



# TIES THAT BIND

BRITON MARTHA ELLEN NUTTALL IS REDESIGNING HISTORY WITH HER WOVEN IKAT BUSINESS.

WORDS **JUSTINE LOPEZ**

**L**ike many twenty-somethings, fashion designer Martha Ellen Nuttall wasn't sure what she was going to do with her life. In 2009, the British native was living in London and diligently working to establish herself in the advertising industry. But the creative-minded Nuttall knew she wanted something different.

"I didn't want to work for somebody forever; I wanted to dictate my future," she says at her boutique in South Jakarta. "Maybe there was something more than what was in front of me."

Having already studied at Central Saint Martins University of the Arts, Nuttall decided that if she wanted to pursue a career in design, it was now or never. In 2009, at the age of 24, she called it quits on her successful advertising job, enrolled in design school at ESMOD Jakarta, moved to Indonesia and never looked back.

"I wanted to study outside of London, to take what I'd learned from my Saint Martins courses...[be] based in an emerging market

and have the space to develop my own style and design," she says.

Fast forward five years later and the 30-year-old designer is making her mark on Indonesia's fashion scene with her innovative designs, which give a contemporary twist to traditional ikat.

Nuttall first came across ikat while perusing a Balinese market a few years ago. With her artistic eye, she was immediately intrigued by its unique motif and fabric structure. It didn't take long for her to come up with the idea of using the fabric to make fun and fashionable women's clothes.

"I bought a sarong in a market with the aim to make it into a dress for someone," she recalls. "The client wasn't sure about wearing ikat to a black-tie dinner, so I decided to use it to prove you could do it."

The Englishwoman, who always likes to stand out from the crowd, set out to make a dress for herself and transformed an indigo blue and brown ikat into a puffball skirt with a blue silk bustier. Her experiment proved to be a success and spurred her interest in tinkering further with ikat.

## MODERN TAKE

An interest in business, fashion and culture is what brought the young designer to Indonesia and is ultimately what inspired her to base herself in Jakarta. Originally hailing from Kent, England, the self-described "country lass" has now lived in the big city of Jakarta for five years.

And she has come a long way in a short amount of time.

Since graduating from ESMOD in 2010, she has worked tirelessly to hone her style and promote her

Photos by Mary K. Higgins, Courtesy of Martha Ellen Nuttall



Model Hannah Al Rasyid

work; she launched her first collection in 2011, showed her designs at Indonesia Fashion Week in 2013 and also opened up her quaint boutique in the artsy Kemang district of South Jakarta in 2013.

Now, she's showing off the fruits of her labor with her 2015 Spring/Summer collection. Using handmade ikat – all individually sourced from weavers in Bali – she has created a ready-to-wear collection of contemporary and colorful pieces that range from casual skirts to business-appropriate blazers to chic dresses.

Playing with conventional, she has given the traditional fabric a modern-day makeover by emphasizing playfully bold color combinations and stylishly fitted designs.

Her work is largely about merging tradition and culture with contemporary design. And, for her, ikat is the perfect fit.

"Ikat has been used for centuries to represent social standing and origin, to connect its wearer to their ancestors," she says. "When thinking about starting a business I knew I wanted to build something that had a positive effect on local [Indonesian] communities and celebrated their culture."

Aside from its traditional uses, she is also fascinated by how the fabric is made. To say that the process is time consuming would be an understatement.

"It starts with threads of pure white cotton, which are separated out and dyed – but only after the



motif has been made on the frame/canvas," she explains. "The motif is made by binding *tali* (string) around the areas that will make up the shape.

"Once this is completed, the strings of thread are dipped into the dye and hung to dry. For each desired color, the tying, binding, dyeing and drying process has to be repeated."

It is a painstaking process that can take months to complete. In fact, all of the different fabrics used in her latest collection took about a year and a half for her weavers to produce. While it may sound like a lot of effort to go through to get her material, for her, it's well worth it.

"It may be harder to do, but it is more special," she says.

#### PRESERVING TRADITION

One of her main goals is to usher ikat into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by raising awareness about the art form. However, because it is so embedded in Indonesian culture, it's not necessarily considered stylish. That's something she aims to change.

"It can sometimes be seen as old fashioned, so designers have to change the way it's used [so it can] be seen as wearable and fashionable again," she says.

#### DESIGNED FOR LIVING

Martha Ellen's ready-to-wear collection is available in UK sizes 6-18 or XXS-XXL. The fit has been standardized to cater to a wide range of body types.

She will also accommodate clients who would like to place custom, made-to-order and made-to-measure designs. Customers are given numerous options in terms of color and pieces for different occasions – from work to weekend to holiday to wedding.

Customers are welcome to come in and browse at the Martha Ellen Boutique. Nuttall will also arrange small gatherings at the shop for small groups of women who want to celebrate a birthday, have a get together or who just want to have fun playing dress up.

For more information, visit [marthaellen.com](http://marthaellen.com) or contact [clothesbyme@gmail.com](mailto:clothesbyme@gmail.com).

Ikats typically feature subtle and earthy tones. One of the ways she makes her designs stand out is by using bright color combinations to accentuate traditional motifs. This method can be seen in her new collection with the Alisa dress and Tuti skirt, which both use an ikat with a triangular checkered pattern.

"Its original form is black and white. [It] is worn by men for ceremonies and is wrapped around trees and entrances to temples," she says. "For this ikat I changed the original colorings to blues and greens to make it really eye catching and to differentiate it from the ones that are used in ceremonies."

She hopes that her modern designs will keep ikat alive.

"I feel strongly about preserving and promoting it because it's such an intricate and amazing process. It would be terrible to let it

die out...no pun intended!" she says. "To be able to make cloth from scratch and by hand is such a skill and an asset to a family and community in terms of both its cultural value and ability to bring people together." ■

