the expertise of other weavers. This phenomenon creates a network of weavers' skills and gives rise to communication between fellow weavers, both those related to family and close friends who are already trusted, and this is in line with the findings of Dias et al., who stated that weaving activities can provide social support to families and communities (Dias et al., 2020). East Sumba ikat weaving artisans tend not to recognize the concept of formal groups in their crafts, although, in practice, they always rely on certain people for each stage of cloth making.

The increasingly rapid changes of the times and the demands of the global market have made many weavers face a dilemma between maintaining tradition and adapting to new, more efficient methods (Asinyo et al., 2021; Patichol et al., 2014). This phenomenon is evident in the findings presented by Scrase, who states that in Indonesia, modernization in the traditional textile industry has created unemployment for more than 400,000 traditional weavers, especially in the dyeing section (Scrase, 2003). The decreasing number of weavers threatens the inheritance of ikat weaving (Buckley, 2016). By maintaining existing informal communication networks, weavers keep their skills and ensure the survival of the art of ikat weaving (Chantamool et al., 2023). Through communication and cooperation, they can maintain the quality and relevance of East Sumba ikat weaving. Organization is the key to keeping weavers alive even though no official structure or rules bind them to work together (Saleh, 2016). Therefore, this article will use the lens of Karl Weick's organizing theory to dissect the communication activities implemented by the weavers so that they can survive working on ikat weaving in informal groups. Organizing allows individuals to share the same beliefs, values, and assumptions, thus encouraging them to build a shared understanding that mutually reinforces their actions and the actions of others (Weick, 1995). Three concepts of organizing theory are used to discuss field findings: enactment, selection, and retention. Enactment occurs when individuals and groups react to the environment and create their environment through their actions and interactions. Selection occurs when, after the environment is "created" through enactment, the group must interpret and give meaning to the information that appears. This process involves filtering information to determine which is relevant and which is not. Retention occurs after a pattern of interpretation is considered valuable; the group will store it in procedures, rules, or norms that can be used in the future (Weick, 1979, 1995, 2009).

2. Method

This type of qualitative research uses the phenomenological method. Phenomenology reveals the conscious experience of communication actors in a phenomenon (Manen, 1990; Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, this study highlights the specificity and identifies a phenomenon individuals feel in a situation. Based on this explanation, the informants in this study are ikat weaving craftsmen who are directly involved in making ikat weaving. The selection of informants was carried out purposively with the criteria of ikat weaving artisans with a minimum work period of five years, with the hope that a network of cooperation between weavers has been formed so that they can tell their experiences in detail when relating to the ikat weaving group. The weavers in this study numbered 10 people spread across the ikat weaving center of East Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. Furthermore, the identity of the informants in the research results is stated with Informant 1 (I-1) to Informant 10 (I-10). This research is limited to the experience of weavers in making ikat weaving at the main stages of making East Sumba ikat weaving, starting from the thread arrangement and continuing until it is ready to be marketed. These stages are thread arrangement, motif making, coloring, weaving, and locking the thread.

3. Results

Based on field findings, researchers found that the ikat weaving group can be studied from several elements. These elements are the form of the group, the role of members, and the form of group cooperation. East Sumba ikat weaving reflects the beauty of culture and the socioeconomic dynamics of its weavers. This group of

weavers was formed informally without a clear organizational structure. They work independently in their homes and collaborate based on needs and geographical proximity. No leaders or formal rules exist, but their ties are formed through shared interests in completing ikat weaving. In a group, the role of weavers is divided into owners of ikat woven fabrics and supporting weavers. The fabric owner has the initiative and control over the production process, while the supporting weavers have the unique skills needed for specific jobs. They cooperate by exchanging jobs or hiring experts based on trust and social relations. With this mechanism, the network of weavers remains alive and growing, reflecting the dependency and flexibility in making East Sumba ikat weaving. An explanation of these three things will be described in more detail in the sub-titles below:

3.1 Group Form

Any institution does not organize ikat weaving artisans in East Sumba, but is naturally connected between one craftsman and another because they need cooperation to complete the work. Each weaver has expertise, so they must cooperate with other weavers with different expertise to produce one piece of woven cloth. These weavers do not have a clear membership structure like groups; for example, there is a leader or group member. There is also a common goal, but the built interactions usually occur repeatedly, so informal relationships are formed between weavers. In addition, these weavers who are connected are among others because they already know each other and also because of the proximity of the location. Based on this description, the researcher found that the form of the ikat weaving group is informal. For example, I-2 and I-5 said they work alone at home and rely only on other family members, including their children. When their children come home from school, they can help with light work, such as rolling the thread and arranging the woven cloth. No one regulates them, so they become leaders for themselves in completing the ikat weaving. In contrast to the informants above, I-4 said that apart from his family, he also usually collaborates with other weavers he trusts.

The ikat weavers work on their weaving independently in their respective homes. If there is a particular stage that they do not master, then they look for other weavers to complete the stage. In interacting with fellow weavers, they have the same interest: completing their ikat weaving. However, they do not have a regular structure, do not have a common goal, do not have an official bond as a group, and are formed only based on proximity. Thus, only interests unite them. This finding was conveyed by Weaver I-1, among others, that the stages of work that he mastered, he did first independently and then gave them to other weavers to complete the stages that he did not master. Likewise, I-3 and I-7, who mastered almost all stages, said that they did work independently at home but sometimes accepted work from other weavers who did not have the same expertise. I-9 said that she prioritized quality, so for the parts that she did not master, he was willing to be done by other weavers whose work reputation was trusted.

3.2 Member Roles

The uniqueness of ikat weaving is that it has a long chain of work involving many weavers, but the process of each stage is done independently. This chain of work means a dependency between ikat weaving artisans. Another weaver can fill the shortcomings of one weaver. Each weaver eventually becomes an expert only at certain stages. If these weavers' expertise is combined, then ikat weaving can be completed. There are two findings about the role of individuals in the group, namely as owners of ikat woven cloth and supporting weavers.

In the context of the group, the owners of the ikat woven cloth can be said to be the leaders. As leaders, the initiative to make ikat weaving comes from them, so they have the power and capacity to determine who they work with. Although talking about ikat weaving is related to specific knowledge and expertise in making ikat weaving, the power held by the owner of the cloth is not necessarily higher than that of other weavers involved in making ikat weaving. Specific skills are scarce, so the fabric owner has few choices when choosing another weaver to complete his ikat weaving. On the contrary, because of interdependence, the owner of the cloth who has more knowledge can even become a member of other cloth owners who do not have the same cognition. Field findings show that as the owner of the ikat woven cloth, a weaver is the primary decision maker and manager of the ikat weaving process. I-1, I-2, and I-6 revealed that the initiative to make ikat weaving started

them, but if there were obstacles in making the weaving, they could stop working without waiting for their own decision. The role of the decision maker during this process is an advantage compared to being an employee or working for someone else. Although they rely on others to complete certain stages of weaving, it is flexible. If they have money, they can immediately use the labor of other weavers, but if there are financial constraints, they can take a break from work. I-4 and I-10 also said the same thing applies if they lack raw materials, especially in making dyes, or experience physical constraints due to the large amount of work at one time.

Among the weavers who are the owners of the cloth, there are also weavers whose role is to complement the expertise or support weavers for the cloth owners. These weavers work on ikat weaving with certain expertise specifications so that the cloth owners will always use them to finish their ikat woven cloth. Some of these weavers have more than one knowledge; some live in specific locations and have mastered certain knowledge and expertise in making ikat weaving for generations. Their position in making ikat weaving is that of co-workers and expert weavers at certain stages that the owners of the woven cloth do not master. Together with these supporting weavers, the group network expands beyond just the family circle. I-8, an expert in the weaving section, and I-10, an expert in the thread end locking section, said they often become supporting weavers for other weavers because of their expertise. Weavers from various ikat weaving center areas usually use their services in the weaving and thread end locking sections. A similar thing was also confirmed by I-9, who shared her experience of often sending semi-finished woven cloth to other weavers outside her village for the coloring stage, which she had not mastered. These stories show that supporting weavers have an essential position in the chain of ikat weaving completion as a response to the work patterns established so far because no single weaver has mastered the entire ikat weaving process from start to finish.

3.3 Forms of Group Cooperation

The long and complex chain of ikat weaving seems to be the basis for the work of ikat weaving, which cannot be done by one weaver alone. One weaver with different knowledge and expertise will depend on other weavers with different knowledge and expertise in making a piece of ikat weaving. The connection between weavers is naturally built based on needs and socioeconomic relations. The cooperation in the ikat weaving group can be explained by exchanging work and hiring supporting weavers.

Exchanging jobs and social relations between weavers make expertise one of the binding forces of cooperation between them. This teamwork is evident where another weaver can overcome expertise one does not possess by exchanging jobs. This job barter is sometimes unbalanced from an economic perspective because the services offered between one weaver and another are not balanced. However, the lack of expertise and the fact that not everyone can be made a partner to exchange jobs makes weavers ignore this imbalance and prioritize the cooperative relationship that has been running so far. These weavers focus more on completing ikat woven fabrics based on mutual agreement between them. For example, I-2 shared her experience of exchanging jobs with other weavers. She worked on the coloring stage for another weaver who could not do the stage, but in return, the weaver would weave I-2's ikat woven fabric. Likewise, with the experience of I-3 and I-7, who made pattern ties on the woven fabrics of other weavers, they could not do it at the weaving stage; the other weaver would complete it. The weavers said this job exchange option benefited them, especially those with financial limitations. The option of working by relying on complementary energy and expertise like this is seen as a solution that benefits all parties. The weavers emphasized that mutual agreement and financial constraints were the main reasons they carried out job exchanges between ikat weaving artisans with different skills.

Another option for completing ikat weaving besides exchanging jobs is to hire people with different skills. The weavers explained that they hire the same people even with the rental system. Trust in the weavers' abilities is the reason for hiring similar weavers, resulting in a chain of groups. There are several main reasons for this rental, namely because of the high demand for ikat weaving, the relationship between weavers who are not too close, the financial ability, there is a barter system, and it depends on the work results of specific weavers. I-8 revealed that she has a regular weaver who has used her services since becoming a weaver. Likewise, I-6 and I-7 met during the interview and worked on ikat weaving and belonging to other weavers. I-4 also said that his expertise in the coloring stage, which is indeed difficult in East Sumba ikat weaving, often allows him to get

much coloring work from other weavers. However, because of the long-standing relationship, he told the weavers who frequently use his services to prepare the raw materials that he only provides his human resources and expertise to help them. He says this is much cheaper and helps fellow weavers in his cooperation network.

Based on the answers of these informants, it is seen that the ikat weaving artisans, although informally networked with different knowledge capacities, believe that this method is quite adaptive amidst their various limitations as ikat weaving craftsmen who are the spearhead of the guardians of East Sumba culture. A detailed description of the form of the group, the role of members, and the form of member cooperation is shown in the following table:

Table 1: Ikat Weaving Group

Ikat Weaving Group	Findings	
a. Form a Group	Informal Group	a). Does not have a group structure
		b). Not having a common goal
		c). There is no official bond between weavers
		d). Have common interests
		e). Formed based on closeness
b.Role of Members	1). Owner of Ikat Woven Fabric	a). Decision makers in the manufacture of ikat weaving
		b). Management of the ikat weaving process
	2). Supporting Weavers	a). Co-workers
		b). Expert weavers
c.Form of Group Cooperation	1). Exchange Jobs	a). Mutual agreement
		b). Financial limitations
	2). Hire Supporting Craftsmen	a). High demand
		b). The relationship is not too close
		c). Have Capital
		d). Focus on specific weavers

Source: Researchers Processing, 2025

4. Discussion

The weaving craftsman groups in East Sumba are informally formed and driven primarily by work-related needs and strong social relationships among their members. Formal structures do not regulate these working relationships but develop organically through social networks built on trust, geographic proximity, and family ties (Dias et al., 2020; Siriphon, 2018). The absence of hierarchical organization allows artisans to collaborate flexibly, relying on interdependence and shared expertise (Weick, 2009). This informal system encourages efficiency in producing ikat weaving, as artisans mutually exchange labor and knowledge. As a result, their interconnectedness supports the production of ikat textiles and the preservation of traditional crafts and cultural heritage (Etten, 2010).

Group dynamics and communication are fundamental to understanding how individuals interact in various social and cultural contexts. In the context of ikat weaving artisans in East Sumba, groups form naturally without formal structures with no formal leaders or fixed membership. The ikat weaving craftsman groups in East Sumba show a unique work pattern, where their interactions are informal and based on needs. These craftsmen tend to work independently in their homes, but at certain stages in the production process, they require the expertise of other artisans. These working relationships are built on practical needs and trust that develops over time. Communication in ikat weaving groups is straightforward and focused on the practical needs of getting the job done. There is no formal communication protocol, and weavers interact as needed. Meanwhile, communication in culturally diverse work groups involves more complex adjustments (Keyton, 2006).

However, knowledge management occurs orally and through direct observation in the context of ikat weaving artisans. Knowledge is transferred through direct practice and social interaction. This phenomenon shows that

knowledge management relies more on interpersonal relationships than formal systems in traditional societies. Knowledge is passed down from generation to generation through active participation in the ikat weaving production process, not through formal training or written documentation. In addition, culture plays a significant role in shaping traditional group dynamics. In ikat weaving groups, local cultural values such as cooperation and community solidarity are the foundations for collaborative work patterns. Kinship relationships and geographical proximity also contribute to maintaining the stability of this work network, which is one of the findings in the research on ikat weaving groups.

This review of the ikat weaving group is also relevant to Weick's view, which reveals how individuals and groups create meaning from everyday experiences to manage uncertainty (Weick, 2009). In the ikat weaving group, this process is seen in how the weavers understand their roles, identify their respective expertise, and build informal networks based on practical needs. Although they do not have a formal organizational structure, sensemaking occurs naturally through repeated interactions, observations, and shared reflections. This phenomenon illustrates that in an uncertain and limited situation, the ikat weaving artisans can still manage the existing situation so that the making of ikat weaving can continue. This situation aligns with the concept of organizing, where uncertain or problematic conditions are responded to be understood and lived with appropriate actions (Robson, 2021; Weick, 1995). In this case, three concepts in the theory of organizing, namely enactment, selection, and retention (Weick, 1979, 1995, 2009), occur among ikat weaving artisans as an effort to preserve the ikat weaving tradition.

The implementation that occurs is shown; the weavers create their work environment through daily actions, such as choosing weaving techniques, organizing production flows, and interacting with fellow weavers they know. This work method is considered the most realistic if they want to continue producing ikat weaving. Relying on new relationships, not from kinship networks, will create increasingly endless uncertainty. Furthermore, selection refers to how weavers determine which practices are practical and worth maintaining. In the context of East Sumba ikat weaving artisans, relying on family ties and trusted people will be more effective because these relationships also have implications for other social moments outside of making ikat weaving. Furthermore, retention among ikat weaving artisans, namely knowledge and practices considered successful, such as job exchanges and rental systems as solutions to fill stages that a weaver does not master, will be integrated into the daily routine when making ikat weaving. Weavers tend to maintain work patterns that are proven efficient and follow their needs.

Based on the concept of enactment, the group environment is not objective but rather the result of social construction based on actions taken by the weavers. The results of this construction, through selection and retention, are then implemented as a reality accepted by the East Sumba ikat weaving artisans. They even believe that their predecessors have implemented similar patterns that have proven to make ikat weaving survive until now. This process is based on experience and informal evaluation that occurs repeatedly and will continue to be passed down to the next generation.

These findings show that the process of organizing ikat weaving work at each stage indirectly reflects the weavers' experience based on the enactment, selection, and retention processes that have taken place and have been practiced repeatedly among East Sumba ikat weaving artisans.

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