

# “MORE LIKE LIVING WITH IT THAN IN IT”: The Modified Functions of Minangkabau *Rumah Gadang* of West Sumatra, Indonesia

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the modified functions of Minangkabau traditional house, called *Rumah Gadang* (large house), in which a large extended matrilineal family lives. Because of its resemblance to a buffalo-horn shaped roof, alternatively it is called *Rumah Bagonjong*, appreciated and interpreted as a powerful symbol of the Minangkabau, the world's largest matrilineal society. Using previous researches, including Usman (1987), Riza (2001), and Elfira (2013; 2015) as its foundation, this paper argues that as a result of current cultural and social situations, and economic needs, the essence of *Rumah Gadang*, a major symbol of Minangkabau ethnicity, to some degrees, has been reconstructed and modified in contemporary Minangkabau society of West Sumatra, Indonesia. Mainly based on qualitative data, collected in Minangkabau land between 2017 and 2018, it is argued that one of its daily functions has been changed into a social condition that is kind of more “living with it,” than “in it”.

**Keywords:** Minangkabau, *Rumah Gadang*, *adat*, matrilineal, Indonesia

## Introduction

*Minangkabau ranah nan den cinto, pusako bundo nan dahulunya.*

*Rumah gadang nan sambilan ruang, rangkiang bairiang nan dihalamannya.*

(Minangkabau is my beloved homeland, the ancestral property of my mother.

The Big House with nine rooms, in which rice sheds are stood in its front yard)

The quotation above is part of a popular Minangkabau song, especially among Minangkabau *perantau* (Minangkabau migrants). The lyric indicates a person's deep love to her/his homeland of Minangkabau, where the mother's role is culturally, structurally and affectively central in its matrilineal kinship system. The song also describes the place in which the Minangkabau people communally live – the *Rumah Gadang*, appreciated and interpreted as a powerful symbol of the Minangkabau, the world's largest existing matrilineal society.

*Rumah* means ‘home’ or ‘house’ and *gadang* means ‘big’ or ‘huge’, *rumah gadang* literally refers to a physically big or large house occupied by a large extended matrilineal family. Verkerk Pistorious, a Dutch official reporter, mentioned that in 1871 about 60 to 80 people lived in a house in the Kota VII region (West Sumatra) and more than 100 people did in one house in Alahan Panjang (West Sumatra) (Cited from Alers, 1990:81).

*Rumah Gadang* is also known as the lineage house since it is owned by a matrilineal descent group as a whole, and forms a part of the group's ancestral property (*harto pusako*). Due to its

resemblance to a buffalo-horn shaped roof, it is alternatively called *Rumah Bagonjong*. This horn shaped roof (*bagonjong*) seems to have been one of the important physical symbols of Minangkabau. Peter Nas and Gerard Persoon (2003:4) argue that this symbolism is strongly linked to ethnicity and identity and that house forms play an important role in expressing these ideas.

There are a lot of modern buildings, most of which are local government offices and public activity centers, with buffalo-horn shaped roofs (*bagonjong*) in many cities of West Sumatra. They have become signs to travelers that they are in the land of Minangkabau (*ranah Minang*), as seen in figure 1.



Figure 1: A railway station with *bagonjong* roof (source: Author's documentation, 2018)

Its significant functions in the application of Minangkabau *adat* practices and communities have led to many researches on Minangkabau studies that focus on the life and character of the *Rumah Gadang*, among them were Bachtiar (1967), Cornelis and Alers (1990), Capistrano (1997), and Hadler (1999).

However, researches like Usman's (1987), Riza's (2001), and Vellinga's (2004), show that currently *Rumah Gadang* seem to have been mostly abandoned today, with their residential and ritual functions taken over by modern houses that better fulfill the wishes of their owners. Kato (1982), Waterson (1990), and Capistrano (1997) add that the need for more privacy and comfort are two of the main reasons raised by some common Minangkabau people why they prefer to build modern houses for their

living place. Elfira (2013, 2015), moreover, argues that the importance of *Rumah Gadang* has declined as a result of the influences of Western values, *Syariah* laws and Indonesian policies on matrilineal *adat*.

Using previous researches as its foundation, this paper argues that due to current cultural and social situations and economical needs, the essence of *Rumah Gadang* as a major symbol of Minangkabau ethnicity, to some degree, has been reconstructed and modified in contemporary Minangkabau society of West Sumatra, Indonesia. It is argued that the implementation of Indonesian new autonomy laws and current government policies have led to one of the *Rumah Gadang*'s daily functions changing into a social state of more like "living with it, than in it".

Some theories have been used as tools for analysis. In relation to family and households, Edholm contends that 'what constitutes the family is dependent on not only what we have called kinship ties but equally in terms of residence, domestic units or households' (Edholm.1993:6). Linda Stone, furthermore, argues that since households or domestic groups are never static as they have changed composition over time, it is better to see them as in flux. Stone also suggests that different domestic cycle patterns found around the world can be studied in relation to political and economic factors, the use of human and natural resources for subsistence, the transmission of property, and other cultural and historical factors (Stone, 2005:18).

Regarding family concepts, it is important to pay attention to how people use the term family in everyday life (Gubrium and Holstein 1990). Coltrane argues that the meaning of family is constructed through talking and discourse (Coltrane 1998, 5).

In order to examine how the transformations are taking place in the Minangkabau *Rumah Gadang*, I relied on qualitative data, focusing

on gender, *adat*, and family, and collected them through deep interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations between 2017 and 2018 in the Indonesian Minangkabau land of West Sumatra. Qualitative methods, which captured the contextual, real-life, everyday experiences of the individual interviewed, are used because they are more effective in exploring the way Minangkabau people modify functions of *Rumah Gadang* in order to cope with current social situation and economical needs.

### **The Essence of *Rumah Gadang*: Epitomizing Minangkabau *Adat***

According to *tambo Minangkabau* (historiography of Minangkabau), the first architect of *Rumah Gadang*, was Tantejo Garhano. He was ordered by Datuk Perpatih Nan Sabatang, the founding father of *Laras Bodi Caniago*, to build a communal house (Usman, 1987: 2). The *Rumah Gadang* had to be built according to prescribed rules and regulations. A representative *Rumah Gadang* should have at least one *ruang* (room), *labuah* (space), *gonjong* (upswept pinnacle of a roof), and *janjang tanggo* (ladder).

The *Rumah Gadang* is a large elongated wooden structure, supported by more than 19 bulky towering wooden pillars (Hadler, 2000:90). The floor is about two meters above the ground and could be reached by climbing a ladder attached to the house. The elongated and rectangular floor is made of planks, which comes in two styles. In the *Laras* (moiety) Koto Piliang, whose social and political systems were more aristocratic, the floors are divided lengthwise into two parts (*labuah*). The back half was constructed a little higher than the front half. In traditional formal activities, the respected people such as the *penghulu* (a clan leader) were seated on the higher part of the floor. In the *Laras Bodi Caniago*, whose social and political systems were more egalitarian, a flat style of floor was chosen, which is seen by some authors to reflect a more egalitarian set of values (Bachtiar, 1967;

Hadler, 1999).

The *Rumah Gadang* has several rooms, usually odd numbered, and, based on their functions, are divided into two categories: the communal or public, and the private. The front or center side of the *Rumah Gadang* was usually used for communal or *adat* functions such as wedding ceremonies, and *penghulu* meetings, whereas the private rooms are usually located at the very back of the house. Normally two thirds to three quarters of the rooms were used for public functions, and the rest for private matters (Hadler, 1999:10). Some of the rooms (*ruang*) were used as sleeping rooms (*bilik*), considered as private areas.

The *bilik* were occupied by the women of the house and their young children. Customarily, in every *bilik* the women received their husbands, who visited regularly at night. The *dapua* (kitchen), added as an annex at the end of the house, was a communal kitchen with communal stoves where the women of the house prepared and provided the food for their own family members or guests. The *dapua*, used by household members or close acquaintances as an informal entrance to the house, was also used as a place to discuss 'women matters' by the women of the house. The agrarian nature of Minangkabau society was reflected in the *rangkiang* (rice shed), located in the front yard of the *Rumah Gadang*. The sharing of rice indicates the communal structure of the household economy.

At least till the 1920s, the *Rumah Gadang* and the surrounding buildings were still a central part of the life of the Minangkabau, as reflected in the memoirs of Rajab (1995):

*The house was built by the husband of my great grandmother, who had had to move from another house because it was full...In order for everyone to have a place in the house the back part of the house was divided into seven rooms for the women of the house...That was the custom in Minangkabau. Everyone who was living under*

*the same roof was considered part of the same family, that is, they were all the grandchildren of the same woman. I would say it was like being born in a barrack, since there were more than forty people living in that house at the time. The seven girls all had children, half of whom also had children, and every night seven unfamiliar men came to the house, that is, the husbands of the seven women (Radjab, 1995:150-151).*

Basing on Rajab's memoirs, it can be said that *Rumah Gadang* is a place in which Minangkabau people started applying their *adat* into daily life. As also argued by Reenen (1996:2), it epitomizes their matrilineal kinship organization. Because of its matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) Minangkabau women have received significant roles within *Rumah Gadang* and Minangkabau society, symbolized as *limpapeh Minang jo Rumah Gadang* (the central pillars of Minangkabau and *Rumah Gadang*). A Minangkabau woman's life could not be separated from her *Rumah Gadang*, as her life begins and ends in, and is centered around the *Rumah Gadang*.

Formally, the *Rumah Gadang* was headed by the eldest *mamak* (maternal uncle), called *tungganai*. He is still considered to be one of its members (*urang rumah*), despite the fact that he does not live there. His function is like a guardian of the house and a mediator between household members and the society, while the true authority lay in the hands of the eldest women (*niniek*).

The physical existence of *Rumah Gadang* has given ways to imitations of its form. According to Marcel Vellinga, since the early 1970s a large number of houses have been built by combining modern building materials, construction methods and facilities with older traditional forms, and examples of these modernised traditional houses can be found in and around towns like Payahkumbuh and Bukittinggi (Vellinga, 2004:100). Such modernized imitation has ultimately led to a reversal influence on the

original functions of the *Rumah Gadang* itself such that even in villages like those of Abai Sangir, situated in the south-east of the province of West Sumatra, where vernacular houses, like *Rumah Gadang*, are still built fairly regularly in the traditional manner, using traditional methods and materials, to some extent, many of its old functions as described by Rajab's memoir have been changed.

### **Modified Functions of *Rumah Gadang* in Contemporary Minangkabau Society**



Figure 2. The Second Replica of *Ustano Baso Pagaruyung* (source: Author's documentation, 2018)

The picture above is the second replica of *Ustano Baso Pagaruyung* (The Palace of *Basa Pagaruyung*), located in *Tanah Datar* - the inland of Minangkabau. After its first replica was burnt in 2007, the Minangkabau people, either in inland and *rantau* (migrant) areas, physically and financially worked together to rebuild it in 2008. Arguably, since the original one, built in 1804 and burned in the time of the Padri war, this kind of *Rumah Gadang*, has become a symbol of Minangkabau unity and identity. The newest one, however, seemingly has been used more for ceremonial *adat* purposes and tourism events, especially after the launch of the local government new policies on tourism. The regent of Tanah Datar, Irudinansyah Tarmizi, declares that "*Pariwisata jadi prioritas Tanah Datar*" ("Tourism has become the priority of Tanah Datar") (*Destinasi Indonesia*, 2017:26). By launching this policy, it is expected that people and regency will financially and culturally get more benefits from tourism sectors.

The local government, apparently, has given wider opportunities for tourists to explore

and enjoy historical architectural sites located in the Tanah Datar regency. An example in this regard would be in the way the local government reorganizes the function of *Ustano Baso Pagaruyung*, which has become the main tourist site in this area. A tourist can rent the palace for a Minangkabau wedding custom, thereby allowing him/her to freely walk inside the Palace. It seems that the function of *Ustano Baso Pagaruyung* as a Royal Palace where the Ruler of Pagaruyung and his extended matrilineal family daily and privately live with *adat* principles is fast disappearing. This kind of *Rumah Gadang* has become regalia of a living place. It seems that other *Rumah Gadangs* around the Minangkabau land, to different degrees, have also had the same fate.

Although in the homeland of Minangkabau a number of *Rumah Gadang* can still be found, many of them are very run-down. An example would be in *Nagari Sumpu*, where in 2012, only 62 out of the original 200 *rumah gadang* were left and most were in a state of ruin (*Destinasi Indonesia*, 2017:14). When organizing a focus group discussion in September 2018 with selected people from Sumpur area – the *Wali Nagari* (head of *nagari*), *Datuk* (head of clan), and *Wali Jorong* (head of neighbor community) – I raised issues on the ruined and neglected *Rumah Gadangs* found within this area. Expensive renovation and complicated lineal heirs were the two main answers provided. The emptiness of the *Rumah Gadangs* could also be due to its legal heirs being in *rantau* (migration). *Marantau* (migrating) has always been associated with the Indonesians of Minangkabau. These people usually engaged in travels to gain prosperity and wisdom before going back to participate in developing their homeland. Since every family has its member conducting *marantau*, most of houses in Sumpur area consist of incomplete families. This condition has proven Stone's argument that household composition may change as a result of changing condition (2005:18). In any event, those *Gandang* houses that may still be around and are being used, they are being used

only as private houses, or have been divided up into separate elementary family compartments.

Nowadays, *A Rumah Gadang* is even functioning as a rented house, where some unrelated elementary families live together. Each family has its own cooking stove, and is busy with its own family affairs. In contrast, in the past, *Rumah Gadang*, especially *Rumah Gadang sambilan ruang* (the Big House with nine rooms), besides being one of the decisive factors in establishing a *nagari*, mainly functioned as a communal house with matrilineal principles. An example of matrilineal principles is that all members, either living in or out of the *Rumah Gadang*, worked together in maintaining the house affairs, except the private ones. They used rice from the same rice barn and prepared food together in the communal kitchen with communal stoves, though they may be using separate pots. Sometimes, the *ninie* (the most elderly woman) would have meals together with one of the *samande* (elementary family consisting of a mother and her young children) groups. The communal kitchen has always been a place where the *ninie* could discuss many issues, or intervene in communal private affairs. By renting their *Rumah Gadang*, the owners, usually living outside area, still can get benefits from this ancestral property.

In addition to their functioning as private homes, some *Rumah Gadang* have also been used as “temporary hotels”, a trend of converting these ancestral houses as tourists' dwelling houses that is becoming very popular, an observation made by Yenny, a 50-year-old Minangkabau *parantau* (traveller) from Jakarta, who had only recently visited her paternal home town:

*“How beautiful is this country of Koto Gadang ... here there are many empty houses, so they are rented for local tourists. The rented room is cheap; only 75 thousand rupiah per night ... (Yenny, quoted from her Facebook line, 16 August 2018, 22.44).*

The owners of these empty houses typically live outside their areas. Those who occasionally

come usually ask local people to look after their houses and giving them commissions for doing so. By renting out their empty houses to tourists, owners of those homes can expect to collect money to pay those looking after their empty houses.

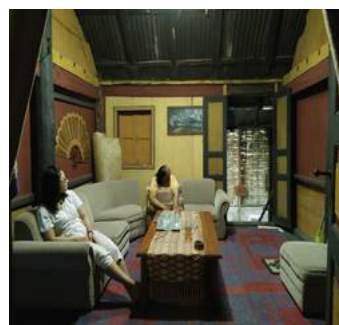
Due to the current developing trend, *Nagari Sumpu* has now become a region that provides home stay at original *rumah gadang*s. Not only can a tourist stay with the owner of the *rumah gadang*, he/she can also participate in the traditional daily life activities. The home owners can also arrange for tours around the Sumpur. So far up to date, there are five renovated *rumah gadang* participating in this program. According to Karnita, the initiator of this program, the home staying program is an idea to conserve *Rumah Gadang*s and their surroundings. Karnita's own matrilineal *Rumah Gadang* itself burned down in 2013. It was rebuilt after getting financial support from a big company concerned with the conservation of *Rumah Gadang*.



Figure 3: Renovated *Rumah Gadang* in Sumpur region (source: Author's documentation, 2018)



Figure 4: Inside a rented *rumah gadang* in Sumpur region (source: author's documentation, 2018)



Figures 3 and 4 show Karnita's *Rumah Gadang* that has been renovated. It has two living rooms, the first and the bigger one with traditional decoration (on the left) located in front or central area of the house, and is used for tourists, while the second and smaller one with sofa seats (on the right) is located in the back area next to the kitchen, and is used for Karnita's family members. Karnita also divides the sleeping rooms into two parts. The rooms located in the front area are used for the tourists, while her family members use the rooms located in the back area of *Rumah Gadang*. Karnita's kitchen located in the backyard area has two types of cooking stove: a modern one (with gas)

and a traditional one (with wood). Karnita has also added other new facilities to her *Rumah Gadang* – a new toilet for her guests. Despite the above-mentioned separations, all members of the *Rumah Gadang* can freely mingle with each other, as Karnita says, “One of the main reasons why I organized this program is that outsiders, especially non-Minangkabau people, can have a real experience living in Minangkabau *Rumah Gadang*....to introduce Minangkabau *adat* practices to them,” (based on interview at her *Rumah Gadang*, September 2018)

It can be said that Karnita’s household composition changes, depending on how many tourists participate in this program. If there is no tourist or extended family member staying in *Rumah Gadang*, Karnita usually locks her *Rumah Gadang* and move to her own house, built by her husband, who is a *Wali Nagari* of this area. This condition suits arguments proposed by Edholm (1993:6), Stone (2005:18), Gubrium and Holstein (1990), Coltrane (1998:5).

## Conclusion

The above discussion leads us to some conclusions. Firstly, as a result of current cultural and social situation, and economical needs, the essence of *Rumah Gadang*, a major symbol of Minangkabau ethnicity, to some degrees, has been reconstructed and modified in contemporary Minangkabau society of West Sumatra, Indonesia. Although most of *Rumah Gadangs* serve a mainly ceremonial and symbolic purpose, some of them still function as residential units with some modifications. The use of *Rumah Gadang* as a “private house”, and “temporary dwelling house”, where unrelated individuals can live together, are some of its modifications. There are also some changes in household practices as the function of their *rumah gadang* has been changed into a condition like like “more living with it, than in it”. By modifying the function of their *rumah gadang*, either for economic or social reasons, these owners of *rumah gadang* indirectly have raised the existence of *rumah gadang* in contemporary

Minangkabau.

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