



## Rimpu: An Overview of Symbolic Meaning

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### **Abstract**

The paper is aimed at describing the symbolic meaning of *Rimpu* [ways of covering the head and face] as a cultural identity of female in Bima community. There are numerous ways of rimpu: *Rimpu Mpida* [smallest covering], *Rimpu Cili* [hiding cover] and *Rimpu Colo* [slight covering]. *Rimpu Mpida* [smallest covering] is usually worn by unmarried women, while *Rimpu Colo* [slight covering] is worn by married women. The methods used in this study were interviews with Bimanese natives and library research describing the symbols in the ways *rimpu* is worn. The study found that numerous symbols and meanings of *Rimpu* for married and married women and they also represent woman's position, status and roles within the society.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Meaning; Woman; Culture; Clothes

### **Introduction**

Bima is located on the eastern cost of the island of Sumbawa in central Indonesia's province West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). It is one of the regions in NTB which is very popular for its religious society. Hilir Ismail (2004), a local historian states that Bimanese tribe is one of the many tribes in Indonesia which famously obedient toward the command of Islam. Bahasa Bima (Bimanese language) is the language which is used by people of Bima, which also called "*nggahi mbojo*", "*dou mbojo*" for Bimanese tribe and "*budaya mbojo*" for its culture.

In terms of culture, Bima is also known for its strong culture which shapes its own sketch of characteristic and identity. One of the cultures which reflect very much into the characteristic and identity of the Bima people is *rimpu*. *Rimpu* shares islamic values, belief, behavior in Bimanese way of life, which is not easy affected by any kind of foreign culture and customs. Moreover, *rimpu* is a hereditary culture which has been proclaimed by the ancestors of Bimanese tribe as a Bimanese culture and identity since 1640, which is maintained and preserved until today.

According to Syaokani, a local historian of Bima, linguistically, "*rimpu*" in Bimanese language consists of two syllables, "ri" means return and "mpu" means cover. Thus, literally, the term *rimpu* is the clothes which cover the entire body of a woman using Bimanese typical woven sarong. Similarly, Hilir

Ismail (2005) says that *rimpu* is traditional clothes of Bimanese female which use two sheets of sarong which called “tembe nggoli”, a typical weaving sarong originally from Bima. One sheet covers the head, and another sheet is worn as a skirt. In the other words, *rimpu* as the way of female dressing represents a cultural identity of the female in Bima community. Furthermore, *rimpu* has its own aesthetic value for the women since years ago. It is one of the beautiful clothes in terms of motives of sarong, materials and also the beauty and uniqueness of the way of *rimpu* is worn.

Furthermore, the way of wearing *rimpu* indicates the status of women in the society that *rimpu* for married women is very different from unmarried women. And this paper aims to describe the symbolic meaning behind the different ways of *rimpu* is worn between them. The methods used in the study are library research and interview with Bimanese natives that described the symbolic meaning of the way of the *rimpu* is worn.

### ***The Short History of Rimpu***

*Rimpu* is the act of dressing in the Bimanese culture. It is mainly practiced by women. It needs two pieces of *sarung*, that is, a large piece of clothes with two large opening on its ends. The first piece is used to cover the head and the face and this method of dressing is what actually referred to as *rimpu*. The second is used to cover the lower parts of the body from the waist in a method called *sanggentu*. For male, the lower cloth is worn in a method called *katente*.

Historically, the existence of *rimpu* was along with the spread of Islam on 5 July 1640, coinciding on the 15th of Rabiul Awal 1050. At the time, the appearance of *rimpu* as a traditional customary clothing was to commemorate the development of Bimanese tradition which served as a basis of the emergence of Islam in Bima since the establishment of the sultanate, in which *rimpu* became the religious polarity of Bimanese in order to develop cultural tribes. According to Hilir (2004), a local historian, *rimpu* has been a part of the cultural identity of Bimanese female since Islam began to develop in Bima. He adds that at the time, wearing *rimpu* for Bimanese female was to show that they could weave the clothes on their own.

Moreover, Arabian traders who came to Bima particularly Arabian women, became a big inspiration for Bimanese women to wear *rimpu* as their identity. In other hands, the existence of *rimpu* according to Hilir Ismail cannot be separated from the efforts of the government to exploit the Bimanese sarong and woven fabric with has been known to be a world's best-selling commodity around 13th century. At the time, Bimanese community utilized the abundance of cotton and processed them into woven fabric which then became a commodity trade which is also sold to China.

Fahrurizki, a Bimanese native who previously conducted a study about *rimpu* says that *rimpu* is actually the way of Bimanese female wearing the woven sarong, not clothes of what people called today. By the time, the *rimpu* develops and spreads to other parts of Bima, people begin to know and call the *rimpu* as the traditional clothes and become the identity of the Bima people (interview, July 30th, 2018)

Before *rimpu* is popular in the community, the people of Bima have been acquainted with “*katente*” and “*sanggentu*”. *Katente* is worn by male, by rolling up the sarong to the waist. Meanwhile, *sanggentu* is worn by rolling the sarong to the chest. *Sanggentu* is usually worn by women. To this day, *katente* is still worn by the Bimanese men for certain religious events. In another part of Bima such as Donggo village, the women wear “*kababu*” for the upper clothing and “*deko*”, a trouser covering with sarong which has a distinctive style and motifs for the down clothing (Ariadi, 2011).

Moreover, in another area of Bima such as Dompu, the women wear “*baruko*”, a thin cloth to cover their head and face, only eyes appeared. The women in Dompu began to wear *rimpu* around 1990 as Fahru Rizki said

“Wanita Dompnu mulai menggunakan rimpu sekitar tahun 1900. Awalnya kerudung wanita Dompnu disebut Baruko, satu kain tipis dililitkan untuk menutup kepala, hanya bagian mata yang terlihat” (interview, 30/07/2018)

“Dompunese women began to wear rimpu around 1900. Previously, the veil of Dompunese women was called Baruko, a thin cloth is wrapped around the head, only eyes appearing”(interview, 30/07/2018)

The following figure shows *baruko* worn by the Dompunese women in 1924.



The figure is taken from unpublished article by Fahru Rizki

### ***Rimpu as the Implementation of the Religious Value***

The spread of Islamic value in Bima has been started since the establishment of sultanate in 1640. The strategy used to spread Islam at the time was by mixing the culture and tradition with the religious value of Islam. In other words, mixing and implementing Islamic values together with the culture and tradition seems to be better way for the government. And the strategy successfully introduces the Islamic values and was the successful achievement for the sultanate to spread Islam in Bima (Honest D. Molasy, 2011).

Moreover, since Islam spread and exist in Bima, the Islamic values influence the way of Bima people dressing. Women wear *kababu*. The *kababu*, a traditional cloth is worn a little bit longer to cover the body. For the down clothing, they wear *deko*, a trouser and cover with weaving sarong. The women also wear “*to’du*”, a traditional veil that people call *rimpu* until today (Honest D. Molasy, 2011).

As the traditional cloth which affected by Islam, *Rimpu* however is not only a community tradition of Bimanese but also it comes as a manifestation to present religious values in the form of culture in daily lives of Bima people. For all of that, wearing *rimpu* is one of the cultural ways in attempting to implement the belief system and the religious values adopted by the Bimanese female community. Then, as one of the valuable cultures, *rimpu* is a visual representation of a woman’s religious affiliation and appreciates the religious norms and values as the synergistically guidance to cover the woman’s genitalia. In other words, as required to cover the entire body for women is also firmly stated in the holy book of Muslim (Quran), *rimpu* also comes to teach that every single woman obliges to keep their honor and to cover their genitals or entire body, not to provoke the man in particular biological impulse fishing.

Thus, for the Bima people, *rimpu* is not only as an accommodation of Islamic teachings, but also as a local living tradition in the community which is strongly affiliated to Islamic religious as an expression of protection toward women. Moreover, the Bimanese slogan of “*Mori ro made na dou Mbojo ede kai hukum Islam-ku*” which means “Life and death of the Bima people should be based on the Islamic law” which has been upheld enables the Bimanese female to keep and manage their everyday behavior and mannerism from the things prohibited by the religion.

### ***Rimpu as Bimanese Cultural Identity***

Culture is not the thing that someone possesses it as individual phenomena. It is a product which originates and grows in the society then shared through social interaction as the continuous process, then becomes the characteristic and identity of the whole ways of life of the society at the end. Edward Tylor (2008) views certain essential aspects of culture. Firstly, culture is learned. It is acquired by learning, which implies that it is not genetically inherited. Secondly, culture is knowledge shared among members of a group. This implies that culture is transmitted between generations through the use of symbols, which lead to anthropological interest in language, indigenous systems of knowledge, and the processes of acquiring culture. Thirdly, culture is taken in its wide ethnographic sense, which is complex whole of human experience, which implies that culture is not only limited to arts, beliefs, morals, law, costume, fashion, design and any other habits acquired by someone as a member of society, but also it encompasses the broad domain of human experience.

Cultural identity was first theorized by Marry Jane Collier and Milth Thomas (1988). They define cultural identity is the status, experience, enactment, creation, negotiation, and contestation of group membership and social identification within particular contexts. Collier (2005) broadens cultural identities to include cultural identifications as a move to locate oneself and one’s identity positioning and alignments in complex cultural structures and dynamic relations with others. Conception of cultural identity conquers three core understandings. Firstly, cultural identity is simultaneously an individual entity, a social category, and then a system of communicative practice. Secondly, cultural identity is both an individual choice and group right. Thirdly, cultural identity is adaptive, evolving, flexible, negotiable or non-negotiable, distinct, communal, and discrete (Kim, 2007).

Thus, a traditional cloth of *rimpu* identifies cultural society and provides the way into the identity of the Bimanese women as self-presentation to express and perform the identity in daily lives of their social interactions as Fahru Rizki stated.

“*Rimpu* sangat sering dipakai oleh wanita jaman dulu, Mereka memakai *rimpu* untuk menunjukan identitas mereka bahwa mereka berasal dari Bima” (interview, 30/07/2018)

“*Rimpu* was frequently worn by old women, they wore *rimpu* was to show their identity that they were from Bima”(interview, 30/07/2018)

Furthermore, in the performing of the cultural identity, *rimpu* addresses a characteristic which distinguishes between the original cultural diversity owned with other regions in Indonesia. For instance, the pattern of Bimanese woven sarong and the way of the sarong is worn identifies its original culture comes from. In addition, *rimpu* is also as a media of nonverbal communication for the wearer to communicate and bring herself as an individual and to communicate and define her social group identity that she belongs to.

## The Symbolic Meaning of Rimpu

As previously explained that *rimpu* has become the cultural identity of Bimanese especially for Bimanese women. *Rimpu* has different symbolic meanings behind the different ways of *rimpu* worn by married and unmarried women. *Rimpu* worn by unmarried women is divided into two styles.

### 1. *Rimpu Cili* [hiding cover]

*Rimpu cili* [hiding cover] is worn by using two sheets of Bimanese sarong to cover the entire body, head and face. An opening is left only for a narrow slit for the eyes. Another sheet of sarong is usually worn as a skirt (Ulya, 2017). This *rimpu* has to be worn by an unmarried woman or a girl that is going to be a bride. The symbolic meaning behind of the style of this *rimpu* is to tell the society that the girl has been purposed by a man. Moreover, the symbol of this *rimpu* may also be said that since the girl is already purposed, she is not allowed to have any interaction with other men. The girl has to wear this style of *rimpu* since the first day of the proposal until she is married.

### 2. *Rimpu Mpida* [smallest covering]

*Rimpu mpida* is slightly the same as the way *rimpu cili* is worn. *Rimpu mpida* only leaves eyes and nose. This *rimpu* is most commonly worn by the girls or unmarried women (Ulya, 2017). The *rimpu mpida* symbolizes that the girls are still single and they have not been proposed or married by any men. In addition, at this phase, since the girls have not been proposed yet, they are banned to show their face until the men come to purpose. Nevertheless, their activities and movements are not restricted. The women have to wear this style of *rimpu* until they are purposed. The following figure shows *rimpu cili* and *rimpu mpida* worn by the girl or unmarried woman.



However, *rimpu* which is worn by married women is called *rimpu colo* [slight covering]. After the woman get married, she may change her style of *rimpu* to the style of *rimpu colo*. The *rimpu colo* consists of two sheets of Bimanese sarong that one sheet covers the head and neck, an opening is left for face. Another sheet is also worn as a skirt (Ulya, 2017). This *rimpu* is commonly worn by married women or housewives (Hilir, 2004). The symbolic meaning of the way of wearing this style of *rimpu* is to indicate the women's social status and indirectly to introduce themselves as married women in the society. Moreover, the tolerance for the married women to show their face in their daily social interactions is also symbolized through *rimpu colo* as Fahru Rizki stated

“Rimpu cili, rimpu mpida dan rimpu colo sebenarnya menunjukkan status si pemakai. Rimpu cili dan rimpu mpida dipakai oleh gadis-gadis atau wanita-wanita yang belum menikah sedangkan rimpu colo dipakai oleh wanita yang sudah menikah (interview, 30/07/2018)”

“Rimpu cili, rimpu mpida dan rimpu colo is actually to show the social status of the wearers. Rimpu cili and rimpu mpida is worn by girls or unmarried women. Meanwhile, rimpu colo is worn by married women (interview, 30/07/2018).

The following figure shows *rimpu colo* worn by unmarried women or housewives.



Furthermore, it is said that, the different style of *rimpu* worn by married and unmarried women represents the women's reputation in the society. To distinguish between married and unmarried women, can be seen at the way the women wear their *rimpu*. So, the man will automatically find his mate to the style of *rimpu mpida* worn by a woman. Meanwhile, the *rimpu colo* which is previously explained represents the married status of the woman. The man will directly recognize that the woman with this style of *rimpu* is already married (Ariadi M. L, 2011)

Moreover, the pattern and the color of the sarong do not indicate the woman's social status. In other words, there is no particular pattern and color of the sarong worn by married and unmarried woman to symbolize their status in the society as a Bimanese native, Fahru Rizki said

“Pemakaian rimpu sendiri tidak membedakan motif dan warna sarung untuk wanita yang belum menikah dan yang sudah menikah. Sarung apapun tidak ada bedanya. Yang beda hanya nama sarungnya yaitu “tembe cau” dan “tembe nggoli”. Dulu sarung yang tidak bermotif dipakai oleh masyarakat biasa sedangkan sarung yang bermotif hanya dipakai oleh kalangan bangsawan. Tapi sekarang sudah tidak membedakan motif dan warna yang harus dipakai oleh wanita yang belum menikah dan wanita yang sudah menikah” (interview, 30/07/2018)

“Rimpu does not differentiate the pattern and color of the sarong for married and unmarried woman. They can wear any kind of sarong. The only difference is the name of sarong that is “tembe cau” and “tembe nggoli”. In the past time, the sarong which has no pattern is only worn by commoners. Meanwhile, the sarong which has pattern is worn by noble families. But today, there is no particular motive and color of the sarong that should be worn by married and unmarried woman” (interview, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018)

He also adds that in the past time, the Bima people particularly in *Malay (kampung melayu)*, wore only one color of sarong that is grey or orange. Since the culture of *rimpu* is acculturated and developed, *rimpu* then comes with variety of colors and patterns as it is seen today (Fahru Rizki, interview, July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2018).

## Conclusion

*Rimpu* grows naturally as local cultural creativity and tradition of the Bimanese women. The fundamental value of *rimpu* for Bimanese women is politeness and identity. The women cover their entire body tightly with the creativity of *rimpu* they created themselves. They wave sarong on their own and wear the sarong as their identity. As *rimpu* takes a special symbolic meaning in the way it is worn, *rimpu* defines and marks a woman's social status as an individual, then defines and introduces the woman's social group identity as a member of the community. Furthermore, to identify the difference social status of the women in the community, an unmarried woman who has been proposed will wear *rimpu cili*. Meanwhile, other unmarried women will wear *rimpu mpida*. The married women or housewives will wear *rimpu colo*. At the recent years, the Bimanese women who wear *rimpu* can be found in certain areas of Bima, West Nusa Tenggara such as Wawo, Sape, Lambitu, woha, Monta, Sanggar, Madapangga, and Tambora.

However, the religious values and practice of *rimpu* in Bimanese female community can be presented as the concept of Islamic tourism to attract the tourists around the world since West Nusa Tenggara wins world's halal tourism awards and continues to improve to become a center of world's halal tourism.

Lastly, this study is hopefully expected to present reference and to provide ideas for other writers to conduct further studies on *rimpu* or on other local cultures and traditions of the Bima people.

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