

Influence of Various Factors on the Development of Karawo Traditional Textiles in Gorontalo Province, Indonesia

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This study aims to clarify the influence of various factors on the development of traditional textiles, by examining the case of the development of traditional karawo textiles in Gorontalo Province, Indonesia from 1970 to 2020. This study employs a qualitative research method with a historical approach. Data were collected through historical documents, observation, interviews, and a literature review. Data were analyzed interactively with continuous comparisons during and after data collection. The results showed that the development of traditional karawo textiles from 1970 to 2020 can be further divided into three distinct periods: 1970–2000, 2000–2010, and 2010–2020. During each period, karawo textiles were influenced by various factors, both internal and external. The most influential internal factors were the emergence of craftspeople and designers as production bases and continuous innovation. The most influential external factors were the actions of government and commercial institutions. Government policies encouraged individuals and non-governmental organizations to contribute to the development of karawo textiles. Commercial institution influent the distribution and marketing of karawo textile products. The study also describes the types of factors and their impacts. The study concludes that to ensure the sustainable development of traditional textiles, therefore those internal and external factors must consistently contribute from time to time.

Keywords: development, traditional textiles, external factors, internal factors.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional textiles are cultural objects that contain collective values and embody the cultural identity of a particular community. Traditional textiles have great historical and cultural value as conventional structures that reflect indigenous cultures and their collective value systems ([Hee & Jeong, 2007](#)). Due to complex interactions between resources, technology, and society, traditional textiles production had an economic, social, and cultural impact on society regardless of time and region ([Strand, 2018](#)). In Indonesia, traditional textiles have grown and developed in various regions and feature a variety of types, shapes, and values. This makes traditional Indonesian textiles to be rich in a variety of motifs, values, and various textile-making techniques ([Pebryani, C.S, Remawa, & Radiawan, 2022](#)).

Karawo textile is a traditional form of textile that developed in the Gorontalo region of Indonesia. Conceptually, karawo is a technique used to add ornamentation to textiles by slicing and pulling certain fibers to make a hollow base area; the extracted fibers are then re-embroidering on to the cloth to create motifs. The motifs made using the karawo technique are called karawo textile ornaments, and they often referred to as simply karawo textiles or karawo ornaments ([Sudana, Suparno, Dharsono, & Guntur, 2018](#)). Clothing that is made with karawo textile is called karawo clothing. Likewise, other textile products that use karawo textiles are always labeled with the name karawo (e.g., karawo handkerchiefs or karawo scarves).

By applying the karawo technique, various types of textile ornaments can be created, which has led to a gradual evolution of this art form. However, its development was not linear or natural, rather, it went through multiple stages and was influenced by various interrelated factors, both internal and external. These internal factors became strengths and played a role in the development of the form and function of karawo textiles. Meanwhile, external factors also affected the development of karawo textiles. Such external factors include policies, promotion, and distribution of karawo textile products.

The development of karawo textiles and the various influencing factors have not been comprehensively studied. Various studies on karawo textiles have been carried out with funding from the Indonesian government. [Mohamad et al. \(2018\)](#) developed karawo textiles by creating contemporary motifs for

the needs of the youth market; [Waty \(2019\)](#) developed karawo textiles by applying airbrush coloring techniques to increase the competitiveness of karawo textile products; [Hasdiana et al. \(2019\)](#) developed karawo textiles by adapting local motifs to add value and diversity to the textiles. However, these studies focus exclusively on design and product development in the context of market needs. They do not consider the various factors that have influenced the development of karawo textiles over time. Therefore, this study seeks to clarify both the stages of development of karawo textiles over time and various internal and external factors that have influenced this development. This study is significant, as it can inform the direction of the development of karawo textiles and other similar traditional textiles. The results of this study will enrich the discourse of traditional textiles on the archipelago.

RESEARCH METHOD

The relationship between the development of karawo textiles and influencing factors is a social phenomenon that has occurred over time. Therefore, the researchers used a qualitative research method with a historical approach. Qualitative methods are generally open-ended, in-depth, and naturalistic; studies employing these methods analyze things, people, and events in natural settings ([Kielmann, Cataldo, & Seeley, 2012](#)). Qualitative methods are suitable for clarifying the development of karawo textiles and related influencing factors because these methods are flexible and can utilize integrated data collection techniques. The qualitative method is similar to the historical approach, as it seeks to collect organize, explain, and interpret complex evidence, and subsequently present this evidence chronologically. When conducting historical research, the scarcity of documentary evidence can be overcome by relying on oral history—that is, by collection information from interviewees, experiences, and historical actors ([Kuntowijoyo, 2003](#)). In historical research, oral data is as important as written data ([Tuchman, 1994](#)).

Data collection was carried out by performing a document review to obtain chronological data on the development of karawo textiles and related influencing factors. The types of documents examined included notes, catalogs, newspapers, magazines, official reports, pictures, photographs, and other archive materials related to karawo textiles. Interviews were used obtain linguistic data (verbal), and they were conducted openly and

flexibly in order to obtain honest and authentic information related to the experiences, attitudes, feelings, and views of the informants on the development of karawo textiles. Interviewees included master craftspeople, designers, distributors, and government representatives. Observations were made to obtain data on the development of karawo textile products. Finally, scientific journal articles, research reports, and books were referenced to obtain secondary data and improve analysis results.

Data validation was carried out using source triangulation techniques. That is, similar data was matched (validated) using different data sources, and in cases where there was a match, the data was considered valid. Data analysis was carried out interactively by continuously comparing data from interviews, observations, and document studies; subsequently, the data were coded and categorized to identify themes and categories ([Jones & Alony, 2011](#)) related to the development of karawo textiles and influencing factors.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Karawo textiles are thought to have first appeared in Gorontalo in approximately 1917. However, they did not develop at this time because the craft was practiced by individuals as a form of leisure ([Sudana, 2019](#)). In addition, the difficulty of sourcing raw materials caused by the economic crisis that began following Indonesia's independence and lasted until the old order era also stifled the development of the artform ([Domili, Tangkilisan, & Walukow, 1997](#)). The karawo textile craft began developing in the early 1970s. Karawo textiles developed from the 1970s until the present, and the factors that influenced this process can be categorized into three distinct time periods: 1970–2000, 2000–2010, and 2010–2020.

Karawo Textile Development: 1970–2000

After Suharto was inaugurated as President of Indonesia in 1968, the government established a new regime known as the “New Order.” The First Five-Year Development Plan in 1969 emphasized economic development in all sectors. The handicraft sector was developed to support overall economic development. [Domili et al. \(1997\)](#) stated that beginning in the early 1970s, the new government focused on karawo textiles. At that time, there was a tendency in the fashion world to regard ethnic textiles as fashion materials. This data demonstrates that the government and fashion world influenced the development of karawo textiles at that time.

The karawo textile was developed to become a driver of economic growth, and karawo textile products began to be treated as tradable commodities. Moreover, the production of karawo textiles was regarded as an important economic activity. Since then, karawo textile products and the craft itself have undergone a process of commodification, which is the process by which things (and activities) begin to be evaluated on the basis of their exchange value as goods (or services). This process establishes a system of exchange, under which the exchange values of goods (and activities) in the market were expressed in terms of prices ([Cohen, 1988](#)).

The commodification of karawo textiles in the early 1970s was supported by the New Order government because it was considered to be a potential contributor to economic growth. The government provided training to craftspeople through the Ministry of Industry's Small Industry Guidance and Development (BIPIK) program, which included training on raw material selection, product diversification, quality improvement, and marketing ([Departemen-Perindustrian, 1977](#)). As a result, karawo textile products become more varied. Before 1970, karawo textiles were only used as handkerchiefs and tablecloths; subsequently, they became used as bed sheets, pillowcases, and other household products.

Consumer demand for household products made with karawo textiles increased; this encouraged the establishment of production and trading units for karawo textile products as commercial institutions. In 1976, the first karawo textile factory, Naga Mas, was established in Gorontalo Regency. This business recruited workers and collaborated with Morotai stores in Gorontalo City to become suppliers of raw materials and distributors of products ([Departemen-Perindustrian, 1977](#)). Since the establishment of this commercial institution, there has been a shift in work patterns, namely from cottage industry work patterns to industrial work patterns. The emergence of commercial institutions is an external factor that has influenced the development of karawo textiles.

In 1977, a karawo textile ornament designer named John Koraag began creating designs from karawo textile motifs and incorporating them into clothing. At the age of 59, John Koraag stated, “The first time I drew a karawo motif at the request of a trader ... he said it was for clothes ... then I made various motifs to order...” (Interview, April 15, 2022). This testimony indicates that the emergence of designers is related to efforts to support the commodification

of karawo textiles. The emergence of designers had a direct influence on the development of karawo textiles because designers applied various motif designs to karawo textiles.

In the 1980s, karawo textiles were widely used for work and party attire, and the clothing featured various motifs and colors (see Figure 1). Karawo textile motifs are large and are formed using the karawo *tisik* technique. The city of Manado in North Sulawesi was the main location where karawo textile products were marketed in the 1980s. Therefore, many people assume that karawo textiles originated in Manado. The popular demand for these products led to an increase in the number of artisans, and the production area expanded. Since 1980, karawo textile production has expanded to rural areas in Gorontalo Regency, including Pulubala Village, Batudaa Village, Bongomeme Village, and surrounding areas.



Figure 1. Karawo Party Fashion from the 1980

(Source: Author's Document)

In 1990, the Naga Mas karawo textile factory employed 750 workers, who were paid based on the amount of textile they produced. Workers were able to produce around 1,000 sheets of karawo textiles per month, and this product was marketed in areas, such as Manado, Palu, Ujung Pandang, Samarinda, and Jakarta ([Departeman-Perindustrian, 1990](#)). This data demonstrates an increase in the number of workers, production output, and marketing area. This reflects the fact that the commodification of karawo textiles has progressed significantly. The widespread commodification of karawo textiles is also marked by the emergence of an increasing number of commercial institutions, namely shops that sell karawo textile products, such as the Palapa Shop, Matahari Store, Sumber Kerawang Store,

Cahaya Kerawang Shop, and others ([Departeman-Perindustrian, 1990](#)). These commercial institutions clearly treat karawo textiles as a commodity that promises economic benefits. Although artistic value was retained within the essence of karawo textiles, the artform became swept up in the vortex of commodities.

In 1993, the government again utilized the BIPIK project to accelerate the commodification of karawo textiles by enhancing promotion and marketing, helping to locate private companies, and developing a coaching program with a mentorship system involving state-owned enterprises and private institutions. This data shows that the government's involvement in the commodification of karawo textiles has grown, and the government has sought more extensive market opportunities for karawo textiles. The government strongly supports commodification of karawo textiles for two main reasons: (1) karawo textiles as commodities have considerable potential and (2) this sector is able to employ a large number of female workers ([Domili et al., 1997](#)).

In 2000, the karawo textile craft was recognized as a minor industrial sector that was absorbing more workers than any other sector, and craftspeople in this industry provided the main financial support for their families. The indexes used to assess the development of karawo textiles, such as levels of employment, income increase, and market expansion, show that karawo textiles are considered a commodity for economic purposes. However, it is precisely the commodification that has led to the diversification and development of the functions, motifs, and colors of the karawo textile.

Based on the evidence and discussion, it can be stated that from 1970 to 2000, both karawo textile products and the craft itself were treated as commodities that served economic needs. Moreover, both the products and craft itself were influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors include the emergence of motif designers who specifically designed karawo textile motifs, the uniqueness and beauty of karawo textiles, and the increase in skilled craftspeople. External factors included government institutions attempting to increase the number and master craftspeople, commercial institutions acting as distributors of karawo textile products, and private companies investing capital in the karawo textile industry.

Karawo Textile Development: 2000–2010

In 2000, the people of Gorontalo desired to form a new province separate from North Sulawesi

Province. This desire was the result of a primordial, tribal emotion and a deep concern over the loss of Gorontalo ethnic identity ([Niode & Elnino, 2003](#)). Finally, in 2001, Gorontalo officially became a new province in Indonesia (the 32nd province, based on the Law of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia Number 38 of 2001). This political event aroused the tribal feeling of the Gorontalo people and inspired them to display their identity; this, in turn, influenced the development of karawo textiles.

Following the establishment of Gorontalo Province, karawo textiles were both treated as a commodity and a marker of cultural identity that reflects the historical experience and shared cultural codes of a group of people with a common history and ancestry ([Hall, 1990](#)). The recognition of karawo textiles as part of the cultural identity of the Gorontalo tribe was accompanied by the emergence of symbolic ornaments on karawo textiles that were adapted from symbols of the local Gorontalo culture. For example, the *dulohupa* ornament is a symbol of deliberation and decision-making consensus, and the *huyula* ornament is a symbol of cooperation in building the country (*Dulo Ito Momongu Lipu*). This means, ornaments as cultural products not only display visual beauty, but also contain symbolic values related to local cultural wisdom ([Widayat, 2022](#)). The emergence of symbolic motifs sourced from the local wisdom of Gorontalo communities added to the diversity of traditional motifs and the value of karawo textiles ([Hasdiana et al., 2019](#)).

In 2005, the Gorontalo provincial government filed a patent claim for a specific method of producing karawo textiles. This patent sought legal recognition of karawo textiles as a traditional Gorontalo craft. On October 18, 2005, karawo textiles were officially issued a patent (ID 0012784) by the Indonesian Minister of Law and Human Rights, the Director General of Intellectual Property Rights. The issuance of this patent constituted legal recognition of karawo textile as a distinctive textile and form of local cultural expression. Cultural expression can be a tool for developing a competitive advantage in the market and maintaining long-term relationships with audiences ([Fan & Zhou, 2020](#)).

Following the issuance of the patent, karawo textiles have received broad support from the Gorontalo community. As a result of this support, karawo textile products have become increasingly visible in various sectors of society. This has given rise to increased optimism among karawo workers, as their profession and creative products feel more valued and needed, both economically and socially. Within the market, the demand for karawo fabric has

increased, which has increased the cost of making karawo textiles. In society, craftspeople have access to more public spaces. For example, the government often asks artisans to become instructors or demonstrate their skills in front of officials. This has boosted the pride of traditional textile workers.

Patent rights are external factors that strengthen the connection between karawo textiles and the cultural identity of the Gorontalo people. This external factor is related to another external factor, namely the user community (consumer), which is characterized by the emergence of a sense of pride and fanaticism for the use of karawo textiles, both as clothing and other textile products. As a result, the demand for karawo textiles has increased sharply, thereby raising the motivations of karawo textile workers (internal factors) to produce and create new textile forms. This feedback mechanism between internal and external factors has spurred the continual development of karawo textiles.

An internal factor that has emerged since karawo textiles were established as the cultural identity of Gorontalo is fashion designers, who play a role in elevating the image of karawo textiles in exclusive spaces, such as fashion shows (Figure 2). As a result, the form and function of karawo textiles have developed. In terms of shape, new, large motifs have appeared. Whereas karawo textiles were previously only used for work and party clothes, they are now used in fashion clothing. As a fashion clothing, a dress can present a message or image to everyone that reflects personality and social status of the wearer ([Fatonah, Bahar, & Hartati, 2022](#)).



Figure 2. Karawo Fashion Show.
(Source: Author's Document)

External factors that have influenced that development of karawo textiles are the actions of the Gorontalo provincial government, which has promoted karawo textiles and built connections between karawo textiles and other regional traditional textiles. The provincial government has also encouraged the private sector to become involved in the development of karawo textiles by highlighting the value of karawo textiles for the cultural identity of the Gorontalo people. To promote karawo textiles, the Gorontalo provincial government has held exhibitions and karawo fashion shows. These efforts have succeeded in prompting the wives of officials to regularly order dozens of karawo textile products.

In 2008, the Gorontalo provincial government sent 20 karawo textile craftspeople to Pekalongan City, Central Java to learn techniques for combining karawo textiles with batik textiles. This was an attempt by the government to build connections between karawo textiles and other well-known batik textiles. This effort gave birth to a combination of karawo and batik textiles, which was considered a new development for karawo textiles at that time.

In 2010, the governor of Gorontalo and the governor of Bank Indonesia signed a memorandum of understanding to accelerate regional economic performance through inflation control and community economic empowerment. Based on this memorandum, the Bank Indonesia (an external factor) planned the development of programmed karawo textiles over a period of four years (2010–2013). Karawo textiles were selected as a commodity deserving of development because of (a)

the peculiarities and uniqueness of the form of karawo textiles, which contain cultural identity values (b) broad support from government and society, (c) large employment opportunities, and (d) market opportunities ([Bank-Indonesia, 2010](#)).

Karawo Textile Development: 2010–2020

The importance of karawo textiles for Gorontalo cultural identity and their enormous economic potential for regional development encouraged the government and Bank Indonesia to continue to carry out product development and massive promotions. For product development, Bank Indonesia conducted trainings on the design of karawo textile motifs. These training sessions were attended by 100 participants, including students and craftspeople ([Bank-Indonesia, 2011](#)). Some of the participants, especially those from artisan families, were able to create new designs based on cartoons, dolls, and social media logos. The selected motifs were based on popular and widely used images in contemporary society, and the resulting motifs also became popular. Finally, karawo textiles with popular motif designs emerged.

The incorporation of popular motifs into Karawo textiles (see Figure 3) is a new development that emerged in early 2011, and these motifs are very different from the previous karawo textile motifs, which were complicated and were derived from conventional themes. The emergence of these new motifs has clearly been influenced by internal factors, namely the emergence of young, creative designers. The emergence of these young designers was triggered by external factors, namely the training sessions run by Bank Indonesia.



Figure 3. Popular Motifs of Karawo Textiles.

(Source: Author's Document)

Bank Indonesia planned a karawo festival to promote karawo textiles. The festival was organized by a professional management team that reached out to government agencies, private institutions, mass media, and the entire community. The vision of the festival was “to participate in enhancing the prosperity of the Gorontalo people by strengthening the economy and developing regional culture” (Bank-Indonesia, 2011). Judging from the target of socialization and the vision of the festival, it can be concluded that the goal of this event was to boost economic development by utilizing karawo textiles for consumption and mass appreciation. Economic orientation involving mass consumption is one of the characteristics of mass culture.

In addition to a karawo fashion show, the festival also included an event where a Karawo Award was presented to karawo textile workers, a photo exhibition of karawo, as high school speech competition on karawo textile development, a karawo textile product creativity competition, a karawo fashion competition, a karawo motif design competition, a karawo textile bazaar, and a kindergarten motif coloring competition (Bank-Indonesia, 2011). This indicates that the karawo festival was indeed intended to promote karawo textiles as a trend that can be consumed widely by the public.

With good preparation, the first karawo festival was held on December 17–18, 2011, and thousands of people attended. The karawo carnival fashion parade, which was the main event of the festival, was attended by 80 groups of delegates from all regencies and government agencies in Gorontalo Province. Triggered by the festival, the various advantages of karawo textiles, such as their uniqueness, beauty, and image as a symbol of Gorontalo's cultural identity, are shown as competitiveness, then produced, promoted, and distributed en masse. This phenomenon represents the concept of mass culture or popular culture. That is, karawo is a culture phenomenon that originated from the people and was produced, distributed, and promoted on a mass scale (Smiers, 2003). Therefore, following the first karawo festival, karawo textiles entered the realm of popular culture. This karawo festival is now held once a year as a strategic mass promotion event.

As an external factor, the karawo festival influences the development of karawo textiles, both in form and function. The development of function can be seen in how karawo textiles are used for carnival clothing (see Figure 4). The clothing applies all the techniques and motifs of karawo textiles. As a result,

karawo carnival clothing sometimes looks strange and unique. Karawo textile motifs are also used for fashion accessories, such as scarves, ties, headscarves, bags, and others. In addition, karawo textiles began to be used as wall decorations like paintings. With varied forms and functions, the market for karawo textile products is growing because the products have conformed to the varied tastes of consumers.



Figure 4. Karawo Textiles as Carnival Clothing.

(Source: Author's Document)

The emergence of karawo textiles with new forms and functions has not singled the abandonment of old forms and functions. The forms and functions of older karawo textiles are still being produced alongside new forms and functions; this allows or the continued evolution of various forms and functions.

In 2016, the Gorontalo provincial government invited karawo textile craftspeople from various parts of the country to demonstrate the process of making karawo textiles in public. The Indonesian Record Museum (MURI) documented 1,250 artisans demonstrating the process of making karawo textiles; they were awarded a certificate from MURI for this undertaking. The government also invited officials from Jakarta and several ambassadors to attend the event. This event was clearly intended to promote karawo textiles in the domestic and international markets.

In 2017, karawo clothing was featured at Jakarta Fashion Week (JFW), a prestigious fashion event that has a significant influence on domestic fashion trends. The appearance of karawo clothing at JFW

can be interpreted as an effort to market local textiles and gain appreciation in the national market. In September 2017, karawo fashion was also featured at New York Fashion Week, supported by four major banks, namely Bank Indonesia, Bank Negara Indonesia, Bank Rakyat Indonesia, and Bank Mandiri. They are obsessed with promoting the uniqueness of karawo textiles at international fashion events, as they see it as a gateway for entering the global market ([Arifuddin, 2017](#)). Karawo textiles are treated as a form of popular culture in the way they are packaged and in how they harness local culture for the benefit of the global market. Efforts to promote and strategies like that are carried out continuously by the government. This shows that the government, as an external factor, plays a major role in the development of karawo textiles.

The karawo festival was not held in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, events meant to benefit the development of karawo textiles were still held. Local governments carried out product trainings for a limited number of craftspeople. Bank Indonesia held exhibitions and fashion shows for karawo textiles at its office. It also conducted marketing training for the craft groups it is mentoring. A leader of one of the craft groups stated, "It would be difficult for my business to grow if it was not nurtured and provided with capital by Bank Indonesia ... I only know how to make things, but I have no capital and do not know how to market and develop a business" (Dunda, 55 years old, interview, September 9, 2022). This quote shows that Bank Indonesia plays a vital role in fostering karawo textile craft groups and helping them develop their businesses.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion, it can be concluded that the development of karawo textile from 1970 to 2020, which can be further divided into three periods (1970–2000, 2000–2010, and 2010–2020), was caused by the way people treat or appreciate karawo textiles. The treatment and appreciation of karawo textiles develops during each time period, and each time period featured different factors, both internal and external factors, that influenced each other.

The period from 1970 to 2000 was a period of commodification. During this period, karawo textiles were treated as commodities that could be used to meet economic needs. Influencing internal factors during this period were the number of

craftspeople, who produced an increasing amount of goods, the uniqueness and beauty of karawo textiles, which attracted many enthusiasts, and the emergence of karawo textile ornament designers. Influencing external factors included the actions of government agencies, the sponsorship of commercial institutions, the contributions of distributors of karawo textiles, and fashion trends incorporating traditional textiles.

The period from 2000 to 2010 was a period of identity. During this period, karawo textiles, which were uniqueness and had commodity value, were treated as a symbol of the cultural identity of the Gorontalo people. Influencing internal factors were the existence of craftspeople as workers, the creativity of karawo motif designers in exploring ideas sourced from local Gorontalo culture, the emergence of karawo fashion designers who specifically developed various forms of karawo fashion, and the enlarging base of karawo textile production. Influencing external factors included the actions of government institutions, commercial institutions, and private institutions as well as the formation of Gorontalo Province, which awakened the tribal identity of Gorontalo people, resulting in the emergence of a sense of pride and community fanaticism for karawo textiles.

The period from 2010 to 2020 was a period of popularity. During this period, karawo textiles were treated as a form of popular culture that has various appearances and were produced, distributed, promoted, and consumed by the public. Influencing internal factors include the existence of craftspeople, the emergence of creative motif designers, and the emergence of creative and visionary karawo fashion designers. Influencing external factors include the actions of government institutions, state-owned enterprises, private institutions, and commercial institutions as well as the emergence of karawo fashion models and fashion shows and the mass media.

Within each period and between periods, there were dominant factors that had the most influence on the development of karawo textiles. The internal factors that had the most influence both within each period and between periods was craftspeople and designers, who have continually been involved in production and innovation. Meanwhile, the most influential external factors were government institutions as policymakers and commercial institutions as distributors of products. Therefore, to ensure the development of traditional textiles, these factors must contribute consistently.

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List of Resource Persons/Informants

Dunda, Karsum (55 years) Leader of the craft groups, interview, September 9, 2022 at the Sumber Usaha Karawo Gorontalo.

Koraag, John (59 years) Karawo Designer, Interview, April 15, 2022 at his home, Desa Ayula, Tapa, Bone Bolango, Gorontalo.