



# Songket Minangkabau

Noble Philosophy in a Piece of Cloth

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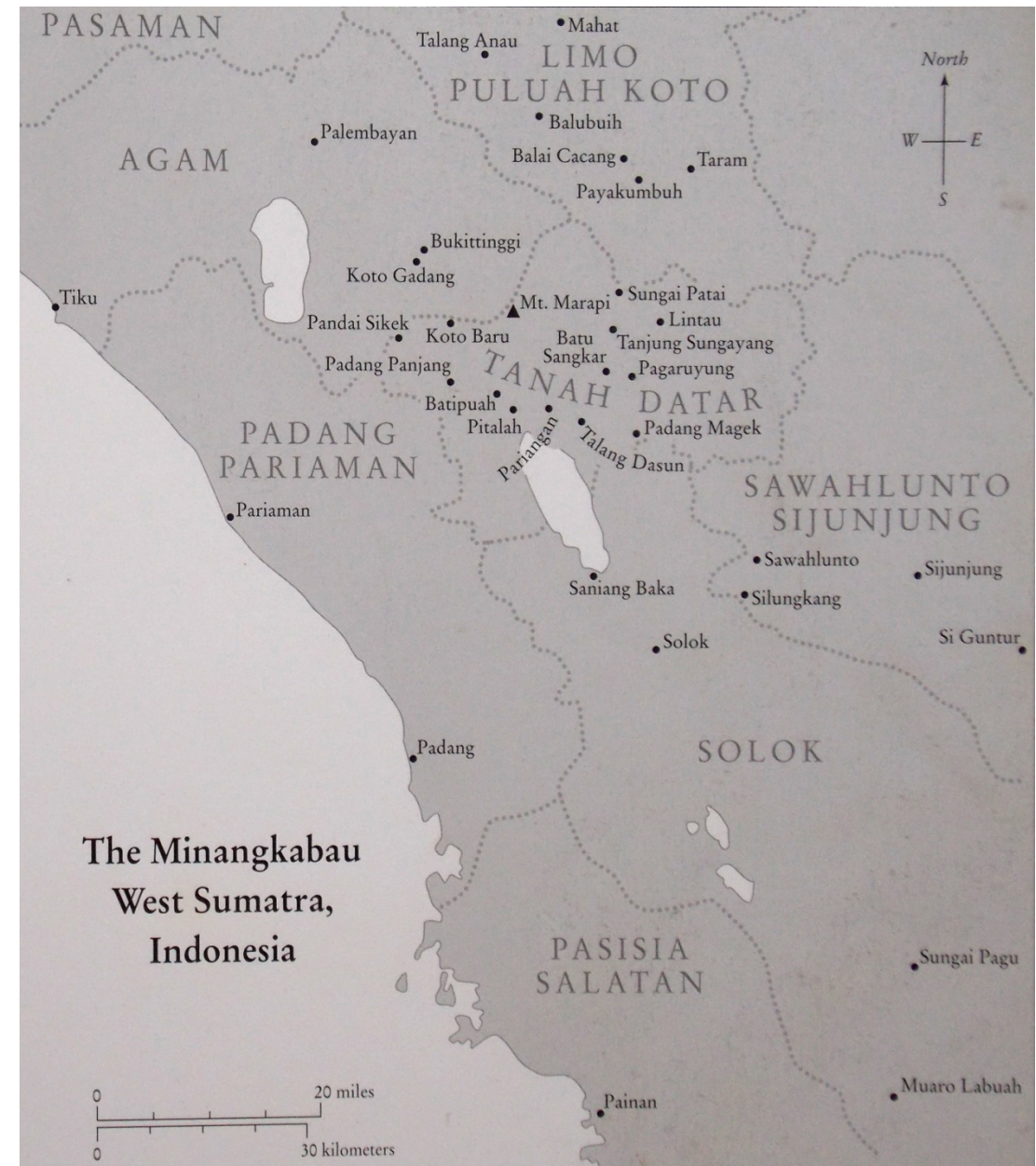


Minangkabau or 'Minang' refers to both cultural and geographical entity which is characterized by a specific language, a customs system (adat) embracing matrilineal kinship and the tenets of Islam as the life-pathway. Geographically, the land of Minangkabau includes most of West Sumatra, half of Riau, northern Bengkulu, western Jambi, North Sumatra's west coast, southwest Aceh, and Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia.

The east coast on the Strait of Malacca experienced the long-term impact of goods flowing between India, Java, Portugal, and the Netherlands. West Sumatran merchants were involved, as well. They travelled eastwards downriver from the mountains to the Strait of Malacca and westwards to the Indian Ocean, following the coastline down to the southern regions, to trade with Chinese, Arabians, Indians, Dutch, and even Americans. (Gittinger cited in Kartiwa, 1996)











## SONGKET MINANGKABAU

The history of Minangkabau songket (brocade) parallels the history of human civilization in the Minangkabau domain itself. The journey of Minangkabau culture and civilization has gone through a long process. The interactions between the Minangkabau people with diverse communities and cultures, occurred through migration, trading, political activities, as well as religious propagation. Many influences brought in during the process were absorbed as regards improving and promoting civilization. However, the basic philosophy of Alam takambang jadi guru (nature becomes the teacher) remains the principal rule uniting all Minangkabau.

Precisely when songket-making began in the Minangkabau domain cannot be ascertained, but old heirloom songkets reveal that cultural interaction has influenced the development of songket creation in several old weaving centers in the Minangkabau heartland. Songket-weaving developed significantly in the heartland, especially from mid 18th until end of 19th century resulting in products with a strong local identity, typically woven for each region.



Until now, several songket weaving center arose rapidly, along with the progressive development of fashion trends. It must be admitted that the revival of songket-weaving centers represented a positive gain in the creative industry perspective. On the other hand, in the cultural perspective, there has been an unconscious decrease in the value of songket as it moved from a noble textile heritage filled with philosophical content into a contemporary fashion item and the inherent necessity to compete with the fast-growing development of the fashion world. Simplification and degeneration are unavoidable. This made efforts to revitalize the old Minangkabau songket tradition a must, for the preservation of Minangkabau's cultural heritage along with the noble wisdom contained therein.

### **Songket as an Adat (customs & traditions) Element in Minangkabau**

For the Minangkabau people, songket was (and still is) not merely an exquisite fashion item, it has also functioned as an element of customs and traditions that accompanied the life-journey of each individual, from birth to death.

The ceremonial function of songket is varied, from custom apparels, ceremonial accessories, decorative cloth, to funeral shroud.







Baju Gadang





# Kain Panjawek Anak (Baby holder)





Tingkuluak  
(woman headdress)





# Salendang / Salempang





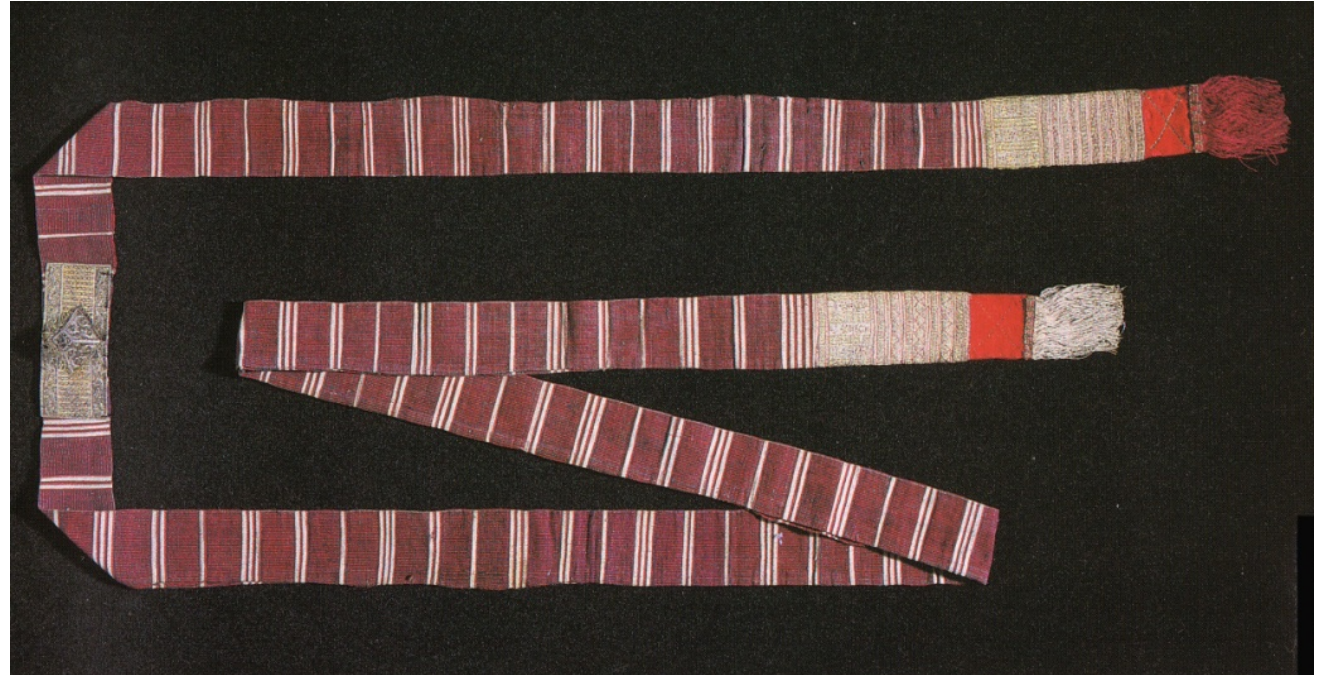
# Kain Serong





# *Cawek* men's belt

Cawek Muarolabuah

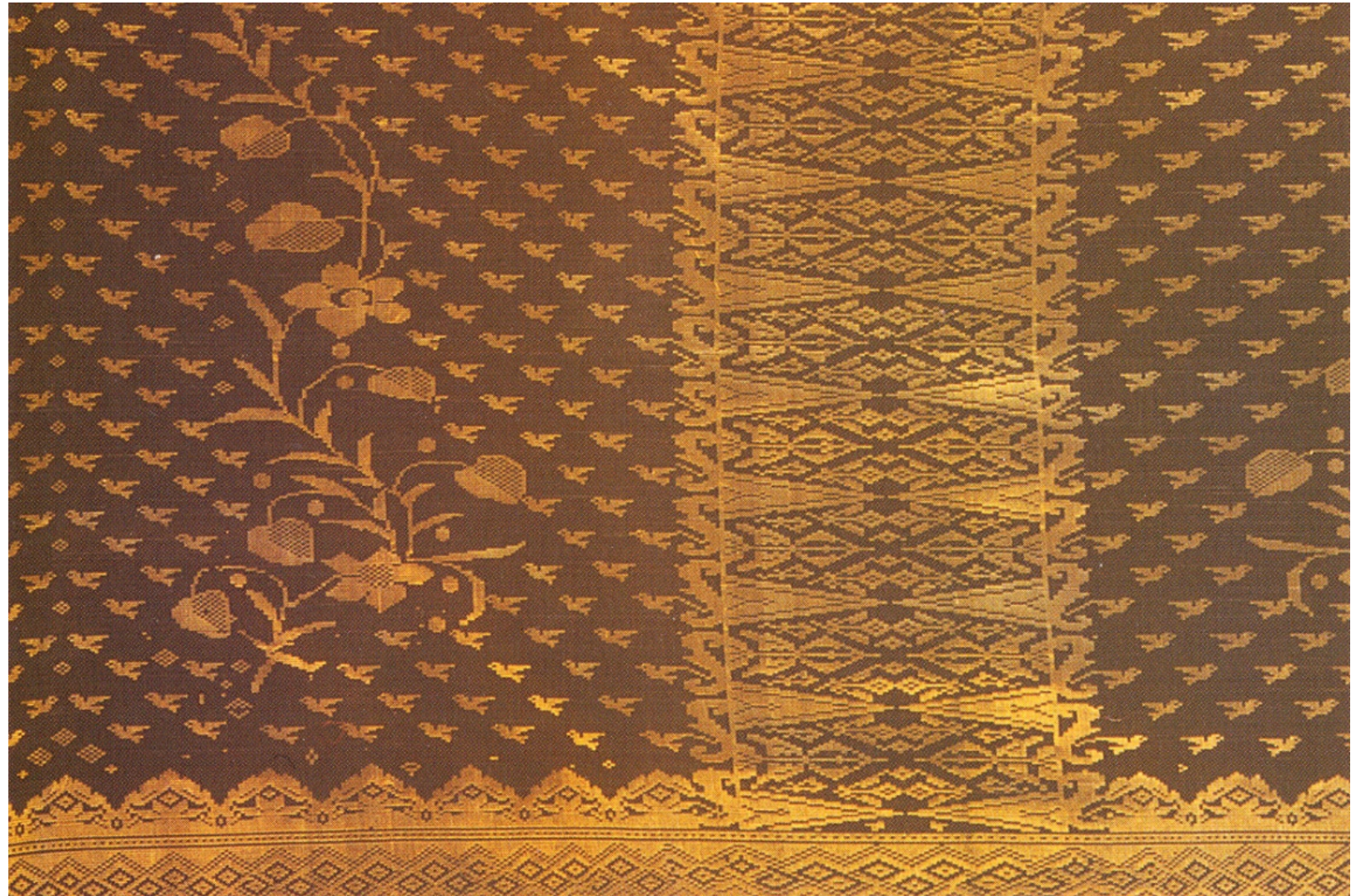


Cawek Silungkang





-Kodek / Lambak





Uncang



Kampuah Dagang





Minangkabau songkets have strong regional characteristics. Various styles are characteristic of particular areas in the heartland of Minangkabau. Different techniques, pattern forms, compositions, and materials have imbued songket work with a specific character in each region of Minangkabau since ancient times.



## songket with continuous supplementary weft



Songket Pitalah



Songket Koto Gadang



## Songket with discontinuous supplementary weft



Body part of songket Padang Magek



Side borders of songket Batusangkar





songket Tanjung Sungayang



songket Koto Gadang



# songket with interwoven discontinuous supplementary weft



songket Padang Magek



Detail of songket Padang Magek



# Songket combined with tapestry and ikat technique



Songket batusangkar, with ikat in body part



Selvedge part of kain Muarolabuah



Traditionally, songket expertise has been in the hands of women from wealthy families, the nobility, and prominent clans. The materials for songket-making were imported from China, Europe and India. Good-quality silk yarn, wool, and gold- and silver-wrapped threads were acquired at considerable cost.

The high price of the materials, as well as the high level of technical complexity, is probably the reason why songket masterpieces were only made on a particular social level. This also explains why songket-making expertise became a prestigious skill amongst the Minangkabau women.<sup>2</sup>

*Padusi di Minangkabau*

*Tau dibayang kato sampai*

*Tau di kilek camin pacah*

*Tau di hulu gabak hujan*

*Tau di riak rasah zaman*

*Tau di hulu persoalan*

(Woman in Minangkabau)

(Knows the words in one's mind before spoken)

(Knows the glint of the broken mirror)

(Knows the cloud in the upstream before the rain)

(Knows the restlessness of time)

(Knows the root of problems)

Women in Minangkabau play a prominent role in their community. They are the lineage successor, heirs of the heirloom, and the symbol of morality in the family. Minangkabau woman should know how to have sense and sensibility, how to maintain the dignity of the clan, how to educate the children, and how to inherit the noble wisdom of the ancestor to the next generation. Songket is one way to pass down the philosophy of Minangkabau through each motif woven by the Minangkabau woman



## **Songket, a 'Manuscript' of Philosophy**

For Minangkabau people, songket is not merely a sumptuously woven cloth. It is also part of Minangkabau social life, following every rite in the life cycle, from birth to death. Each motif or pattern woven into a songket – and also carved into wood – has a name and meaning reflecting the philosophical values that govern the life of the Minangkabau people. It may be said that philosophy came to be 'written down' in the form of a visual language: motifs and patterns

Each motif can be defined through three stages of philosophical conception: written, implied, and concealed (Wimar in Bart, 2006). Even a single vertical line on the songket is given a name: stem of the Areca palm. Areca palm stems are planted to mark the boundary of one's land ownership in the Minangkabau domain. Explicitly, the Areca palm stem is described as the sorting of rights and obligations of each member of the clan. Implicitly, the Areca nut illustrates the importance of problem-sorting, and choosing the proper solution for each problem based on the context of bringing benefit to all the people involved. In a concealed meaning, divinely, the Areca palm stem brings us to one basic philosophy: every effort to resolve a problem is a struggle for the truth, as a way to get closer to the Truth (God).

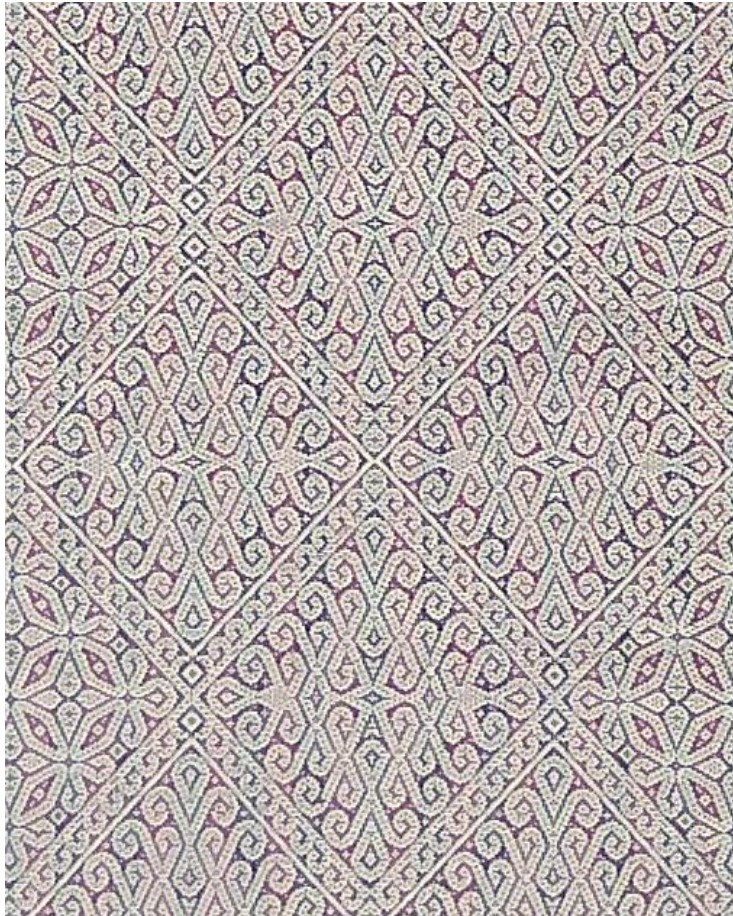
Several published references, including that by Jasper and Pirngadie (Vol. II de Weefkunst, 1912), give the number of motifs existing in the forms of both songket-weaving and wood-carving as between 90 to 120



# *Kaluak paku* (fern tendril)

*Kaluak* means a curling tendril. Literally, the term *kaluak paku* describes the fern tendril in a beautiful and dynamic form. It reflects children and nieces and nephews as the next generation. It is the duty of a *mamak* (uncle) to look after, to guide and protect, his nephews, nieces, and children until they become adults, when they may be 'released' as an integral part of the wider community

The implied meaning of the *kaluak* symbol, as explained by Abdul Hamid Datuk Rangkayo Sati, a chieftain in Pariangan Padangpanjang, is human nature. Sprouting ferns grow first in an inward coil, then grow in an outward coil. Likewise, humans in the early stage of life recognize themselves first, before socializing and interacting with their surroundings. It also implies the importance of introspection: curling inward first, then curling outwards. Judging oneself first, before judging others.





# *Pucuak Rabuang* (bamboo shoot)

The bamboo shoot is called *rabuang* in the Minangkabau language. Fresh bamboo shoots are often used as a vegetable, which is usually processed in curry form. *Rabuang*, the young bamboo shoot, grows into a strong bamboo stalk that is used as building material. As expressed in the Minangkabau saying: *Ketek paguno gadang tapakai*, which means: 'useful when young, more useful in old age'. When it become tall, the top bows towards the earth. This symbolizes strength without arrogance, a personal character that should be owned by a leader.



Meanwhile, the concealed meaning of the *rabuang* (bamboo shoot) is that though not yet able to become a leader, one can become an integral part of leadership in the regeneration process.



## *Sajamba Makan* (ceremonial dining)

*Makan bajamba* means to partake of a feast in groups with each group eating from a single large platter spread with the various foods.



This motif symbolizes the ethics in togetherness, converging in a meeting to reach a consensus, facing and resolving problems together. Minangkabau democracy is a democracy of consensus reached through deliberation.





### ***Sajamba Makan* (ceremonial dining)**

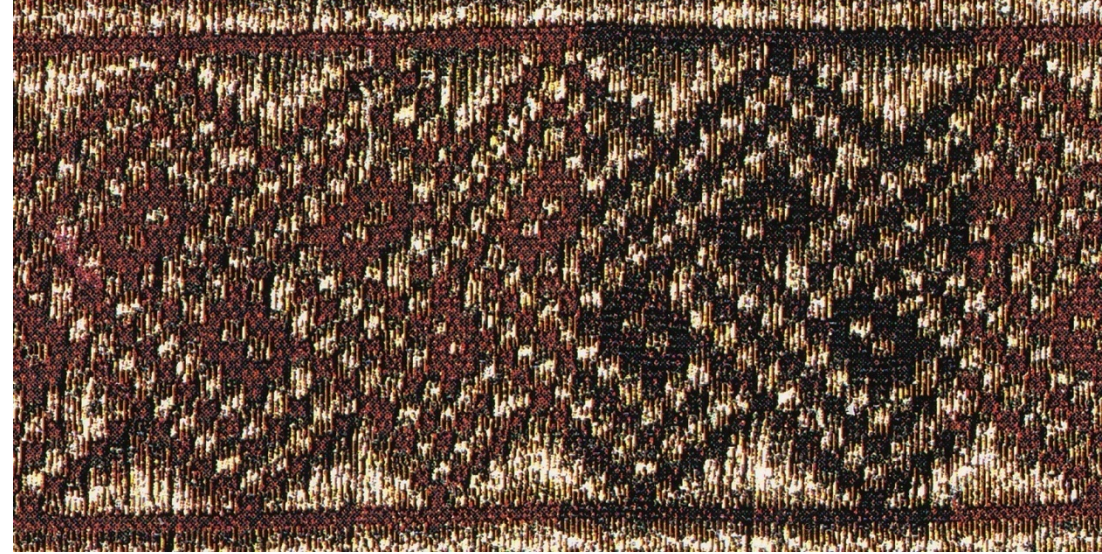
The people involved in the deliberation process, must have the right degree of capability. They must be able to make a sharp and deep analysis of problems, to negotiate thoroughly with correct and clear arguments. The analysis must be lucid and minutely detailed with a balance of mind and sense (feeling).

Another Minangkabau saying teaches that: *Raso dibao naiak, pareso dibao turun*. This means that the feeling (from the heart) should be brought up (to the head), and brought down (from mind or head to heart). In other words, any emotion to be expressed must first be examined in the mind, while logical thoughts to be presented should also be considered by sense (implied meaning).



### ***Saluak Laka* (Interwoven rattan basket base)**

The *laka* is a circular plate-like base for holding pots and made of wicker work. Its purpose is to stabilize the position of a clay pot



*Laka* webbing is neat; there are no visible rattan ends sticking out. All is hidden in the bottom. This symbolizes that a united society will bring forth great strength. This power is built up through cooperation and sincerity. Individuals are united and merged as a shared force.

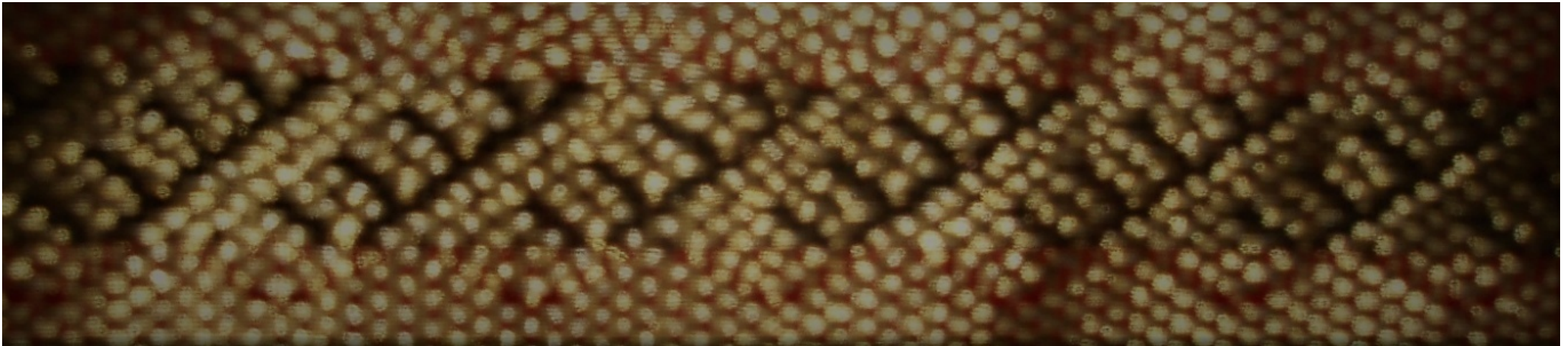


***Itiak pulang patang***  
**(ducks going home in the afternoon)**

is a stylized depiction of ducks returning home in the late afternoon.

They waddle single-file in an orderly manner, not vying for precedence. The leading duck is followed by the others with orderliness and trust. Itiak pulang patang implies order and discipline in organization and in society.

There is hidden wisdom behind the ducks' behavior: scattered when hungry, united when full. In the morning the ducks are out of their cages, foraging on their own. In the afternoon, when sated, they return home together in a group.

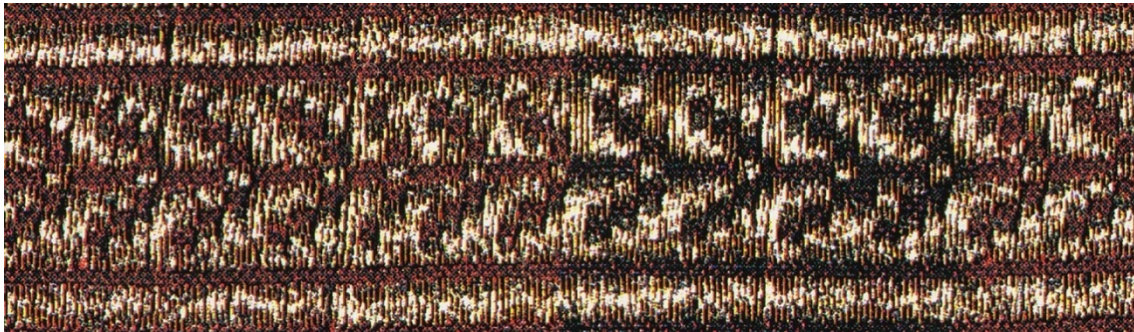




***Bada Mudiak***  
**(anchovies going upstream)**

*Bada mudiak* is a portrayal of small fish swimming upstream in groups. It is a metaphor for common people confronting great power.

But why do these small fishes strive so hard to reach the headwaters? Because clear water is upstream. And this is the implied meaning of *bada mudiak*: to get a clear source we must go to the upstream. To solve problems we must return to the source of the problem.



There is a hidden, divine meaning from this philosophy: that to reach the truth one must return to the source of all truth, Truth itself (God).



## ***Balah Kacang*** **(split peanut)**

A split peanut, *balah kacang*, reveals its contents. The lesson is that when one opens oneself to interaction in a community, one must demonstrate good intentions, instead of boasting about one's severity or predominance.



The split peanut motif is usually found on weavings intended to be used as head-coverings or headcloths called *deta* or *saluak*. The meaning implied in the motif – in the words of the humanist Bagindo Fahmi – is that in his way of thinking, the chieftain should be fair, balances, and always in harmony. A peanut splits symmetrically; this is a symbol of balance and justice. That is why the split peanut motif is usually found in the *deta* (headcloth) worn by the clan or community chief. This noble motif is 'attached' to the heads of the chieftain. The chieftain – as the leader of his people, as a guide for his children and nephews and nieces – must be able to think and to consider all things in a fair and equal manner.



Motifs as symbols of noble values inherited from one's forebears contain wisdoms that can answer the questions in today's life. About justice, about humanity, about the need for truth, about leadership, about self-recognize, and about diverse matters encountered in our personal lives, in society, as a nation, and in touch with the world. Indeed, every nation in the world has noble philosophies inherent in its various manifestations that makes one become a better human being, to create a better world for everyone. By preserving our cultural heritage, we are saving all the noble values therein for future generations.





