

# MINANGKABAU AND ITS COLONIAL CONDITIONING

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Freek Colombijn, *Patches of Padang: The History of an Indonesian Town in the Twentieth Century and the Use of Urban Space*. Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1994. xiii + 428.

Joel S. Kahn, *Constituting the Minangkabau: Peasants, Culture, and Modernity in Colonial Indonesia*. Providence/Oxford: Berg, 1993. xi + 314.

Ken Young, *Islamic Peasants and the State: The 1908 Anti-Tax Rebellion in West Sumatra*. New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph 40, 1994. xviii + 361.

West Sumatran society in the late colonial period and during Indonesia's first fifty years of independence has received considerable attention from anthropologists—European, American, Australian—but much less from historians. Although the authors whose books are reviewed here work mainly in the field of anthropology, all three studies are valuable in defining and at least partially filling some serious gaps in recent Minangkabau history. This is particularly true of Ken Young's book on the background and course of the 1908 anti-tax rebellion. Here he illuminates the principal role in that rebellion, and the perhaps more important "near rebellion" of 1897, played by the Sufi brotherhoods or *tarekat*, especially the Syattariyah and Naqsyabandiyah. In its focus on these traditionalist Islamic sects (that would form part of the later conservative or *kaum tua* group), this book parallels earlier studies by Taufik Abdullah and Deliar Noer, which highlighted the roles of the modernist *kaum muda* movements in nurturing and developing Indonesian nationalism in early twentieth-century West Sumatra. By elucidating the importance of the Sufi brotherhoods not only in the 1908 rebellion but also more generally in the history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century West Sumatra, Young rights the balance and restores the traditional Islamic groups to a place in Minangkabau history which cannot be ignored in studies of later periods.

He shows how the growth of the Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Naqsyabandiyah, in the late 1800s worried the Dutch and brought pressure on the politically domesticated Islamic officials who formed an essential element in the ordered Minangkabau village society the Dutch were attempting to define and exploit. He demonstrates how the Naqsyabandi-

yah and, to an even greater extent, the Syattariyah sects reacted to the threats posed to their social and economic position not only by the burgeoning movement of modernist Muslims but also by Dutch efforts to introduce a head tax as a replacement for the failed coffee cultivation system. The sects' opposition was initially successful, and the "lengthy preparation for the introduction of taxation was halted in 1897" when the government discovered their plan for widespread armed resistance to the regime." (Young, 47). But when the *tarekat* again provided the leadership, networks, and organization for challenging the Dutch in 1908 this effort "came too late." This was both because, as a result of challenges from the modernists, the *tarekat* themselves were in decline, and because the Dutch, no longer being drained by the Aceh war, had consolidated their military control of West Sumatra, so real power now lay with the state apparatus. (Young, 130).

While Young's book focuses on the 1908 rebellion, Kahn, within his more general effort to interpret "Minangkabau culture," is concerned with the underlying causes of the 1927 rebellion. Both are interested in exploring how far the portrayal of early-twentieth century economic and social conditions by such Dutch writers as Schrieke accord with the reality. Certain themes and approaches are common to both studies—including their agreement that many supposedly precolonial traditional features of Minangkabau society, particularly at the village level, have their origin, rather, in the late nineteenth century and are the outcome of shaping by the colonial state.

In contrast to the situation on Java, in West Sumatra the Minangkabau resisted Dutch efforts to set up large estates, so the forced cultivation system had to rely on coffee from small-scale peasant production (garden plots and hedgerow coffee bushes cultivated by individuals or households). This meant that the Dutch needed to "extract surpluses by a combination of controls and incentives." They thus confronted a paradox, as Young notes: "Dutch political control and a measure of legitimacy for their system of government depended on support for the adat hierarchy. Yet their attempts to extract surplus from the region . . . ran into difficulties because of lineage control over land." (Young, 187)

Both authors give a nuanced treatment to the differences and contradictions in the village societies. While drawing from such earlier writers as Christine Dobbin and Elizabeth Graves, they believe these authors have oversimplified the distinction between the commercially oriented hill villages and the rice-abundant villages of the plains, noting the long history of inter-dependence "between the largely subsistence-oriented rice economy and the primarily market-oriented economy of cash croppers and migrant traders, school teachers, government workers, artisans, etc." (Kahn, 42) Young states that the varieties of combinations of resources and opportunities in both the subsistence and commercial sectors of the economy preclude any "simple dichotomy between hill villages and plains villages," arguing that "the majority of villages were very likely neither entirely commercial nor subsistence oriented," and that the "substantial lines of division" were to be found between individuals and households within villages rather than between the villages themselves. (Young, 174)

Both authors see the nagari in precolonial, early nineteenth-century Minangkabau not as closed autonomous entities but as village-based socio-economic institutions already engaged in extensive commercial activity. In addition, the "supra-village ties of clanship" permitted villagers "to establish claims to membership of village communities beyond their nagari of birth." (Kahn, 162) The highly commercialized indigenous economies of upland West Sumatra, with external trade flowing principally through the ports of East Coast Sumatra, relied on trade not only in tobacco, pepper, coconuts, and gambir, but also in rice (Kahn, 174–80). When they introduced their forced delivery system for coffee in 1847, the Dutch

attempted to cut ties among the nagari, and between the highlands and the east coast, in order to create a system whereby the nagari in each area would send their products to a single market town from which the coffee tribute could be gathered and channeled to the Dutch-controlled west coast ports of Padang and Pariaman. This Dutch policy distorted the precolonial order and trading patterns, cut the villages off from one another and also from outlets on the east coast; it also specifically proscribed rice as a trading commodity.

In the view of both authors, the isolation which the Dutch sought to impose on the individual "autonomous" nagari violated their earlier interaction and distorted and froze previously relatively fluid adat institutions, compromising those adat leaders who were willing to cooperate with the colonial administration. As the earlier supra nagari trading ties were severed by the Dutch they were replaced by religious ties principally through the "networks of free religious schools and the links that existed between teachers and pupils all over the region." (Young, 67–68) The political potential of these schools "lay in their extended organizational links across nagari boundaries, and in their independence from the authority structures of nagari, laras, and the colonial government." (Young, 98) These schools too provided havens and spring-boards for small-scale traders who were attempting to evade Dutch efforts to control all commerce within the channels they had established.

The ties between independent traders and religious school networks (whether of the *kaum tua* in the early twentieth century or the *kaum muda* in the 1920s and 1930s) were to become a major strand of the anti-colonial opposition in the final decades of Dutch rule. This makes it difficult, as Kahn recognizes, to draw a firm line between the forces organizing and leading the 1908 rebellion and those at the head of the 1927 uprising and later opposition. Young appears to make such a distinction when he states that "The [1908] rebellion's failure sealed the demise of traditional forms of resistance. From then on it would develop through other institutions such as political parties, unions, and national (Indonesian) religious organisations." (Young, 130) How far these later institutions did in fact differ from those dominant in 1908 is open to question. As Kahn reminds us, the expansion of the Communist movement in West Sumatra in the 1920s was a result of "the association between the PKI and, apparently, traditional forms of anticolonial hostility," and on the eve of the 1927 Communist uprising, "the political agenda was being set by . . . a seemingly motley collection of traditionalists, populists and Marxists." (Kahn, 153, 115)

In one respect Dutch policy was largely successful. That was in refashioning the trading patterns that had previously been based on the eastern ports and their links across the Malacca Strait to Singapore and Malaya, and instead "directing them along new road and rail networks focussed on the west coast capital, Padang." (Young, 141) It is with the development of this port, that Freek Colombijn is concerned, tracing its history and the "process of spatial change" there between 1906 and 1990. The first half of this useful volume deals with the history of the town and the second with the factors that have governed its spatial development in the twentieth century.

Colombijn elucidates some of the themes present in the other two studies, showing that Padang's development in comparison with its Sumatran competitors, Palembang and the Medan port of Belawan, has been hindered by its location "on the wrong side of Sumatra," away from the major shipping lanes between Europe and the Orient, which run through the Malacca Strait. Even today its location is not well adapted to trade with Japan and the Newly Industrializing Countries of East and Southeast Asia. Geographical features—the Barisan range separating the port from its hinterland and Padang hill which rises up between the harbor at Teluk Bayur and the town itself—have also curtailed its expansion. Other particular characteristics of Minangkabau society have influenced the city's growth,

especially the communal Minangkabau landownership patterns affecting large areas of the town which have made it difficult for outsiders to get land; and the fact that the majority of the Minangkabau population inhabiting the town are immigrants from the highlands, with their deepest loyalties still lying with the villages of their birth. This has led the town's expansion to take "an elongated shape to the north" along the main road leading to the Anai Pass, the major access route to the highland towns and villages. With regard to the morphological changes in Padang, Colombijn remarks that "it came as a surprise to me that natural features played such an important role. Not only are the Indian Ocean and Gunung Padang natural barriers, but the location of the Anai Pass is the main directional determinant." (Colombijn, 259)

There is much interesting and useful information in this book, but the reader must regret one surprising gap in its coverage—the absence of any specific treatment of the Minangkabau trading families in Padang who played such an important role in West Sumatra's twentieth-century history. Both Kahn and Young note the influence the big Padang traders—whether Dutch, Chinese, or Minangkabau—exerted on the development of Dutch economic policy at the turn of the century in the ending of the forced cultivation system and the imposition of direct taxation. The political and economic role of the indigenous merchants expanded in subsequent decades. But Colombijn virtually ignores them in his extensive treatment of many aspects of the trade on which Padang's growth has been dependent. He has fascinating material on the small-scale hawkers clustering around the markets, on the Chinese traders defending their position against pressures from the dominant Minangkabau, and on the Eurasian Haacke family and its important position in the commercial life of Padang from the 1880s until the economic disasters of the 1930s and its virtual extinction during the Japanese occupation. It is strange that among this extensive coverage, there is virtually nothing on those Minangkabau merchants (for instance not even a mention of Basa Bandaro), who played such a crucial role in the development of Padang, its economy, its educational institutions, and its commercial ties with the highlands, and whose activities had such a great influence on the growth and character of the nationalist movement in West Sumatra.