



Padang Magek (Minangkabau Musicians  
with guitar and viol

DANCES OF MINANGKABAU:  
NOTES BY CLAIRE HOLT\*

In the dances of the Minangkabau, just as in their language, music, law, and undoubtedly in other phases of their culture as well, one discerns side by side the disparate elements that have impinged upon Minangkabau society in successive epochs. Most clearly distinguishable is the form and mood of dances with tambourines--an instrument introduced into the archipelago by Islam and used for accompanying chanted praises to Allah--as contrasted with the style and mood of the pre-existing dances of the *pentjak-randai* family. And yet, despite their seeming total difference, both contain hints of the perpetual presence of other strains, neither Islamic nor Hinduistic, but rather recalling still older traditions.

The peculiar affinities of the tambourine dances with the choral performances with sun hats in the Celebes, and the echoes of dances with weapons common to pagan Borneo and other islands also found in Minangkabau combats with arms--all these point to ancient Indonesia. As in so many aspects of life in Sumatra, whether among the Minangkabau, Redjang, Batak, or others, we witness the products of a completed process of cultural assimilation. With the impact of influences from the West, discerned symptomatically in the dances of school children, we may be seeing the beginning of a disintegrative process. But it is to be hoped that after a period of transition this phase too will lead to the emergence of new forms, a new reintegration.

Our first impression of truly Minangkabau country came at the interior village of Alahan Pandjang, our destination after disembarking at the West Sumatran port of Padang. We marvelled at the exquisite architecture and gaily painted, woodcarved ornamentation of the buildings. The graceful and seemingly old *balai adat* (council hall), for example, strongly invoked the vision of a wooden ship, rising from ground level at its center to an elevated floor at either end.

We had our first conversations about Minangkabau dances in Alahan Pandjang. Here we learned that the dance was integrally associated with most *adat* (custom) feasts. Though the election and installation of a new *penghulu* (family chief) was probably the most important ceremony, the greatest variety of dances was usually to be found at wedding ceremonies.

A pair of girls danced the *tari pajung* (parasol dance) for us. One represented a boy and carried the parasol. (Later, in other villages, we witnessed the same dance but with two boys, one representing the girl.) The pair began by facing each other at some distance, then slowly coming together with softly swaying steps. When

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they met, the girl turned around. The boy followed very closely behind her. Swaying from side to side at the waist, moving in opposite directions, with the parasol balanced between them, the dancers advanced one behind the other, describing a curving path. The atmosphere conveyed a light hint of flirtation and gaiety.



A pleasant surprise was in store for us at Alahan Pandjang. A very agile boy with keen eyes gracefully demonstrated a dance pantomime of a youthful kite flier. After he finished, the kite dancer squatted on the ground, draped his loosened scarf over his hand, leaned his cheek on his right hand, and began to sing in *pantun*, the traditional Malay verse style. Another boy began a soft theme on his bamboo flute. The sweet, mournful music and song which followed were called *basaluang* after the name of the flute (*saluang*).



Our next excursion took us to Lubuk Alung, northwest of Padang along the route to Bukittinggi (known to the Dutch as Fort de Kock), the heart of the highlands both geographically and culturally. Our particular interest here was the stylized mock combat (*silé*), probably the most outstanding of the traditional Minangkabau dances. These displays required remarkable alertness, agility, and balance-control. As with similar dances widespread throughout the Indonesian archipelago, they carried the echoes of ancient ritual.

The most accomplished performance of *silé* which we witnessed while in West Sumatra was that performed at Lubuk Alung. The man who had trained the dancers was present, and his appearance was as impressive as his name--Hadji Nuri Datu' Radjo Sampono. His several titles reflected the historical combination of cultural influences--Minangkabau (Datu'), Hindu (Radjo), and Islamic (Hadji). The pair of *silé* performers, clad in unrelieved black, started their dance with a short ceremony. Bending towards each other, they first passed their palms as if in caress along each other's extended hands and then along their own cheeks, as if washing their faces. The gesture was called *tjutji muka* (lit. washing the face) and was said to symbolize the assurance of a "clean" fight.



Drawing apart, they assumed challenging postures. Tensely upturned palms accentuated the postures and changed angles in accompaniment with soft, long, halting steps. All was undertaken from a low, half-crouching position, as if the dancers were preparing to spring. This preliminary sparring acted as a sort of warm-up period, checking the limberness of one's own body and exploring the reactions of the opponent, while creating the necessary interacting tensions which would fuse the dancers.

The dancers drew slowly nearer to each other. Then, with sudden swiftness, one thrust at the other with a hand or kicking foot. This motion precipitated a series of rapid maneuvers of assault and evasion, but at all times complete control of posture was preserved. No accidentally dangling limb or uncontrolled motion occurred to mar the overall style. Each situation, unexpected though it might be, dictated a prescribed reaction and each dance phrase ended in a still pose.

Visually, the dance created a sequence of excellently composed and expressive attitudes which would have delighted any sculptor. For a moment, but only for a moment, the model remained still to show his stance. The performers held us spellbound until they finally squatted low on the ground with reverent gestures of salutation.



North and west of Bukittinggi, in the high country near Lake Manindjau, we visited the village of Matur. Here we were fortunate to see a most impressive performance of the *randai*. The mere arrival of the dancers and musicians conveyed a sense of ceremonial form. They came in procession to the sounds of music produced by a drum, tambourines, small gongs, a bamboo flute, and a thin-voiced reed instrument, the *pupui'*.



The dance itself was executed by a circle of some twenty men. Most wore the baggy, low-crotched, black, Minangkabau trousers (*sarawa*), and the black, wide-sleeved blouse with silver-embroidered borders or stripes (*bertanti*); wound around their hips was a woven cloth (*sampiang*) which hung down in the back in a triangle and was anchored at the waist by a girdle (*sampua*). Each wore a turban, no two of which were alike but each of which blended subtly with the rest of its wearer's costume. When not dancing, the men usually also carried a shawl (*selendang*) draped across the shoulder.

The black-clad dancers formed a large circle on the wide field in front of Matur's rest-house. In unison, they assumed a dynamic stance and then the whole group froze. Complete silence. A subdued shout from the leader. The circle began to move, dancers half-crouched on widespread legs. One arm described a shielding movement



to the front, the other was poised as if it would draw or had already drawn a weapon. Then everything became still again.

Occasionally, a clap of hands preceded a new stance of attack, defense or challenge. Sometimes the dancers stopped in mid-motion, one leg raised in the air as if testing their capacity to maintain balance. Many of these highly controlled postures also occurred in the mock combat dances. Taken as a whole, randai was a rhythmic expression of manly grace and vitality.

The dance, they said, was used to teach village youth about their adat and the virtues of the family chieftain. Sometimes the dance would be accompanied by singing which recounted important Minangkabau epics, most generally that of Tjindua Mato, the most famous Minangkabau culture hero.

Next a trio of dancers appeared--a young boy flanked by two "girls" who were boys in female costume--to perform the *tari serbeta* (kerchief dance). Each had a selendang. They started in a row, now advancing a little, now receding again; the girls danced with even, treading steps and the boy gracefully rose and fell on gently flexing knees while pivoting from one side to the other. The "girls" played with the ends of their selendang, covering their boyish heads, and the boy sang and played with the scarf. Each "girl" wore ankle-bells (*girieng-girieng*). It was the first time we have encountered these accessories.



After a time the dancers formed a three-winged "mill" and stepped around in this formation until the boy separated from the group and danced alone. His two partners moved off and stepped lightly around each other agitating the ends of their selendang. The dance ended.

Seven men appeared and seated themselves in a row with their apparent leader in the middle. The latter held a large tambourine (*rabana*) while the rest had smaller ones (*rapa'i*). Their dance, the *indang*, was said to have come to Minangkabau from Atjeh. *Indang* meant winnowing, and the rhythmic sways of the tambourines held by the group of dancing men supposedly duplicated the movements of women when winnowing rice with large round trays.

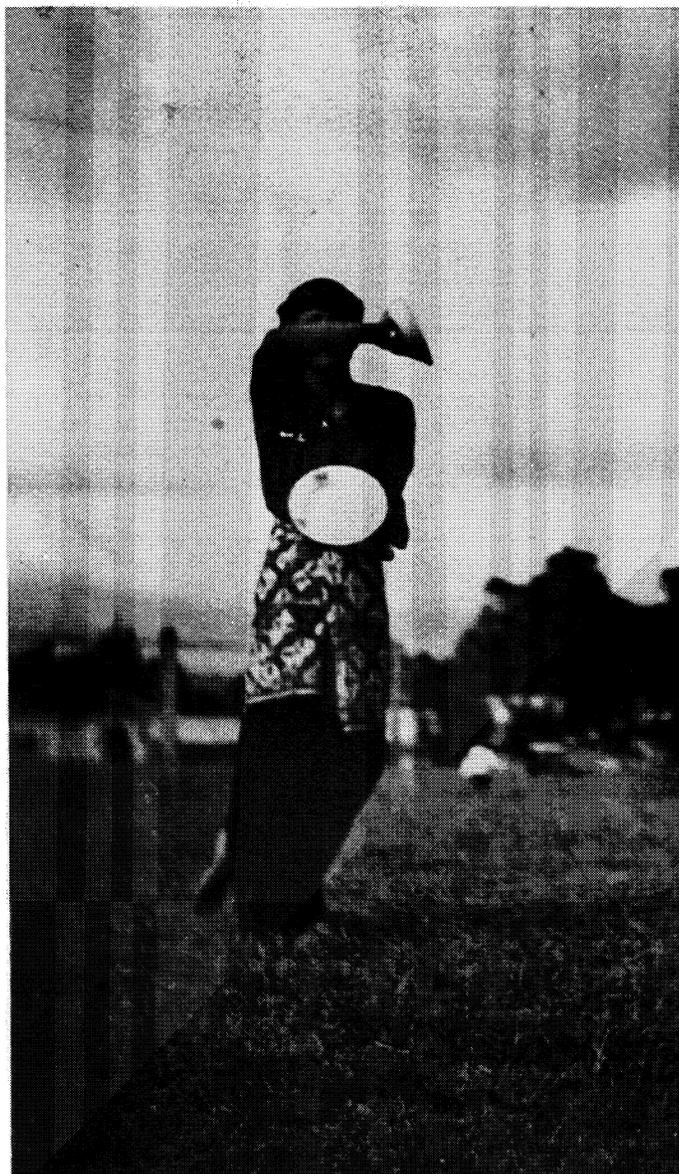


They chanted and lightly tapped their tambourines while the dance unfolded in slow rhythmic phrases. In unison the seated men first poised on one knee, their tambourines held vertically on edge. Then the discs were raised and held obliquely aloft in forward stretching hands, with the circles now looking down to the earth. Another slow, solemn motion lowered them again, held above the ground like rimmed trays. The tambourines were raised again, the dancers' bodies swayed continuously from side to side, rhythmically tilting their instruments. Eventually the performers rose to their feet in a flowing sequence during which alternate dancers crouched to the ground and then rose while the other crouched.



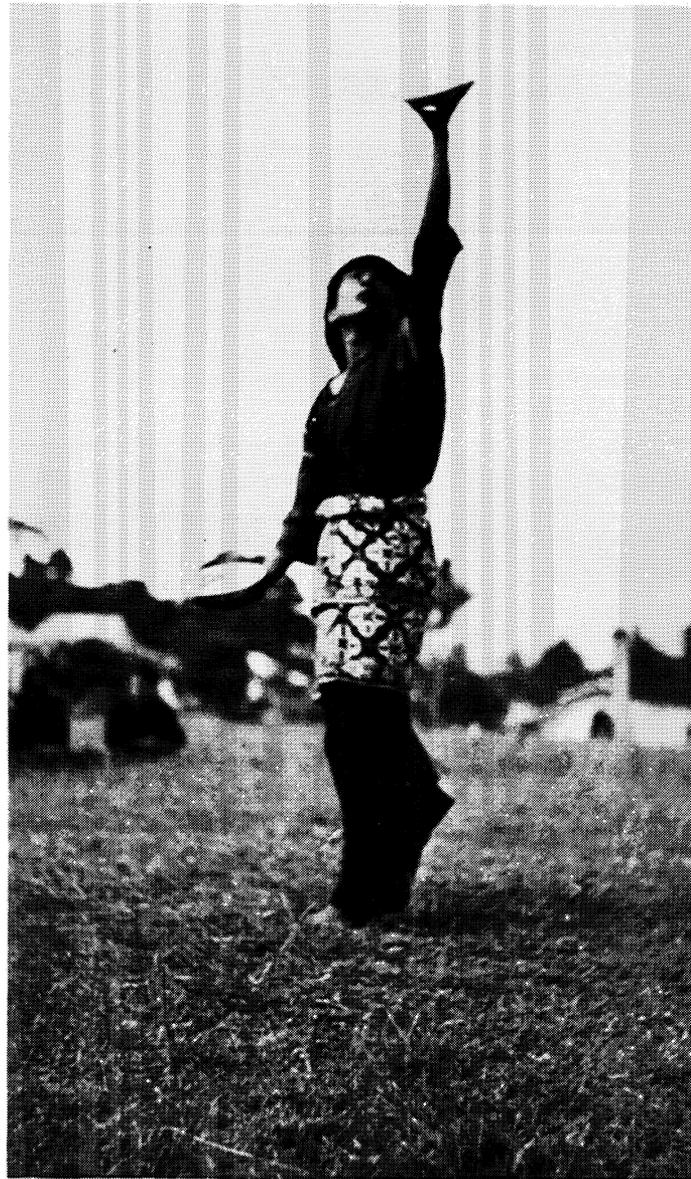
Then the whole group knelt, trunks erect, placing the tambourines on the ground rims facing upward. To a chanted rhythm, the dancers alternately clapped their hands and then made weaving motions with hands joined at the fingertips. The graceful undulation of the lightly joined hands ended with a brief snapping of the fingers and formed a delicate lace edging to the sturdier clapping rhythms.

Standing up again in a row, every second dancer turned about-face and moved forward one or two steps. The move was repeated again until all stood facing the same direction, swaying gently and tapping their tambourines.



At Matur, we also saw a lively version of the *tari piriang* or plate dance, a form of entertainment common to many areas of Sumatra. The dancers were accompanied by singers, tambourine players, and hand-clappers. Each dancer had two plates larger in circumference than the span of his outstretched fingers. On the middle finger of each hand, the dancer wore a special ring or thimble made of a hard substance (sometimes the shell of a kemiri nut). This he clicked against the plate rhythmically, creating a sort of Sumatran-style castanet.

Each dancer described curving figures in the air with his palms, on which the plates rested. His hands moved in opposite directions, up and down, past his face and chest, out to the sides and back again, turning them in figure-eight curves to reverse directions. This juggling proceeded in delicate coordination with the dance steps.



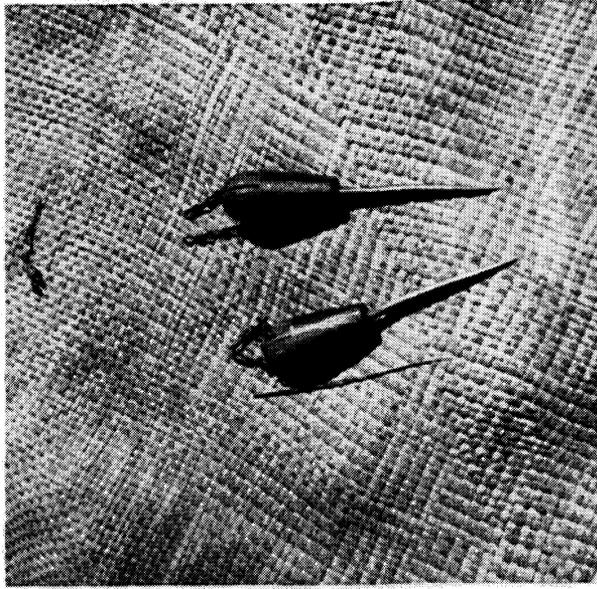
The dancers first crouched, then stood up and stepped around each other in ever faster rhythms, clicking the plates on every second beat. After the initial circling, they proceeded to step backward and forward, side by side. On the backward step, each foot in turn crossed behind the other giving the impetus for the next move with the tiniest of skips. All the while, the dancers' hands continued their curving motions with the plates.

The accompanying chorus described the dance in vivid words and encouraged the performers to increasingly involved and lively formations. The dancers squatted, describing spirals with the plates on their palms. They circled around each other. The plates whirled and the clicks sounded on every beat now, clearly audible against the drumming and hand-clapping.

When we arrived in Minangkabau, we heard about an ecstatic dance in which the performers pierced their bodies with iron awls (*dabuih*) but suffered no pain. Our first direct observation of such an exhibition occurred at Mandiangin, on an open field behind the mosque. A few colonial officials accompanied us to the site but left when the performance began, apparently to signal their disapproval.

The dancers were under the supervision of a teacher (*khalifah*) a mustached man with a drawn, veiled expression on his face. He wore a checkered sarong, white jacket, and black cap. The *khalifah* was regarded as a spiritual descendant of Ahmad Rifa'i, an early North Sumatra mystic, in whose name the dance was supposedly performed. The dancers and teacher belonged to a mystical order. Young men joined at between eighteen to twenty years of age as apprentices to the *khalifah*, who trained them in the esoteric practices of the order, including the *dabuih* ceremony. The youth had first to undergo severe privations and endurance tests, including fasts lasting up to twenty days, in order to qualify as a true follower of the *khalifah* *dabuih*. Once accepted, he travelled with his teacher, giving public exhibitions of his invulnerability.





Before the dance began, the khalifah was seated on a mat flanked at the right by a man of apparent high status who watched respectfully. To the left of the khalifah, an apprentice was sharpening an awl on a grindstone. Farther to the left sat a row of tambourine (*rapa'i*) players.

As the preparations began, the khalifah, his assistant, and the notable lowered their heads and sat quite still as if gathering their strength in prayer. After they raised their heads again, a dancer approached and seated himself opposite the khalifah's assistant. The latter pierced the dancer's earlobe with a long thick needle (*anak amit*). A voice began chanting. The tambourines kept a steady rhythm of two short beats, then one long and loud, then an emphatic beat, followed by a pause. The khalifah played a large tambourine.

The dancer approached each musician in turn, stopped, and gently clasped their right hands with his extended fingers. Then he sat down on a mat in a posture of reverence, hands folded, elbows resting on thighs, fingers interlaced. In front of him two sharpened awls lay side by side. After some moments of devotion, the dancer rose, taking up the awls by the spiked ends. In long, halting steps on pliable knees, he moved forward, matching his steps to the rhythm of the tambourines and flourishing the awls. He displayed them to the audience in a manner reminiscent of the way in which magicians show off their props. But he did not communicate in any way with the audience; his facial expression remained detached, turned inward.

The rhythm of the tambourines accelerated as the dancer progressed, now holding the awls spiked end downward. He crouched on the ground brandishing the awls, rose again, and then returned to his master with long halting steps, punctuated every fourth beat by a pause. He sat down near the khalifah. The introductory passage had ended.



Now another young man, with a withdrawn but intense expression on his face, came and squatted before the khalifah. The master pierced the dancer's ear with a needle similar to the first one and then smeared some saliva over the point of entry. The tambourines again took up their rhythm. With a sweep, the new dancer set off on a curving course along the grass-covered ground, brandishing the awls.

His pace quickened. The motions became sharper, more intense. He worked himself into a state of exaltation through his dancing. Dropping to one knee, he pulled up his white trouser leg and, with a broad swing, brought the awl point against the outer part of his lower thigh. Even from a distance, we could see the emphatic screwing gestures he made trying to pierce his flesh. Then he grasped the awl handle with one hand and began hammering on its head with the other to drive the spike through his flesh. The spike protruded from the thigh muscle through which it had been driven.

The dancer then proceeded to drive the second awl through the flesh of his left forearm. At the end of the dance, the youth returned to the khalifah, who healed his arm by holding it over a plate of burning incense, while quietly murmuring sacred formulae.



A change from the intensity of the dabuih was the *adau-adau*, a solo dance performed with great merriment by a wrinkled and smiling man called Raman, nicknamed Gaek Lala or the ubiquitous old man. He did a light, balancing kind of dance with none of the tense mock combat *silé* styles. Occasionally he poised himself on tip toes while spreading his arms and raising one leg forward. The old man had a very elastic and light manner, in tune with the lively rhythms of the accompanying flutes and tambourines. He told us he usually danced at festivities. His was the only dance we saw which did not seem encumbered by tensely combative poses or the solemn undertones of ritual.

