

BHINNEKA TUNGGAL IKA – UNITY IN DIVERSITY

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Since the beginning of time humanity has always created and shared stories. These help to spread knowledge about social norms, behaviour and cooperation. Without stories, a society would not be able to function. That is why we want to make sure everyone knows them. They relate the guidelines of a society – a collective consciousness. At a time in which we become more distant from each other, in which divisions and insecurities in society are growing, we seem to be looking for our personal connection with the collective. But what if someone's story does not fit within the guidelines, should this person adapt it so that it does? Or should the ideals of the collective change to create more space for new and diverse stories?

As Jennifer Tee's studio assistant, I have been able to see how *Tampan Tulip* (2014 - present) is an introspection process about Tee's own history and identity. Her maternal grandfather was a tulip trader and as a young boy her own father came with his family from Indonesia by boat to the Netherlands after the Second World War. However, the works she makes are never directly autobiographical. Instead, they show how her own history and her personal story, infused with spiritual echoes and political resonances, are interwoven with the current Zeitgeist. Tee explores this connection by delving into the history and techniques of her use of materials.

Each spring, Tee visits Hortus Bulborum¹ in Limmen to study the extensive collection of historical spring bulbous plants for her series of collages *Tampan Tulip*. Together with the specialists of Hortus Bulborum, Tee selects different tulips based on their shapes, colours and history. The tulip, at first sight a cheerful flower that symbolises the Dutch identity, has an often forgotten economic and socio-political history. The tulip was imported from the Ottoman Empire (currently Turkey) by European

1 Since 1924, the Hortus Bolborum Foundation has been preserving historic spring-flowering bulbs and tubers in Limmen. It is the only garden in the world with a large collection of 4500 different historical spring bulbous plants. Some flower bulbs even date from the sixteenth century, which are hardly ever cultivated commercially. (This information originates from the website of the Hortus Bolborum Foundation, consulted in May 2020.)

travellers to Western Europe. The flower became the Dutch trademark in the seventeenth century.² It was a flourishing economic period, but with the remark that it was rooted in colonialism: poverty, war and human trafficking. The flower benefited Dutch horticulturalists, merchants and artists. The popular flowers with their unusually intense colour became iconic status symbols. Between 1634 and 1637, the demand for the tulip exploded so spectacularly that these years became known as the years of the Tulip Mania, when the price of the bulbs was equal to that of an Amsterdam canal house. The exorbitant inflation was caused by a tulip with a flamed colour pattern in the petals: The Rembrandt tulip.³ In 1928 it was discovered that the flaming pattern was caused by a mosaic virus.⁴ These virus-infected tulips are often recorded in still life paintings, for example by Maria van Oosterwijck (1630 - 1693) and Rachel Ruysch (1664 - 1750). The works may have stood for transience, but they also represented an admiration for creation.

Tampam Tulip (2014 - present) transforms a three-dimensional colour grid of tulips into flat rows of dried tulip petals in Tee's design of figures and patterns. The design is inspired by small square woven *tampam* ship cloths⁵ from the Lampung region of South Sumatra, Indonesia. In 2016, Tee visited the Lampung region for her research into the lost Indonesian weaving. Tee's interest in weaving techniques has been present in her work since 2009; she frequently uses woven and knitted rugs, which function as sculptures or as a stage for performances.⁶ Tee continues her experience in *Tampam Tulip*. Inspired by ancient traditions and techniques, the series of collages refer to old tapestries which we could

2 Tulips originally grew in the wild in North Africa and in a band from Southern Europe up to the northwest of China. Eventually the flower reached the Ottoman Empire. The name tulip comes from *tulipa* and was the local name for a turban. Palace gardens of rich sultans in the Ottoman Empire were filled with tulips.

3 The Rembrandt tulips are named after the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Rijn, most probably referring to his brushstroke. The Rembrandt tulips used in *Tampam Tulip* are cultivated as such and are therefore no longer infected with the virus (Nijssen 2015).

4 Nijssen, 2015.

5 The cloths are called ship cloths in the West because of the common ship motif depicted on the cloths. There are three different names for the ship cloths, related to the type of cloth. The first is *tampam*, recognisable by its small square size. The second *palepai*, often this canvas is more than 3 metres long and 1 metre wide. And the third is *tatibin*, it is also narrow in width but does not exceed 1 metre in length (Gittinger 1979, p. 88).

6 The first work was *Crystalline Floorpiece / Red* (2009), exhibited in De Hallen (Haarlem, the Netherlands). In 2010 *Star-Crossed* was exhibited at the World Expo in Shanghai curated by Witte de With (Rotterdam, The Netherlands). *Gridding Sentences* (2011) and *Star-Crossed 2* (2012) were both on display at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. In 2013 *Rugs & Bones* was on display in La Loge (Brussels, Belgium).

'now describe as cinematographic: at once narrative and symbolic.'⁷

The ship cloths are dated between 1700 and 1800⁸ and depict in a harmonious, symmetrical and almost classical form a ship with human figures, animals and objects, with a mast that branches into a tree of life surrounded by ornaments. The ship cloths were probably used in rites of passage and life cycle ceremonies; they were a connection to the spiritual world. The depicted ships can be associated with 'ships of death'⁹, but the ship itself probably also suggests a rite of passage, which is an appropriate design for birth, circumcision, marriage and death ceremonies, but also for *papadon* ceremonies, during which a person changed social rank in society.¹⁰ The ship cloths would therefore play an important role for the people of South Sumatra as an instructive design for the organisation of their social and ceremonial processions. The cloths functioned as a visual representation of social segments and thus the hierarchical structure of society. The tampan ship cloths stand for transition and structure. During ceremonies the cloths were passed on as family heirlooms and exchanged with other tribes, symbolising the multiple ties between the tribes, usually linked by marriage – a spiritual act that binds society together.¹¹

Many questions remain unanswered, though. For example, Matiebelle Gittinger¹² believes that the ship cloths represent a cosmological system: an upper world and an underworld. However, these findings about the reconstruction of the Lampungworld are largely based on narratives

7 Gray, p. 139.

8 Rodgers 2012, p. 115-135. Around 1900 the ship cloths and the weaving technique disappeared. This was probably caused by the collapse of the pepper trade. As a result many cloths were sold to travellers or turned into clothing. In addition, the Lampung society has become largely Islamic and the hierarchical papadon structure has disappeared. There was also a volcanic eruption of the Krakatoa in 1883 (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 9-10).

9 In the bronze age the ship motif 'the ship of death' was introduced in Indonesia by the Dongson culture from Vietnam (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 51).

10 During these ceremonies ships on wheels were used as ceremonial carts. These ships were called proa andak or proa garuda. On top was a hornbill. On the left and right side was a mast decorated like trees. And these 'trees' were decorated with coins, shells and flags (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 34-35).

11 Gittinger 1979, p. 88.

12 Mattiebelle Gittinger was the first researcher to make a study trip to the Lampung region in 1970 to investigate the tampan. In her thesis *A study of the ship cloths of South Sumatra: Their Design and Usage* (1972), Gittinger sketches what society could remember about the role of tampan in their society, but the exact origin of the tampan remained unclear. In addition, no one could remember the old weaving technique. Through Gittinger's fieldwork we obtained more information about the tampan that was used on a very small scale in the Lampung society (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 1).

from outside the region.¹³ The actual reasons for which these enchanting cloths were designed, as well as the actual iconography and the loss of the weaving technique, remain a mystery. Images and objects from the early Lampung culture that would help to clarify the meaning have virtually disappeared. Our knowledge of this culture and its visual language thus remains speculative and based on broad visual and ethnographic parallels with other, better-known societies.

Since ancient times, South Sumatra has experienced many cultural movements, because the island is situated on a centuries-old trade route. The Lampung region has a rich history that is interwoven with cultural, religious and artistic traditions from different regions and eras. The tampan could be a reflection of a cultural collective memory consisting of various stories, norms and structures. From 2000 BC, the Austronesian and Dongson cultures, from surrounding island groups, China and Taiwan, brought their social norms, religious structures and artistic traditions to the region. Later, Hindu-Indian and Islamic migrants came to Sumatra as well. The Lampung region owes its wealth of textiles and the growth of weaving practices to this cultural influx.¹⁴ From the seventeenth century, Europeans made their entrance because of the rich pepper plantations in the Lampung area.¹⁵ During the time of the United East India Company (VOC), Lampung became an important trading post because of the pepper trade. The Netherlands was in Lampung from 1668 and completely dominated the area from 1808 onwards.¹⁶ Trade under the VOC regime was accompanied by genocide, exploitation and corruption; slaves were shipped, put to work and traded.¹⁷ The slave trade and slavery during the Dutch colonial rule in the Dutch East Indies is to this day 'a large, unknown pillar on which the then imposing

13 The motif of the hornbill is thought to be a cosmological symbol for the upper world. This symbolism is derived from the Ngaju Dayak culture in Borneo, Indonesia. In addition, Gittinger gives no description of what the upper and lower world mean. Does the cosmos only consist of two parts, heaven and earth, or, as in other cultures, of three parts: upper, middle and underworld? And which worlds are depicted by the ship cloths? (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 36).

14 Van Dijk en De Jonge 1980, p. 14-15.

15 The production of pepper was very important for the Lampung region. Its economy was largely built on it. Fishing was also an important part of the economy (Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 16). Before the arrival of the Dutch, the pepper trade from West Java was regulated by local rulers (Gittinger 1979, p. 79).

16 Van Dijk and De Jonge 1980, p. 14.

17 Research shows that during its existence the VOC estimated that it shipped, employed and traded between six hundred thousand and more than one million slaves. In the Dutch East Indies, the slaves were used to build, maintain and expand the VOC empire. Slaves were also bought, sold and used by private individuals for services in the home, but also on the plantation (Baay, 2017).

VOC empire was partly built'.¹⁸ Despite the formal abolition of slavery in the Dutch East Indies in 1860, it continued until the first decades of the twentieth century.¹⁹

The 2020 *Tampan Tulip* collages tell Tee's story about travel, trade and migration. The motifs refer to the natural process of movement in the lives of people, plants and animals. The different compartments of the ship motif refer to an unequal and divided structure in society. In addition, this motif refers to the spiritual journey after death; a dark contemporary commentary on the migration problems in Europe and the many human lives lost during the overseas crossing to Europe.²⁰

Every life transition of an individual or a society comes with feelings of fear, vulnerability and disruption. A tampan offered protection, stabilisation and structure to transition passages; a spiritual lifeboat that guides the individual and the community safely through uncertain times and from one state of stability to another. The question we can ask in an era of growing division and inequality is: what can help us find stability in this time? What narratives can bring us together again? What are we clinging on to or what is at risk of being forgotten?

Tampan Tulip encourages us to look critically from different perspectives, times and histories. From a distance, the work shows a spectacle of figures and lines, but from up close, offers a closer look in which the details of both the material character and the spiritual images can reveal themselves. Not only will the reading of the work change over time, but also the work itself will transform. The dried tulip petals show a way of holding beauty and preserving history, just as flower still lifes of the seventeenth century that tried to capture the transience of life. But Tee's collages *are* transient: the petals will wither, lose their colour and fall apart. Because of this, Tee's work shows that a story is subject to constant change – it moves, it connects, and it disperses in history, and across cultures and environments. It is this shifting nature of stories that allows diversity to speak.

18 Baay, 2017, p. xx.

19 'By the 1st of January 1860 at the latest, slavery was abolished in the entire Dutch East Indies.' However, the fear of political unrest among local monarchs and large landowners, but in particular the knowledge that the release of these slaves would cost money, prevented successive Dutch governments from actually putting an end to slavery in this colony until the beginning of the twentieth century (Baay, 2017).

20 Phone call with Tee on 29 May 2020.

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