

# THREADS OF LIFE

February 2013 Newsletter

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Dear William,

This month's newsletter focuses on the weavers of the Kalumpang region of West Sulawesi with the story of a recent challenge we faced in our work with the Kalumpang weavers. But first, there is small follow-up piece about the work of the late Lou Zeldis that is still available through his estate in the US.

*(Left to right) Lilis, a weaver from Sulawesi; dyed threads from the Sulawesi workshop; Jean and Pung in a pedicab in Mamuju, where the workshop was held*

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## About Threads of Life

Threads of Life is a fair trade business that uses culture and conservation to alleviate poverty in rural Indonesia. The heirloom-quality textiles and baskets we commission are made with local materials and natural dyes. With the proceeds from the [Threads of Life gallery](#), we help weavers to form independent cooperatives and to manage their resources sustainably.



*Lou Zeldis batiks displayed at [Umajati Retreat](#)*

## Lou Zeldis's Inventory

In the May 2011 newsletter I wrote of the passing of our friend Lou Zeldis, an extraordinary soul, creative talent, and lover of textiles. Among many avenues of expression, he was known for the batik textiles he designed and produced in collaboration with a batik studio in Surakarta, Java, and the complex boundary-pushing basket forms he made in collaboration with basket makers across Indonesia. He always kept a large part of his body of work was in the US, ready for sale. Since his passing this inventory has been in storage accruing storage fees, and his estate is interested in selling this body of work, in part or whole. There are over 2,000 batiks and hundreds of basketry works. For more information, please contact Liz Marx at [lizmarxstudios@gmail.com](mailto:lizmarxstudios@gmail.com).



Donate to



*Mapping dye plant resources*

## Challenging Times in Kalumpang, Sulawesi

In December 2012 we received a shipment of three bales containing 84 textiles from the most remote communities we work with in the Kalumpang region of West Sulawesi. (See the [May 2011 Field Notes](#)). The shipment included 57 of the large 150 x 200 cm (60 x 80 inch) [Sekomandi](#) and [Marilotong](#) textiles, and 27 smaller [Selendangs](#). This seemed like yet another triumph for our work with a group of weavers that has grown from two to 54 women over the course of ten years. The weavers' isolation means our field staff get to visit them at most once a year. So to help the weavers gain access to Threads of Life and other potential buyers, we have been facilitating the development of seven weavers' cooperatives. In this way, weavers work together, combining their efforts and pooling resources so that they can ship textiles to us when we are unable to visit them. This process had been going well since 2009, but suddenly with the most recent shipment, something appeared to be wrong.

The colors were not right. The red was too bright and too uniform in some cloths; natural dyes would show more depth and more variation. We became suspicious that the weavers were mixing synthetic dyes into their natural dye work. The end-of-year planning and reporting work in the office was put on hold as we spent two weeks examining each textile, spot testing for color fastness, and burn testing fringe threads for indigo. The results were discouraging, and led us back into our archive of benchmark textiles from recent years from the Sulawesi weavers.

When laid out as a timeline, one next to the other, we were reminded that the weavers had been struggling to produce good colors with natural dyes for some years. We had attributed recent improvements in color to improved skills, but the improvements had gone too far and suddenly we were suspicious. Not wanting to put the women on the defensive, our first response was circumspect. There is no cell phone signal in the villages, so we must wait for someone to make the full-day journey to the nearest coastal town for communications to be possible. Text messages were sent to several women for someone to receive when they came to market, and it was one of the head weavers who responded first. Pung called her back and said we were having some problems with the colorfastness of their work. He said we were confused as to why this was happening, and that we needed to understand the problem before we could pay for the shipment we had just received. He asked her, could she think what the problem was? Several explanations were given, but the one that rang true was her suspicion that some weavers were mixing synthetic dyes with their natural colors.

## Donate to The Bebali Foundation

Threads of Life's nonprofit partner, the Bebali Foundation, works with the same communities as Threads of Life to support cooperative development and environmental sustainability. The Bebali Foundation trains weavers in the establishment and maintaining of credit unions, and the sustainable cultivation, harvesting and use of dye plants. Its groundbreaking dye plant and dye recipe identification and documentation is the backbone of ongoing work to safeguard endangered indigenous weaving traditions, and the livelihoods they represent, from extinction. To support the Bebali Foundation, please donate at [www.bebali.org](http://www.bebali.org) via Give2Asia, PayPal, or bank transfer.



## Umajati Retreat

Surrounded by tranquil rice fields, Umajati is a lush garden property hosting two elegantly converted 100-year-old Javanese teak wooden homes that provide 21st century living in 19th century houses. Each has a kitchen and several private garden spaces around a shared swimming pool. Umajati is just 10 minutes north of Ubud and offers daily, weekly or monthly rentals hosted by Balinese house-keepers and cooks who specialize in healthy and vegetarian food.

[www.umajati.com](http://www.umajati.com)

1-bedroom house,  
USD 190 per night.  
2-bedroom house

Again, we held our tongues. This was especially hard for Pung as he had spent a decade building trust with the weavers in the area. But our mission is to support marginalized producers, and to educate them about how to build and maintain markets. Writing any of them off would not have served this end. Instead, we planned a workshop with the women to discuss the problem and design a solution. We felt it important enough that we spent a week designing the facilitation and sent four of our most senior staff for the meeting. The meeting was held over three days during the third week of January in the West Sulawesi regency town of Mamuju; a day's travel for us from Bali, and a day's travel from the villages for the weavers. We paid for nineteen women to attend.

We wanted the women to know this was important to us and sent Pung as our ethnobotanist, Sujata as our best dyer, Werten as our senior facilitator, and Jean as our chief buyer and marketer. For the weavers also, joining the meeting showed a serious commitment. January is not a time of year they usually leave home. The monsoon wreaks havoc on the regions unpaved roads and few would attempt travel until April if there were not a very good reason. In fact, the representatives of one co-op were late to the workshop because their bus was mired in a landslide for a whole day.

At the start of the first morning of the workshop we brought out all the textiles they had sent, so we could show the weavers the problems we had with each piece. We also showed them textiles from weavers on other islands that we work with, so they could see the differences. Next we asked them to explain the reasons for the problems with their work. It took nearly two hours of discussion of dye plant supply problems before one of the women acknowledged she had used synthetic dyes. Her admission opened the floodgates and the whole story came out: one weaver had mixed synthetic dyes in a textile in a recent shipment; we did not notice it and did not reject it; and so everyone felt it was acceptable to do the same.

Only one woman was still making 100% natural dyed cloth for us. For the rest, having done 95% of the work using natural dyes, including a complex oiling process and a full Morinda red process, the application of a half-teaspoon of synthetic red as an over-dye at the very end devalued their work by more than half.

I should note here that it is very difficult to prove the difference between synthetic and natural dyes in a finished cloth without expensive chromatographic lab tests. In the field, we rely on our eyes and experience for judging color, on our long-term relationships with the weavers for their honesty, and audits of the local abundance of dye plants to judge whether dye plant supply matches production volumes.

In the afternoon of the first day of the workshop, we held a hands-on session during which weavers performed their red natural dye work, and we weighed and quantified their dye recipes. The second day was spent with the weavers drawing maps of their dye plant resources, and us totaling their supplies and checking for double counting. Comparing the amount of dyestuff needed to make the textiles produced with the acknowledged supply gave us a measure of the dye plant supply problem. The results showed that there were not enough Morinda trees for the red dye work.

2 bedroom house,  
USD 245 per night.  
Weekly and monthly rates are  
available on request.

## Threads of Life on TEDx



### Weaving a new approach to poverty alleviation

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The weavers disputed this, and from the ensuing discussion it emerged that of the 54 weavers listed as members of the co-ops, only thirty were active, and that for these weavers there were enough Morinda trees. The weavers that left had not given up weaving. A man from Mamuju, with family in one of the weaving villages and business ties in Bali, had been bringing synthetic dyes to the villages and buying textiles. He was paying a third of our prices, but for those without Morinda trees it became the only option. At last, we understood the source of the synthetic dyes that the cooperative weavers had used on the pieces they made for Threads of Life.

On the final day of the workshop, plans were made to address the problems. We recognized that Threads of Life had to increase its buying prices for natural dyed work, to maintain its economic viability in the face of the new market now available to the weavers. We agreed that prices could increase by as much as 25% if there was an improvement in dye quality, and if our market proved capable of bearing such an increase. The women agreed to plant more Morinda trees and harvest them sustainably, to try Symplocos leaves as a mordant, and to work to improve their oiling process.

The final act was to buy 39 of the original textiles that we felt would be colorfast, though at a price appropriate for mixed natural- and synthetic-dyed work. (These are currently on sale in the gallery, labeled as "Natural and synthetic dyes.") Though many were disappointed to have received less money than they were expecting, most acknowledged their mistake and were relieved that their business relationship with us had been saved.

As is often the case in Indonesia, the emotionally difficult negotiations of the week were concluded with a party. Dinner on the last evening was followed by three hours of line dancing. Pung, who claims to have two left feet, said he was just starting to learn the steps by the end of the night!

Best wishes,



from William, Jean, Pung and everyone at Threads of Life and the Bebal Foundation

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