



## Sadum: Traditional and Contemporary

Ratna Panggabean

Crafts and Traditions Research Group, Faculty of Art and Design,  
Bandung Institute of Technology

**Abstract.** Sadum is one of the traditional cloths of the Batak people in North Sumatra. It is woven on a back strap loom with supplementary weft technique. Sadum is a warp faced weaving made of cotton and beads woven into the cloth. Ritually it is used as a shoulder cloth, gifts exchanges, and in dances. It also bears the symbol of good tidings and blessings for the receiver. The cloth has change during times in technique, color, patterns, as well as in functions. But the use as a ritual cloth stays the same. The basic weaving techniques and equipments used to create it hasn't change, but its material and added techniques has made this cloth become more rich in color, pattern, and texture. Most changes began when the Europeans came to Indonesia and introduced new material such as synthetic fibers and colors. In the 70s traditional cloth of Indonesia got its boost when the government declared batik as Indonesian national attire. This encourages other traditional weavings to develop into contemporary clothing. Later, new techniques and material were introduced to the Sadum weavings including embroidery, silk and golden threads which were never used before.

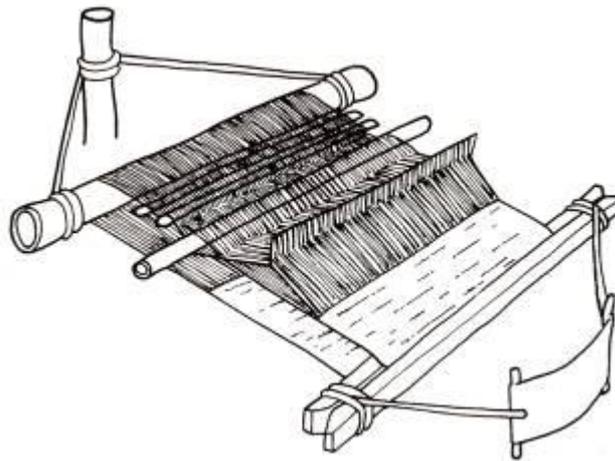
**Keywords:** *sadum; traditional; ulos; weaving.*

Batak traditional weaving is called ulos, which literally means blanket. Ulos is a woven fabric, commonly 50 to 150 cm in width and 150 to 220 cm in length and made of cotton fiber threads. Motif designing in ulos is achieved through several techniques, such as supplementary weft (songket), warp ikat, and application of beads. In the traditional life of Batak people, ulos plays inseparable significant roles, especially those related to tradition and local religion. There are actually several kinds of ulos with different traditional significances, such as Ragidup, Ragihotang, Sadum, Sibolang, Bintang Maratur, Mangiring [1]. Every ulos fabric possesses distinct ornaments which differentiate one from another. Among various types of ulos having traditional significances, sadum is the most common. Sadum is distinguishable from other types of ulos due to its bright colors. Like other types of ulos, Sadum features also warp-faced background, except for the portion of the motif formed using songket (supplementary weft) technique. Sadum also features more color variations than other types of ulos. This traditional fabric is worn by both men

and women, in both delightful and mournful occasions. This general characteristic renders the traditional fabric open to developments.



**Figure 1** Sadum Tarutung. Cotton. Late 19th century (Collection of Dr. Poltak Hutagalung).



**Figure 2** Backstrap loom (Anas, 1995).

Sadum is produced in Tarutung, North Sumatera, as a type of publicly consumed ulos. This traditional fabric is sold in local markets, major cities, and tourism souvenir centers. Sadum is commonly 55 – 120 in width and 150 – 200 cm in length, and traditionally woven by women using the backstrap loom. This loom can only produce a limited width of fabric. To produce a sheet of fabric

wider than 100 cm, the weaving process involves two long sheets of fabric with a symmetrical motif which are later combined into a unified sheet. The motifs on the sheet are applied through structure design, which means that the motifs are created simultaneously along with the weaving process. The techniques used are songket (supplementary weft) and application of beads in the weaving. The remainder of the warp thread at the edge of the sheet is knit horizontally as the seal of the weaving, while the remaining thread is spun to shape tassels. Weaving the sheets using the back strap loom allows for denser and more solid thread structures and plaits, which in turn produces soft, fine, and heavy sheets.

Sadum, among other traditional Batak fabrics, has the richest color variation. Besides the traditional red, white, and black, sadum also features bright colors, such as blue, yellow, and green. These colors are obtained from indigenous plants, such as mengkudu/awl tree (*morinda citrifolia*) which produces red, indigo (*indigofera tinctoria*) produces blue, and turmeric (*curcuma domestica*) which produces yellow [2]. Sadum ornaments basically consist of three main lines on the arrangements of warp threads, which are usually dark red and blue. The motifs are latter woven using the supplementary weft technique (songket) following the direction of the weft, usually in yellow and green. One of the most distinctive motifs in Sadum is the horizontal line which was entirely woven using the weft threads in bright colors. The motif on this line is commonly diamond-shaped. Other motifs are stylization of natural objects arranged on horizontal lines above the diamond-shaped motif.



**Figure 3** One of the distinctive motif of Sadum, a horizontal line with diamond shaped patterns woven in bright colors. (Collection of Dr. Poltak Hutagalung).

According to Batak culture, Sadum represents joy and blessing and appears in almost every ritual of both delight (marriage, birth) and grief (death). It is not uncommon that words of hope and blessing are woven on sadum. As traditional clothing, sadum is commonly worn as a shoulder cloth for man or woman. In traditional dances, sadum is also worn as body covering (sarong), breast covering, and headwear for women [3]. In rituals, sadum is presented as a symbol of blessing for the receiver and is common in gift exchange rituals. Sadum is also utilized as traditional equipment, usually as a coaster or cover of other traditional artifacts. The appearance of sadum, which is rich in colors and beads, contains a positive traditional meaning which attracts the general public. As message bearer and gift, this traditional fabric may be presented to anyone, including those outside the Batak society. Thus, sadum may be produced, with certain adjustment and diversification in its forms and functions, to anticipate a larger market. For this reason, sadum is produced in different degrees of quality, according to its role in rituals. For instance, the quality of sadum for rituals is not as high as sadum for clothing, message bearer, and gift. The consideration of the quality of sadum as a traditional fabric covers motif sophistication, variation of colors, and density of weaving.



**Figure 4** Parents of the groom cover the shoulders of the bride & bridegroom with a Sadum as token blessings. (Courtesy of S.E. Hutapea).

Since the arrival of Western civilization in the early 19th century for disseminating Christianity and, later, colonization, the production of sadum also underwent development in techniques, materials, and background motifs. In the past, every Batak women could weave. However, since the introduction of Western education, plantation, and economy systems, weaving became an

activity centered in certain regions. The best weaving centers of the era were those in fertile regions, such as the Silindung valley, around Lake Toba, and South Tapanuli. These weaving centers specialized in certain traditional fabrics [4]. The Europeans, at that time, had also introduced factory-made fine cotton threads in bright colors, the result synthetic dyes. The changes escalated in 1930 when the pedal loom<sup>1</sup> is introduced to the people of Toba [4]. Ulos weaving also utilized this device and new techniques which, in turn, influence the produced forms and motifs. The most evident change was apparent in the sparse density of the threads and in the background which showed both the warp and weft threads on the basic weaving. This resulted in thinner and lighter fabrics. Besides the quality of the fabrics, the creation of motifs became simpler due to the technical limitation of the pedal loom. This limitation made it impossible for sadum to be produced using this loom. Even so, the weaving of sadum underwent development in materials and motifs, namely in the usage of factory-made threads and synthetic colors which offer more variations than traditional colors. European flower motifs, such as the rose, also began to adorn sadum ornaments, as well as new colors for the background which, until then, had previously been limited only into black and white.



**Figure 5** Sadum influenced by Europe patterns and colors. Cotton. Late 19th century. (Collection of Dr. Poltak Hutagalung).

The development of sadum reaches its peak after the 1970s. At that time, the Indonesian government enacted the role of batik shirt as an alternative to formal clothing, besides suit and tie. This enactment marked the revival of Indonesian traditional fabrics. Traditional fabrics diversified not only into various kinds of

---

<sup>1</sup> The pedal loom is a loom that uses a foot pedal to create spaces between the warp threads to enable the weft threads to pass through. The pedal loom is a predecessor of the non-mechanical loom.

new clothing, but also into new functions. The usage of traditional clothing developed into the production of traditional fabrics as materials for modern clothing, such as suit, skirts, and other clothing accessories, besides scarf. The wearers and enthusiasts of sadum are not only the Batak society but also the general public. As a result of adjustment to market demands, sadum has become open to development and changes. Sadum then falls into two groups, with the first being the traditional fabrics serving ritual purposes and adorned with traditional ornaments, while the other being the general traditional clothing adjusted to meet the demands of the market. This development was consequently followed by the development of materials and techniques. Along with the development of textile industry in Indonesia at that time, the motifs of sadum have become ornaments printed on organdy fabrics and mass-produced. The usage of factory-made fabrics was solely intended for the production of modern clothing, and not the production of traditional fabrics. The production of traditional sadum has since been going on to serve ritual purposes still conducted by Batak people up to now.



**Figure 6** (left): Sadum as a sarong & shoulder cloth woven in matching pattern and color. (right): Various ulos sold in Medan's market.

The development of functions happened also in the 1980s when traditional fabrics transformed into national clothings for women, such as in the form of sarong and kebaya or kurung blouses with scarves similar to the sarong. Sadum and other types of ulos were then modified into a suit called mandar. In the 1990s, sadum as mandar saw better development, both in colors and motifs. Entering the 21st century, the production of sadum has undergone so many techniques that it even incorporates techniques previously unfamiliar with sadum, such as bordir (embroidery) and krancang. The interest of the market in contemporary style of traditional clothing is growing. Sadum now features new

color compositions. The main motif patterns as the identity of the traditional sadum are still exists, but the composition of colors has been suited to meet current market demands. The materials and techniques are affected as well. Silk has become one of the preferred fibers for the production of sadum mandar. Silk fibers which form threads in small sizes require proficient skills in weaving.



**Figure 7** Sadum woven with synthetic threads in gold, red, and brown colors with beads interwoven into its weavings. Also applying embroidery at each weaving ends



**Figure 8** Sadum with embroidery in its edges as a finishing touch. Cotton, synthetic yarn, beads. 2008.

The new technique added to the weaving of sadum is embroidery. Traditionally, embroidery has never been applied to the production of sadum and other types of ulos. Nevertheless, the rising market demands in embroidered fabrics result in the incorporation of the technique into the woven sadum. The smoothness of weaving using small-sized threads is complemented by embroidered patterns using similar threads. This development of sadum for contemporary purposes has affected the weaving process of the traditional sadum as well. New color compositions are applied, especially to motif lines. Embroidery techniques are also applied. This new, highly-skilled process will, in turn, affect the economic value of sadum. This, however, does not diminish the interest of both the producers and consumers in sadum, considering that the produced fabrics possess high quality.



**Figure 9** Sarong & shoulder cloth with Sadum motifs in contemporary colors composition. Silk, cotton. 2008. (Courtesy of Arthur Sianipar).

### Reference

- [1] Hasibuan, Dr. Jamaluddin S., Batak, Art and Culture, Medan, 1986
- [2] Anas, Biranul (et.al), Tenunan Indonesia, Yayasan Harapan Kita, Jakarta, 1995
- [3] Niessen, S.A., Batak Cloth and Clothing: A Dinamic Indonesian Tradition, Oxford Unversity Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1993
- [4] Sibeth, Achim, Living With Ancestors: The Batak, Peoples of the Island of Sumatra, Thames & Hudson, London, 1991