

Jane Drakard. *A Kingdom of Words: Language and Power in Sumatra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xxi + 322 pages.

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Jane Drakard has set herself a formidable task. Despite the paucity of indigenous sources and the resulting need to place great reliance on the Dutch colonial records, she seeks to examine the essence of Minangkabau kingship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and to show how it "was realized and actuated through language and the dissemination of royal signs." (p. 3) She conceives of her study "as a journey . . . towards local voices which are rarely heard" (pp. 11–12) in the remote highlands of the West Sumatran kingdom. At the same time, she provides a critical reading of the records of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), whose perspective on the upland realm was almost totally dependent on the emissaries purporting to represent the Minangkabau kings, and the letters and seals which they presented as a sign of their royal authority.

The large deposits of gold in the Minangkabau highlands, which probably gave Sumatra its Sanskrit name of Swarnadwipa (Island of Gold), were that island's major attraction for Western traders. From its beaches and river mouths, where they pursued their trade, VOC officials became aware that the kingdom "under the clouds of Minangkabau" exercised "a pervasive and ubiquitous presence in the archipelago," and "was regarded as the supreme seat of civil and religious authority in this part of the East." (p. 4) They then expected that the key to gaining access to the riches of that kingdom lay in coming to terms with its king, whom they assumed to be an absolute ruler exercising centralizing power. But they were continually frustrated both in seeking the locus of that power and in attempting to negotiate with it.

The Minangkabau realm offered a different type of polity from the traditional coastal kingdoms that characterized the Malay world, which from their power centers, usually situated at mouths of rivers, were able to interject themselves between the producers and their markets and draw to themselves the wealth of the region. Instead, with their centers of power located in the upland interior of the island, the Minangkabau kings sent out to the periphery their kingdom's riches—primarily gold and coffee. In some ways their realm resembled more closely the inland kingdoms of Java, but it differed from its Javanese counterparts in that it consisted of "scattered and mobile communities" and "lacked a hierarchical territorial and bureaucratic structure and a developed military power." (p. 17) Indeed, Drakard believes, along with most historians who have written about the region, that, even within their core upland territory, the authority of the Minangkabau rulers "was tempered by a deep-seated attachment to self-government by lineage elders." (p. 24) In that polity "as much emphasis [was] placed upon process as upon result" and "local conflicts were frequently subject to a cycle of resolution, disintegration and renewed resolution." (p. 49) Even the earliest Dutch records reflect a government which had a "wild or popular" character, where "internal divisions appear to have been incorporated within the political life of the region" (p. 32) and where the ruler "kept the kingdom in equilibrium by 'balancing' tension between the two major groups . . ." (p. 79) But Drakard assigns to the Minangkabau kings much greater power and authority than

other historians generally accord them. She also finds evidence to contradict the long held assumption in much of the writing on the region that the royal house followed a patrilineal succession in contrast to the matrilineal nature of the rest of Minangkabau society. (p. 94)

The VOC was unable to come to terms with the amorphous nature of the power exercised by the Minangkabau kings, which continually frustrated the usual Dutch strategy of gaining control over a region's resources by coopting and supporting a single royal authority. Drakard points out that the hierarchical and intensely bureaucratic structure of the Company itself led its officials to take for granted that the societies with which they were dealing had a similar character. They assumed not only that the coastal rajas who entered into contractual relationship with the Company were able to exercise control over their own communities, but also that the ruler in the highlands exercised a similar hierarchical authority over these coastal princes. Company officials did not recognize the tension that seems to have existed in west Sumatra "between the more egalitarian traditions of the interior and a tendency towards sovereignty vested in individuals in the coastal regions." (p. 50) Nor did they realize that these coastal rulers frequently pretended to an authority and control that they did not possess. Dutch attempts to coopt or replace these coastal rajas in an effort to gain control over the trade compounded the confusion and led to further Dutch resentment of the inland rulers. "Strandbound, mentally as well as physically, Company servants regarded the interior with mistrust as well as greed." (p. 57) Drakard details the Dutch inability to establish an alliance with the Minangkabau rulers, whereby the Company would recognize "the inland king as sovereign over the west coast in exchange for his renunciation of any claims he might cherish to tax the people or to act independently of the Dutch." (p. 69)

By the late seventeenth century, the Company's representatives were becoming disillusioned and being compelled to confront the fact that "Minangkabau royal authority was too diffuse to be easily manipulated by the Company." (p. 117) In reaction they formulated "a dismissive discourse of powerlessness" by which they could henceforth characterize Minangkabau kingship. But while dismissing the possibility that the words and signs of the Minangkabau kingdom, as reflected in its edicts and letters, provided evidence of any indigenous power, the Dutch also strove themselves to use these titles and terminology as a means of bolstering their own authority. (p. 73)

Throughout the book Drakard confronts the contradiction which so enraged not only the Dutch but also other Westerners—most notably William Marsden in the late eighteenth century—between the "extravagantly absurd" titles and epithets employed by the Minangkabau kings in their letters and what the Westerners regarded as the "actual" power of these rulers. (pp. 149-50) The Dutch were constantly trying to look behind the symbols of the power of the Minangkabau kings to perceive the reality of that power, for their world view was unable to embrace the possibility that substantial authority might reside in appearances and in words themselves. Drakard recognizes that the contradiction between the two perceptions can illuminate the different cultural realities of the two worlds.

She throws light on the nature of power in the Minangkabau kingdom and the authority inherent in the letters and seals which tied the rulers in Sumatra's interior

with their subjects in the coastal regions and how “the power of coercion which rulers exercised over distant subjects lay in their words.” (p. 235) Their letters were signs of the Minangkabau kings’ authority, which derived from their claim to “holy” descent. “Royal words represented the raja who represented Iskandar Zulkarnain [Alexander the Great] who represented God.” (p. 192) Drakard notes that the validity of the Minangkabau king’s sacred claims was recognized not only on Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, but also by the Susuhunan of Mataram on Java. (p. 191) She examines the authority of words, seals, and delegates of the Minangkabau kings and shows how a series of connections could be made which identified these signs with their source—“the ruler, who was, himself, presented as a sign of God’s power.” (p. 200) The letters the king sent out stood in his place and embodied his authority. In analyzing the letters themselves (using fascinating illustrations of several of them), she notes how, in fact, they provide proofs of the God-given power of these rulers, and, at the same time, the pattern of their seals depicts “a map of the polities centered upon the Minangkabau kingdom.” (pp. 222, 224)

Company officials rejected the potency of the letters and mocked the power of the interior kings, insisting that their authority existed in name only and not “in fact.” Nevertheless, they were unable to ignore the important role these letters played in fomenting opposition to the Dutch. As a source of empowerment, the letters were increasingly associated with anti-Dutch protest (p. 155), circulating among Minangkabau networks throughout Sumatra and even the Malay peninsula. “Within this web of signs we may detect a local discourse of power which, in the face of European hegemony, was fashioned into a language of resistance.” (p. 183) Within the framework provided by the “authority of the sign” emanating from the highlands, those living on the Minangkabau periphery could feel empowered in their resistance to outside pressures.

In her book, Drakard has gone beyond an analysis of the uneasy relationships between the colonizers and colonized as the Dutch attempted to extend their control over the trade and wealth of Sumatra. She has explored the depths of the contradictory perceptions not only of power and authority, but indeed of reality between the “enlightened” Western thought of the Dutch officials and traders and the worldviews of the diverse peoples in the Indies. She has succeeded in illuminating this other reality as it may well have existed in West Sumatra, and perhaps other parts of the Malay world, before the overbearing Dutch pressure had forced changes upon Sumatra’s “local discourse of power.” Efforts by the indigenous rulers to accommodate this Dutch pressure while resisting its encroachment permanently changed that local discourse. We are indebted to Drakard for her ability to recapture it.

