Alit Djajasoebrata, *Flowers from Universe: Textiles of Java*. Volendam: LM Publishers, 2018, 190 pp. ISBN: 9789460224478, price: EUR 34,50 (hardcover).

More than 30 years ago, a book appeared with the original title *Bloemen van het heelal, de kleurrijke wereld van de textiel op Java*. Recently, an English translation has come out. This enriched republication of *Bloemen*, which I review here, is a beautifully designed work.

In the intervening years, more data was collected and Alit Djajasoebrata delved further into the meaning and symbols of the function of textiles in society. She used her experiences and knowledge as a curator of the *Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde* (Museum of Land and Ethnology), which is currently known as World Museum Rotterdam. Encouraged by colleagues and other experts, she decided to revise the text and photo material in a translation intended for a larger audience.

The new book is a valuable source of information about the significance and influence of textiles on social relations and relationships between Sunda (West Java), Java's Royal Principalities, and eastern Java. The multitude of subjects clearly demonstrate this ambition through its interweaving of textiles with social institutions. It is also an anthropological study of art.

The book conveys ideas about the cosmos incorporated in mysticism, myths, and legends in an interplay of lines and a color range featuring a naturalistic or abstract design. An illustrative language has taken shape through which artistic figures are applied to fabrics, predominantly cotton fabrics. The subjects of the study are of a dual nature: a material component and a social factor. Among the former are techniques and methods to work with the material, the weaving and dyeing of the fabrics, *batik*, and the hand-stamp. This is extensively discussed, for example, with regard to the mythological backgrounds of weaving in Sunda (West Java) and its cosmological classification, the unity of mankind with the earth and the universe, and the *mancapat* configuration. This concept is represented in a matrix, which explains the order and social values underlying the design on the fabrics.

This system, supported by tradition, underwent changes over time, which initially made it more valuable, but which would eventually lose its coherence. Even before the arrival of Europeans, coastal towns on Java became part of a large trading network in which China, India, and the Middle East dominated. Textile was an important trade item. The VOC and Dutch colonialism subsequently exerted an important influence, especially on Java. For the textile industry, these consequences of Dutch contact were initially enriching. However, as a result of mechanization, which has led to a radical deterioration of traditional values, this industry has largely disappeared. Yet the con-

BIJDRAGEN TOT DE TAAL-, LAND- EN VOLKENKUNDE

© CHRIS BAKS, 2020 | DOI:10.1163/22134379-17601005

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC 4.0 license.

Downloaded from Brill.com04/26/2023 03:03:21PM
via free access

sequences were not entirely negative. The industrialization of the textile sector meant that a greater part of the population could afford to wear fabrics printed with the expensive and intricate patterns of the past.

This study by Alit Djajasoebata is a good example of the way a social system functions and can be understood through material objects.

Chris Baks

Independent scholar

Correspondence address: hoogervorst@kitlv.nl