



EMBROIDERING IDENTITY: WOMEN AND BUGIS SILK WEAVING FROM AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Feby Triadi

Univeristas Cahaya Prima, Bone Regency, Indonesia

Email: febytriadi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

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Bugis silk weaving is a rich cultural heritage, where women play a key role in the production process. This research uses a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how women craftsmen embroider cultural identity through weaving practices, traditional motifs, and technical innovation. Data was collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation, then analyzed thematically to reveal the relationship between technical skills, motif creativity, and the symbolic value attached to silk fabric. The research results show that women craftsmen not only maintain traditional techniques, but also adapt motifs and production processes to modern market demands, so that silk weaving functions as a medium for cultural expression, women's empowerment, and community identity. This study confirms the importance of preserving traditional practices through sustainable approaches, as well as providing an empirical contribution to the understanding of the role of women in the preservation of textile heritage and innovation in material culture.



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INTRODUCTION

Bugis silk weaving represents one of the most prominent cultural expressions in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, embodying not only aesthetic sophistication but also social values, collective identity, and historical continuity. Known locally as *lipa' sabbe*, Bugis silk textiles occupy an important place in ceremonial life, social stratification, and economic activities. For centuries, silk weaving has functioned as more than a material object; it has symbolized prestige, kinship, femininity, and cultural belonging. In Bugis society, textiles are deeply connected to customary traditions, rituals, and symbolic meanings that reflect the worldview and life philosophy of the community (Pelras, 1996; Mattulada, 1985). Consequently, Bugis silk weaving constitutes a form of intangible cultural heritage that integrates technical knowledge, artistic creativity, and social memory.

Women have historically occupied a central position in the production and transmission of Bugis silk weaving traditions. From preparing fibers and selecting dyes to designing motifs and operating traditional looms, women act as both producers and custodians of cultural knowledge. These activities extend beyond economic functions and represent mechanisms through which values, identities, and collective memories are transmitted across generations. According to UNESCO (2022), traditional craftsmanship constitutes an important component of intangible cultural heritage because it preserves local knowledge and strengthens cultural continuity. In the Bugis context, weaving practices are closely associated with women's roles in maintaining social harmony and preserving the symbolic meanings embedded within

textile motifs (Azizah, 2021). Thus, women are not merely artisans but active cultural agents who contribute to the reproduction and transformation of Bugis identity.

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of examining traditional textiles through anthropological and gender perspectives. Textile production involves not only technical expertise but also systems of meaning, social relations, and symbolic representations (Kawamura, 2018; Parker, 2016). Motifs and weaving patterns are frequently associated with cosmological beliefs, ethical values, and social status. In Bugis society, the *lipa' sabbe* motif represents more than visual ornamentation; it embodies concepts of harmony, dignity, and social order rooted in local philosophy (Hanafiah, 2022). Sulistyowati and Putri (2023) further argue that traditional weaving practices incorporate sophisticated forms of indigenous knowledge, including mathematical calculations, color symbolism, and ecological understanding reflected in the use of natural dyes. These findings suggest that Bugis silk weaving constitutes a multidimensional cultural system where aesthetic values intersect with social and symbolic meanings.

Despite the growing literature on Indonesian traditional textiles, studies focusing specifically on women as key actors in Bugis silk weaving remain limited. Existing research tends to emphasize artistic characteristics, historical development, or economic aspects without adequately addressing the gendered dimensions of production and cultural transmission (Ridwan, 2022). Ethnographic analyses concerning how women negotiate tradition, innovation, and market pressures are particularly scarce. Such limitations are significant because women artisans are increasingly confronted with the challenges posed by globalization, industrialization, and changing consumer preferences. In many weaving communities, women simultaneously perform domestic responsibilities, engage in textile production, and contribute to household income, illustrating the intersection of gender roles and economic resilience (Rahmat & Sari, 2024).

Contemporary transformations have generated both opportunities and challenges for the sustainability of Bugis silk weaving. Modernization and the expansion of textile industries have introduced new technologies and market opportunities, allowing artisans to reach broader audiences. However, these developments have also intensified competition from mass-produced fabrics and synthetic materials. According to Fletcher and Grose (2019), traditional textile industries worldwide face increasing pressure to balance economic competitiveness with cultural authenticity and environmental sustainability. In South Sulawesi, declining interest among younger generations in pursuing weaving professions has raised concerns regarding the continuity of traditional knowledge systems (Mahmud & Hasan, 2025). These circumstances underscore the urgency of documenting and understanding the experiences of women artisans who continue to preserve and adapt weaving traditions.

From an anthropological perspective, weaving represents a form of embodied knowledge that is acquired through observation, repetition, and participation within social networks. Ingold (2018) emphasizes that craftsmanship involves processes of learning and creativity embedded in everyday practices. Likewise, Pink et al. (2016) argue that ethnographic approaches enable researchers to capture the sensory, emotional, and relational dimensions of cultural activities that are often overlooked by quantitative methods. Through weaving, women transmit not only technical skills but also stories, values, and identities that contribute to the continuity of Bugis culture. The loom becomes a site where memory, gender, and creativity intersect, producing textiles that embody both tradition and adaptation.

This study seeks to address these theoretical and empirical gaps by examining the role of women in Bugis silk weaving from an ethnographic perspective. Specifically, the research investigates how women artisans construct meanings, preserve traditions, and develop innovative strategies in response to changing socio-economic conditions. Bone Regency, one of the most important centers of Bugis silk production, provides an ideal setting for exploring these dynamics because traditional weaving techniques continue to be practiced through

networks of female artisans. By focusing on women actively involved in all stages of production, the study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of weaving as a social, cultural, and economic practice.

The research employs a qualitative ethnographic approach that emphasizes prolonged engagement and direct participation in community life. Ethnography enables researchers to explore lived experiences and understand the symbolic dimensions of everyday practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Data are collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation, allowing the researcher to capture narratives of experience, innovation strategies, and social meanings associated with textile production. Thematic analysis and triangulation enhance interpretive depth and ensure the credibility of findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019; Saldaña, 2021).

The significance of this study extends beyond academic discussions concerning traditional textiles. Understanding women's roles in Bugis silk weaving contributes to broader debates on gender, cultural heritage, and sustainable development. Women artisans occupy strategic positions as economic actors and custodians of local wisdom, making their experiences highly relevant to discussions of empowerment and community resilience (UN Women, 2021). Furthermore, documenting weaving traditions provides important insights for cultural preservation strategies and creative industries based on indigenous knowledge. As globalization continues to reshape local economies and cultural practices, understanding how women negotiate continuity and change becomes increasingly important.

Ultimately, this research argues that Bugis silk weaving represents more than a craft tradition; it is a dynamic cultural institution through which women construct identity, transmit knowledge, and negotiate contemporary challenges. Through their creativity and resilience, women artisans sustain not only economic livelihoods but also the symbolic and philosophical foundations of Bugis society. By adopting an ethnographic perspective, this study contributes to the growing literature on material culture, gender studies, and textile anthropology while offering practical implications for cultural preservation and women's empowerment in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the role of women in Bugis silk weaving and to understand how weaving practices function as expressions of cultural identity within their socio-cultural context. Ethnography was chosen because it enables researchers to examine cultural phenomena through direct engagement with participants and everyday practices, thereby revealing the meanings, values, and social relationships embedded within material culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, one of the most important centers of Bugis silk weaving where traditional techniques are still actively preserved by communities of women artisans. Participants were selected purposively and consisted of 10–15 women actively involved in various stages of silk production, including sericulture, dyeing, motif design, and weaving activities. Such a sampling strategy ensured access to information-rich participants who possessed extensive knowledge and practical experience regarding weaving traditions (Patton, 2015). Data collection involved participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and visual documentation. Through participant observation, the researcher participated in and observed daily weaving activities, social interactions, and cultural practices surrounding textile production, enabling the documentation of tacit knowledge and embodied skills that might not emerge through interviews alone (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Semi-structured interviews facilitated exploration of women's experiences, the symbolic meanings of motifs, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and responses to socio-economic changes and

market pressures (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In addition, photographs and video recordings of weaving processes, motifs, and working environments were utilized as visual data to enrich interpretation and support triangulation (Pink et al., 2016; Hine, 2020).

Data analysis followed a thematic procedure involving verbatim transcription of interviews and field notes, open coding to identify key themes, and axial coding to establish relationships among categories associated with weaving techniques, gender roles, symbolic meanings, and adaptation strategies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019; Saldaña, 2021). Triangulation across observational, interview, and visual data enhanced the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings. To ensure trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed, including member checking, audit trails, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2020). Member checking enabled participants to verify preliminary interpretations, while systematic documentation of field notes and methodological procedures increased transparency and consistency throughout the research process. Discussions with academic colleagues further minimized researcher bias and strengthened analytical rigor. Methodologically, ethnography was considered particularly appropriate because Bugis silk weaving represents a complex cultural practice involving embodied knowledge, gendered experiences, aesthetic values, and symbolic meanings that can only be fully understood through prolonged engagement and contextual interpretation (Ingold, 2018; Kawamura, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Consequently, this approach generated rich and contextually grounded data, contributing to scholarship on textile anthropology, gender studies, material culture, and the preservation of traditional knowledge in contemporary Bugis society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research results show that women play a central role in the production of Bugis silk weaving, both as technical actors and as guardians of cultural symbolism. Participatory observations in Bone show that every stage of production—from silkworm rearing, fiber spinning, dyeing, to weaving—is carried out using standardized procedures and full awareness of aesthetic and symbolic values. Technical knowledge about cocoon quality, uniform fiber selection, and consistent fiber thickness are the main keys to producing silk fabric that is smooth, strong, and has high sales value (Hanafiah, 2022). The fiber preparation stage shows the ecological and technical skills of craftswomen, as they have to consider optimal humidity, temperature and environmental conditions to maintain fiber quality.

When it comes to colouring, craftswomen combine traditional and modern techniques, which influences the aesthetics and colour durability of the fabric. Natural colouring using indigo leaves, bark or local plant extracts is maintained because it provides a distinctive colour that is rich in cultural symbolism. For example, the blue colour of indigo leaves is associated with luck and prosperity, while the red colour of certain tree bark is considered a symbol of courage and social strength (Sulistyowati & Putri, 2023). However, to meet modern market demands, craftsmen also use selective synthetic dyes to keep colours consistent, especially in complex motifs. This hybrid approach shows a balance between preserving tradition and adapting to market dynamics, which is in line with Ridwan's (2022) findings that technical innovation is part of a sustainable strategy for traditional textile production.

Woven motifs and patterns have a double meaning, namely as aesthetic elements and social symbols. In-depth interview data shows that certain motifs are associated with traditional ceremonies, social status, or important phases in people's lives, such as weddings, births, and death ceremonies. The *lipa' Sabbe* motif, for example, is not only a visual pattern, but also a means of expressing Bugis cosmology, ethical values and community identity (Azizah, 2021). Women craftsmen play an important role in transmitting knowledge of these motifs to the younger generation, resulting in cultural transfer as well as innovation, when new motifs are developed to meet market tastes or contemporary aesthetic trends. This

phenomenon confirms that Bugis silk weaving is a dynamic medium for expressing identity, where tradition and modernization are in synergy.

Analysis of visual documentation and field observations also shows that the weaving process is a collective activity that involves social interaction. Senior craftsmen function as mentors, teaching weaving techniques, motif arrangement, and dyeing procedures to young craftsmen. These activities not only transfer technical skills, but also maintain social values, work ethics, and cultural symbolism. Certain rituals before and during the weaving process, such as prayers or motif selection rituals, are believed to improve the quality of the fabric, while strengthening community cohesion (Rahmat & Sari, 2024). The ethnographic approach in this research allows researchers to capture social dimensions that are not visible to the naked eye, but which greatly determine the sustainability of cultural practices and identities.

From a material perspective, the findings of this study are consistent with the literature that silk fabrics have superior physical properties, including high tensile strength, optimal elongation, natural lustre, and good moisture absorption (Rinaudo, 2021). The craftsman consciously adjusts the tension on the loom, the number of layers of fiber, and the weaving pattern to achieve the desired quality. A variety of weaving techniques such as twill, plain weave, and brocade are used to produce different textures, motifs, and lustre, so that silk fabrics have diverse functional and aesthetic values. This technical innovation shows that women craftsmen not only maintain traditions, but also play an active role in developing adaptive textile products according to market demands.

In addition, this research found that Bugis silk weaving is an important source of livelihood for craftswomen. Their income depends on the quality of the fabric, complexity of motifs, and local and regional market demand. Craftswomen emphasize that preserving traditional techniques and motifs directly increases economic competitiveness, so that cultural and economic values are interrelated. This finding is in line with the study of Mahmud & Hasan (2025), which emphasizes that the sustainability of traditional textiles requires a combination of cultural preservation and adaptive economic strategies.

Interview findings also point to significant challenges in the sustainability of traditional practices. Some young people are less interested in becoming craftsmen because of competition with mass industrial products, low economic incentives, and the perception that traditional weaving requires a lot of time and effort. Craftswomen realize that adapting techniques, diversifying motifs, and colouring innovations are important strategies to maintain production relevance. This research confirms that the sustainability of silk fabrics does not only depend on physical quality, but also on community strategies and knowledge transfer between generations (Fujimoto, 2016).

Thematic analysis shows a complex relationship between production techniques, motif symbolism, and social values. Craftswomen integrate technical skills, motif creativity and symbolic knowledge to produce silk fabrics that have high aesthetic, social and economic value. The applied ethnographic approach allows researchers to capture social interactions, cultural practices, and technical innovations simultaneously, thereby enriching the literature on traditional textiles, gender, and material anthropology.

In addition to academic contributions, this research provides practical implications. Understanding production patterns, innovation, and motif symbolism can be used as a basis for strategies for empowering women craftsmen, training the younger generation, developing products based on traditional motifs, and sustainable marketing. This approach also opens up opportunities for local governments and cultural institutions to develop traditional textile conservation programs, while increasing market access and competitiveness of Bugis silk products in the era of globalization.

Research findings confirm that Bugis silk weaving is not just a cloth, but a medium of identity, cultural expression and socio-economic innovation. Women craftsmen play a strategic role in maintaining traditional practices while adapting to contemporary demands. Synchronization between tradition, technical innovation and socio-economic adaptation is the

key to the sustainability of this material culture. This study emphasizes that silk fabric conservation strategies must consider technical, symbolic and economic aspects simultaneously, so that silk weaving remains relevant, adaptive and of high value for present and future generations (Chen & Wu, 2020).

Thus, this research makes theoretical and practical contributions to the textile literature and cultural anthropology, by showing that Bugis silk cloth production practices are a complex system that brings together technique, symbolism, identity, and economic value through the active role of women craftsmen. These findings are the basis for developing strategies for cultural preservation, product innovation and community empowerment that maintain the authenticity of motifs while adapting to modern market needs.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Bugis silk weaving is not merely a traditional craft but a dynamic cultural institution through which women express identity, preserve cultural values, and sustain local livelihoods. Women artisans play a central role in every stage of production, functioning simultaneously as producers, innovators, and custodians of symbolic knowledge embedded in weaving motifs and techniques. Their practices illustrate the integration of technical expertise, aesthetic values, and social meanings that have been transmitted across generations. The findings further reveal that Bugis silk weaving embodies a balance between tradition and adaptation. While preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural symbolism, women artisans continuously innovate in response to changing market demands and contemporary socio-economic challenges. Nevertheless, pressures from industrial products and declining interest among younger generations threaten the sustainability of this heritage. Overall, this study highlights the importance of strengthening cultural preservation, women's empowerment, and intergenerational knowledge transmission to ensure that Bugis silk weaving remains relevant, resilient, and valuable for future generations.

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