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Heirloom and Hierarchy The Sacred *Lawo butu* Cloth of the Lio of Central Flores

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INTRODUCTION

The most sacred ceremonial cloth of the Lio on the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia is an heirloom called *lawo butu*, a tubular skirt or sarong traditionally worn by high-ranking women at the most important fertility ceremony. This beaded sarong is only found in one of the main cultural centres of the Lio, the weaving village of Nggela on the south coast of Central Flores, a village of almost 1300 inhabitants. Until Indonesian independence in 1945 this village was more stratified by a rank system of nobles (*ata ria*), commoners (*ana fai walu*) and slaves (*ata ko'o*) than other Lio villages (Prior 1988: 62). Of the more than thirty types of the local cloth system only the *lawo butu* cloth belongs to the category of heirloom or inalienable possessions in the sense of the anthropologist Annette Weiner (1992)¹ – cloths that should be kept and cherished. The other cloth types belong to the category of alienable possessions. They may be given in ritual exchange or sold (see de Jong 1994, 1995, n.d.).

There exist a few other types of beaded cloths on Flores, all heirloom property (see Maxwell 1983: fig. 1, 2, Maxwell 1990: fig. 200–203, Khan Majlis 1991: fig. 163, Orinbao 1992: 129, 181–183, Hamilton 1994: fig. 2–16, 4–4, 5–14). The motifs of the Lio *lawo butu* have some resemblance to those on the beaded sarongs of the Sikka and the Ngada people, but the context of its production and its ceremonial function seem to have been different, at least as far as the Ngada *lawo butu* is concerned (see Hamilton 1994: 108–109). While the *lawo butu* of the Lio has figuratively been represented in publications on Indonesian and Southeast Asian textiles, there has been little information on the social significance and the ritual use of this cloth (see for example Khan Majlis 1991: 191).

To elaborate on the *lawo butu* is not easy, however, because it is no longer used in the original ceremonial context. Moreover, knowledge about it is almost lost, as I experienced during my anthropological fieldwork in Central Flores. Important sources of information for reconstructing the significance of the beaded sacred sarong were data from oral history by village elders and by old women who had continued to wear this cloth at former ceremonial occasions, a thesis by a local theologian (Ndate 1988) and my own observations of its use in the village at ceremonial events in 1987 and in 1988.

This paper examines the extent to which the *lawo butu* as an inalienable possession has strengthened the sociopolitical hierarchy of the rank system in the village society. To answer this question I will first describe the visual aspects of the *lawo butu* and explore its significance as a

Postdoctoral fieldwork in Central Flores in 1987–88 and 1990–91 was supported by the Canton of Zurich and conducted under the auspices of the Indonesian Academy of Sciences (LIPI), Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta and Universitas Nusa Cendana in Kupang.

¹ Weiner (1992: 33) defines an inalienable possession as follows: "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."

collective and individual heirloom with regard to the social organization of the village. Then I will elaborate on the properties of this ceremonial cloth related to female and male aspects. Finally I will analyze the role of this sacred sarong in ceremonial contexts before independence and afterwards. I will suggest that the change in the ceremonial use of the *lawo butu* reflects a change in the sociopolitical system of the local society.

VISUAL ASPECTS OF THE *LAWO BUTU*

The beaded sarong is the only women's sarong type in the village without ikat design (Figure 1). This black indigo dyed and handspun cotton sarong has a centre panel with red morinda dyed and white undyed stripes and a panel at the lower border with six or seven motifs made of glass beads (see de Jong 1994: fig. 10–6). The technique of dyeing, weaving and sewing of the beaded sarong does not resemble the production of the warp ikat women's sarong, but of the warp striped men's sarong. The weave type, in particular, is plain weave and not warp-faced plain weave. However, no reed is used and, having a length of 85 cm and a width of 60 cm, it is much smaller than the men's sarong.

The bead motifs still found today are said to resemble octopuses and are designated accordingly (*maka kubi*). The diamond shaped inner part of the bead motif is called *mata bili*, which means 'round like a circle'. This motif design also appears on other cloth types (see de Jong 1994: fig. 10-8, 10–10).² It is sometimes associated with the female vulva and is said to symbolize fertility.³ The yellow, white, red, green and blue beads are said to originate from the Portuguese, that is to say from the first wave of European colonization in the sixteenth century.

THE *LAWO BUTU* AS A COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL HEIRLOOM CLOTH

In the social organization of the Lio in Central Flores kin relations on both the female and the male side are important for the transfer of rights of group membership, of property and of ritual and political offices (see Sugishima 1994). In the research village, membership of rank in the sense of estate and rights of ritual and political tasks are transferred in the line of the mother. Membership of a 'House' as well as rights of land, however, are transferred in the line of the father (see de Jong 1996). The almost thirty Houses of the village are physically and symbolically represented in their ceremonial house (*sa'o*), where agricultural rituals (*nggua*) used to be celebrated and where the ancestors of the House are worshipped (see Howell 1995).⁴ The high-ranking heads of the Houses with the title 'lord of the land' (*mosa laki*) formerly constituted the village council, and as village elders they organized ritual life.

There are two categories of property or possessions in the village: those collectively owned by the Houses which are inalienable and those owned by individual men and women which are mainly alienable. Collective possessions of the Houses are the ceremonial house and its treasures. Symbolically these heirlooms are closely related to the ancestors and therefore possess sacred properties (*du'a bapu*). Trade with these items is taboo (*piré*) and will be punished with illness by the ancestral spirits, people say. Besides heirloom items such as ivory tusks and ancient gold jewelry each House possessed three or more pieces of the beaded women's sarongs. The format of the sarong was presumably created by high-ranking weavers of the rich Houses whose ancestors have supposedly originated from Portugal, Malakka and from the islands of

² These motifs are probably borrowed from imported patola cloths. They also appear on Balinese ceremonial clothing (see Bühler et al. 1975).

³ Ndate, personal communication.

⁴ With the term 'House' I signify a socioreligious unit, with 'house' a physical building.

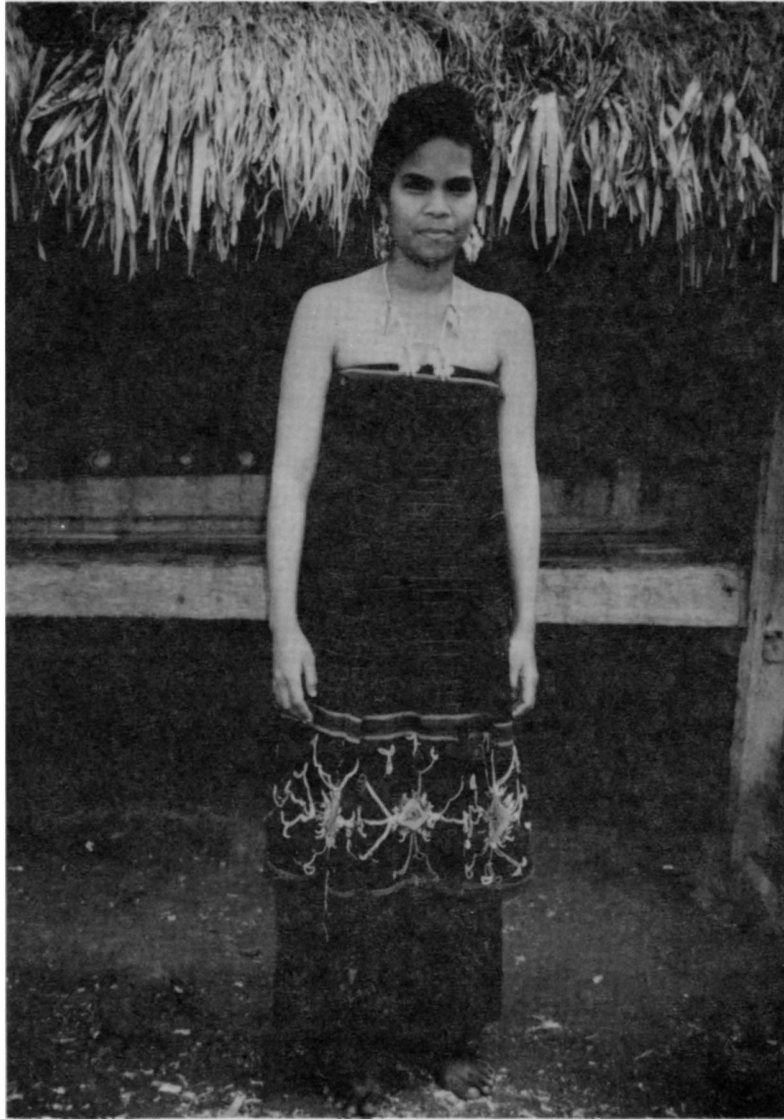


Figure 1. A young high-ranking woman wearing a *lawo butu* and a sarong called *lawo kéli mara* underneath.

Java and Sumba (Ndate 1988: 32). The collectively owned beaded cloths which still exist probably date from the last century, as none of the villagers ever saw them being produced.

Among the important individual possessions of women are all types of alienable cloths, which are passed down from mother to daughter. High-ranking women sometimes also possess a piece of beaded sarong as an heirloom cloth of their own. Individually owned *lawo butu*, as well as the beading, seem to have been made by high-ranking weavers until the beginning of this century. These sarongs look the same as the collectively owned ones. As they are not connected with ancestors of a large kin group, they are less sacred, but selling them may also be dangerous.

Before independence a total of more than a hundred pieces of this textile must have existed. Some of them wore out; others were sold. At present there may be at most approximately thirty pieces left in the village. Recently even new *lawo butu*, apparently with machinespun yarn and plastic beads, have been made by women from the village living in the neighbouring town. These are still ritual cloths, but as new individual possessions, produced and worn in new social contexts, they are again less sacred than the old ones. If we consider the three kinds of beaded sarongs, the old collective ones, the old individual ones and the new individual ones, we can scale them from more sacred to less sacred.

FEMALE AND MALE PROPERTIES OF THE *LAWO BUTU*

At first sight the inalienable possessions of the Houses seem to have properties either related to male or to female aspects. In the anthropological literature about Indonesian societies gold jewelry for example is often perceived as male, whereas cloth is perceived as female (see Niessen 1984). In the village where I conducted my research, however, the two ivory tusks that belong to the inalienable property of the most important Houses are conceptualized as male and as female.⁵ In a similar vein the beaded sarong appears to embody both male and female properties (see also Geirnaert 1992: 93).

The properties of the *lawo butu* related to female aspects are most conspicuous. It is a female piece of clothing, traditionally made and worn by high-ranking young women who possess their rank membership through their mother and partly owned by individual elite women. Further, the sarong has female properties in the beaded motifs that resemble motifs on other types of women's ikat sarongs.

After a closer look, however, properties related to male aspects are also unmistakable. The sacred sarongs belong in the first place to the collective property of the Houses. These are kin groups who visibly acted as groups in agricultural ceremonies. Membership in these groups is accorded through the father. Moreover, male village elders used to determine the need to perform the fertility ceremony in which the beaded sarong was used. And since the 1960s, males have also sometimes stolen these sacred sarongs and sold them to finance school fees for their children, whereas women normally organize the use as well as the selling and giving of cloth. Finally, the fact that the sacred sarong is technically mainly produced as a men's sarong and is decorated with warp stripes and not with ikat motifs is also a significant male property.

⁵ Interestingly, the bigger tusk is female and the smaller one is male. This corresponds with the pair of wooden ancestor statues in the local temple (*keda*) in former times in the Lio area, of which the female one also may have been larger than the male one (Howell 1990: 253).

THE *LAWO BUTU* IN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CEREMONIAL CONTEXTS

Until the 1930s the *lawo butu* was worn as a prescribed ritual dress by young elite women in its original context, the ceremony of the rain dance (*muré*). As a preferred ceremonial dress the *lawo butu* was also worn at the meditation ceremony (*maru*) of the thatching of two of the most important ceremonial houses (*até sa'o nggua*) (see de Jong 1994: fig. 10–16). Here I will concentrate on the context in which the beaded sarong is prescribed, that is on the rain dance. This four-day ceremony was performed when, due to exceptional drought, starvation was imminent, or when after seven years of fallow new swidden fields were cleared for the cultivation of mainly cassava and corn. After periods of upheaval through World War II and the processes of decolonization the rain dance was revitalized in the beginning of the 1960s, but in a shorter version and additionally was now almost exclusively presented in state oriented ceremonial contexts (Figure 2–5).

According to village mythology the origin of agricultural rituals on the whole started with the rain dance ceremony. After an inundation and subsequent severe drought the village elders determined that young high-ranking maidens, because of their physical and spiritual capacities, were best suited to influence the spirits and finally the deities in these food crises. They had to bring about fertility and wealth to the village population.⁶

In pre-independence days numerous preparations had to take place, before the ceremony of the rain dance could be performed. The village elders fixed the timing of the ceremonial event through divination (*so au*). Despite scarcity, large quantities of food as well as clothing and gold jewelry in the shape of a crescent (*gebé rajo*)⁷ had to be prepared. And about a hundred young women were to be chosen and had to be trained in dancing, singing and meditation (*maru*). In case there were too few dancers (*ata eo tau jo'i*), young elite women of the surrounding villages and, in exceptional cases, less respected non-elite young women of the village itself could also take part, but only after the elders had examined their strength of character and their physical and spiritual conditions. Many candidates may have applied, because women who had participated in the rain dance ceremony were higher valued than other women. Young women of the rank of slaves could only assist in cooking tasks and the like.

Because the performance of the ceremony lasted four days, the village population was put to high expense. Every day in the late afternoon and sometimes in the morning the dance was presented in the sacred village centre (*pusé nua*) near the public cult places (*kanga keda*) (see Arndt 1944). The movements expressed the content of the song text. This dealt with an invocation to the deities, the foundation of a ceremonial house and of a family, the actual request for rain (*rina ae*) or fecundation, and the expression of joy after the rain has come. The beginning and end of the dance were accompanied by rhythmic music of gongs and drums (*nggo lamba*). The dance movements were restrained and had a sacred and esthetic quality. This was emphasized by the clothing: the beaded sarong, within living memory worn over an ikat sarong (Figure 1).⁸ Today a shoulder cloth (*luka sémba*), formerly the sacred cloth of the village elders, is additionally used as

⁶ As in other parts of Indonesia (see Heringa 1993), in Nggela women as well as cloths are symbolically related to the fields. This also appears in the Lio myth of the rice maiden Ine Pare whose body was chopped up by her brothers and food plants such as rice grew out of it (see Yamaguchi 1989 and Howell 1990).

⁷ Traditional vulva-shaped golden ear-drops (*wéa*), mainly used for bridewealth, are now worn as finery for the rain dance. The crescent-shaped gold jewelry has apparently mostly been sold.

⁸ Today this sarong is of the type called *lawo kéli mara*, which was only created in the 1960s. Before, any type of ikat sarong is said to have been used. In earlier times the beaded sarong may have been worn without another sarong underneath.

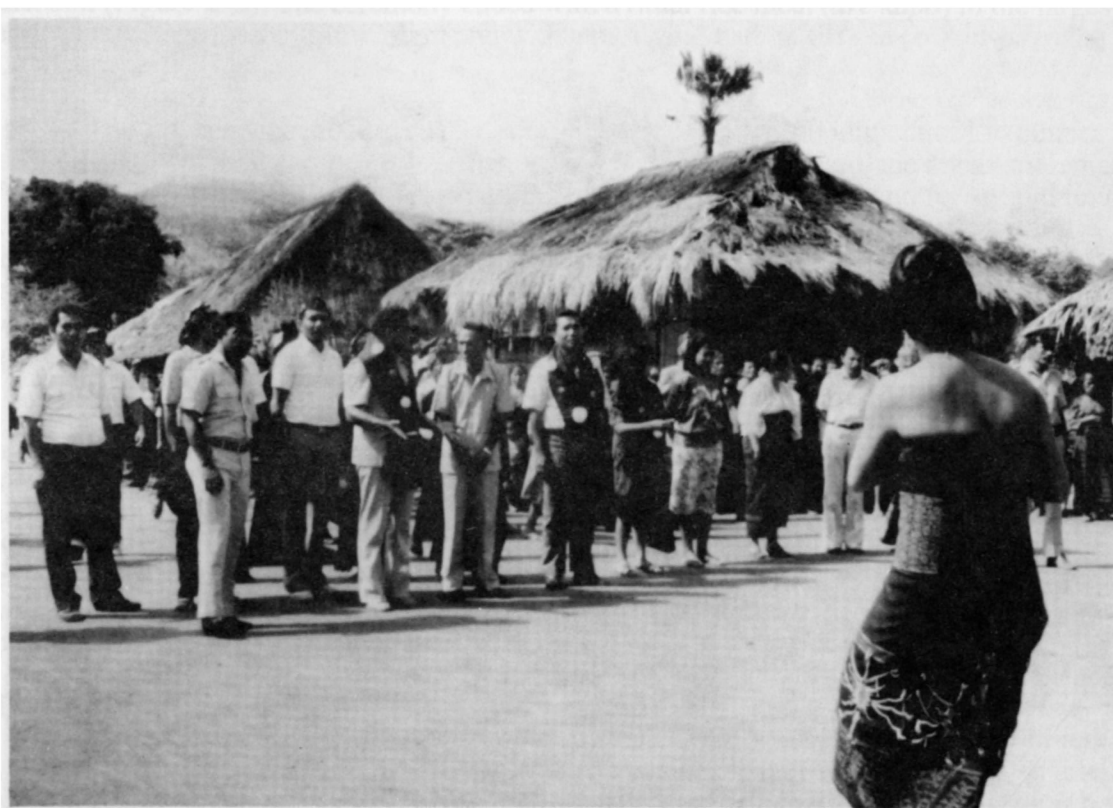


Figure 2. The rain dance performed at the visit of the district governor in 1987.



Figure 3. The rain dance performed at the visit of provincial tourist authorities in 1988.

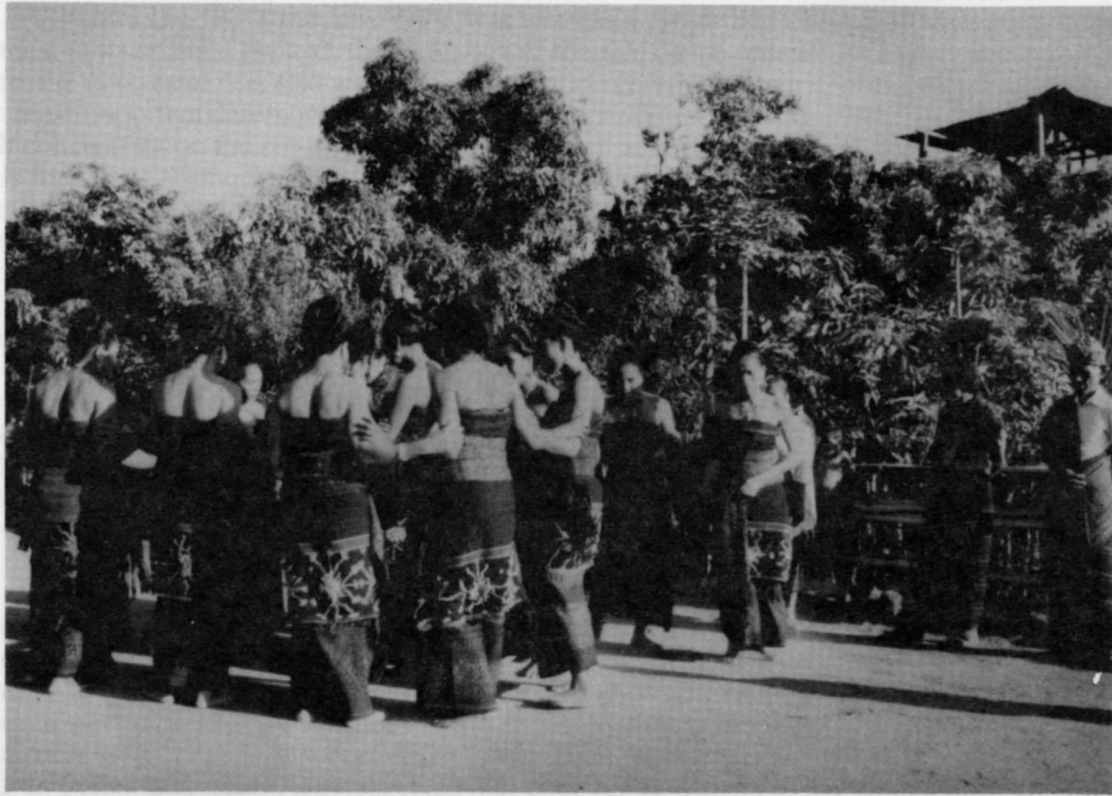


Fig. 4. The middle sequence of the rain dance. 1988.

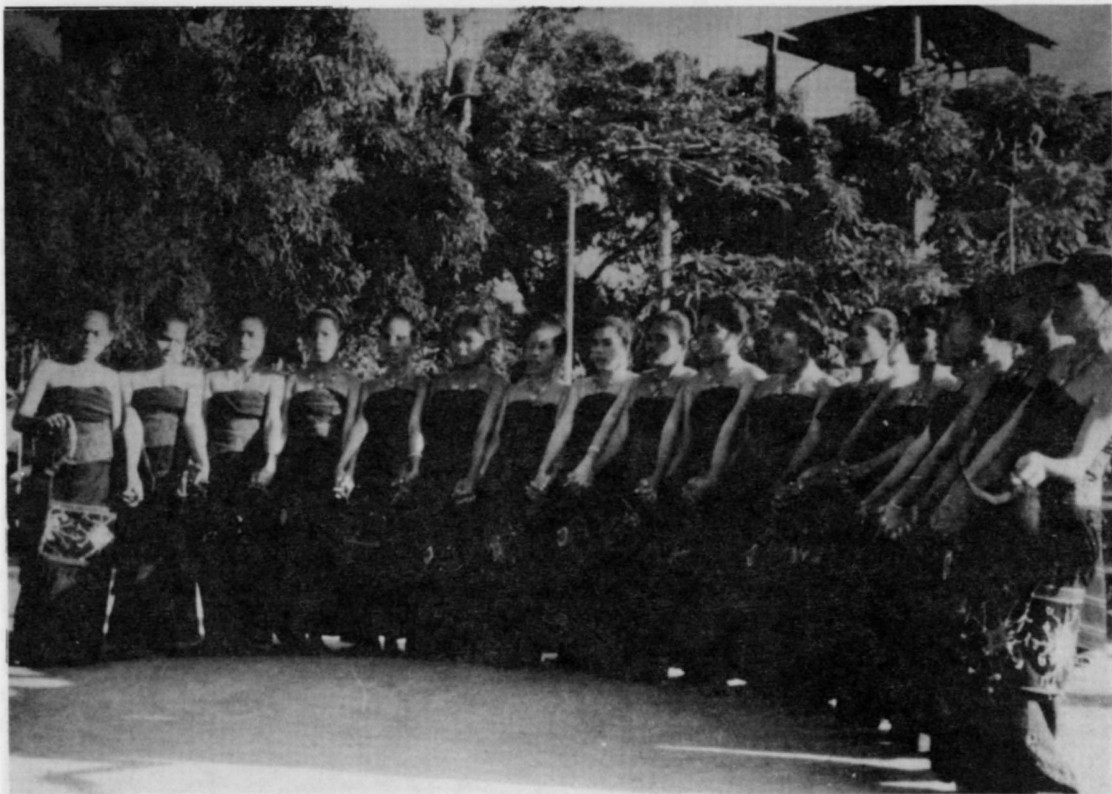


Fig. 5. The last sequence of the rain dance. 1988.

a waist belt (Figure 2–5). The ceremony ended with a ritual rice meal (*aré kapo*) in the largest House of the village on the fourth night and with a purifying bath in the sea (*rio ae mesi*) the next day.

After independence the rain dance was performed as the embodiment of Lio culture in state oriented ceremonial contexts with a national character. Inside the village it was sporadically performed as a welcome ceremony for visiting high government officials and for special tourist groups. Outside the village it was shown at folk art exhibitions, inaugurations of electricity and the like at district level, at province level, and even once in the capital Jakarta. The people of Nggela tell with pride that in Jakarta it actually started to rain before the dance was finished. Recently the rain dance was also shown once at the occasion of a Catholic ceremony in the neighbouring town, supposedly with a strong religious intention.⁹

Formerly the beaded sarongs and the gold jewelry as inalienable possessions of the Houses were only allowed to be used in the sacred village centre. Initially, to perform the dance outside the village, blood sacrifices of pigs and even once of a water buffalo were made to avoid infuriating the ancestral spirits. Gradually the strict conditions related to the rain dance were given up. Government officials initiate the dance now instead of village elders. And it is the government indeed, that distributes rice, if rain fails and the villagers are starving. Participants are far fewer now and belong to all social groups, sometimes they are members of the local state-guided women's group (PKK), and they originate more often from other places.

CONCLUSIONS

The Lio cloth as an heirloom item or as an inalienable possession contains both female and male features in a non-hierarchical way, whereas as an exchange item or as an alienable possession it has female properties, I would suggest. Because Niessen (1984), as well as other anthropologists, mainly seems to focus on exchange cloth she may have come to the right conclusion, that cloth is predominantly female. If she had differentiated between heirloom and exchange cloth and studied the first in more detail, she also might have come up with qualities of these textiles related to both female and male aspects.

Weiner (1987, 1989, 1992) suggests that where the technologies for making cloth become more complex and where the cloth itself becomes an heirloom, certain cloths are regarded as treasures and they are endowed with sacred qualities. She further contends that societal transformations towards hierarchization according to rank most probably occurred as soon as "cloth is imbued with the inalienability of the social group and therefore, the authority attached to rank" (1989: 63). She exemplifies this thesis in case studies of precolonial Samoa and Hawaii in Polynesia. My case study of the *lawo butu* confirms Weiner's conclusions, in so far as this particular heirloom cloth is also perceived as sacred. As a garment merely worn by the young female elite in the most crucial village ceremony organized by the old male elite it also markedly supports the traditional sociopolitical hierarchy of the rank system in this local society. Unlike Weiner, I think that high-ranking women created this heirloom cloth only after, and not before the hierarchization of the village society had evolved. Apart from its important religious and esthetic meaning and function, the beaded sarong thus helped to legitimate and to reify the rank system of nobles, commoners and slaves. Heirloom and hierarchy were thus firmly linked.

⁹ This ceremony concerned the inauguration of a new bishop. Ndate, personal communication.

With independence rank systems were formally abolished in Indonesia, and particularly the political autonomy of village communities. Moreover, the Indonesian government acknowledges Catholicism as one of the official religions, whereas the traditional belief system is not. In the process of nation building certain elements of the local cultures were absorbed in the national culture, expressed by the motto 'unity in diversity' (*bhinneka tunggal ika*). Singular religious expressions of regional ethnic groups thus have become particular forms of Indonesian performing arts. This has also happened with the ceremony of the rain dance. With the erosion of the traditional sociopolitical hierarchy and belief system the ceremony of the rain dance changed from a local ritual to a kind of national oriented state ritual. With it the beaded sarong as an heirloom generally has lost part of its former sacred character and has become more secular. Interestingly, its function of sustaining a sociopolitical order seems to continue, though in a wider frame.

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