Basket Makers of the Highlands

The Dou Wawo of Bima, Sumbawa

The varied terrain of the Island of Sumbawa is best appreciated from the air. During the wet season one can catch a glimpse of it when the plane descends from the thick cloud cover to land near one of the three major towns, engendering an impression of lush rice fields separated by miles of emptiness—a perspective shared by the few maps of this part of Indonesia. Should the flight be made between April and November, however, when the island is parched by winds originating in the arid Australian continent, then one is immediately struck by the extent and ruggedness of the mountain ranges. Small villages, often perched well up the mountain sides, are also clearly visible from the plane, their isolation contrasting markedly with the dense clusters of settlements in the verdant irrigated valleys. Indeed such is the altitude at which some of these highlanders live that they are called by the lowlanders the people of the summit or Don Donggo.

Bima, the island’s eastern regency, has some of the most inaccessible mountain ranges, supporting many of these highland peoples, including the Dou Wawo. One of these mountain groups, known as the Dou Wawo, is especially noteworthy since the people have their own separate language; a distinction not shared by most of the other highlanders who along with the Donggo speak a language common with the lowland Bimanese. Until recently the Wawo people had no contact with westerners, although their trade and political contacts with the often well-traveled lowland Bimanese have been very longstanding. Among these latter people they are particularly well known for their skills in the herding of water buffaloes and in basketry, both of which are items of trade with the lowlands.

What is significant is that the lowlanders often perceive all the highlanders in similar ways despite the linguistic distinctiveness of the Dou Wawo. Both the terms wawo and donggo mean exactly the same thing—summit or peak—and some lowlanders even describe the Wawo group as the Don Donggo Ele (literally ‘eastern people of the summit’). The most common name for them is, however, Dou Wawo, and even though this term should logically include some of the ethnic Bimanese who inhabit the district called Wawo, confusion is avoided by the latter group’s emphasis on their lowland connections.

Although the linguistic distinctiveness of the Dou Wawo was known to Peter Just (who visited one of their villages in 1980, 1984–85) and to myself, it only became apparent that two dialects of the language were spoken during the third of my journeys to these highlands when I took time away from my main research among the lowland Bimanese. Also of interest is the fact that although the Wawo vocabulary of both dialects differs substantially from lowland Bimanese, many of the craft technical terms are precisely the same; it would appear that the highlands are an area of potential linguistic research.

Aside from language the cultural distinctiveness of the Wawo people can be discerned in their oral histories, often quite dissimilar from those of the lowland Bimanese. One legend describes a great flood at the beginning of time that drove the people into the highlands, forcing them to build their village on an exposed hillside. While in this vulnerable location two children were snatched by a sparrowhawk, only to be deposited on a stone on the opposite side of the valley, around which the people later built their permanent village, taking the action of the bird as a
An iron tipped rod (most probably an old spear) that is used in planting rice (copyright Pitt Rivers Museum).

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"[the Wawo] are particularly well known for their skills in the herding of water buffalo and in basketry."

Sheaves of rice are dried on these traps above the hearth of an Uma Lengge (highland A-frame home).

Some especially fine baskets...were embellished with silver thread and velvet.

Silver and velvet were used to embellish this Sultanate basketry rice cover.
been politically associated with the lowland Bimaese. Thus, for example, part of the Sultanate that ruled Bima up until its accession to the Indonesian Republic in 1949, and each Wawa village was customarily obliged to supply servants to fill a number of specific posts at the palace, although the precise terms of this arrangement remain unresearched. Partly because of their relations with the Sultanate, and partly because of the numerical superiority of the lowland Bimaese, the Wawa tend to be identified as Bimaese by the wider Indonesian society. The recent arrival of television and the construction of two fair-weather roads will undoubtedly make an impact on the ethnic identity of the Wawa highlanders, as events in the last few years seem to indicate, not least because the wider medium of communication is the Indonesian language.

Basketry

A n exquisite example of the Bimaese basket makers' craft is recorded in Jasper and Pirragide's monumental publication of 1932, De Florentische Kunstenaar in Nederlandsch Indie (Fig. 11). It is possible that items such as these were available in the lowlands, and since there is no record of whether or not the authors visited the highlands we cannot precisely trace its origins; we do know, however, that in Wawa a complex of baskets was woven by women in the Sultanate period. Some especially fine baskets were actually made by women in the Sultan's palace and, being used as rice covers during state banquets, were embellished with silver thread and velvet (Fig. 2). These rice covers are no longer produced today and can only be seen in the Sultanate collections. Similarly much of the lowland basket industry has declined, items of the quality illustrated by Jasper and Pirragide being virtually nonexistent, and today the Wawa highlanders remain some of the last exponents of what was once a more widespread and especially attractive local craft.

During my visits to Wawa I saw evidence of an active trade in baskets. On one occasion I encountered a group of men on a steep mountain trail who were returning home with rice covers, the route they had taken being clearly marked by a large stone near the summit. On another occasion I saw a group of women weaving baskets for sale, their hands soiled with the red clay of the soil. The women were working on the edge of a small stream, their hands covered with dirt, their faces covered with mud. They were making baskets for a foreigner, a foreigner who would pay a good price for their work. The baskets were made of the local rice, the rice that was grown in the Wawa highlands, the rice that was grown in the Sultanate.

In addition to foodstuffs the highlanders cultivate a variety of plants that are used in basketry and related crafts, and they are some of the regency's foremost suppliers of these products. These include yam, cassava, sweet potatoes, and yams, the latter being especially prized by lowland weavers. It is said that the best baskets are made from the roots of the yam, a root that is used to make the bottom of the basket, the bottom of the basket being made of rice straw. The baskets are then glazed with a special type of glaze that is applied with a brush, the brush being made from the roots of the yam. The baskets are then allowed to dry in the sun, after which they are polished with a special type of polish that is made from the roots of the yam. The baskets are then sold to the Wawa highlanders, who use them for storing foodstuffs, such as rice, yams, and yams, the latter being especially prized by lowland weavers. The baskets are then used as storage vessels, the storage vessels being made from the roots of the yam.
rapidly, and I was told that the women can comfortably make at least three a day and sometimes as many as ten, which could be sold in 1981 for between Rupiah (Rp) 150 (30 cents) and Rp250 (50 cents) each.

Although baskets were not made in the neighboring village of lower Tarlawi, they did have an interesting variant of this craft—rain capes from pandanus leaves. While I did not see any being made, I was told how they had been put together. Two sheets, each made of five leaves compressed together along their long sides, had been joined together end to end to make one long strip. This strip had been folded in the middle and sewn along one side so as to make a roof-like structure that could be hung over the head. The sides of the cape reached as far as the upper back, and with its open front the garment was ideal for working in the rice fields during the wet season, especially for tasks such as transplanting rice seedlings when the weaver would be bent double. For children the garment was particularly snug since it would almost envelop them (Fig. 17). Another practical application for pandanus leaves could be seen in the village of Teta where hard-wearing house mats, the usual interior furnishing of highland homes, were plaited.

More delicate examples of the basket maker’s craft could be seen in the village of Sambori where I purchased three different varieties. The first one, kaleru, was a soft plaited bag that was used for storing either a packed lunch of boiled rice or the owner’s betel chewing kit (Fig. 18); its flexible neck could be folded over to prevent the contents from spilling out. The second kind of basket, saduku, was used for carrying seeds or plants and therefore had a broad round opening and a strap for suspending from the wrist. Dyed strips were incorporated into the third basket, kula baku toi, which was shaped like a small hexagonal cylinder. Its lid was detachable and the basket could be used for carrying a woman’s personal effects by stowing it in a fold in the sarong.

Basketry is a craft well adapted to highland life; all the materials can be grown there and it is the kind of occupation that can easily be resumed during lulls in the agricultural cycle. Both highly practical and aesthetically pleasing items are made, and their sale earns much-appreciated cash for the highland economy. Although the industry was in good health when I visited Wawo, I did feel that perhaps the highlanders might be able to utilize the vacuum left by the disappearance of the high-quality lowland basketry crafts, for it would be a shame if these were to be entirely superseded by modern factory-made goods.

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