

## THE TRADITIONAL HOUSE (*RUMAH GADANG*) THE NEGLECTED CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MINANGKABAU<sup>1</sup>

By: Herwandi<sup>2</sup>

The traditional house also called *Rumah Gadang* or *rumah adat* is one of Minangkabau cultural heritage. The construction of the *Rumah Gadang* has characteristic features showing differences from the other traditional houses existing across Indonesia. This cultural heritage is a stage like house whose floors lie ranging from 2.5 to 3 meters from the ground level. The roofs are buffalo horns shaped, pointed. The outsides of the wall are tilting out forming an angle wider than Dinding-dinding bagian luar berdiri miring kearah luar membentuk –sudut besar dari 90 degrees so that principally the traditional house looks like unsymmetrical rectangle raises up wider. So that such construction causes the upper space will become wider than the one of the lower part, causing the air circulation frier. The house construction uses no nail but rather by chisling or tying the building material one another: usually the larger material is chisled, and the small ones are tied to one another.

At the beginning the function of rumah gadang is as a house to live and a lace in which the customary ceremonies are held. As a common living house, the *rumah gadang* preserves particular rules. A married woman lives together with her children in the *rumah gadang*. Specilly for an adult man (*balligh*) is not allowed to spend the night in the *rumah gadang*, they are permitted to go to bed at a small mosque (*Surau*) belonging to respective community within the clan where they belong to. As a place where the consultation is held, the rumah gadang is a building of activity center of all clans in discussion their common concerns. As a place where the customary cerimonies are held the *rumah gadang* becomes important in positioning their ranking of dignitary level (Clan member) in a "proper" position, and the appointment the adat leader (*penghulu*) is there. Nowadays, the *rumah gadang* has been abandoned and it does not function as a living house of the clan member anymore. Somewhere else, probably the rumah gadang stil function as a facility in which the ceremonied of adat are held such as matrimonial and the appointment the *Penghulu*, however, somewhere else it has become an abandoned building, and even many of them have deteriorated and are flat to the ground without any attempt of renewal and maintainance.

This papers tries to discuss the matter of *rumah gadang* as a cultural heritage, either its material in relation to the surrounding nature or the form of its architecture, its function, as well as the reason such a heritage starts to undergo the functional degradation, and abandoned by its supporting society.

Key word: *Rumah Gadang, function, customary, ceremony, sustainability.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Papers, introducing discussion, presented in "International Seminar Archipelago Haritage 2012", held by Faculty of Letters and Arts- Universitas Negri Semarang, Desember 18-19 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Herwandi, a lecturer of Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University (Padang), the Dean of the same Faculty.

## **Introduction**

Nowadays, the *rumah gadang* in Minangkabau is already out of use as it should be. There are not so many *rumah gadang* standing intactly and most of which are deteriorating to wait for their ends and even, a lot of them are flat to the ground. In general, the *rumah gadang* has experienced its primary functional degradation for it is not made use by the people of Minangkabau as it functioned initially namely as the living house of the clan community, as a place in which the matrilineal tradition is inherited, as place to hold a traditional ceremony such as the ceremonies of wedding, the appointment of *Penghulu*, the *adat* consultation at the clan level and so on related to the sustainability of the clan. At the present there are many traditional houses become vacated without occupant, and they are only used for a certain time so it make sense many of them are out of order and even many of which fall ruin and even they are flat to the ground.

In this paper, we will see that the *rumah gadang* as a traditional cultural heritage of Minangkabau is the adapted result of the Minangkabau people to the ecosystem in the context of Minangkabau cultural loyalty. This papers will see how the ties of social and ecosystem changes toward the existance of *rumah gadang* in Minangkabau now. How is the Minangkabau social system at the present causing the functional degradation of *rumah gadang*? Is there a correlation of the *rumah gadang* functional degradation to the condition of of ecosystem surrounding Minangkabau which also has undergone changes and it does not support the existence of the *rumah gadang* anymore anylonger.

## **Topography and People of Minangkabau**

The topography of Minangkabau intermontonous and lot of hills through which sometimes there flows a stony and rapid current river. Some of the high mountains are mount Merapi, Mount Singgalang, Mount Tandikat, Mount Bungsu, an Mount Talang belonging to the ridges of *Bukit Barisan* in Sumatra.some of which are active vulcanos emitting vucanic smoke, though several of which are not active any longer. Since the better part of topography of *Minangkabau* consist of high mountains, therefore, occasionally the wind blows severely and is followed with torrential rain.

Here and there, especially, on the slope and on the feet of the mountains runs a vast forest which was reviously full of big trees and high enough, but now the trees are becoming the object of illegal logging and the beeter part of which is made farm plantation. Long ago, there roamed wild animals in the forest such as boar, tapir, tiger, snake, bird and so on, for the forest and its environment still can keep their system of living. Today, however, lot of their habitat have been robbed for the need of farm and plantation, therefore, most of the animals migrated on to find their new habitat, and even they unreluctantly enter the pople settlement.

The people settlement are scattered in the areas situated between the mountains and the hills, and along the river bank which the fertile area for agriculture of growing rice both dry and wet fields. On the slops of the hill or on the height there stand the buildings of rumah gadang well ordered forming units of settlement. Then the units of the settlement form *Nagari*\_namely a tradisional village of Minangkabau.<sup>3</sup> A number of nagaris still preserving the building of rumah gadang and up to now they can be found such as in the *nagari* of Balimbiang, Regency of Tanah Datar (Izzati cs, 2002), *nagari* Muaro Labuah and Abai in the Regency of South Solok (Nur and Herwandi, 2009).

*Nagari* is the smallest ethnographic territory in Minangkabau and is an autonomous territory. *Nagari* is also a cultural unit territory distinguishing one nagari from another for each nagari has its own *adat-istiadat* showing the identity of *nagari*, although it is still in the sense of Minangkabau customary. In the past,, nagari is governed by an institution namely the Assembly of Nagari (*Kerapatan Adat Nagari*), based upon the principle of democracy whose member consist of *Penghulus* of each clan prevailing in the Nagari (Kato: 1977, 43). The Assembly of Nagari is truly an institution *adat* which has run since long time ago. In the previous papers, Herwandi (2010) stated that the Assembly of Nagari is an institution carrying on the role called open stage *medan nan bapaneh* di Minangkabau. The institution of *medan nan*

---

<sup>3</sup> In the era of precolonial it is assumed that the number of nagari reached 600 inMinangkabau (Graves, 1981, 14). In 1911 noted 541 nagaris in 1920 about 567 nagaris, after some years later it was likely to happen a signifikan rduction, for in 1931 it was noted bout 531 nagaris prevailed in Minangkabau (Oki: 1977, 27). It seemed to happen because the Dutch started to organize its territory inMinangkabau, including simplifying numbers of nagaris in the colonial era. In the era of Independece nowadays is noted as many as 498 nagaris (Effendi, 2006). About nagari, see also, Dobbin (1983: 13).

*bapaneh* is an democratic institution which has appeared since the era of neolithic-megalithic in Minangkabau. Materially, this institution consists of a number of ordered *menhir* being functioned as a stone chair, then, a number of the stone chairs were ordered in such a way to form letter U or in other formation. The function of *medan nan bapaneh* is not other than an open place in which a consultation was taken. Sometimes, such a function is added as the arena in which the performance shows took place or the performance art of the local people. The function of *medan nan bapaneh* as a democratic institution is carried on by the Assembly of Nagari usually holding the activity of making consultation in the House of Assembly (*Kerapatan Adat Nagari*) (Herwandi, 2010). Nowadays, the House of Assembly is just a complement in carrying out the administration of Nagari for the nagari itself is structurally headed by The Head of Nagari (Wali Nagari) and such a term of wali Nagari is not recognized in the traditional adat of Minangkabau.<sup>4</sup>

The people of Minangkabau belong to Matrilineal parentage based upon maternal descendant, prevailing in an umbrella of clan geneology unit consisting of some wombs (*paruik*), and each womb divided into a unit of community (*kaum*). The clan (*suku*) is lead by one or more *Penghulus*; the Womb (*Paruik*) womb is lead by an uncle – mother's brother a *Tungganai* or called *mamak rumah* (Kato, 1977: 38, 44), and community (*Kaum*) is lead by a *Mamak* the head of kaum. In the past, the role of *mamak* was predominant and decisive in the Minangkabau society but now the situation is quite otherwise there occurs a great degradation. The *mamak* is not decisive anymore in the family of Minangkabau people. Instead, the *mamak's* role has taken over by the father of the whole lives.

In a traditional people of Minangkabau there is a quite complex familiar relationship traditional, however, such a familiar relationship may become a meaningful social asset to empower the social strength within the Minangkabau people. In such a kinship relation there are terms such as *niniak*, *gaek*, *amak*, *mamak*, *kemenakan*, *bako*, *anak pisang*, *sumando*, *pasumandan*, *ipa*, *bisan*.<sup>5</sup> In the

---

<sup>4</sup>Wali nagari was introduced in Dutch colonial era at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, corresponding to the beginning era of colonial Dutch imposed its power in (Herwandi, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> *Niniak* is the mother of mother or sister of mother *amak*, whereas *gaek* is the brother of mother, *amak* (one generation above mother). *Amak* is a term of expression to

past such a kinship relation already strengthened the social network as well as strengthened the social resilient in Minangkabau but now such a social network has weakened and even tend to cease.

In the traditional people of Minangkabau, the principle of communal order has deeply planted in their behavior except those who have been damaged by negative external values. The principle of community does not mean to reign the freedom of the clan member to act creatively in a permissible restrictions along with the adat rules. It means the people of Minangkabau prioritize both individual person and communal society. One has a full capacity as an individual person and is deeply realized by the communal people and the individual in person, but on the contrary, an individual person fully realizes how important the society is. Principle of community in a certain respect is beginning to be disturbed since the tradition ("Alam Minangkabau") collided with other cultural values such as Western culture so that the community in a certain viewpoint has switched to the individual values.

### **The *Rumah Gadang* Construction: Result of Adaptation and Local Wisdom "Earth Quake Proof"**

The traditional house (*Rumah Gadang*) is the one having particular characteristic and showing differences from other traditional house construction across Indonesia. The house is a stage like (Junus, 1971: 251), whose floor ranges 2,5 up to 3 meters from the ground level. Its roof is acute formed, pointed. The outside walls stand tilting out to form an angle of larger than 90 degrees so that if the the basic is seen, the *Rumah Gadang* looks like an unsymmetrical rectangle raising up. Such a construction causes the upper space wider than the lower one. The construction of this house uses no nail but by chisling or by tying one material to another: usually the larger material is chisled and the smaller one is tied.

The room/space in *Rumah Gadang* is usually called *lanjar* and *ruang*; *Lanjar* is the space from the fron to the back of the house and is screend by columns and the most back lanjar consists of series of rooms whereas two or three *lanjars* at the front

---

mother. *Mamak* is the brother of mother. *Kamanakan* is the son of ancle sister (*mamak*). Bako is the family of father side. *Anak pisang* is the chil of brother. *Sumando* is the husband of sister. *Pasumandan* is the mother of husband of our daughter. *Ipa* is *husband/wife of brother/sister of wife* (Kato 1977: 72)

part of the house just the vacant rooms being functioned on certain occasion; *the room (ruang)* is a serial room running from left to right also screened by columns – usually the room and space have no screen in the front part, it is called a space as a whole.

Though commonly a *rumah gadang* has a ladder at the front of the house just exactly at the middle space, there are some places showing the difference with prevalence such as in the region of *Limapuluh Koto* part of which are located at the back of the house as in Agam it is located in the front left.

The kitchen is located differently. Sometimes, it is particularly made and located on the right of the entrance and sometimes it is located in a special room at both end of the house. Anyhow, sometimes it is made separately from the *Rumah Gadang* and is connected with a special bridge to the main building.

The traditional *rumah gadang* of Minangkabau is a cultural product of Minangkabau and is result of social interaction of the people to their ecosystem. At the beginning, materially, the nature provides the material for the construction of the *Rumah Gadang* such as column, floor, wall, and materials for roof, and ladder. The column is made of *iron* wood (Kato 1977, 49) which is big and long enough whose diameter is more than 30 cms and the length is more than 20 up to 25 m. the ladder is made of wood, the floor is made of wooden plank or bamboo, wall is made of wooden plank and the roof is made of wine-palm mane. As a further development, at the present there is other material replacing them such as the column and roof (the column is made of concrete, and the roof is made of corrugated iron). This is truly due to several factors namely: Firstly, the area surrounding the home settlement does not support it any longer for a better part of land surrounding the village has been exploited in such a way for the sake of rice growing farm and plantation so that the nature does not provide enough tree any more to be housing material *Rumah Gadang*: the living tree is limited, there is almost no tree reaching the diameter of 25 up to 30 cm, if any, it grows in a deep forest far away from the people's reach so that it is hard for the people to have the building material thereof. Similarly, the palm wine mane for roof for the tree producing the mane is now scarcely growing and hard to find around the people settlement and if any it is quite limited. Secondly, the technological system and the knowledge of people about modern technology that the

have recognize modern technology. The people have known the concrete technology for column making and corrugated metal technology using nail to fasten the roof though the knowledge of the technology is still limited. The technological system and the knowledge of modern technology owned by the people are much more practical rather than the traditional one so it enables them to use it and switch to the new technological system. Thirdly, the easier transportation to reach the resident settlement enable the people to have the building material such as ferro concrete, cement, and so on needed by the new system of technology they have.

The construction *rumah gadang*, forming a stage house for its floor lies far from the ground (Junus, 1971: 251), lavitated 2,5 - 3 ms from the ground showing there is adaptation of the Minangkabau people to the biotic environment primarily animal. It means the higher range of the floor to the ground, besides functioning as a domestic animal enclosure it also reflect the fear of the people from the wild animal to themselves or to their domestic animal.

The tilting roof and wall constructions of *rumah gadang* reflect the people adaptation to weather of Minangkabau topography running on the tropical mountains in which the change of seasons frequently occurs. In the rainy, the rain drop runs severely so the tilting roof fit to the torrential rain to anticipate such a weather condition that the water running down on the roof quickly foll down to the ground without being absorbed by the roof. Where as in the sunny, the tilting roof functions as to ban the sunshine from falling on the roof to form 90 degrees angle that the floor of the *rumah gadang* in such a way that the temperature in the house do not grill<sup>a</sup>. Meanwhile, the wall construction of the *rumah gadang* tending to tilt and form the angle of 90 degrees with floor is also to reflect the adaptation of Minangkabau people to their surrounding environment, mainly, the wind blow and mountains surrounding. Since the *rumah gadang* is located on the hilly area and the slope of mountains, probably the wind blow always goes swiftly. Therefore, the tilting wall construction of *rumah gadang* is very much helping to blocking the wind blow. Yhe wall larger corner which is larger than 90 degrees may switch parts of wind blow when there is fast wind storms the body of the *rumah gadang*. Such a wall corner is to weaken the wind blow from outside for the wall directs wind blow more to the ground preventing the wind from coliding to the wall frontally. As for the wall tilting

outward will make the inner space of the *rumah gadang* wider. This situation is very conducive to the air circulation inside the house. The air coming into the house immediately experiences rotary process since it does not come across any significant block inside the *rumah gadang* because the wall tending to form the angle larger than 90 degrees is very much helpful.

In general, the Rumah Gadang is located on the slope of mountain, within the *ring of fire* of course there frequently occurs earthquake (hypocenter). Though there is still no research on it, it can be taken for granted that the *rumah gadang* tilting construction, vertically unsymmetrical is a reflection local indigenous (Syukri, 2009), having thought of the earthquake effect (Wimra 2009), for the stronger the shake of the earthquake does not make the *rumah gadang* collapse even it just true strengthen the construction of *the rumah gadang*.<sup>6</sup>

### **Functional Degrade: An Abandoned *Rumah Gadang***

Initially, the function of the *rumah gadang* is as a living house and a place in which the adat ceremony is held. At the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century a *rumah gadang*, according to Dobbin is occupied by 60 – 80 members of clan. Even, according to him, as he cited from Rafles, a *rumah gadang* at Simawang was occupied by 150 of community members. The number depended on the quantity of the clan group member (Dobbin, 1983, 13-14).

As common living house, the *Rumah Gadang* preserves particular rules. Each married woman occupies one room. The youngest woman occupies the most front room and the eldest one's room is next to the kitchen. Whereas the juvenile woman occupies other room. Particularly, the adult men are not allowed to go to bed in the *Rumah Gadang*, they are permitted to have a sleep at a small mosque (*surau*) belonging to each kaum in their clan. As a place for making consultation, rumah ga-

---

<sup>6</sup> According to Eko Alfares, Don of Architecture of Faculty of Civil Engineering and Planning University of Bung Hatta (UBH) Padang, the architecture of rumah gadang Minangkabau, in building the rumah gadang, it actually shows that since long time ago the Minangkabau people has for a long time adopted the building technique of an earth quake proof house (<http://www.harianhaluan.com>).



dang is a building of activity center of members of the kaum in discussing a common concern.

As for a place in which the adat ceremony takes place, the *rumah gadang* is becoming important in positioning the degree of their dinitory (the clan member) in a proper position "*beradat*" and there the appointment of the *Penghulu* takes place. The *rumah gadang* is also functioning as a place in which the sick family member is treated, in such a case the *rumah gadang* plays a role as a hospital for all members of the clan including the men who spent the night away from home or stayed in the *rumah gadang*. In this respect, if a man is supposed to approach his inevitability, therefore he will be taken to the *rumah gadang* for treatment till he recovered or died.

Usually, the *rumah gadang* the number of *rumah gadang* rooms is usually odd starting from 3. The common number of the room is seven but there is also a *rumah gadang* that has as many as 17 rooms as found in *nagari* of Sulit (Junus, 1971: 251). The traditional house whose rooms are the most now found in the *nagari* of Abai in South Solok as many as 21 rooms (Nur and Herwandi 2009:20).

Certain rooms in *rumah gadang* has particular function: the room is usually small with the size 2x3 ms, it just carries one bed, one cupboard or chest and a little room to move so the room is only use for sleeping and dress fitting. It is impossible to use it for other activity. The vacant rooms in front of the room are used for special room for the room occupant as a place for drink and waiting for a guest. The *lanjar* or unoccupied room in front of the room located in the middle part is also used to wait and to serve the guest of the room occupant living in the room. The rooms are also used for the room occupant to relax and play for fun among them. The function switches a little bit when in the *rumah gadang* there is held an adat ceremony so the closest room is the one used to serve the adat leaders of *rumah gadang* including the guests, meanwhile the members of the *rumah gadang* occupants and men of the same clan together with them sit together sit at the most front, almost next to the front wall of the *rumah gadang*.

The rooms of the-ruangan *rumah gadang* is a mirror of the community principle of Minangkabau people liking to live communally in the family, *paruik*, clan, and so on. The rooms are also to symbolizes the homogeneity and heterogeneity of the people, it means the clan, on one hand is a homogenous social organization,

however, the family existence in the clan shows the heterogeneity in the clan for the family existence and person are recognized so far.

As it now develops, certain parts have undergone changes. The function of rumah gadang as a living house does not occupy a dominant position any more. The people do not use the Rumah Gadang as their living room.

In one of his papers, Umar Junus assumed that *rumah gadang* will disappear shortly for it can be said that there is nobody build a new *rumah gadang* any more (Junus, 1971: 251). Hamka also stated the *rumah gadang* has been abandoned by the Minangkabau people, the house has no more dignity in the society of Minangkabau. In a poetic word, it was stated by Hamka how the rumah gadang has become a building abandoned, it has lost the spirit. "*lah lengang rumah nan gadang, Jenjang tidak berluluk lagi.*" (Hamka, 1984: 69).

Such a matter is truly due to the people of Minangkabau has tended to live in a nuclear family – eternal triangle: Mother, Father, and, Child(ren) in which the full responsibility is full held by the Father (Husband). The mother's brother does not play a dominant role any longer in raising his niece and nephew. All the needs of the children is taken over by the father/husband. This is immediately strongly supported by the rapid development of individual value which is deeply rooted in the people of Minangkabau caused by the collision of its culture with the other one either Islamic or western culture. Besides, such a situation is also worsened by the rapid development of clan members population causing the *rumah gadang* is not able to accomodated the clan members any more live there.

Furthermore, since the value system developing in such a way causes the *rumah gadang* does not function as it did before, however, it function just as a symbol of clan and is used in a given time such as on the occasion of adat ceremony, for example, the ceremony of the Penghulu appointment and matrimonial ceremony. It means, on current days the *Rumah Gadang* becomes "vacant house", lonely, useless except just only in the ceremonial moment.

## **Closing**

The Rumah Gadang is the result of adaptation of Minangkabau people with their ecosystem. At initial phase, actually all material of Rumah Gadang was provided by the environment, however, due to the ecosystem exploitation, the environment is not able to provide the building material for the *rumah gadang* in an adequate limit so that to maintain. The rumah gadang is difficult enough though there are alternative material such as ferro-concrete and corrugated iron.

The rumah gadang become the heritage further abandoned in step with the changes occur in the social system in the Minangkabau people making the function of *rumah gadang* switches that is it just looks like a symbol and emblem of the clan existence used only in a given ceremonial even.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “Desain Rumah Gadang Rumah Tahan Gempa” dalam <http://www.harianhaluan.com>
- Dobbin, Cristine. *Islamic Revivalism in A Changing Peasant Economy, Central Sumatra 1784-1847*. London And Malmo: Curzon Press.1983
- Effendi, Nursyirwan. “Pemerintahan Nagari dan Pemerintahan Adat”, dalam Alfian Miko *Pemerintahan Nagari dan tanah Ulayat 70 Tahun Prof. Dr. Syahmunir Am. SH*. Padang: Andalas University Press.2006.
- Graves, Elizabeth E. *The Minangkabau Response\_to Dutch Colonial Rule in the Nineteenth Century*. New York and Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1981.
- Hamka. *Islam dan Adat Minangkabau*, Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas: 1984.
- Herwandi, *Angku Lareh, Pejabat Kolonial Belanda dari Primbumi*. Padang: FIB Unand, 2012.
- Izzati dkk. *Rumah Tuo Kampai nan Panjang Rumah Adat Tradisional Minangkabau*. Padang: UPTD Museum Adityawarman. 2002.
- Junus, Umar.”Kebudayaan Minangkabau”, dalam *Koentjaraningrat. Manusia dan Kebudayaan Indonesia*. Jakarta: Djambatan. 1971. Hal. 248-265.
- Kato, Tsuyoshi, “Social Change in A Centrifugal Society: The Minangkabau of West Sumatra”, *Thesis Doctor Philosophy*. Cornell University. 1977
- Miko, Alfian. *Pemerintahan Nagari dan tanah Ulayat 70 Tahun Prof. Dr. Syahmunir Am. SH*. Padang: Andalas University Press. 2006.
- Nur, Mhd dan Herwandi. “Manajemen Pengelolaan Warisan Sejarah di Sumbar: Mencari Model yang Dapat Memelihara Pelestarian Nilai Keaslian”, *Laporan Penelitian Hibah Penelitian Strategis Nasional tahun 2009*.
- Oki, Akira. "Social Change in West Sumatran Village: 1908-1945". *A Thesis* . Canberra; The Australian National University: 1977.
- Syukri, Andi. “Kearifan Lokal Sistem Bangunan Rumah Tradisional Minangkabau Terhadap Reduksi Bahaya Gempa” *Skripsi Jurusan Teknik Sipil, Fakultas Teknik Universitas Andalas*. 2009.
- Wimra, Zelfeni. *Rumah Gadang Tahan Gempa*. Padang-Today.Com. Senin 05/10/2009