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The secret life of sarongs: Manggarai textiles as super-skins

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Abstract

Studies of Indonesian textiles have predominantly focused on their symbolic and religious aspects, ignoring their everyday use as clothing. This article reveals the sensual, intimate life of Manggarai sarongs as everyday garments, a life that has remained a 'secret' in the academic literature. Sarongs, with their capacities to wrap, protect and hide, accentuate the properties of skin and can therefore be considered 'super-skins'. As artefactual extensions of their wearer's body they absorb substances and intentions, offer comfort at times of upset or illness, and transmit social and emotional messages. As burial objects, sarongs index the close kinship performed in everyday acts of feeding, comforting and protecting. However, there is no single 'social life' or 'career' of a sarong. Instead, sarongs as super-skins have a range of possibilities of becoming, in connection with the varied fates and projects of human lives.

Key Words * sarongs * clothing * skin * the senses * personhood * Eastern Indonesia

It is a cool morning in southern Manggarai (Flores, eastern Indonesia) and I am at the women's bathing place (waé), enveloping my body in a long, tubular sarong as I stand under a stream of cold water directed by a bamboo chute. Sita, a middle-aged woman with three children, arrives at the waé with her youngest daughter and a heavy bucket

containing blood-soaked sarongs. The sarongs bear witness to the previous day's labour of Odi, with whom Sita shares a house, and were placed under Odi as her daughter was born. Sita hitches up the striped sarong she herself is wearing and squats to begin the laborious process of washing out the blood. As she lifts the dark, heavy material out of the bucket she wrinkles up her nose and spits, as Manggarai people always do when confronted with unpleasant odours, their saliva contaminated by the stench. 'Wau (bad smell)' she says to me, by way of explanation, and begins to pound the blood of childbirth out of the first sarong.

Two months earlier, sarongs had occupied quite a different place at a ritual to formally recognize the marriage of my adoptive sister. As the negotiations progressed between the bride's and groom's families, a brooding gloom seemed to settle over my adoptive father (Amé), who became increasingly stony-faced, oblivious to the jokes of the other men. Later, after the extended family crowded into the house for the 'post-mortem' on the ritual, I discovered the reason for Amé's sombre mood. A woven sarong, called 'the sarong to lead by the hand' (lipa padong) and presented by Amé's patrilineal kin 'to make a shelter' (kudut pandé mbau) for the couple and their children, had been controversially rejected by the lowland in-laws. Privately, a friend tells me the groom's kin were probably afraid of accepting such a gift, since they would have had to 'answer' it with a horse. In a ritual context, such a named sarong, which would fetch a far cheaper price than a horse in the market, is particularly 'heavy' (mendo).

Fast forward to almost a year later, and a different view of sarongs emerges as I record the life history of an old woman called Iné Kris. She describes how, towards the end of her father's life, she presented him with a fine sarong she had woven. 'That was to

be his shroud,' she explained. She said that she told her father 'Oh, this is to praise you', whereupon he silently accepted her gift. Later in our conversation, I ask Iné Kris about her eldest daughter, Mela, who died when she was 16, a few years after she had learnt to weave. Do they still have any of Mela's sarongs? No, she replies, 'she took them all with her. The day that she died, we took a sarong that she had made with her own hands, and covered her in it.'

Hand-woven sarongs, the thread that unites these disparate ethnographic vignettes, are perhaps the most ubiquitous item of everyday life in southern Manggarai. Known as lipa or towé, sarongs are worn by men and women, in the house and to work in the fields, to church, whilst bathing and sleeping, in the cold and rain, at birth and marriage, and in one's coffin and grave after death. Sarongs are also used to carry babies, piles of areca nut or freshly-cut tobacco, small amounts of coffee or other beans, and to conceal money, pregnancy and secret medicines.

In this article, I argue that in the anthropology of cloth, and specifically work on Indonesia's incredible wealth of woven textiles, this mundane, everyday life of textiles has tended to be ignored, with emphasis placed instead on symbolic and religious aspects. Textiles have been studied in relation to systems of social and cosmological classification (Geirnaert-Martin, 1992), as works of art (Adams, 1969) and historical systems of design (Barnes, 1989), as goods involved in the ritual consolidation of political systems (Schneider, 1987) and as symbolically 'female' (Hoskins, 1989) or 'doubly gendered' objects (Hoskins, 1998). More recently, research has focused on the economic and socio-political aspects of cloth production, and their interaction with gender issues (de Jong,

2002). This rich literature has helped to reveal the many ways in which, in Gittinger's words, Indonesian societies 'speak with cloth' (1989). However, these textiles have overwhelmingly been considered as heirlooms and exchange valuables, a female realm of expression parallel to men's ritual speech. As such, the more sensual, non-linguistic aspects of textiles, as well as their everyday use and materiality as clothing, have tended to be overlooked.

Manggarai sarongs do have a 'public life' as both exchange valuables and commodities for sale in the market. However, they also have what I have called a 'secret life', one closely entwined with the messy and productive lives of those who wrap them around their bodies and children. In calling this life 'secret', I want to draw attention to a scholarly silence, evidenced by the lack of studies of the sensuous, everyday aspects of Indonesian cloth. However, I also want to focus on what many theorists consider to be the central paradox of 'the everyday': the fact that it is simultaneously 'the most obvious and the best hidden' of conditions (Lefebvre, 1987: 9; cf Highmore, 2002: 1-2).

Although, as I will show, people do sometimes use sarongs secretly, to hide objects and bodily conditions, there is nothing inherently mysterious about the aspects of sarongs that I shall describe. Indeed, in some respects, these aspects are so obvious that they 'go without saying' in Manggarai social life (Bloch, 1992). Yet, paradoxically, the very 'obviousness' of the everyday life of sarongs makes it difficult to describe, particularly in the eastern Indonesian context where powerful rituals couple objects with speech (Keane, 1997), leaving their non-ritual significance hidden from the attentions of anthropologists.

It is this 'everyday' approach that leads me to speak of 'sarongs' rather than, as in most of the literature, textiles or cloth, since in daily life in southern Manggarai, woven

textiles are meant to be worn. As such, sarongs are distinctly three-dimensional objects, animated by the shape and movements of human bodies, rather than the two-dimensional panels displayed in museums or printed in the pages of glossy art books. The silence regarding this apparently obvious aspect of textiles supports Colchester's (2003) recent description of the poverty of serious social scientific approaches to clothing. Drawing on Hollander's (1993) idea that clothes – in this case in the context of Western painting – offer a highly specific 'means of seeing', Colchester argues that clothing needs to be taken seriously in and of itself, rather than in terms of how it reflects other domains of experience. While Hollander, with her interest in Western pictorial art, emphasizes the visual messages that clothes convey, I want to move away from privileging the visual to considering the phenomenological and somatic effects of sarongs as clothing. Sarongs have an intimate connection to their wearer's body and bodily substances; they are, as Banerjee and Miller (2003) have shown with respect to the sari, lived garments. They do not offer merely a distinct 'means of seeing', but also a very particular and multi-sensory means of being in the world.

In focusing on sarongs as clothing, this article makes two main arguments. The first of these is that, as a lived garment, a sarong is like a skin. As I shall show, a number of anthropologists have argued that skin decoration, tattooing and clothing are like 'second' or 'social' skins. However, by considering in more detail the particular properties and peculiarities of skin, particularly those emphasized by Anzieu (1989), I shall show how sarongs accentuate some of the ordinary aspects of skin and should therefore be considered 'super-skins'. This emphasis on skin also enables me to re-unite the non-visual, somatic aspects of sarongs with their visual appearance. The second broad

argument of the article is that the ‘social life’ (Appadurai, 1986) of a sarong is intimately entwined with, but not reducible to, the biographies of both its weaver and its primary wearer. Following Gell’s (1998) work on the indexical agency of art objects, I show how sarongs can act, transformatively, as the material embodiments of everyday kinship, and how unusual disruptions in the life of a sarong index extraordinary disruptions in human lives. Norris, in her work on ‘divestment’ in India, has shown how clothing and persons are ‘things in the process of becoming in relation to each other’ (2004: 69). In a similar vein, this article shows how there is no single ‘social life’ of a sarong, but a range of possibilities of becoming in connection with the varied fates and projects of individual lives.

Textiles and weaving in Manggarai

Some brief information on weaving will help to set the scene for my descriptions of sarong-wearing. In the area of southern Manggarai with which I am familiar, there are two types of sarong that women weave: simple, stripy sarongs known as lipa surak or lipa Todo, and more complicated and highly valued lipa songké, which consist of small, brightly coloured patterns on a dark background. These sarongs differ from other eastern Indonesian textiles in several main respects. Firstly, unlike the more famous ikat textiles of east Flores and Sumba, the threads of which are dyed prior to weaving, patterns in songké cloths are formed through a process known as ‘supplementary weft’, whereby motifs are woven into the textile in addition to the basic warp and weft. Secondly,

although textiles are woven on backstrap looms, the warp is not circular, but is instead wound onto a warp beam plank. Sections of cloth are then cut and sewn into long tubular sarongs. Thirdly, unlike in other areas of Flores, there is no clan ownership of specific patterns, nor do motifs indicate a person's class (Molnar, 1998: 44). However, certain styles and motifs tend to be associated with particular Manggarai villages so that when a woman moves after marriage, she both introduces new patterns into her husband's village, and sets about learning new designs. Fourthly and finally, unlike many eastern Indonesian societies, Manggarai has no distinct 'male' or 'female' sarongs (Geirnaert-Martin, 1992: 109), with surak and songké styles worn by both men and women. The only, rather subtle, difference lies in the way in which women and men tie their sarongs. Whilst women gather the excess length of the sarong towards one side before tucking it in slightly off-centre at the waist, men pull the excess up to their chests and then roll it down tightly, wearing their sarongs shorter than women.

Hamilton has noted that a two-tiered system governs the sale of Florenese textiles, with cloths of lower quality sold in markets and those of higher quality sold at home to private clients (1994: 52). In southern Manggarai, cloths woven for sale in the market are always of an inferior quality, bought by town-dwellers or by those from areas of Manggarai with historical taboos against weaving (see Erb, 1994). However, higher quality cloths are very rarely sold. More often than not, they are given as one of two kinds of gifts. Firstly, a woman's sarong may be used as one of the named sarongs given (always by the bride's side) at marriage rituals. The use of cloths in this manner is familiar from the eastern Indonesian literature and is one of the main reasons why cloth has been seen as a 'female' gift that must be 'answered' with 'male' objects such as

jewellery, money or particular livestock (Keane, 1997: 75-81). By contrast, the second main way in which Manggarai sarongs are given as gifts is rather unfamiliar from the literature. In this form, a woman's cloths are not appropriated as extended family property but instead, are given privately and informally by the weaver to her husband, mother, brother or other male or female relative. Women may have in mind a particular person to receive a sarong as they are weaving it, though they tend to be rather shy about revealing this. Given in this way, sarongs are the material sign of a woman's love and remembering, and this is why it is common for unmarried women to tease one another that they are weaving a sarong for a husband. As we shall see, the idea that sarongs are valued not only for the female labour that has gone into producing them, but also for the ways in which they embody loving protection, is central to their significance as everyday objects.

Hand-woven, but no longer hand-dyed, sarongs do remain completely central to everyday village life. There was, for example, not a day of my fieldwork when I was not wearing one. However, it is important to stress that Manggarai people are increasingly wearing other kinds of clothes in addition to sarongs, as well as using woven cloth for other purposes besides clothing. Some men have begun to wear the kinds of shop-bought, checkered sarongs common throughout Indonesia, perhaps as a means of cultivating a modern, pan-Indonesian identity. In the town of Ruteng, state officials (pegawai) have songké cloth stitched to make jackets or shirts, in line with common practices in Indonesia, where textiles index legitimate ethnicity. In villages, songké sarongs are being increasingly replaced by white wedding dresses and dark suits as the clothing of choice for a bride and groom in church. Instead, the songké cloths they might have worn are

hung up as decoration on the wall behind them as they sit receiving guests and sipping coffee after their wedding. In these instances, the visual aspects of Manggarai sarongs as markers of village or ethnic identity do seem to predominate. However, unlike in neighbouring Ngada, the introduction of ready-to-wear clothing does not mean that weaving skills are disappearing (Molnar, 1998: 46), nor that hand-woven sarongs are becoming less ubiquitous.

Cloth and skin

In this article, I want to stress how sarongs, with their capacities to wrap, protect and hide, have distinctly 'skin-like' properties. However, I am not the first anthropologist to use such a metaphor in connection with cloth or with body decoration more generally. Skin metaphors can be found in two main kinds of literature on these themes. The first is an older literature on body arts, in which tattooing, painting, wig-making and other decorative activities are interpreted as overlaying a person's body-skin with a 'second' or 'social' skin (Turner, 1980; O'Hanlon, 1992; Gell, 1993). This literature tends to use skin metaphors to make various arguments about the link between appearance and identity, as when the skin and its decorations are thought by various societies to reveal the 'truth' about a person (or group) and their social relations (Strathern, 1979). This is in turn contrasted with commonsense western assumptions, which see the skin and its decoration as somehow superficial, masking a deeper reality. The second literature that makes reference to skin metaphors is a more recent series of writings on cloth and clothing that,

again, interpret these as a ‘second skin’ (Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Thomas, 2003; Norris, 2004; Woodward, 2005). In this literature, cloth is considered to be like skin because it has a similar function, wrapping the body (Thomas, 2003: 81), associated with its substances (Norris, 2004: 63) and feeling, therefore, as though it is almost a part of those who wear it (Bannerjee and Miller, 2003: 25). This literature, with its emphasis on cloth, might seem to be closer to the concerns of this article. However, skin metaphors are not particularly central to the arguments of these authors, nor do they fully exploit the specificity of skin. It is therefore important to consider other works that detail the properties of skin.

As Montagu notes in Touching: the human significance of the skin, most of us take our skin ‘entirely for granted’ (1971: 5). It is, perhaps, the most everyday of our sense organs. And yet, as Montagu stresses, human skin is astonishingly versatile: ‘waterproof, dustproof, and miraculously – until we grow old – always the right size’ (ibid: 5). Montagu’s work discusses the significance of skin cross-culturally, dwelling in particular on the role of skin sensations in infant development. However, the significance of skin to psychological development has been most notably explored by the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu who, in The Skin Ego (1989), argues for connections between skin-experiences and the formation and sustaining of the ego. As Gell has noted, Anzieu’s work appears to confirm, from a psychological perspective, the proposition of both Strathern (1979) and Turner (1980) – from the first set of literature noted above – that the skin is ‘in many ways, the social person himself/ herself’ (Gell 1993: 28). Anzieu stresses that the skin is the most vital of our sense organs: we can live quite healthily without sight, hearing, taste or smell, yet we die if we lose just a seventh of the surface of

our skin (1990: 64). He describes nine main functions of the skin ego that are very helpful for considering the significance of skin. These are: supporting, containing, protecting/ shielding, individuating, connecting (particularly all the other senses), sexualizing, libidinal recharging, registering/ signifying and (self) destroying. However, as a psychoanalyst, Anzieu is primarily concerned with describing case-studies of deficiencies in the formation of the skin-ego, and their subsequent treatment.

I am not particularly interested in supporting Anzieu's entire psychoanalytic scheme, although I do refer to many of his 'skin-functions' in my descriptions of sarong-wearing. More intriguing is Anzieu's stress on what Gell calls the 'double-sidedness' (1993: 29) of the skin, and the paradoxes that this involves. Although the skin is a single structure, it has an 'inside' and an 'outside'; this means that tactile experience has the 'peculiarity' (compared with other forms of sensory experience) of being both active and passive (Anzieu 1990: 63). The double-sidedness of skin also means that it mediates 'traffic' (Gell, 1993: 29) between the internal and external worlds. The skin shields our internal body from 'exogenous disruptions' and yet, paradoxically, at the same time preserves the marks of those disruptions; it is both permeable and impermeable; it is regenerative and yet 'caught up in a continual process of dessication' (Anzieu, 1989: 17).

I find this idea of skin's paradoxical double-sidedness particularly helpful to an understanding of the everyday use and significance of sarongs as clothing. Indeed, cloth has also been said to have a 'dual quality', both touching the body and facing outwards, thereby enabling both individual and collective identities (Hansen, 2004: 372). However, it is important to remember that clothing or sarongs are a very particular kind of 'artefactual skin' (Gell, 1993: 38). This is why, though the description of skin decoration

and tattooing as a ‘second skin’ is pertinent, I do not find the image of cloth as simply a second skin entirely convincing. Cloth does have many of the functions of skin that Anzieu describes. And yet, because a person can use their sarong to entirely envelop their baby, or have a number of new sarongs to cover them after death, or have their sarong taken off them and almost forcibly replaced with another, cloth (in comparison with actual skin decoration) clearly has something a little extra. This is why, as I shall explore in more detail in what follows, I have chosen to describe sarongs as ‘super-skins’.

I should emphasize, of course, that the idea of sarongs as skins is not one that I gained explicitly from my informants. The main metaphorical use of skin in Manggarai speech is the phrase loké-weki, which literally translates as ‘skin-body’ but is used to refer to a person’s fate (also dara-weki or ‘blood-body’). This notion of (good or bad) ‘fate’ is frequently employed, whether to explain a person’s encounter with heavy rain on a walk or more serious accidents or illnesses. What is interesting for our purposes here is that, firstly, a person’s fate is symbolically connected with their skin, and that the skin (and blood) are central to the unity and identity of a particular body.

Wearing a sarong

Most adult Manggarai villagers wear tubular sarongs almost continuously, something made possible by their incredible flexibility as garments. Women and some men bathe underneath sarongs, slipping a dry one over their heads when they have finished and letting the wet sarong fall to the ground. During the day, sarongs are worn like skirts, rolled or gathered and then fastened around one’s waist in the male or female manner. By

contrast, at night, sarongs become a kind of blanket or sleeping bag, pulled up over the sleeper's body. A man going to his fields to work might prefer to wear shorts, but he is still likely to wear his sarong slung across one shoulder or around his neck, for times when he suddenly meets someone else and needs to be a bit more presentable, or for when he just becomes a little cold.

Like the looped string bags of New Guinea, then, sarongs might be considered 'essential companions' for Manggarai women and men (MacKenzie, 1991: 2). However, as clothing, sarongs are particularly intimate companions, closely associated with their wearers' bodies, emotions and substances. Describing sarongs as 'skirts' hardly does justice to the manner in which Manggarai people are constantly engaging in micro-processes of shifting and adjusting sarong material, pulling the cloth around their shoulders, using it to wipe their eyes, undoing and re-doing sarong fastenings. As I myself found as I struggled to master wrapping a sarong around my waist, sarong-wearing inculcates certain bodily habits and dispositions in a Manggarai person. Wearing their sarongs long encourages women to walk with short, quick steps, rarely running, whilst men's shorter sarongs enable them to take longer strides. Since sarongs are not fastened with any pins or ties, there is always a certain danger that a sarong may fall down, and indeed they sometimes do. The 'material microscopics' (Woodward, 2005: 22) of sarong-wearing are thus hedged with a certain amount of anxiety, as is also the case for the equally fluid sari (Banerjee and Miller, 2003: 27). When getting up from sitting down, people will therefore often re-fasten their sarongs, stretching the fabric as they stretch their limbs and yawn. Women carrying children are particularly deft at re-

arranging sarongs over the bodies of both themselves and their child, 'hooking' material over their shoulder, if needs be, to avoid re-fastening it at their waist.

Since the manipulation of clothing frequently communicates both social and emotional messages (Murphy, 1964), this constant adjusting of sarongs is also a reflection of social situations. For example, if a woman is sitting on the floor chatting, surrounded by her children and close female kin, she is likely to sit extremely informally, with her legs out straight in front of her and her sarong fallen down to below her waist, often exposing her petticoat. However, if a visitor or older man enters the house, she will gather up the top of her sarong and fasten it high above her waist before crossing her legs into the more polite sitting posture. Similarly, if a man appears at the door of a house wearing his sarong long, down to his ankles, it communicates an instant message that he has come on formal business. By contrast, a man on his way to his fields who pops in on friends for a quick chew of betel will happily keep his sarong slung casually across his shoulder. In these instances, people adjust their sarong not only according to the type of social interaction taking place, but also to their own sense of comfort or relaxation and their inclination to talk freely or remain silent.

Like many Austronesian societies, Manggarai people are very prudish about adult nudity, and sarong-wrapping helps to preserve appropriate modesty in particular settings. However, the use of sarongs to maintain modesty means, ironically and perhaps inevitably, that their wrapping and unwrapping also has an erotic element. This is particularly noticeable when a young man pulls his sarong up to under his armpits and then rolls it, slowly and tightly, down his T-shirted torso, drawing female eyes as he goes. Although, as I shall describe in the next section, the female style of sarong-wearing hides

waists and stomachs, it does accentuate the bottom, and this is undoubtedly emphasized by young women, who wear their sarongs much tighter than older women. Since any young woman is likely to be wearing a sarong she herself has woven, there is a kind of mutual feedback between her attractiveness and her weaving skill: her body emphasising the fine patterns of her songké weaving and vice versa. Although the life of sarongs that I am describing in this article is a multi-sensual one, it would be wrong to give the impression that the visual aspects of sarongs are insignificant to their everyday life. In the case of sarongs wrapping unmarried bodies and desires, the visual is clearly extremely important

This initial consideration of sarong-wrapping will hopefully have shown how sarongs accentuate many of the functions of skin as outlined by Anzieu (1989): containing, individuating, registering and sexualizing. However, it is Anzieu's third function, protecting or shielding, which I want to particularly emphasize. As everyday objects, Manggarai sarongs offer a kind of protection to the wearer, concealing hidden motives and worries just as they conceal the lower body, whilst at the same time transforming the wearer's status, whether from intimate confidante to guest or vice versa. Significantly, this aspect of skin decoration has also been stressed by Gell with respect to Polynesian tattooing. Influenced by Anzieu, but also following Reich, Gell describes such tattoos as 'character armour' since they simultaneously protect and constitute the person (1993: 33-4). What is significant about sarongs is that, unlike permanent tattoos, their protective role is not constant. Instead, because sarongs are a kind of flexible super-skin, it can be suddenly assumed. This is seen most strikingly at times of great emotion when women cover their heads with their sarongs as they weep. To see a woman walking with

her sarong pulled up over her head is to know that she is distraught and unspeaking.

Whilst a woman relaxing with her sarong fallen open about her is open to conversation and joking, a woman with her sarong over her head is sealed off from social engagement, turned in on her own grief.

If sarongs wrap and protect the inner thoughts and emotional states of a person, they can also be considered a more mundane super-skin because they protect their wearer from the elements and from dirt and spilt foodstuffs. With their dark hues and tough cotton, sarongs have a particularly good capacity to absorb bodily and other substances. Indeed, as artefactual skins, sarongs can never be cleaned as efficiently as one's real skin: they seem to always bear traces of body secretions (menstrual blood, breast milk) and odours, of the betel juice spat by older villagers or the baby powder used as a cosmetic by young girls (see Allerton, forthcoming). Very old sarongs may in fact become too stained and worn for normal use, and will then be used to place underneath a woman during childbirth. Caregivers use sarongs to mop up the urine of infants, to wipe mucky hands and faces, and to absorb mud as children return from playing outside and clamber over adults. When women wash sarongs, slapping them down on large, flat stones at the stream, they are thus literally (though never entirely successfully) beating out of them the substances of daily, messy, family life.

Symbolic associations of cloth, weaving and life processes have been frequently noted in the literature on Indonesian textiles (Geirnaert-Martin, 1992; Hoskins, 1998). Manggarai sarongs, too, are connected with fertility and the human life-cycle, though as much for practical, sensual reasons as for any worked-up cosmology. During the chilly mountain evenings, people will often pull their sarong up around their shoulders, an

action known as wéngko molé or ‘making a blanket’. Using sarongs as a blanket in this way also occurs during illness, emphasizing cloth’s role as a comforting, protective skin behind which the vulnerable can hide. A sarong is thus a kind of artefactual hug.

However, wéngko is also the term used to refer to a baby’s placenta. Newborn babies are always wrapped in soft, old sarongs in the days and weeks after birth and thus, in quite practical terms, a baby replaces the amniotic sac and placenta of its mother’s womb with its mother’s sarongs. Once a baby has reached two months or so, it will begin to be carried in an extra sarong on its mother’s or father’s back, an action known as éko. Since babies are able to recognize and be comforted by the odours of their mother soon after birth (Classen et al, 1994: 2), the smell of a woman’s sarong is key to its comforting role. Manggarai babies are also likely to be soothed by the feel of a soft, old, warm sarong against their skin (Montagu, 1971: 87). Indeed, the materiality of a mother to her baby is intimately connected to the materiality of her sarongs.

The soothing, kinesthetic and olfactory aspects of sarongs, as well as their close association with the mother’s body, raises the likelihood that sarongs may, like Western ‘comfort blankets’, become ‘transitional objects’ for Manggarai infants (Winnicott, 1971). Certainly, sarongs are so closely associated with a mother’s body that, in her absence, they act as comforting, enveloping skins. Infants fondle or chew their mother’s sarong and very young siblings may sometimes fight over a particular sarong that they wish to lie down and sleep with. However, beyond the age of 3 or so, sarongs cease to be so central to the lives of children, reflecting the fact that the significance of sarongs waxes and wanes through the human life-cycle. Historically, Florenese peoples have not made child-sized sarongs (Hamilton, 1994: 41), and during the day, Manggarai children

wear T-shirts and shorts, borrowing a general, household sarong to sleep in at night. It is not until early adolescence that a child may claim one of the household sarongs as their own and, particularly in the case of girls, begin to wear it on other occasions besides night-time sleeping. Young, unmarried men wear sarongs very infrequently in the day, preferring to sport long trousers or shorts. However, once a man marries and has children, he increasingly starts to adopt a sarong, in part because he now has a wife to weave one for him, and in part because he is increasingly involved in the kinds of formal activities that require sarong-wearing. Similarly, once women marry and become mothers, they start to wear sarongs more frequently. The people who are, without exception, always to be found wearing sarongs are the elderly, a significant fact to which I shall return.

Intimacy, secrecy and protection

As super-skins that absorb tears, sweat and other bodily substances, sarongs are an artefactual extension of their wearer's body. It is this, as well as the unconscious erotic elements of sarong-wearing, that seems to explain the fact that a woman cannot wear a man's sarong, and vice versa. This generally unstated prohibition is somewhat unusual in Manggarai social life, where, unlike on Sumba (Hoskins, 1989), there are no ideas about 'pollution' or taboos connected with menstruation. Moreover, Manggarai men and women wear exactly the same style of sarongs. One woman described to me a time in the past before she was married when a man visiting her village asked to swap her attractive sarong with his own. She was outraged and refused, clearly seeing this invitation as a

sexual come-on. Since sarongs are closely connected with a person's body, wearing another's involves the kind of bodily intimacy that may be appropriate for two sisters, or for mother and child, but which is clearly inappropriate for adults of different sex.

These kinds of extremely personal connections between a sarong and its wearer are also shown in the way that people hide things in sarongs. Tubular sarongs are woven and stitched to be as long as a person's body and at least twice as wide, so there is always a good deal of extra fabric around the waist when wearing a sarong as a 'skirt'. People can therefore hide small objects such as medicines, tobacco, juicy new areca nuts or sums of money inside their sarongs. This allows such objects, taken as gifts for other people, to escape the prying eyes of neighbours when a person goes visiting. Such discretion is highly valued in a village context of extensive kinship links and a general cultural emphasis on sharing. However, as well as objects, sarongs can also hide bodily states and conditions. For example, women who are menstruating feel much more comfortable wearing a dark sarong, which can be twisted around to hide embarrassing stains, than clothes such as skirts and shorts.

Since women's sarongs can be tied so that the excess material hangs over the waist at the front, they also help to 'hide' a woman's stomach until well into her pregnancy. Although Manggarai women place a high value on having many children, they are often extremely reluctant to let others know that they are pregnant. This is partly because of a general reluctance to discuss sex or to 'jinx' a fortuitous event by mentioning it in advance, and partly because knowledge of a woman's pregnancy might make her a target for jealous sorcery. Indeed, these secretive aspects of sarongs may well be one of the reasons why brides wearing a 'traditional' (adat) costume that includes a

songké sarong are often seen by the church as having a ‘dirty’ (kotor) – that is, already consummated – marriage. By contrast, white wedding dresses, which do a less efficient job of covering a swollen belly, are promoted by certain Catholics as cleaner and purer than ‘dirty’ sarongs.

The sense of sarongs as extremely private places where one hides gifts, emotions and vulnerable bodily conditions reinforces a more general impression, noted above, of sarongs as protective. One interesting way in which this connection becomes apparent concerns the use of local medicines. When Manggarai people become ill, they tend to avoid bathing, and instead sit or lie at home with their sarong blanketed around them. They will usually be visited by one or more of the community’s healers (ata mbeko), who silently ‘blow’ (pur) healing prayers into some ginger or other medicinal root. Part of this is usually chewed and eaten by the patient, but a fair amount of it is used to do something called humak. This involves a friend or relative chewing up some of the prayer-infused ginger and then forcefully spitting it over the patient’s back. Once they have had such a humak with ginger, patients tend to find it difficult to replace shirts, and so they will often simply pull their sarongs – their artefactual super-skin – up over their shoulders. The warming, healing ginger juice thus becomes another pungent substance soaked up by sarongs and, significantly, a person will not normally go for a bathe or change this sarong until they have started to feel better.

This idea of ‘protection’ (jaga) is in fact a central notion in Manggarai social life. Before any major journey or ritual event, people hold small sacrificial rituals to request ancestral protection, or obtain prophylactic ginger medicine or special mantras from healers. What is interesting is that sarongs are often a key part of these protective devices.

For example, one woman, Iné Aga, told me about the wedding of her eldest son Simus in the past, when he was ‘protected’ from the harmful intentions of others by ‘medicine’ (rewos) and her own gift of a heavy, hand-spun cotton sarong. A man’s sarong also endows him with a kind of magical protection if he takes part in sasi, the highly distinctive Manggarai whip-fights. I was told that when preparing to fight, a man should make sure that no-one – and particularly no woman – touches the songké sarong that he is going to wear. If his fighting sarong was touched, it would diminish his power and he would be vulnerable to wounds from another man’s whip. Sarongs, then, have the capacity to absorb not only substances and odours, but also intentions, whether protective or harmful.

These examples of the individual connections between sarongs and bodies mean that it is hard to see Manggarai cloth as a ‘master symbol’ only for women. Such a conclusion is common in the literature on eastern Indonesia, where semidurable textiles have been seen as symbolically ‘female’ or ‘feminine’ goods, as contrasted with durable ‘male’ objects such as metal and stone (Hoskins, 1989: 144; 165-6; Barnes, 1989: 18). The view of cloth as a ‘female good’, although not unanimous (see Geirnaert-Martin, 1992: 131-3; also Hoskins, 1998 on ‘gender dualism’) seems to have arisen largely through a focus on the symbolism of textiles in the context of production and exchange. Certainly, if one were to concentrate on these realms in the Manggarai context, where weaving is a solely female occupation, and where named textiles are always given by ‘wife-givers’ to ‘accompany the bride’ (padong molas), one might be led to a similar conclusion. It is also true, as I have described with respect to the feedback between sarong design and young women’s allure, that women’s role as weavers gives them a

particularly intense connection with the sarongs they wear. However, focusing on everyday use and consumption, on the ways in which sarongs are worn as clothing, has also revealed the sensual, even secretive aspects of cloth that are by no means confined to sarongs worn by women. Men, too, have sarongs that carry their scent, that cradle their children, that wrap them when ill or that hide spells or medicines. Thus, one of the advantages of an everyday approach to objects is to see them as more ‘androgynous objects’ (MacKenzie, 1991), to complicate any assumptions about their ‘gendered’ status.

Appearance and identity

I noted earlier that skin metaphors could be found in two main kinds of literature on body coverings and decoration: an older literature largely concerned with skin decoration and a more recent literature on cloth and clothing. One of the advantages of describing sarongs as super-skins is that, following Anzieu (1989), we can acknowledge their distinct ‘double-sidedness’. The inside of a sarong acts as a secret container of goods, emotions and body-states; the outside, by contrast, communicates various messages to the world. The inside of a sarong is lived-in by the body; the outside marks that body visually. Thus, whilst I follow the second literature in its concern with clothes as lived garments, it is also important to consider the kinds of questions about appearance and identity posed by the first literature on ‘second skins’.

One context in which the appearance of Manggarai textiles is closely connected with the issue of identity is the presentation of ‘guest sarongs’ to a person visiting another

village. As I myself discovered, it is considered very impolite to reject such a sarong, even if one has brought sarongs from home. These ‘guest’ sarongs are nearly always the best kind of lipa songké, still stiff and pungent with newness. Wearing such a sarong thus clearly marks one out as a visitor, since very fine songké are normally worn at ritual events or to church, and are not the kind of sarong to be worn for ordinary work. Moreover, since songké patterns vary from village to village, the wearer’s body is covered in the songké style of their hosts rather than their home.

Presenting a guest with a sarong to wear is therefore one way, together with feeding and housing, of making them a temporary ‘insider’ in one’s home, family and village. It is a way of marking a person’s body with one’s concern and protection as a host. But it is also a more possessive claim on that person’s body; it says to others, ‘look who we are feeding and who is sleeping in our house’. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this occurs when a bride arrives in her husband’s home at the end of her padong, the accompanied journey from her natal home (Allerton, 2004). At the edge of her new village, the bride is met by a party of her husband’s patrilineal kin, who proceed to divest her of her outer garments and dress her up in a new costume of blouse, bali-bélo headdress and a lipa songké. The bride is thus very literally given a new kinship identity, marked by her husband’s kin as one of their own before being led down to her new home.

These two examples suggest that in certain situations, there are very clear links between the visual appearance of a sarong and a person’s identity, whether as a ‘guest’ or ‘new bride’. Though our body-skin is our most fundamental and intimate sense-organ, a sarong is a super-skin that can be imposed on us by others, thus imposing a distinct ‘image of sociality’ (Colchester, 2003: 8). Moreover, because of the artefactual qualities

of new sarongs (stiff, restricting, pungent), a person wearing a guest sarong may literally be made to feel even more like a guest. However, unlike tattoos, the identity imposed by such sarongs is not permanent. Although the songké used to dress up a newly-arrived bride wraps her in the fabric of her new village, as that woman herself learns to combine the style of weaving she learnt at home with new patterns, her husband and children will be wrapped in cloth that expresses that bride's unique (kinship) history. Wrapping a guest in a sarong is about enveloping them in the intimacy of one's hearth and house. However, since a sarong is an artefactual skin, it can always be removed and returned to that house. This suggests that, because of the flexibility of sarongs as garments, their connection with a specific, proclaimed identity is always contingent. The visual aspects of a patterned sarong might appear to be most closely linked to identity, to what Anzieu terms the 'individuality' function of skin. Ironically, though, it is actually the non-visual aspects of old, faded sarongs – their smell and suppleness – that link them most closely with their wearers, perhaps because touch and smell are more intimate senses than sight.

Sarongs as shrouds

In speaking of sarongs as skins, I have been trying to capture something that the word 'textiles', or even 'clothing' does not quite convey. This is the way in which Manggarai sarongs are connected with the intimate, personal side of village life and village bodies. However, if sarongs have an everyday, sensual life, do they also have a death? And is this death commensurate with that of their owner? What happens to a sarong used to clothe a body when that particular body dies?

The subject of death has always been central to the literature on Indonesian textiles and weaving, in two main respects. Firstly, weaving as an activity has been seen to have a complex relationship to death: with its associations of fertility, weaving is generally antithetical to death, but can sometimes be seen as a dangerous, even cursed enterprise (Erb, 1994:207). Secondly, textiles occupy a central place in the funerary practices of many Indonesian societies, with particular categories of cloth used as shrouds or objects to accompany the deceased (Schneider, 1987:411; Barnes, 1989:91) or burial rituals centering on ostentatious expenditures of cloth (Adams, 1969:166-8). In Manggarai, both of these aspects are seen. Weaving as an activity is strongly linked to everyday, productive work and is banned in the village for three days after a death, for fear that the deceased's soul would hear the tok tok sound of the weaving sword and think his or her death was not being marked. In addition, sarongs are used as gifts to be buried with the deceased. However, what I want to stress here is that the significance of sarongs at funerals is not necessarily a sign of their more 'cosmic nature', as Barnes has argued for Lamalera (1989:18) but, in the Manggarai context, is in line with their everyday use as a super-skin.

After a Manggarai person has died, women in the house will immediately set up a wailing lament known as lorang. This sound spreads like fire around the village, announcing the tragedy and bringing those from neighbouring houses to cry over the body and to help with arrangements for receiving mourners. The deceased is washed, dusted with baby powder and then dressed in their best clothes. For adults, this always includes one of their sarongs, whilst children are dressed in smart, two-piece outfits. The body of the deceased is then laid out on top of a mat in front of the central house post,

and covered in a shroud. Although I was told that this shroud could be a white sheet, I never saw such a sheet being used, and shrouds are invariably high-quality lipa songké, placed over any sarongs the deceased is already wearing. The shrouding sarong is tucked all around the deceased's body and pulled up over their head. The complete covering of the face in this manner seems to be especially shocking for the bereaved, a final sarong-wrapping that demonstrates the deceased's future exclusion from everyday social interaction.

Following the initial private shock of the death, the laying-out and shrouding of the corpse signals the move to a more public phase of mourning. The deceased's closest female relatives sit next to the corpse, often enveloped in their own sarongs, as first guests from the village and later those from the surrounding area, enter the house. As they approach the door, female guests immediately begin to lorang, quickly sitting on the ground and hugging the bodies of both deceased and bereaved. Very close male relatives will also cry near the body, but usually men sit together silently around the edges of the main room. After they have finished crying, guests wipe their tears with their sarong and blow their noses loudly onto the floor, before finding a place to sit. A man, or occasionally a woman, will then present a small sum of money on behalf of their family. This is called waé lu'u or 'tears' and is seen as a way of recompensing the bereaved family for the expenses of the mourning period. These 'tears' will often be tucked temporarily underneath the shrouding sarong or laying-out mat, an interesting reminder of the capacity of sarongs for 'hiding' money.

The use of sarongs during burial procedures provides further evidence of their shifting role as super-skins. Indeed, shrouds are perhaps the most potent example of the

slippage between body-skin and cloth (think, for example, of the Turin shroud).

Manggarai sarong-shrouds are a kind of third skin over the clothing and body-skin of the deceased. When mourners come to wail next to the body, they repeatedly stroke the deceased through this shrouding sarong, mirroring the ways in which Manggarai people occasionally touch one another with brisk repetitive strokes in everyday life to express affection. Thus, as a shroud, a sarong appears to finally become completely melded with its wearer's body, no longer wrapped and unwrapped according to personal whims, but permanently tucked in place. Wailing villagers do not touch the actual skin of the deceased, but stroke this artefactual skin. Similarly, mourners visiting the house after the initial period in which the deceased's body was washed and dressed do not actually 'see' the corpse, but look upon a human shape wrapped in songké patterns. Sarongs are super-skins because they can be layered and manipulated in ways that are impossible for real skin.

The role of sarongs as shrouds partly explains why sarongs become more significant and more permanent as super-skins the older a person gets. Old and faded sarongs that are worn continually by the elderly are so completely associated with their wearer's body that they are not only buried with them but must also be covered in a shroud. Anzieu's comments on the paradoxical nature of skin seem again pertinent here, particularly what he says about the role of skin as both 'regenerative' and 'dessicating'. Whilst a sarong as a super-skin can to some extent 'regenerate' a person – as when a dazzling new sarong marks a young woman as a bride or offers protection to a whip-fighter – once a person becomes very old, it is somehow inappropriate for them to wear too new a sarong, and instead their sarongs 'dessicate' and become more rubbish-like.

Sarongs as shrouds also remain bound up with the physical aspects of bodily substances, absorbing the odour of decomposition and eventually rotting with the corpse in the grave. Indeed, the sarongs of mourners seem to absorb not only their tears but also part of the polluting aspects of death and corpses. Immediately after a death, the deceased's family may not change their clothes or go to bathe. Their dirty clothing materializes their grief until, three days after the death, a small ritual called haung ta'a ('green/ unripe leaves') is held. An elder will say a few words and then the family will all go off to bathe together, returning in clean clothes and sarongs.

Burials usually take place some 24 hours or so after the death. The deceased is not only buried in their shrouding sarong but, in addition, a number of other sarongs will be wrapped around the corpse, or placed with it inside the coffin. Unlike the sums of money given as 'tears', which are presented by co-villagers and others who knew the deceased, sarongs for burial are only given by close relatives such as siblings, spouses and children. A baby or young child might have only two or three sarongs buried with them, but an older person is likely to have a good number of such burial sarongs, at least one for every adult child. One woman told me that such sarongs are given for a deceased person as a 'sign of love' (tanda momang). For her, it did not matter if one gave a tattered sarong, what was important was to give a 'loving' sarong as such. However, it is actually the case that most such sarongs are of high quality, though nothing like the expensive 'heirloom cloths' used for burials in Sumba (Hoskins, 1998: 84).

The contrast of tears and money on the one hand and sarongs on the other is worth some discussion. Within the village, food items such as coffee, rice and sugar are almost constantly exchanged. At all major events such as those connected with marriages and

deaths, as well as communal agricultural rituals, households contribute cups of these foodstuffs, the quantities meticulously measured out and recorded. The idea is that, if I contribute towards the coffee and rice needed to receive guests for your daughter's wedding, you will later contribute such goods for my father's funeral. Indeed, there is even a sense in which tears and lorang wailing are part of this village-wide system of sharing. Women will rather matter-of-factly talk about having to go and cry for a particular person since that person's relatives had in the past come to cry for one of their own kin. It is in part the idea of the exchangeability of crying, the fact that one owes certain people one's tears, that explains why the cash given after a death is also called 'tears'. Thus, when a rather miserly and unsociable old woman died, most women in the village refused to go and cry over her corpse, or to present money for 'tears', arguing that she had never come to cry for any of their deceased relatives.

Now, although sarongs as clothing do absorb the tears of mourners, as objects given at funerals, they are very different to rice, coffee, sugar and tears. Burial sarongs are not thought of in terms of 'sharing' or 'exchange'. A sarong given as a burial gift is explicitly talked about as a 'sign of love', a 'sign of praise' and is only given by very close relatives. Writers on cloth given at burials in other Indonesian societies have seen these gifts as transmitting information about a dead person's social status to the 'society' he or she is about to join (Schneider, 1987: 411). However, in Manggarai (and in line with the fact that no classes or groups 'own' motifs), sarongs as burial gifts do not materialize social status; rather, it is as though they continue to provide comfort and protection, evidence of close familial ties. I think this may be what explains what I at first saw as the rather insensitive way in which people give their parents shrouding-sarongs

before their death. Given as a gift for ‘praising’ (tabing) during life, a sarong can more explicitly be seen as a gift of love, removed from the exchange aura of mourning and funerary rituals. Manggarai sarongs materialize the intimacy of close bodily contact within families, and are contrasted with exchange substances that are ingested (rice, sweet coffee) or expelled (tears) amongst the wider community.

It might be better, rather than seeing funeral sarongs as a particular kind of symbolic good, to instead consider them, following Gell (1998), as indexes of agency. Gell argues that art objects are a ‘congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated’ (1998: 68). When placed in a grave with a corpse, a Manggarai sarong ideally indexes the ‘love’ (momang) of a close relative for the deceased. Indeed, the various different sarongs given by different relatives are in part a ‘congealed residue’ of the close kinship links performed in everyday acts of feeding, comforting and protecting. However, burial sarongs do not always index the concern and remembrance of loving relatives, as the example of Mela from my opening vignettes reminds us. Dying young and unmarried, Mela’s corpse was accompanied by her own, recently-woven sarongs. Much of the poignancy of this example undoubtedly lies in the fact that Mela never got the chance to, in Gell’s terms, ‘distribute’ her personhood by using her sarongs as loving gifts to others. These sarongs remain significant to her mother, Iné Kris, as absent objects, prematurely dessicating in the grave just like her teenage daughter. In this instance, the gradual and mutual relations of ‘becoming’ between cloth and persons (Norris, 2004: 69) were never fully developed, and the ‘life cycles’ of both Mela and her sarongs were cut short.

Conclusion

In their famous volume, Cloth and Human Experience, Weiner and Schneider (1989) stressed the human actions that made cloth politically and socially salient. They argued that these actions were associated with three main ‘domains’: that of cloth manufacture, that of bestowal and exchange and that of political ceremony. In this article, I have sought to show how the social (if not political) salience of cloth can also be uncovered in the domain of lived, sensual experience. Eastern Indonesian textiles may well have a ‘function that reaches far beyond that of dress and costume’ (Barnes, 1989: 18), but too often their everyday role as clothing has been overlooked, as though it were fairly obvious what clothes were about (cf. Colchester, 2003). The theoretical power of the concept of the ‘everyday’ is that it creates a space to discuss ‘the meaning of things which are usually overlooked’ (Attfield, 2000: 11) and, certainly, the life of sarongs that I have considered in this article has remained a secret, both for ethnographic and theoretical reasons. In ritual contexts throughout eastern Indonesia, cloth is coupled with powerful speech. Thus, the cloth presented by Amé during the marriage ritual described in my opening vignettes was proclaimed to be ‘the sarong to lead by the hand’ (lipa padong). However, in non-ritual, everyday contexts, cloth is uncoupled from speech: Iné Kris’s father silently accepted the sarong that his daughter gave him as a future shroud, Sita merely commented on the smell of the blood-soaked sarongs as she washed them. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize the feedback between the ‘secret everyday’ and ‘ritual’ importance of sarongs. A sarong’s use as a super-skin – to cradle children, to

comfort those who are sick or upset, or to modestly cover a person's body whilst they bathe – is undoubtedly very different from its role as a 'sheltering' gift at marriage rituals. However, it is the 'secret' associations of sarongs, the ways in which they are bound up with the materiality of everyday kinship, that makes them such an apt object to index protective or 'sheltering' intentions. This is why its rejection in a ritual context can be so shocking.

This article has uncovered how the human life cycle intersects in various ways with the life cycle of sarongs. Just as human lives are remarkably varied in length and eventfulness, so too there is no 'ideal career' (Kopytoff, 1986: 66) for sarongs but rather a number of possible life trajectories. A sarong may be worn and washed for years before being buried with its owner. Alternatively, it may become so tattered that it never makes it to a grave, but is instead used to soak up the blood of childbirth or the faeces of a newborn baby, before finally disintegrating and becoming a rag on a rubbish dump. It may have a brief life as a commodity for sale in the market, before being bought and worn as clothing. Or it may be given, brand-new, as a gift for an elderly parent, stored in a chest as a future shrouding sarong, and never worn except in the grave. The 'sheltering' sarong rejected by Amé's in-laws almost started out its 'life' as a formal gift to the groom's kin. However, even if given as an exchange object in this way, a sarong will eventually end up being worn by someone. Cloth in Manggarai is always potential clothing, is never stored as an heirloom and can thus never be considered separately from its everyday, mundane life. Indeed, the very materiality of cloth – its softness and impermanence – means that, like its wearers (and unless it can find itself displayed and 'preserved' in a museum collection) it is always destined to die.

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