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# Weaving Ancestral Wisdom: Communicating the Power of Sumbanese Women's Resistance to the Next Generation through Arts-Based Liberative Pedagogy

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## ABSTRACT

As an artistic activity, weaving traditions have been passed down by women weavers from generation to generation in Sumba, Indonesia. Women can express their resistance to an oppressive situation through aesthetic engagement using handwoven textile motifs. There are also motifs related to woman's resistance to Dutch colonialization in the past. This paper argues that the motifs of resistance in Sumba handwoven textiles are an important element that can support an arts-based liberative pedagogy in Christian religious education as part of the struggle against grand narratives of colonial legacy, especially in the context of colonial heritage churches in Indonesia.

## KEYWORDS

Sumba; women; resistance; handwoven textile; arts-based liberative pedagogy

## Introduction

My great-grandmother comes from East Nusa Tenggara, the same province as Sumba Island. She collected handwoven textiles, a famous product of the province. Her collection had been passed down in our family from generation to generation. Unfortunately, when my family faced an economic crisis, my grandmother sold the textiles. None are left in our family, but the handwoven textiles helped the family to survive. The same reality also exists in Sumba. Weaving provides many benefits on this island and promotes the economy of people who are still living in poverty. In February 2021, data showed that East Nusa Tenggara Province was the third-poorest of all provinces in Indonesia (Tamtomo 2021). The *ijon* system (high-interest loans provided by owners of capital to poor farmers) in Sumba exacerbates the poor economic situation (Mila 2017, 302–303).

Poverty is part of the complex injustice in Sumba society today. This injustice is dual in nature, coming both from outside Sumba Island and from the Sumba community itself. From outside Sumba, the imitation of Sumba weaving and its motifs using machine-made factory weaving and chemical dyes has captured the attention of the international market because its price is much lower than that of original weaving. These imitations deny the experiences and lives of Sumba women as depicted in the handwoven textiles (Lolo 2017, 288). In the Sumba community, Sumbanese women are particularly vulnerable to multiple oppressions due to the multi-role responsibilities of

household life (e.g., mother, wife, weaver, farmer) in a patriarchal society that is still influenced by the colonial values of the past.

One example of this oppression is the tradition of *kawin tangkap* that still occurs in Sumba today. It contains colonial values through conquest and power domination over the body and life of a woman. *Kawin tangkap* or bride kidnapping “is carried out when members of the man’s family kidnap women who they have selected as their wives ... if the women leave the forced marriage, they are ridiculed by their villages and told that they will never have a husband or children. On the other hand, if the women stay, they have no decision in the matter and remain in the marriage for the remainder of their lives” (Misnick 2020). However, when women weavers in East Sumba express their voices of resistance through handwoven textile motifs, it shows that they have a vital role in society despite the lack of recognition their contribution brings to them. Handwoven textiles preserve the collective experience of women weavers from the effects of time and pass down ancestral wisdom inherited through handwoven textile motifs from generation to generation.

This paper seeks to answer the following question: *How can an arts-based liberative pedagogy give space to explore the meaning of resistance as depicted in East Sumba handwoven textiles?* A qualitative methodology through narrative inquiry in an arts-based genre is used to support the research and data collection process. As a method for qualitative research, narrative inquiry is a way to read, listen, and understand research participants’ narrative histories. In the context of educational research, a connection between life history and learning makes narrative inquiry useful. It can also be characterized as a spiritual and liberating research method in religion and education (Bruce 2008, 323). The spiritual aspect is seen when the research process leads to relationships that enrich both the researcher and the participant, both of whom are searching for meaning, and when it builds an attitude of respect for others. By embracing human wholeness through the process of reflexivity, narrative research enhances spiritual values. The liberating aspects of narrative inquiry are seen through a passion for social change. This change begins to happen when there is space for the voices of those who have been silenced (Bruce 2008, 323).

To explore the narratives behind the motifs in the weavings, I established informal communication with women weavers during my first encounter when I came to Sumba in 2016. I also engaged with women weavers through my female pastor friends in Sumba.<sup>1</sup> The approach taken was dialogue, including the exploration of passed-down oral wisdom. Through dialogue, I was able to gain insight into the strong role women have taken by passing on the values of life, including the value of resistance, to the next

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<sup>1</sup>Special appreciation goes to Rev. Suryaningsih Mila, Kornelis Ndapakamang (founder of the Sumba Natural Dye weaving group), Titus Nggaba Karanggu Limu (founder of the *Rinjungu Pahammu* weaving group), Ersi Yati Rambu Lawu, and Ayu Rambu Ngana in East Sumba. They helped me to build a connection with the women weavers, weaving groups (the groups are very helpful for women weavers because their members help each other in producing handwoven textiles according to their respective expertise), and explaining the meaning of the handwoven motifs. I also thank Rev. Herlina Ratu Kenya, who inspired the weaving process through a wonderful motif. When the pandemic hit, I continued my research process through communication by phone and WhatsApp with handwoven textile artisans. I validated the meanings of the motifs through re-confirmation with handwoven textile artisans and by reviewing the literature on the meaning of Sumba handwoven textile motifs, including literature written by female theologians from Sumba as well as researchers and collectors of East Nusa Tenggara handwoven textiles. In this paper, I put the complete names of the weavers based on their request because, nowadays, they are getting more uncomfortable with the process of imitating Sumba handwoven textiles from irresponsible parties.

generation. This educational model extends not only to girls but to boys as well. When the latter grow up, many get involved in the art of weaving by creating their own resistance motifs.

According to Jeong-Hee Kim in her book *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* (2016), narrative inquiry can be divided into autobiographical, biographical, and arts-based genres. As Kim states, “In arts-based narrative inquiry, the arts accompany narratives to convey the meaning of the stories told and retold” (2016). The study of the handwoven motifs and the meaning of resistance in these motifs as it relates to the lives of women weavers is closely associated with a visual-based narrative inquiry as part of arts-based research. As Kim explains, storytelling through visuals is a key component of visual-based narrative inquiry:

Visual-based narrative inquiry is storytelling research that uses visual methods such as images, photographs, drawings, paintings, collages, cartoons, films, video, signs, symbols, and other visual technology ... The use of visual data in narrative inquiry is promising, as it will broaden the field of narrative inquiry to encompass visual images to share the lived experiences of our participants. (2016)

Through visual-based narrative inquiry, this paper argues that the motif of resistance in Sumba handwoven textiles is an important aspect of an arts-based liberative pedagogy in Christian religious education that attempts to clarify and give meaning to the struggle that has been raised against grand narratives of colonial legacy. The argument in this paper is explained in four stages: (1) an explanation of the current context of women weavers in Sumba, (2) an academic study of postcolonial imagination that is connected with narratives of resistance in the motifs of East Sumba handwoven textiles, (3) insights from decolonial values in Christian religious education, and (4) illustrating the arts-based liberative pedagogy that enriches the church educational ministry as part of the struggle against grand narratives of colonial legacy, especially in the contexts of colonial heritage churches in Indonesia. Arts-based liberative pedagogy that adopts Sumba handwoven textile motifs will be beneficial in developing decolonial imagination in Christian religious education. In this process, there are also spaces for listening to marginalized voices and building solidarity toward social justice (Kim and Shaw 2018, 61).

### **Women weavers in Sumba as identity custodians and sustainers of life**

In 2016, I taught as a guest lecturer at a theological school in East Sumba owned by *Gereja Kristen Sumba* (The Sumba Christian Church), abbreviated as GKS. I received Sumba handwoven textiles as a gift at that time, and I also bought some from women weavers I met. I admired the motifs, enjoyed their distinctive smell, was captivated by the strong texture, and saw the high quality of the handwoven textiles. I have some handwoven textiles in which there are several long white hairs interwoven between the patterns. Based on my conversation with a woman weaver, I know that the hair of an old woman weaver often gets caught in the textile when she is weaving. In this, I am reminded that women have to weave amid their busy domestic duties in the patriarchal society of Sumba and that a piece of handwoven textile is born from an extraordinary struggle. Thus, I began collecting and studying the meaning of the motifs in East Sumba’s handwoven textiles.

The uniqueness of the Sumba handwoven textiles lies not only in their intricacy and complexity but also in their storytelling motifs. Narrative is an inseparable part of the lives of women weavers. A weaving, therefore, is not just a piece of textile. It represents the experience and identity of its woman weaver and the people of Sumba. The weaving and the weaver's body are bound to each other. If the weaver is overwhelmed by feelings of anger or uneasiness, the thread may get caught or break in the weaving process, and the result will not be satisfactory (Lolo 2018, 28).

In the weaving process, a cultural link is formed when women's imaginations enter into dialogue with the narratives of women who came before them. Through weaving, women transfer the wealth of these narratives from ancestral heritage to motifs of resistance against grand narratives of colonial legacy that continue to persist in a patriarchal society. In this context, postcolonial imagination becomes important as an interpretive lens to comprehend the meanings that Sumbanese women give to the handwoven motifs and textiles.

### **Postcolonial imagination: exploring narratives of resistance in east Sumba handwoven textiles**

The term "postcolonial imagination" refers to "a desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises" (Kwok 2005, 2-3). To imagine is "to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation" (Kwok 2005, 30). The following subsections will explain how postcolonial imagination is related to historical, dialogical, and diasporic imagination.

#### ***Historical imagination: a narrative of the motif of Queen Sumba***

In historical imagination, remembering is a part of survival. By opening the window of history to be explored more thoroughly, historical imagination intends "not only to reconstitute the past but also to release the past so that the present is livable" (Kwok 2005, 37). In the context of women weavers in Sumba, historical imagination is studied by delving deeply into women's narratives and exploring their life stories, the effects of colonialism, and the patriarchal culture in Sumba.

The dominance of patriarchal culture and the silencing of women's voices in Sumba society are closely related to Sumba's colonial history. The first Europeans who set foot on Sumba were the Portuguese, followed by the British and the Dutch. Slavery became inevitable because the Sumbanese were considered to have good qualities for serving as slaves. The slave trade was familiar to the Sumbanese, especially during the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) era (Wellem 2004, 20-22). In Sumba, women could be enslaved because of the caste system that exists in Sumba society. This caste system divides the people of Sumba into aristocrats (*maramba*), free people (*kabihu*) who are coworkers of aristocrats, and servants/slaves (*ata*) (Wellem 2004, 34). In addition, the system of giving *belis* as a dowry from the man to the woman negates the rights of a woman in a man's family (Maeri 2018, 207).



**Figure 1.** The motif of Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands (left) and Queen Sumba(right). Source of picture and description: Queen Wilhelmina(Rambu Ngana, WhatsApp, October 19, 2022; Prijosusilo 2017, 58), Queen Sumba (Ndapakamang, WhatsApp, May 17, 2022).

Handwoven textiles save the collective experience of women weavers from generation to generation. Based on the narrative of a textile woven by Dai Ngana, while under colonial domination, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands appears in the motif of a handwoven textile of East Sumba.<sup>2</sup> This image comes from a golden coin. However, when the Sumba people's ancestors saw that the Queen of Sumba, together with the King and the community, had played a role in fighting for independence, the weavers also "fought" by creating the Queen Sumba (*Maramba Kawini*) motif, a strong message of resistance. This motif adopts the same pattern as that of Queen Wilhelmina but with a creative reversal of meaning. The Queen of Sumba is depicted wearing the typical Sumba *mamuli* (a symbol of the woman's womb/fertility) (figure 1).

The motif of Queen Sumba is still used today to voice the complaints of the weavers in East Sumba because, despite Indonesia's independence since 1945, the society is still influenced by the colonial values of the past. Through this motif of resistance, the imagination of women weavers connects the reality of past colonialism with present hopes for the future. Until now, Sumba handwoven textiles have been imitated by the textile industry, which produces woven textiles quickly using a machine and offers them at a much lower price. When I heard the narrative behind the motif, I felt sad, regretful, and annoyed. I regret that some of the handwoven textiles I had purchased turned out to be imitations, and I resolved not to buy any more replications of Sumbanese woven motifs.

<sup>2</sup>Ngana is a weaver from Maulumbi,Kambera, East Sumba.





**Figure 2.** *Mamuli* symbol (left) and *Karihu* symbol (right).

I took pictures of these two motifs while visiting Waingapu, East Sumba on November 10, 2016.

### ***Dialogical imagination: a narrative of the motif of Jesus and the Sumbanese woman***

Dialogical imagination explains “the process of creative hermeneutics in Asia. It attempts to convey the complexities, the multidimensional linkages, and the different levels of meaning that underlie our present task of relating the Bible to Asia” (Kwok 2005, 38). Using this framework, this section will discuss the connection between the traditional Sumbanese belief of *Marapu* and the motif of Jesus the Redeemer in the context of the women weavers in East Sumba.

*Marapu* is a belief in the highest God, ancestral and other spirits, and magical powers (Wellem 2004, 42). The highest divine expression is conveyed in terms of the equality of men and women: the united essence of man and woman (*Ina-Ama*) or Mother and Father in parallel, understood as neither male nor female alone (Wellem 2004, 43). In the *Marapu* tradition of respecting ancestors, the dignity of women is reflected in the Sumba people’s term for their island, *Tana Humba*, which means the Land of Sumba. The wife of one of the ancestors of the first people who inhabited Sumba was named Humba, and her husband, Umbu Walu Mandoku, immortalized her name for the island to signify his joy and love for her (Wellem 2004, 15).

There are also symbols in the *Marapu* that pay respect to women. One of them, previously mentioned, is *mamuli*, a symbol of female fertility shaped like the omega symbol (Indriati 2019, 35). When I came to Sumba, a woman weaver from Melolo told me that this symbol was also related to the woman’s womb. Another symbol related to the woman’s womb is *karihu*, which is in the form of the letter “x” depicted as two wombs. These two wombs symbolize the beauty of a woman as divine motherhood, fertile in her role of giving birth. This symbol embraces the understanding of a woman in her motherly role as part of God’s breath for life (Prijosusilo 2017, 50; Indriati 2019, 32) (figure 2).

In the encounter with Christianity brought by *zending* (the Dutch Protestant mission), the people of Sumba were seen as primitive, infidels, and impoverished. This view was connected with their *Marapu* belief (Wellem 2004, 166-168 and 196). With the arrival of colonialism, the original culture and beliefs of the people of Sumba were

rejected and had no place in the new religion of Christianity. The life narratives of the indigenous people of Sumba—which were passed down from their ancestors for survival—were shifted by “whiteness domination.” Actually, the symbol of the *Marapu* house is particularly contextual in Sumba, being a house that is open to women (Natar 2016, 153). Christian Sumbanese women show courage and resistance when they sacredly engage traditional weaving motifs of *Marapu* with their faith that Jesus is present at the center of Sumba culture and accepts Sumba people as they are.

This understanding is shown in the narrative of a handwoven textile motif woven by Agustina Kahi Atanau, who is now 71 years old.<sup>3</sup> This handwoven textile was made in 1992. The motif of Jesus the Redeemer was taken from a Sumbanese portrait, reflecting the perspective that Jesus did not come as “a white Jesus” but as “Jesus in color.” Jesus the Redeemer accepts people as they are, despite the lack of respect in society for slaves or victims of oppression. At the center of the handwoven textile are women engaged in domestic activities and the *patola ratu* symbol, which indicates women who are respected in life. This symbol shows the redemptive work of Jesus, which also applies to women. Even the legs of Jesus, who was crucified, curve in the motif to form a *mamuli*. This respect for women becomes very meaningful in the context of gender inequality. The value Atanau places on equality continues to be upheld by her children. Her daughters and sons are still actively promoting Sumba weaving, designing motifs of resistance, and continuing to remember the importance of gender equality through their mother’s weaving motifs. Women weavers can become mentors not only to their daughters but also to their sons amid patriarchal society and its colonial grand narratives (figure 3).

In the context of colonial legacy and patriarchal culture, depicting Jesus the Redeemer from the perspective of woman weavers is essential because “redemption comprises, therefore, not only personal and spiritual reconciliation with God, but also liberation from bondage, the opportunity to develop one’s potential, the well-being of one’s family and community, the freedom from warfare and other forms of violence, the availability of a life-sustaining eco-system, and a sense of hope and security for the future” (Kwok 2000, 81). I was stunned by the motif of this handwoven textile. I had never seen this motif before, specifically Jesus’ legs curving to take the shape of a *mamuli*. This motif implies a shift in the meaning of weakness and a new understanding of challenge. In this motif, obstacles are turned into a spirit of strength through salvation and therefore no longer need to be shunned.

### ***Diasporic imagination: a narrative of the motif of the peace dove***

According to Kwok (2005, 49), “Diasporic imagination recognizes the diversity and similarities of diasporas and honors different histories and memories.” In this generation, perhaps even more so than previously, people need to think beyond boundaries. Instead of building a theology in a local scope only, which is necessarily bounded, we need to make an effort to cross boundaries so that the struggle of women in East Sumba becomes a collective communal struggle and even a transnational struggle. Women

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<sup>3</sup>Atanau is a weaver who is also the founder of the *Paluanda Lama Hamu* (“hand-in-hand towards a good direction”), one of the long-established weaving groups in Kambara, East Sumba. Ndapakamang (a person who drew the Queen Sumba motif) is one of the children of Atanau who is inspired to continue Atanau’s work in the art of weaving.





**Figure 3.** Jesus' feet forming the *mamuli* symbol as a motif in a handwoven textile. The motif was created by Atanau. The source of the picture and description came from Ndapakamang (WhatsApp, July 16, 2021).

weavers' struggles in East Sumba are not only a concern of Sumba people, theologians, or churches in Sumba but also of people who value justice wherever they might live.

The spirit of diasporic imagination is shown in the narrative of a textile motif woven by Yustina Rambu Pihu.<sup>4</sup> A peace dove motif was born based on a dialogue with a female pastor in Sumba who is active in the interfaith community, especially focusing on the relationship of Christianity to Islam for the sake of global peace. The hope behind this motif reflects a strong collaboration between religious people from different faiths who aim to deal with conflicts and challenges amid the realities of diversity. I admire the openness, creativity, and enthusiasm for learning about the meanings of motifs from different traditions in the weaving process because a dove motif was created juxtaposing Arabic calligraphy about love and peace with the *mamuli* symbol. It shows that women have an essential role in life through peace and love in a diverse community (figure 4).

### **Women's narratives of resistance and decolonial values in Christian religious education**

From a postcolonial perspective, weaving creates a third space for women weavers working in the spirit of resistance. Homi K. Bhabha (1994, 37) states, "It is that Third Space which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the

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<sup>4</sup>Pihu is a weaver from the *Rinjungu Pahammu* ("be a good person"), a weaving group in Kambera, East Sumba.



**Figure 4.** The motif of the peace dove and *mamuli*.

This handwoven textile is my private collection. I took the picture on December 15, 2021. According to Limu, a person who drew the motif, the inspiration came from Rev. Herlina Ratu Kenya, a female pastor in Sumba (WhatsApp, May 17, 2022).

meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity of fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.” In this space, weaving provides a symbolic opportunity for women to free themselves from colonial values and results in the formation of an identity that is born from a strategy of defending against the dominant culture. In relation to religious educational values, Mariska Lauterboom (2019, 105) offers her decolonial imagining of Christian religious education in Indonesia, which explicitly provides a place for the narratives of local cultures (*adat*) that are particularly rich in Indonesia as well as body narratives that have been marginalized in educational practice due to the framework of binary relations (i.e., the dualism of mind and body). Here is where the role of narratives of resistance from the women weavers becomes important. The daily life experiences of women weavers are connected with ancestral wisdom inherited through handwoven motifs that explore the deep feelings of the women. Thus, the narratives become alive and have a strong meaning.

In this process of transmitting meaning, women weavers also reconstruct meaning by creating inherited motifs or producing new motifs with the theme of resistance. Handwoven textiles with resistance motifs play an important role as a third space that unites the body and mind (including the feelings) of the weaver woman. This process also paves the way to build a connection among past, present, and future generations, so that the latter feel the robust connectivity of women’s struggles and play a role in preserving handwoven textiles, including the noble meanings contained in them.

Through the narratives of resistance depicted in handwoven textiles, we can see the power of ancestral wisdom that resists the church’s colonial legacy in Indonesia as it appeared in Christian religious education, which failed to discern the richness of local culture and the integration of body and mind as part of the sacredness in the encounter with God (Lauterboom 2019, 105). Thus, the narratives surrounding the handwoven textiles contribute to decolonizing Christian religious education in Indonesia, specifically

in the educational ministry of the colonial heritage churches. In the next section, we will see how liberative pedagogy and aesthetic teaching can be of value in communicating this ancestral wisdom.

### **Exploration into liberative pedagogy and aesthetic teaching**

This section discusses the concept of liberative pedagogy, which provides a place for the narrative of resistance emerging from the handwoven textiles of East Sumba to be heard and practiced. It also explores the aesthetic dimension of the Sumbanese weaving as works of art that have beauty and educational value. Together with the analysis in the previous section, these two perspectives—pedagogy and esthetics—lay the foundation for an arts-based liberative pedagogy, which I will present near the end of this paper.

#### ***Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy***

Paulo Freire's concept of problem-posing education positions a person to realize their full humanity within a liberating educational context. By presenting problems for the oppressed that are familiar to them, an interdisciplinary team working on generative themes can enable the oppressed to participate in developing their own pedagogy of liberation through critical awareness (conscientization). In a dialogical process, generative themes are "codified" (Freire 1999, 161-165), and the analysis of codification is carried out by parsing codified themes into disaggregated states and reshaping them (decodification taking into account the codified situation) (Freire 1984, 128-129). The process is not completed until it reaches the stage of cultural action, the "praxis" stage, where the actions of each person or group take place within larger, real-life situations. The narratives and symbols in Sumba handwoven textile motifs become generative themes that can support the codification/de-codification process for the struggle to prevent and reject colonial discourse in all its forms.

#### ***Maria Harris' invitation to imagination and aesthetic teaching***

In her book, *Teaching and Religious Imagination*, Maria Harris (1987) explores the role of imagination in the teaching-learning process. The call to religious imagination is a calling for togetherness in creativity. The power to resist includes refusing a uniformity of perspectives on life, mainly those held by the oppressors of colonial heritage, whose injustices throw into question their norms and values and preclude their right to mandate uniformity. According to Harris (1987, 92), "Resistance is refusal to accept the way things are because things could be different." She claims that "the activity of teaching, when viewed as a religious imaginative act, is able to save and redeem" (Harris 1987, 3).

Harris draws a connection between her liberative views with Mary Anderson Tully's pedagogical ideas about the importance of aesthetic elements in teaching. From her experience of being a student of Tully, Harris sees these aesthetic elements as closely related to the sensory exploration of visual symbols. This exploration takes three forms: the language of arts (verbal and beyond), environmental preparation, and engagement

with feeling and experience (Harris 1987, 126). In the aesthetic, there is an experience of seeing *something that was not seen before* through imagination, creativity, discovery, and reflection. The aesthetic elements of teaching reflect a pedagogical model that emphasizes the difference between knowing *about* something and knowing: “we were doing what we were studying” (Harris 1987, 130). This emphasis on connecting with the object of inquiry is similar to Freire’s idea of reading the word and the world. Aesthetic teaching becomes a part of liberative pedagogy when there is a process to “mediate the grace of power to human subjects as they engage in the work of re-creating the world” (Harris 1987, 141). This statement is in line with Herbert Marcuse’s understanding (1978, ix) that art is inseparable from the practice of resistance. As an arts-based cultural form, Sumba handwoven textiles engage both religious and educational dimensions.

What is especially interesting about Harris’s melding of liberative pedagogy and aesthetics (Harris 1987, 144) is that “one does not need long years of training in art to bring the aesthetic to educational work: One needs only desire and the conviction that as teachers we are all artists, creating forms that enable our students to see and to live at deeper and more profound levels, levels that might accurately be called religious.” Harris also applies aesthetics to religious education. Within this framework, there is room for teachers and students to explore multiple possibilities of interpretation and opportunities for recording impressions (e.g., through journaling). Harris develops her ideas in an article (1988) titled “Art and Religious Education: A Conversation,” in which she integrates art and religious education using three models. The invitation to incorporate art into the teaching-learning process of religious education is presented in the third model, which includes a reference to personal and public lives.

### **Communicating the power of Sumbanese women’s resistance to the next generation: an arts-based liberative pedagogy in religious education**

The foregoing analysis, which focuses on the narrative motifs woven in the textiles of Sumbanese women and incorporates the aesthetic and pedagogical ideas of Freire and Harris, forms the basis for this paper’s presentation of an arts-based liberative pedagogy in religious education using traditional handwoven textiles from East Sumba. The narratives of resistance from Sumba handwoven textiles discussed show a connection between ancestral wisdom in the past, today’s reality, and future hope. This connection builds engagement with ancestral wisdom and the next generation. The pedagogy I propose is intended to be carried out in three steps: exploration, integration, and collaboration. In defining these three steps, I was greatly inspired by Maria Harris’s ideas in “Art and Religious Education: A Conversation” (1988). Where my presentation differs from hers is that I place more emphasis on the connections to the past, present, and future, and I include an invitation to use imagination at each step. As with Harris’s liberative pedagogy, the educational process presented here is not hierarchical but dynamic and relational.

The ultimate goal of the three steps in this process is building the decolonial imagination. This imagination is a real form of resistance to the colonial heritage values in Christian religious education that silenced local cultural and body narratives, including

women's bodies, which have been marginalized in educational practice (Lauterboom 2019, 105). Decolonial imagination is an important aspect of a decolonized curriculum in Christian religious education that can be used within the colonial heritage churches in Indonesia.

### **Exploration**

Exploration opens up opportunities for encounters with the resistance narratives behind the motifs of East Sumba handwoven textiles. Furthering this process requires gathering information from relevant sources, which allows for connections to be built with the past (history/ancestor), present (context), and future (hope) of women weavers. The past, present, and future are all depicted both implicitly and explicitly in the handwoven textiles. For example, by exploring the meaning of women's narratives within the present context and history of Sumba, the teacher/learner can "experience" the process of creating handwoven textiles, for example, by touching and inhaling the scent of natural dyes or directly observing the process of natural coloring and weaving. This experience is part of the "codification/de-codification" process. Engagement with the feelings and experiences of women weavers is created here. The awareness that emerges is not only *knowing about* something that took place, but *knowing it*. The engagement is an invitation to imagine and *see something that was not seen before* through aesthetic exploration of the artistic dimensions of handwoven textiles. Women weavers become "mentors" by exploring the meaning of the motifs in their handwoven textiles. By widening one's visual experience, we can explore the question of "*what matters most to her?*" It is hoped that critical awareness and decolonial imagination will arise when this stage opens a space for encountering colonial discourses in women's lives (the problem-solving method).

### **Integration**

Integration is an attempt to dialogue the "findings" of the exploration stage with our own narratives. As Ernst Barlach (as cited by Lealman and Robinson 1980, 4) says, "Two are needed for every art, one who makes it and one who needs it." This section explains how women weavers become "mentors" who guide us through their wisdom, using the spirit of resistance shown in the handwoven textiles' motifs. Our life narratives are explored through connections with past experiences (history/ancestor), present (context), and future (hope) through our "text of life," biblical text, or other sources. In their book, *The Image of Life*, Brenda Lealman and Edward Robinson (1980, 4-5) state that "the act of creation does not finish with the work of the original artist ... it is not their [artists] that matter most now. They have done their work; now it is up to us if that work is to attain full stature." The generative themes that appear in the exploration stage (for example, the theme of resistance) are correlated in this stage with the personal and social narratives that we ourselves face, including our experience of colonial discourse (a culture of obedience, shame, and silence). Here, there are opportunities to reflect and respond to the question, "*what matters most to me?*" Through this process of reflection, reflexivity, aesthetics, and creativity are present in lamentation and hope. We



are invited to use our decolonial imaginations to express the results of reflection in a work of art (symbol/metaphor/sign/etc.) representing “my narrative of resistance.” We can share the meaning of our reflection/expression with other participants in the teaching-learning community.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is the “praxis” stage of solidarity because everyone is part of the community. Collaboration seeks to engage our feelings and experiences as a form of resistance to the reality of the injustice born of colonial grand narratives in various forms. We connect to the communal narrative, including past experiences (communal history/ancestors), present experiences (communal context), and future experiences (communal hope). Here we find an invitation to imagine our future as a community in decolonial imagination. We are allowed to answer the question, “*what matters most to us?*” This process opens a space for reflexivity and creativity, where we can express imagination through collaborative art projects in communal symbolic actions (Radford 2020, 60-74). Collaboration brings us into real action in the public sphere, where we advocate against every form of colonial discourse that shackles women, including women weavers. Our advocacy encompasses these struggles so that women weavers’ experiences can be recognized in society and their rights as weavers protected by law. Communal collaboration can also be manifested in other forms, for example, art exhibitions, including exhibitions of weaving, or various other activities. We can also display creative collaboration in the digital space through social media (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, podcasts, blogs, or websites) by, for example, digital storytelling. In doing so, we build communal awareness, including intergenerational connections.

### **Conclusion**

For women weavers, weaving is a valuable way of finding strength to face life’s difficulties. Through the spirit of resistance found in handwoven textiles, weavers find a space to survive amidst oppression and hardship. When space is given to the woman weaver, her theology, story, and handwoven textiles can be displayed publically in local and global venues. Arts-based liberative pedagogy in decolonial imagination can strongly impact the transregional(national) approach to intercultural ministry and Christian religious education. Advocacy is one of the goals of this process. Churches situated in the context of colonial grand narratives often assume that the main sources of knowledge in the congregation will necessarily be male pastors or leaders. To correct this misconception, church educational ministries can be carried out together with women weavers as mentors who have a tradition of passing down wisdom from generation to generation. The role of female pastors in Sumba is also essential in this process of educational reform. As the larger community becomes involved in the spirit of postcolonial and intercultural relations, paying respect to women weavers and openly acknowledging them, the encounter with diversity can create a more permissive open-endedness of spiritualities. In this process of encounter, people can begin to see that women have a significant role as a source of wisdom in life.

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