

Jeffrey Hadler. *Muslims and Matriarchs: Cultural Resilience in Indonesia through Jihad and Colonialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. 224 pp.

Michael Laffan

And so it is if we *want* to wage a war of pens, for there are men who are not ashamed to want a war of pens with women, who want to engage in a discussion with women, and so to ridicule and taunt us women. There will be no shortage of spirit among the women they choose to oppose and afterwards these men will feel ashamed for themselves, for inviting women to fight, and for wanting to fight with women.

Z. R. Djoewita, August 1912, as cited by J. Hadler (p. 157)

Fire-hardened Matriarchs?

In a fascinating and often playful study, Jeffrey Hadler takes the reader in and out of the iconic Minangkabau longhouse (*rumah gadang*) in an attempt to explain, as he puts it, why matriarchy persists against the odds of colonial and postcolonial history. In the end he argues that it was due to its having been previously tested by the fires of Islamic reformism, launched by the now infamous Padri movement at the opening of the nineteenth century, that matriarchy could hold together for the shocks to come.

Rather than take us on a straightforward tour of Minangkabau society across the decades, Hadler opens several different windows on that history. After all, much like the *rumah gadang*, which is ultimately a specific choice of form used to represent a region, the domestic architecture of the Minangkabau World (Alam Minangkabau) has often changed quite radically. Following a reading of the Padri War and the depredations of its “reformist” scholars, based in part on the underused memoirs of Tuanku Imam Bondjol (1772–1864), Hadler shows how, in a region scorched by decades of internecine conflict, the Dutch would both approve of the “reformist” goals of the Padris and yet be drawn to the side of the traditional elite that sought their protection. They would also accept that this (male) elite had the rights to construct the most imposing *rumah gadang*, which they altered internally to resemble minor audience halls rather than the traditional series of domestic apartments allocated to individual women.

Hadler also points out that such legislative actions as the prohibitions of the internal hearth in 1847 played their part in radically restructuring multi-family homes still dedicated in principal as the residences of the wives and mothers (p. 67). Yet these were not the sole sites of what Hadler calls the “contentions” sited in the Alam Minangkabau, and, through the use of memoirs and novels, he turns to consider the place of the *lapau* (coffeehouse) and *surau* (prayer house) in the lives of boys dreaming of the world beyond their valleys.

While it is hard to reconstruct the pedagogical lives of a typical *surau* student from their often tattered notebooks, Hadler shows that the exercise books left by their elite kin who attended schools organized by the Dutch have yielded fascinating internal views, and contentious criticisms, of Minangkabau social practices. These criticisms,

which flowed into the modernist, progress-inspired, social movements of Island Southeast Asia, were also shared at many levels by their sometime rivals in what became the Muslim modernist movement. Building on what Hadler argues was the failure of Sufi leaders to be seen as effective coordinators of resistance in the wake of a failed tax revolt of 1908, this movement was made up of activists inspired by teachers in Mecca and then, more particularly, in Cairo. Haji Rasul (1879–1949) was a particularly vocal opponent of certain practices that corrupted the Islamic family. But, as Hadler shows, Haji Rasul's serial marriages did more than enough to trouble his arguably more famous son, Hamka (1908–81), whose reflections were just some of many offered by Minangkabau luminaries active on the increasingly national stage.

Still, these books, whether written by aspirant Tuanku Laras or Reformist teachers, were written largely by males, which may leave the reader wondering when the matriarchs will join the action. In the end, though, women—and very active women, too—do make their entrance once Hadler's material allows him to show them to full effect. Yet their interventions were neither in the domestic space nor the migratory domain of men. Rather it was in the opening world of the press, to which the Minangkabau people seem to have been especially attuned, such that women like Z. R. Djoewita, the daughter of Datuk Soetan Maharadja (1860–1921), quoted above, could claim a space in the emergent public sphere. For such women would ask pertinent questions indeed, as when a grouping enquired, at a meeting convened in 1924, just why it was that publicly debated notions of custom only referred or applied to their sex alone (p. 129).

Thus it is that Hadler's heroines make their recorded mark a century after the Padri eruption and without leaving their valleys. Yet this was also a time of confusion. For just as the women made their entrance, in the press and in the establishment of girl's schools like Rahmah el-Junusijjah's Dinijjah School, the great earthquake of June 1926 threw down much of what had been built up. Yet in the aftermath of this jolt, and, indeed, after the Communist uprising of 1926–27 that would inaugurate a period of heightened political repression, Hadler would prefer us to see what remained intact. For behind the ruin of a modern minaret featured on Hadler's book cover, a traditional mosque looms, somehow standing for the capacious rooflines of the Alam Minangkabau that are still able to shelter all manners of contentions over religion, the domestic, and the political.

To reiterate: this is a highly stimulating and rewarding book, especially in its chapters on the making of the house and the education of children, though readers unfamiliar with the narrative of Minangkabau history may be confused at times by the reference to events that are not really given much space in this treatment. Such affairs as the tax revolt and the Communist uprising seem particularly key, though Hadler eschews a more expansive explanation of them.

One might wonder, too, about how "Indonesian" we can say that this story is in the end. Hadler points out that the *Path to Heaven*, written in 1914 by the Muslim modernist Abdullah Ahmad (1878–1933), was the first Minangkabau attempt to fuse Islamic reformist and progressive tenets (p. 102). Yet, if one turns back to the earlier Singaporean journal *al-Imam*, which Abdullah Ahmad engaged with, then we find a number of Minangkabau similarly participating in this fusion, if not in the sustained manner of a novel.

While Hadler does identify the “Malay World” as having been an equally valid frame of reference for so many of the literati whose work he deploys to good effect, he seems inclined at times to read Indonesian-ness back into their pre-revolutionary works. This perhaps reflects his natural focus on what would become Indonesian literature, which would become almost synonymous with the Minangkabau from the 1930s, when so many West Sumatrans would spearhead “the fictionalization of historical discourse” in response to political repression (p. 176).

In Hadler’s treatment of the Islamic front, meanwhile, there is an occasional fuzziness about terms. For example, the notion of “caliphate,” invoked by Leon Salim in his reflection on the labors of Rahmah el-Junusijah, is probably less about the “spiritual” succession of a political office than humanity’s vicegerency on Earth (p. 160). Perhaps more tangentially, the Earthly “Alam” of the Minangkabau is probably derived from the Arabic word for “world” (*‘alam*), rather than that for a Sufi “banner” (*‘alam*) (cf. p. 148, note).

Lest I make too much of them, though, I should hasten to add that these are small matters in the book. In large part, Hadler is so successful in giving us rich vistas into the sometimes fiery world of West Sumatra because the material lends itself to a wide range of interesting interpretations. To my mind, though, the interpretations of others with respect to Islamic history could be tested further in future studies. This is not to fault Hadler, who has so clearly trawled all the available material in Dutch, but one wonders at times about the oft-positing continuum of “reform” one finds in the field that takes in Sufi activists to Wahhabis and, lastly, modernists. My own sense is that the doctrinal evidence on the ground of a Wahhabi, or even what Hadler sometimes calls a “neo-Wahhabi,” movement is thin, and that such evidence rests more on post-factum Dutch descriptions than the internal evidence.

The Padris were often bloody-minded activists, to be sure, and akin to the Wahhabis of Najd in their vigor. But they did many things that would have raised the blood pressure of the zealots who despoiled Mecca. Among many Padri practices that would have incurred the wrath of the Arabian movement was the very consumption of the stimulant that gave the Sumatrans so much wealth. It furthermore strikes me that the hapless Imam Bondjol only cast his failure retrospectively in the 1830s to mirror the fortunes of an ideology that had been suppressed in Mecca over a decade beforehand (pp. 27–28).

While I hesitate to affirm that it is matriarchy as such that has survived in West Sumatra to this day, it is clear that women have been active participants in key debates about the role of the family and what activities they might carry out. Certainly we should accept Hadler’s broader point that, in looking at West Sumatra, one can bear witness to a truly “resilient and dynamic” regional culture, yet it is one that will have to continue to struggle as yet more people write about what it means to be properly Muslim, and properly Indonesian.