

THESIS RESEARCH AND COLLECTING: A FIELDWORKER'S VIEW

Sir Edward B. Tylor took particular interest and delight in the ethnological collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum,¹ but he perceived the study of material culture as merely one of many departments in the wider subject of anthropology.² During the first two decades of the twentieth century British scholars interested in material culture, who were known as ethnologists, '...tended to be more preoccupied with things than with people'; nevertheless, behind the study of objects there remained an interest in the people who made them.³ It was clear that while ethnological specimens might be objects of intrinsic interest worthy of study in their own right, they might also reveal much about the societies whence they came. Sturtevant was later to emphasize the role of ethnological specimens as an important primary source and indeed argued that '...artefacts also have advantages over written records of behaviour and belief in being concrete, objective, difficult to distort, and little subject to

¹ A.C. Haddon, 'Introduction', in E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology Volume I*, [1881], London: Watts & Co. 1946, p.viii.

² E.B. Tylor, *Anthropology Volume I*, [1881], London: Watts & Co. 1946, p.xii.

³ G. Lienhardt, *Social Anthropology*, [1964], Oxford: Oxford University Press 1979, p.5.

personal or ethnocentric bias'.⁴

If ethnological specimens are to be worthy of scholarly attention above the level of mere curiosities and possibly, as was suggested by Sturtevant, as an undistorted source of information, then their manner of acquisition must be open to investigation. If they are to be used as a source, then the scholar needs to know in what way the specimen records the ethnography and whether it is representative; and, since it is impossible to accept Sturtevant's claims of objectivity for the material record, whether personal prejudice on the part of the collector influenced the selection of specimens.

Field collecting is one of the methods by which anthropological museums and departments acquire ethnological specimens, and yet it is a subject that has been sparsely mentioned in the specialized literature. In his *Guide to Field Collecting of Ethnographic Specimens*, Sturtevant argued that the best collections were usually those made during the course of fieldwork by anthropologists interested in both artefacts and the local ethnography;⁵ but he did not give many specific examples. It is my intention to provide an account of how a field collection was recently made for the Pitt Rivers Museum, in the hope that this may be of assistance to future field collectors. It is hoped that this paper will show how the ethnography is illuminated by the specimens and what considerations influenced their selection, with a view to assessing the collection as an anthropological source.

Between 1980 and 1982 I carried out approximately twenty months of fieldwork in the Bima regency of Sumbawa, one of Indonesia's larger eastern islands. The purpose of the research was to examine closely a variety of Biman craft industries, tracing aspects of their history and recording their adaptation to the contemporary social and economic environment. The research was funded to doctoral level by the Social Science Research Council, and field permits were granted by the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia). The Pitt Rivers Museum, which has a policy of asking students to collect for it, agreed to purchase Biman materials gathered during the course of my fieldwork, and to advance funds for the purpose.

The Museum was interested in acquiring specimens from a range of Biman crafts, though since an important part of the research was concerned with the manufacture of textiles, both the curator (Mr B.A.L. Cranstone) and I were particularly enthusiastic

⁴ W.C. Sturtevant, *Guide to Field Collecting of Ethnographic Specimens*, Smithsonian Information Leaflet 503, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1977, p.2.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p.4.

to collect examples of textile technology and the completed fabrics. This emphasis on textiles and their technology was also influenced by the Museum's tradition of collecting examples of craft processes and the fact that we knew that Bima had been historically a significant textile-producing region;⁶ but since the regency had hardly been documented by anthropologists we had no information about the present condition of the industry.

Before commencing fieldwork I had several meetings with the curator to discuss methods of collecting and he provided many useful suggestions based on his own experience in Papua New Guinea. I had undertaken both library and museum research in Britain and Holland prior to leaving for Indonesia, which further enabled me to assess Bima's collecting potential from the academic perspective: as has been pointed out by Sturtevant, a collector informed in this manner is better able to fill the gaps in existing museum collections.⁷

My fieldwork revealed that while some of Bima's craft industries had declined, many, such as textiles, were still important. The latter had managed to stay in business, despite competition from mass-produced goods, by exploiting the regional ethnic and custom-made markets, which had not been penetrated by larger competitors. I thus had the good fortune of being able to collect specimens from a contemporary domestic textile industry, and it is worth examining three aspects of the technology which were of significant research interest.

The first of these concerns the manufacture of thread in the Indonesian archipelago, which is recorded in publications and represented in a number of British museum collections. Despite the acknowledged skill of some of the authors on the subject,⁸ there remain vague areas and it is unclear whether museum collections illustrating the process are complete. In this context Bima is of academic importance because its cotton industry was still operating, though in decline, and the thread-manufacturing equipment was still available.

Secondly, the method of transferring thread to a loom (warping-up) has been poorly recorded. In Bima this task can be undertaken with or without the use of specialized equipment, the former method being quicker and easier. The latter method is generally well understood,⁹ and information from Bima was likely

⁶ J.E. Jasper and M. Pirngadie, 'De Weefkurst', in *De Inlansche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlansch Indie*, Vol. II, The Hague: Mouton 1912, pp.142-143.

⁷ Sturtevant, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁸ See for example A.C. Haddon and L.E. Swart, *Iban or Sea Dayak Fabrics and their Patterns*, [1936], Carlton: Ruth Bean 1982, pp. 5-9.

⁹ Cf. Jasper and Pirngadie, *op. cit.*, p.98.

to provide only further evidence of regional variation. However, while the technology of the first method is well represented in British and Dutch museum collections, its use has been only partially described.

A third potential area of interest both to researchers and possibly to the craft-oriented general public (such as the Weavers' Guild) was one of the Biman methods of patterning textiles. While the techniques of *batik* and *ikat* are widely known in Britain, another of Indonesia's great textile traditions has received scant attention. This technique, called supplementary weft, is one of the foremost in Bima, and therefore a collection in this area was likely to have wider scholarly and craft implications.

Following this outline of the technical significance of Biman textile methods it is worth considering two aspects of the technology which have wider social and economic implications. Firstly, one of the reasons for the persistence of the Biman textile industry, in spite of factory-based competition, lies in its reliance on simple domestic technology. The main apparatus, the back-strap loom, is flexible because it can be swiftly brought into operation and easily stored when not in use. This allows women, who are the weavers in Biman society, to manufacture cloth at odd moments in the working day. Since they are not totally dependent on weaving for an income, and as the equipment is not capital-intensive, they are able to take advantage of local market changes with low financial risk. The latter point can be compared with the garment trade of southern India, where Swallow has argued that the domestic industry has maintained its competitiveness by low overheads and market adaptability.¹⁰

In the second place, until the 1950s Biman unmarried women were largely confined to their homes in accordance with local Muslim practice. Men appreciated the economic advantages of having wives who were good weavers, and young women were expected to advertise their industriousness to potential husbands. However, since they were unable to demonstrate these skills in public, the unmarried women broadcast their abilities by means of rattles attached to or built into their looms, which clattered as they worked. Examples of similar devices from Indonesia can be found in British museums, such as the model of the Bugis loom in the Skeat Collection, in the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge; yet there is insufficient documentation to explain the technical features. Therefore an example from Bima with accompanying background information was likely to provide useful comparative material.

¹⁰ D.A. Swallow, 'Production and Control in the Indian Garment Export Industry', in E.N. Goody (ed.), *From Craft to Industry: the Ethnography of Proto-Industrial Craft Production*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982, p.151.

While the textile technology was interesting and worth collecting, the fabrics themselves were also noteworthy from the perspectives both of social anthropology and of the general public. An example of this is the manner in which textiles had been used as indicators of social position during the period when Bima was ruled by a Sultan. The region had been governed through a complex bureaucracy in which people of high social status had worn sarongs woven of expensive materials and occupation was indicated by the colour of the clothing. Though this use of textiles declined when Bima came under republican government in 1950, another social aspect of textiles is still of contemporary significance. In common with many other Indonesian peoples, the Bimanese exchange elaborate fabrics at festivals held at salient points in the life cycle, and this tradition has not diminished in importance. With their Biman aesthetic and symbolic value, these textiles indicate vividly the modern relevance of the festivals, and are therefore of interest to social scientists.

As indicated above, the selection of specimens was undertaken with reference both to museum and literary records, and to what was available and noteworthy in the contemporary society. It is, however, worth considering two aspects of European and North American ways of perceiving artefacts which would have been ethnocentric and possibly socially irresponsible in the Biman context. Anthropologists such as Paul Henley have drawn our attention to the ethnocentrism inherent in ascribing worth to objects of antiquity in societies without such values.¹¹ Furthermore, he has indicated the limited usefulness of praising certain materials because they appear to be traditional, as these often may not have been indigenous.¹² As will be examined below, both these observations and an attention to collecting ethics were pertinent to the Biman situation.

It is very difficult to define what might be a traditional material in a society such as that of Bima, where imported thread has been available since at least the turn of the century.¹³ Today, most of the handloom industry employs synthetic thread made on the island of Java, which is preferred by the Bimanese to locally-spun cotton for practical and aesthetic reasons. In the first place, synthetic thread is easier to weave because it does not break as often as does the local cotton, and garments made with it are both lighter and cooler than those made of heavier

¹¹ P. Henley, 'The Economic and Aesthetic Value of Ethnic Art', in *New Society*, 1979, p.640, citing Bascom.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.641.

¹³ J.E. Jasper, 'Het eiland Soembawa en zijn bevolking', in *Tijdschrift voor het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* 34 (1908), p.100.

home-spun. Secondly, though the Bimaneses were able to obtain a range of bright colours with vegetable dyestuffs, these were difficult to fix and tended to fade. Since local aesthetics demanded colour definition, especially when they were combined in checks, fading was particularly undesirable and therefore the vivid, long-lasting aniline dyes of the imported thread were easily incorporated into Biman society. A textile made of synthetic thread, in the eyes of the people, is no less Bimaneses than one woven from home-grown products; and as the collection was intended to reflect contemporary reality, examples of both types were acquired.

In the art-dealer markets of Europe and North America antiquity is associated with value, yet these preoccupations are not relevant in the Biman context where objects are not revered on account of their age. In the Biman markets an old item is not necessarily more expensive than its modern counterpart. Nevertheless old objects, such as textiles, are important in Biman society, not because they fetch a better price, but because they are often used as a design resource. When weavers design a new high-quality textile they sometimes employ old cloths as a reference from which successful motifs and combinations of colour can be copied. The local market price does not reflect this value possibly because the resource does not usually leave the area, nor is the local economy sufficiently wealthy to support inflated prices like those of the antique markets of the western industrialized nations.

Old Biman textiles are of academic interest because they were employed as indicators of social status, and since they were available on favourable purchase terms they would have made a valuable addition to the museum's collections, but this would have been at the risk of depleting a local resource. The solution to these ethical considerations was to focus the collection on the contemporary industry, recording the use of established designs in the modern fabrics and tracing their history with photographs of some of the older textiles.

While the varying academic, ethnographic and ethical demands influenced the selection of specimens, the process of collecting itself was not straightforward. Textiles, for instance, were available in the markets or could easily be bought from peddlars in the villages, but had the collection consisted only of objects acquired by outright purchase it would have been devoid of examples from the important custom-made trade. A further problem was that, while the museum wished to collect some of the textile manufacturing equipment, these items were not usually for sale. Biman weavers normally inherit their tools or have them specially made by their male kinsmen, in which case they hardly ever appear in the market-place; also, since they are not items of common trade, it was difficult to put a price on them. These specimens therefore had to be acquired by a variety of often complex transactions which it would be tedious to list here. In summary, however, the items were secured for the museum either by direct purchase or by being made to order. It is the

latter method I propose to discuss here, with reference to the largest apparatus brought back, which was the back-strap loom.

During fieldwork I had regular contact with a local cultural organization comprising a group of enthusiasts who were interested in regional history and the performing arts. After I had told them that I was interested in purchasing a loom they introduced me to one of their members, a well-known carpenter called Idrus Yahya, who agreed to build one for me. As Idrus had to buy special materials and equipment I arranged to pay him in advance; and to protect the investment we drew up an official contract, written in the national language, which was in accordance with Indonesian law.

Idrus commenced work in May 1981 and a deadline was set at the end of September the same year. As the component parts of a loom are subject to dissimilar stresses when in operation, they are made from different timbers selected for their appropriate qualities, and it took longer to gather the materials than was anticipated. Furthermore, a completely new Biman loom is seldom made, the new parts usually being added to an existing apparatus as old sections wear out. Therefore it was beyond anybody's experience to be able to predict exactly how long it would take to build it. As it happened we were not able to start entering the thread (warping-up) into the loom until February the following year, and so were fortunate to have commenced the project fairly early in my fieldwork.

In order to keep the project running I had to keep calling on Idrus to provide encouragement and monitor his progress. Despite the irritation of having to make constant visits, which increased in intensity as we went beyond the deadline, I did have the rare opportunity of observing at first hand many aspects of local carpentry; and the data gained through this kind of participant observation later formed an invaluable part of the doctoral thesis. What was interesting was that the design for the carvings which were to embellish the loom were, like the designs for the textiles, quite eclectic. Some motifs were traced from wall panels in the Sultan's palace, while others were copied from old looms, which in turn were combined with yet further ideas from the carpenter's imagination. Usually the customer is expected to participate in the design process by adding suggestions or even helping the craftsman though, being a novice in local terms, my role seldom progressed beyond holding steady pieces of wood. We both agreed, however, that the loom would be more complete if fitted with a rattle of the type once used by unmarried women, although this mechanism is seldom employed today.

Since the loom was required to be in an operational condition to provide an example of the supplementary weft technique, it was necessary to set it up and weave a portion of the fabric (because the component parts of a back-strap loom are mainly held in place by the warp threads, some degree of weaving was of course a basic requirement). Two women from a nearby village, Halimah M. Said and Siti Samsia, arranged to take on the task,

and between us we selected the materials and designs. By this time many people had become interested in the project, a number of whom (including the eldest daughter of the last Sultan of Bima) provided drawings of motifs or old textiles for reference purposes. The work progressed swiftly and the only problem occurred when, on reaching the half-way point, there was general agreement that part of the design did not suit the remainder of the textile. The weavers decided to unpick approximately eight inches of fairly finely woven cloth and try another series of motifs which, fortunately, were successful. This reworking delayed the textile's progress and the women were still weaving it on the morning of my departure from the field. Even then they were slightly reluctant to part with it as it was incomplete.

While there were immense difficulties in arranging the complete manufacture of complicated specimens for the museum, there were, in addition to its usefulness for research, two advantages. Firstly, it involved the museum in some minor patronage of craftsmen in a poor country, which may not have been possible had the modest funds been diverted by dealers and other middle-men. In the second place, since the Indonesian government is concerned about the removal of items of local significance, there might have been difficulties in obtaining shipping permits for older specimens. Because the specimens were new they came under the commercial category of handicrafts, the export of which the government is keen to encourage.

For museum specimens to be of value, either to the scholar or to the general public, they need to be well documented. In the case of this collection the documentation was likely to be greatly increased by the information contained in the thesis. In addition to my thesis field notes, I kept a collection notebook in which I entered as many details about each specimen as could be gathered. Where possible, I recorded the local names of the objects and their components, and in what circumstances they had been used. The source of each item was included and in some cases whether it had been moved since its original manufacture. The names of people involved in making, owning or selling the object were also noted, and occasionally it was possible to record their (or other people's) opinion about it. Also of importance was the price paid for each specimen, whether in money or in kind, and the date of the transaction, because these might be of interest to future researchers. I added sketches of the specimens in the notebook to aid identification in Britain and attempted to provide labels for each item, though both of these tasks proved difficult to achieve in the final rush at the close of fieldwork.

Since the collection was to be shipped across three islands along sometimes extremely rough roads by assorted means of transport, the packaging had to be secure. The large specimens were dismantled, and we made extensive use of cigarette cartons for padding and plastic bags for protection from damp and dust. There was an abundance of locally-grown wood for use in packing cases and it was both cheap and straightforward to arrange the

construction of purpose-built crates. The collection was finally air-freighted from Bali, which is an important commercial centre for the export of handicrafts. In this case it would have been more expensive to take the collection to a major Javanese port or to Singapore for shipment, as this would have involved long and costly overland journeys and possibly delays in various harbours with extra hotel bills as a consequence.

The field collector may and should do all within his power to recognize and overcome subjectivity and ethnocentric bias in an attempt to approach Sturtevant's ideal for obtaining ethnological specimens, and I have shown some of the ways I tried to achieve this while collecting in Bima. Yet however informed and careful one may be, it must not be forgotten that each field situation imposes its own host of problems beyond practical control: droughts or floods may affect accessibility; transport may not operate; sickness may cause delays; items may be lost or damaged in transit. Academic ideals and field realities always conjoin in the resulting collection.

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