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HEIRLOOM CLOTH AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

The ceremonial *kain sandang gobo* of the Minangkabau, West Sumatra

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of the ceremonial shouldercloth —*kain sandang gobo*— as an inalienable possession in the social organization of the village society of Balai Cacang¹. To this end I shall examine the *kain sandang gobo* for its several visual aspects and symbolic meaning, and as an heirloom cloth in the *harto pusako*². The *kain sandang gobo* as a means of expressing rank and hierarchy will be explored by analyzing its role in the wedding-ceremony. The results will contribute to the aim of this panel, which is to come to a comparison of the meaning of highly valued locally made heirloom cloth among three ethnic groups in Indonesia.

THE KAIN SANDANG GOBO OF BALAI CACANG

The most important ceremonial cloth of women of the matrilineal Minangkabau society of Balai Cacang —a small hamlet located 6 km north of Payakumbuh in the centre of the Padang Highlands— is the *kain sandang gobo*, exclusively worn during wedding-ceremonies of the highest level. This red chequered cotton shouldercloth, densely decorated with gold thread, is only produced in this traditional weaving village for the use of its own inhabitants. It is combined with a head- and hipcloth and a blouse into a costume set called *pakaian sandang gobo*. It is completed with adjusting jewelry, shoes, make-up, hairstyle and accessories. Every item is carefully detailed and prescribed by the *adat*, which is the Minangkabau custom, tradition and rules for living. As such it is one of the fifteen costume sets that are worn by women during rites de passage as I experienced them during my fieldwork in Balai Cacang in 1993 (Hanssen, 1995).

¹ Weiner (1992:33) gives the following definition for an inalienable possession: "What makes a possession inalienable is its exclusive and cumulative identity with a particular series of owners through time. Its history is authenticated by fictive or true genealogies, origin myths, sacred ancestors, and gods. In this way, inalienable possessions are transcendent treasures to be guarded against all the exigencies that might force their loss."

² In the anthropological literature it is pointed out that heirloom cloth in South Pacific societies which is kept rather than given becomes "inalienable". As such, cloth can express rank and hierarchy in societies. It enlarges the integrity of the individual as well as of the group (Weiner 1989:35).

MINANGKABAU TEXTILES OF THE LIMO PULUH KOTO PROVINCE

Most textiles of the Minangkabau are characterized by abundant use of gold thread, so densely that the ground fabric is hardly to be seen. These cloths are called *kain songket* owing to the use of gold thread, but also to the supplementary weft technique. Like everywhere in Indonesia and South-east Asia the history of textiles follows the history of trade. Through its extremely strategic position on trade-routes in Southeast Asia and an abundance of natural sources —such as the enormous gold supplies which gave Sumatra the name of Golden Island— first the coastal region underwent the influences of migration and trade-contacts with China, India, Portugal, the Middle East and Holland. At a later stage the province of Limo Puluh Koto in the Padang Highlands got acquainted with new dye- and weaving techniques, colors, materials and designs. Silk, gold- and silver thread and the supplementary weft were incorporated in their weaving tradition. The locally made *kain songket* combined with imported cloths are part of an extensive textile system of the Minang people. The *songket*-cloths are considered to be of a higher status than imported cloths. As such they form a mirror of the people's worldview which is strongly imbued by *adat*.

PRESENT SITUATION

The traditional textiles have always been —and still are— dedicated to ceremonial use. The ceremonies are mostly *adat*-related, except for some Islamic ones. *Adat* prescribes the proper dress and although *adat* is flexible and adaptive to changes, the ceremonial cloths have not changed. This does not imply that modern developments did not find their way to the village people. Satellite-dishes and Western clothing are common in the Padang Highlands. As opposed to the changes in education, economy, and family life, the Minangkabau men and women —young and old— partake in ceremonial *adat*-life as often as their presence is required. However, the weaving of *songket* is liable to change. Young girls nowadays are not interested in weaving anymore, because education opens better perspectives for their future. In the village of Balai Cacang, weaving belongs to the female domain. At the time of my field research twelve female weavers still practiced weaving of ceremonial cloths.

THE KAIN SANDANG GOBO

The most valuable and technically most intricate cloth in the range of locally woven *songket*-cloths is *kain sandang gobo*. The word *gobo* derives from *gaba*, which means to string garlands, and refers to the row of *tanjung* —blue lotus-flowers or flowers of the coconut tree. In the wedding ceremony of the most affluent, it is worn by recently married women and women with young children. The complex designs are produced by the best qualified weavers, the eldest women. The *gobo*-cloth is characterised by a checked centrefield in red with black and white. The endpanels and borders along the selvage show motifs in gold thread. Out of a warplength of 550 cm the woven cloth is cut into two halves and sewn together.

THE VISUAL AND SYMBOLIC ASPECTS OF THE GOBO

Kain sandang gobo and Land

There is a clear twopartition —centerfield and borders— which is common throughout South-east Asia. The checked centerfield is seen as a mirror of the agricultural lands (Summerfield 1991:54 fig.50, Kartiwa 1979:59)³. The *sawah* belong to the ancestral properties which are of essential importance for the female descent group in providing food and surplus money. Men work the land of their mothers and sisters, but not the land of their wives' relatives. Only married women wear this type of cloth.

Kain sandang gobo and Age

The *gobo* is woven in a deep red color, with in the centre a combination of black and white warp and weft threads forming the checks. This red color combined with the large quantity of gold is the color for the young married women between twenty and thirty years of age with one or two young children. As such it marks the procreative stage of a woman, which is essential for the continuity of her descent group. When women grow older the intensity of red is fading by using more black, blue and white, and silver thread instead of gold. Comparable color symbolism in relation to age is found throughout the Indonesian archipelago.

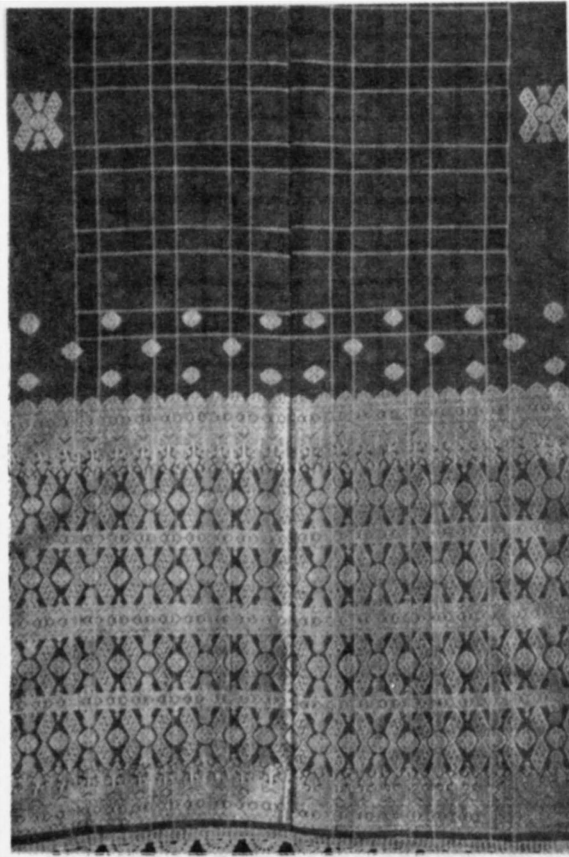
The *gobo* is tied under the arm and across the shoulder, held together by a knot on top of the right shoulder, so that the decorated gold patterns are best visible. Wearing shouldercloths in this way is called *bengkak* (swollen) and meant only for married women⁴. Because of its big size and the placing so high on the body, the shouldercloth is the most significant part of a woman's *adat*-costume.

Kain sandang gobo and Stratification

In the *gobo* we can differentiate various layers; the ground fabric in plain weave shows a decoration in the centre with checks; the rich gold decoration of the motifs in supplementary weft and the finish of the edgings in a crocheted goldlace. The more layers and additional decorations, the higher the status of the wearer. Special attention deserve the endpanels, which are

³ Kartiwa and Sanday state that this centerfield is accentuating the centre of power, which is embodied by borders with small motifs as protection. Village people are surrounded and tied down to *adat* (1984:21). Concerning the centerfield another explanation is given by Heringa: the chequered centerfield represents the *sawah* and the dry agricultural grounds. The dry land represents the woman, on which the man will seed the new plants (Heringa 1994:22).

⁴ *buhul santak* (knot-untie); name for the way in which the knot is tied and easily untied. It symbolizes that a woman is tied to somebody or married and she is experienced in many things. For the Payakumbuh people this knot contains an extra meaning; it is the way one solves one's problems; although some decisions have already been made but are not acceptable, one can always change them (Kartiwa 1979:65).



Kain sandang gobo



Detail of *kain sandang gobo*



Woman dressed in *pakaian sandang gobo* (second of the right),
Balai Cacang, 1993

densely filled with gold patterns with a continuous warp, which usually gives a cloth a higher value than one with a discontinuous warp.

Silk for the *gobo* was common in former days. These cloths still exist in the heirloom. Today there is a differentiation in quality, only in a small detail, but women do know it. Weavers use shop-bought cotton, '*katun*' for their clientele, but when weaving for their lineage members they choose a fine quality cotton called '*lenan*'. Silk is hardly used anymore, only on demand.

Not every descent group possesses a *kain sandang gobo*. Only the well-to-do own or are able to order a new *sandang gobo*. Otherwise it is borrowed from kin or weavers by paying in uncooked rice, raw eggs and cake. On account of the recent increase in nuclear families and a higher standard of living the demand of *kain sandang gobo* strongly increased: in 1993 it took three to five months to order a *gobo*-cloth.

The *kain sandang gobo* and the Male and Female Aspects

The *gobo* is woven by women for the use of women. As such it can be seen as female. However, it has male aspects as well. The loom and the weaving-comb are produced and carved by men. As such they form part of the heirloom and are inherited by the daughters. Mattiebelle Gittinger (1979:113) suggests that cloth decorated with gold thread possesses male properties. In relation to the 'consistent' pattern of exchange, she refers to the situation of bride-givers in Indonesia presenting textiles to family of the groom in order to accentuate the woman's position to the bride-takers. Bride-takers, though, return products of men's work, such as knives, cattle and jewelry (1979:107). In Gittinger's opinion *songket* textiles may have functioned more as male metal-ware rather than women's textiles.

In the matrilineal Minangkabau situation we must speak about bridegroom-givers and -takers, because the men are exchanged. Nowadays Balai Cacang no longer knows an exchange pattern as such, although Toorn reports in 1881 that there used to be a 'mixed' pattern of giving in Minang society (cited in Gittinger 1979:108). The groom and his female relatives presented textiles to the bride and her family; the bride and her family offered a set of symbolic *kain*, one of gold and silk, the other an imported cloth. Toorn states that in this matrilocal society the textiles symbolised the groom's welcome into the bride's house. If the marriage was due to end before there were children the set of *kain* were returned. The lack of further details on the type of *songket* cloth makes it impossible to look for any male details of the cloth.

The motifs on the *gobo* show rows of geometrical motifs. Among them stars filled with *tanjung* flowers (*bintang bungo tanjuang*) and men-like figures with sticks in between them —*tirai*— which means "curtain". The weavers were not able to give an explanation. According to them it came from the ancestors —*turun menurun*. Flowers have indeed a female connotation in Sumatran symbolism (Heringa 1993:21). The row of men-like figures might symbolize the descendants of a the matrilineal descent group. The curtain is found on top of the nuptial bed, and might stand for fertility.

KAIN SANDANG GOBO AS AN HEIRLOOM

When discussing the function of the *sandang gobo* as an heirloom, it is essential to look at the social organization of the Minangkabau. The Minangkabau are organised matrilineally: group membership and property are inherited from mother to daughter. Women live with their families in the matrilineal longhouse —*rumah gadang*, while married sons live with their wives' relatives.

The collective properties of a matrilineal descent group are called the *harto pusako*, ancestral property which is inherited mainly by women. These properties are essential for a descent group, because they represent the property of the ancestors as well as the property for the future generation. To these properties belong the agricultural lands (*sawah* and gardens), livestock, ponds, houses, jewelry, ceremonial costumes, gold and money. Next to these material aspects, titles and *adat*-sayings are important. The latter category is inherited by the male kin, the former category mainly by women.

These goods are especially important to women, because they are greatly attached to them. Von Benda-Beckmann even speaks about it as *harto padoesi* "women's properties" (in Courtens & Thoonen 1990:18). A special category is formed by the *pusako gaib*, the ceremonial clothing for men and women, completed with jewelry and accessories.

Harto pusako is collective property which is not divisible and not to be sold. Women have usufruct over a part of it. The oldest woman of the lineage, *Bundo Kandung*, controls the *harto pusako*; she keeps 'the key to the treasure-chest.' Land produce, such as rice, is first meant for the own sake of the lineage members; surplus proceeds flow back to the *harto pusako*.

The *sandang gobo* as such has a high esteem in the *harto pusako*, it is the most expensive cloth. Together with the other cloths it shows the cloth wealth as assets of a lineage. The old *gobo* is not actively worn anymore but kept in a treasure-box. On special occasions like a *penghulu*⁵-installation it is displayed. As such a *gobo* can have the status of an inalienable possession.'

A second group of properties belong to the *harto pencarian*. This is individual property gained by a husband and a wife separately. In a marriage these goods stay separate and will be inherited by the husband's and wife's lineage, respectively. Owing to pressure of the Islamic movement the gained properties of the father are inherited by his children. According to Von Benda-Beckmann, goods inherited by the daughters will flow back to the *harto pusako* of the mother's lineage (in Postel-Coster 1985:31). For cloth wealth including the *gobo* cloth it means that it starts its life as an alienable possession and once it is part of the *harto pusaka* it becomes inalienable.

A third group of heirloom is called *harto suarang* (common property). These goods are acquired by a couple and are not divisible. In case of death the goods are divided by the partner and the lineage of the deceased.

⁵ *adat* title for the head of a lineage

The function of the *gobo* in the latter two groups is quite noticable as an 'alienable property.' Once it is adjusted to the *pusako gaib* of the lineage it becomes inalienable, normally after one generation.

THE KAIN SANDANG GOBO AND THE MARRIAGE RITUAL

Among *adat*-ceremonies marriage is one of the biggest events in village life. It offers the possibility to start new alliances or to enforce matrilineal kinship. The persons involved in a marriage-ceremony form part of large social networks. Such a ceremony gives the opportunity to display economical and social status of a descent group and to show how large the group is one can appeal to for the preparations. A marriage-ceremony is mainly a women's affair: they perform the role of organisers or guests. It is the mother of the bride and her kin (sisters, brothers, mother and aunts) and the *penghulu* who determine the level of the wedding.

In Minang-*adat* there are three levels, each prescribing the dress code and jewelry code, the length of the ceremony, and the food code⁶. Each level indicates a different amount of status and wealth. In the highest level the most important cloth is the *kain sandang gobo* in the costume set of the *pakaian sandang gobo*; the celebration lasts six to seven days and a waterbuffalo is slaughtered. The celebration takes place in the longhouse of the bride. The first time the *gobo* plays a role is when the bride's mother invites the guests personally by visiting each woman and offering them *sirih* which she carries in her pouch —*unciang*— under her shouldercloth. By declaring the wedding to be of highest level she indicates the use of costume sets of the highest level, including the highest proportion of *songket*-cloth, with the *gobo* as the most prominent one. She expresses the high status of her descent group. Furthermore the *gobo* expresses the level of the dress code, which consists of fifteen costume combinations for every ritual during the ceremony.

This dress code is based on two principles; the first and the most important on affinal ties and the second on individual aspects of the wearer. Groups related by marriage can be divided into the group that already provided a bridegroom to the same lineage in the past —called *bako*, the bridegroom-givers and the group that received a bridegroom from the descent group —called *sumandan*, the bridegroom-takers. Compared with the patrilineal situation when brides are exchanged and the bride-givers have a higher status, it is not the same with the actual group of the exchanged bridegroom. They are of a lower status. To show respect to group of the bride they will overdress. The female kin will wear the costume sets with the rich goldthreaded cloth. In the meantime the group of the bride pay respect by dressing lower than their high status entitles them. Their costume sets consist of few *songket*-cloth but more *batik* and *kain Bugis*. At a full-blown wedding

⁶ These prescriptions are written down by the *penghulu* of each region. Clothing of women is called *Bundu Kanduang*, the name which refers also to the oldest women of a lineage and the ancestral mother. Costumes of Payakumbuh are called *Bundu Kanduang Payakumbuh*.



Wedding of the third level; sister of the bridegroom (on his left) dressed in *pakaian sandang gobo*, Tarok 1993

one may witness about fifteen costume sets, each telling the relationship of the wearer to the group of the bride or groom. Within this group affiliation also the individual status of a woman can be read: married/unmarried; age; number of children; married daughters; number of grandchildren.

Returning to the *sandang gobo*, one can see that it is worn by women of the lineage of the bridegroom on the day of the delivery of the bridegroom to his bride by his relatives —*batagak penghulu*/installing the *penghulu* rite. It is worn by his married sister or aunt in her twenties or thirties with young children. They stand beside him in front of the nuptial seat.

CONCLUSION

In considering the female or male properties of the *gobo* I have shown that this cloth is merely female-related. For it is woven by women, for women and worn and bought by women. Its most important function is that of dress, which symbolizes the status of a descent group and shows group affiliation of the wearer, but also her individual status. The symbolic meaning of the combination of gold thread and textile, which is quite obvious in other societies, cannot be explored. The men-like figures on the cloth might implicate male properties, however.

The role of the *gobo* in exchange does not exist anymore. The exchange pattern at present is merely to be found in the exchanging of food and paying the *mas kawin*, the bridegroom-price. The descent group of bridegroom presents raw food, such as fish, meat and uncooked rice, while the lineage of the bride offers cooked rice, meat and cakes. The most important issue of a marriage is that the continuity of their matrilineal group is being taken care of. The important role is played by the young woman in her reproductive period of life. Not by the man; he is the medium, brought in from the outside as producer for his wife's future lineage. The symbolic meaning of the exchange of food is that the raw food is turned into cooked food, which can be seen as a medium for affirming social relations for future reproduction. (Ng 1987:117)

Kain sandang gobo is therefore a visual representation of the continuity of a lineage by letting the kinwomen who are in their most procreative stage of life wear it. As such it shows the status of a descent group and will therefore continue its life as an inalienable possession.

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