

THE MINANGKABAU OF SUMATRA

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Contents

A. Location and Size	page 1
B. Importance	1
C. Political Loyalties	1
D. Ethnic Features	2
E. Language and Literature	2
F. Economy	3
G. Social Organization	4
H. Cultural Life	5
I. Sources	6

THE MINANGKABAU OF SUMATRA

A. Location and Size

The Minangkabau are a Malay people inhabiting the coastal area and highlands of West Central Sumatra. The area itself is sometimes referred to as Minangkabau. Under Dutch rule, it comprised the Sumatran Westcoast Residency. According to the 1930 census, the Minangkabau numbered 1,998,648; current estimates vary between two and three million.

B. Importance

Although the Minangkabau constitute only about 3.3 per cent of the total population of Indonesia, their importance is greater than that small percentage would suggest. As one of the most intelligent and progressive peoples of Indonesia and certainly of Sumatra, the Minangkabau have contributed a considerably disproportionate number of Indonesian leaders. Mohammed Hatta, former vice president and second in popular regard only to Sukarno, was born in Bukittingi. Sutan Sjahrir, former premier and head of the Partai Sosialis Indonesia, and Mohammed Natsir, former premier and chairman of the Masjumi Party, both come from Minangkabau, as do also Mohammed Yamin and Mohammed Shafai, both former Ministers of Education. Other prominent leaders from Minangkabau are Djamaluddin Malik, a parliamentary leader of the Nahdatul Ulama and publisher of the party organ Duta Masjarakat, and Sabilal Rasjad, secretary general of the Partai Nasional Indonesia and a former Minister of Labor. The late Hadji Agus Salim, leader of the pre-war Sarekat Islam and Indonesia's revered "elder statesman" from independence until his death, was also a Minangkabau.

C. Political Loyalties

Although the Minangkabau have contributed leaders to most of Indonesia's major political parties, they are principally supporters of the Islamic-oriented Masjumi Party. In nearly every Minangkabau village the local Masjumi office is as much a fixture as the village mosque. Nevertheless, a spirit of radicalism and extreme nationalism is not absent,

and Minangkabau has figured prominently in the Indonesian struggle for independence. Padang, the principal city of the Minangkabau country, was the scene of the founding of the Youth Movement in Sumatra in 1910; and in 1924 Sumatran youth were instrumental in establishing the United Youth Movement in Djakarta (then Batavia). In 1927, an extensive agrarian revolutionary movement occurred in Minangkabau, which the Dutch easily, though bloodily, suppressed. In December 1945 and the following months, a bloody social revolution which started in Atjeh and the Sumatran Eastcoast Residency eventually spread to Minangkabau. The result was the elimination of the remaining power of the feudal aristocracy.

The Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) has had relatively little success in the area due to the conservative, Muslim orientation of the people and to the absence of any large industrial class. It was only after 1925, when the PKI changed its tactic of stressing atheism to one of claiming similarities between the teachings of Marx and Islam, which they attempted to show by citing certain passages from the Koran, that the PKI registered any progress at all. During the 1930's, sufficient Minangkabau leftists were attracted by this propaganda that they joined into a separate party, the Permi (Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia). As of today, however, PKI strength and influence in Minangkabau are negligible.

D. Ethnic Features

Ethnically the Minangkabau fall in the same broad racial grouping--Deutero-Malay--as the Atjehnese, Coastal Malays, Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Macassarese-Buginese, Balinese and Sasak. The Minangkabau themselves trace their original dynasty back to Iskender (the Arabic for Alexander the Great) and consider their homeland to be the cradle of the entire Malay race, from whence began, about 1160 A.D., the migrations of Malays throughout Sumatra, Malaya and the archipelago. According to Minangkabau legend, their ancestors were the original conquerors of Sumatra; and there is historical evidence to suggest that a Minangkabau kingdom once did extend over most of the island.

E. Language and Literature

The Minangkabau speak a language closely related to modern Malay, so close, in fact, that linguists are not yet agreed on

whether it should be considered a divergent dialect of Malay or a separate language. In any case, the similarity between the two is striking. There are two major dialects of Minangkabau--Agam and Pajakumbuh-Tanah Datar--as well as several minor ones. Due to the Islamic influence, the Minangkabau normally use a modified Arabic alphabet for writing, although the Latin alphabet officially adopted for Bahasa Indonesia is used to some extent.

The Minangkabau have a literature of their own consisting chiefly of long poems, legendary and semi-historical in nature. Shorter popular stories do occur, often in prose mixed with verse, as well as orations and collections of traditional writings. A favorite subject for poems and books, as well as for songs, is Imam Bonjol (or Tungku Imam), a national hero who led the Minangkabau resistance to the Dutch in the 1830's. Generally speaking, all Minangkabau, whether literate or not, are well acquainted with the stories of Minangkabau legend and history.

F. Economy

The abundant rainfall and volcanic soil make the area a rich agricultural region. The principal food crops are rice (grown in wet and dry fields), coconuts, maize, cassava and ground nuts. Commercial crops include sugar cane, tobacco, coffee and rubber. The Minangkabau are also fine craftsmen who are famous throughout Indonesia for their intricately carved houses, silver filigree work, fine kris blades, and the magnificence of their weaving and jewelry. The area is largely devoid of mineral resources so that there is little industry.

Aside from engaging in local agriculture, hunting, fishing and craft work, a considerable number of Minangkabau serve as coolie labor on coffee plantations in South Tapanuli. The Minangkabau also have a wide reputation for cunning and commercial sense as merchants and traders, the validity of which is evidenced by the fact that they, virtually alone in all Southeast Asia, have successfully resisted the invasion and monopolistic supremacy of Chinese traders. As traders, the Minangkabau men travel widely and often, while their women run the homes and work in the fields and on the coffee and tobacco plantations.

G. Social Organization

The Minangkabau have long been devout Muslims, and society is controlled by the traditional Muslim adat law. Muslim religious leaders hold an honored place in society. Before the Dutch conquest and occupation, the Padris (men in white, so called from their garb), leaders of a strict, ascetic Muslim sect, brought all of Minangkabau and most of the rest of Sumatra under their rule.

However, while Islam has long had a strong hold on the people, it has had to compromise with traditional pre-Islamic social values. Women have a position and independence unequalled in other Muslim societies. Although somewhat weakened by infiltration of modern ideas, Minangkabau has traditionally been matrilineal (though not matriarchal as is sometimes alleged). The basic social unit is an expanded family group of at least five generations of blood relatives who trace common descent from one female ancestor, though the head of the group is a male. Membership is by birth alone, is not changed during a person's lifetime, and is independent of residence or household affiliation. Traditionally, such a family group of as many as 70 members lived together in a single large house. Their houses, one of the most distinctive features of the Minangkabau landscape, have roofs ending in horns, like a Chinese temple, and intricately carved outside walls and doors. Although the modern trend is away from these large family residences, the sense of family solidarity remains strong.

This expanded matrilineal family group is also a corporate unit, owning houses, lands and other communal property. The head of the group allots family land to an individual member for use during his lifetime, which reverts to the group at death. Under Minangkabau adat law, no individual may own land.

Adat law on inheritance differs sharply from orthodox Muslim law as stipulated in the Koran and is framed to ensure the continued integrity of the family group's property. When a woman dies, her property is inherited by her daughters or by her daughters' daughters; and only in the absence of any direct female descendant is the property inherited by a woman's brothers or sisters. In the case of brothers, it is for their lifetime only, after which it reverts to the family group. When a man dies, his property goes back to his own matrilineal group, although he can, in his lifetime, dispose of half of it to his sons.

These provisions appear to arise from the fact that marriages within the same matrilineal group are prohibited. After marriage, the husband and wife each continue to remain a member of their respective family groups. Traditionally, the wife continues to live with her own group; while the husband, although he may move into his wife's home, generally remains in his own matrilineal house or lives at a men's house, simply visiting his wife from time to time.

A village complex, negeri, composed of a varying number of such matrilineal groups, is controlled by a council composed of the male heads of these groups. In accordance with the matrilineal practice, this headship is inherited by a man's nephew rather than his son. The village is a closed, exclusive society and a stranger, not related by blood or adoption to one of the local family groups, would find it hard to settle there and be accepted.

H. Cultural Life

The Minangkabau, as a cultured and progressive people, exhibit a strong partiality towards education. The wealthier Minangkabaus have long arranged for their sons to receive a Western education, a fact which perhaps explains the prominent role played in Indonesia by men from Minangkabau. Intellectual unemployment has not been too much of a problem in Minangkabau. The absence of economic development along capitalistic lines means few opportunities for intellectual workers, so the latter inevitably seek positions elsewhere and, in fact, prefer to do so since they no longer feel they "belong" in the village community. This migration, resulting from lack of opportunity as a consequence of the rigid adat family system for individuals who have slackened their bonds with tradition, has also involved merchants. It is estimated that today more than 100,000 Minangkabau are living in other parts of Indonesia.

Modern art as well as the traditional crafts attract the Minangkabau. There is a modern art school in Kajutaname, a few miles from Padang, and an art center at Padang Pajang, further up in the highlands, both founded by Mohammed Shafei, the republic's first Minister of Education. In 1951, a new university was opened in Padang.

Trade unions are well organized in Minangkabau, and their members show a high level of political understanding as well as interest in foreign affairs. Women's organizations are very active and run special schools for training girls for domestic service and as nurses, and also illiteracy classes in villages.

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