

The Matrilineal System of the Minangkabau and its Persistence Throughout History: A Structural Perspective

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Abstract

The matrilineal society of the Minangkabau has fascinated numerous researchers from around the world. The co-existence of a matrilineal family structure and system of inheritance on one side and an Islamic way of life on the other side has intrigued these researchers. However most of the research has been descriptive or focused on a special element of the Minangkabau way of life. Two outstanding researchers namely Taufik Abdullah and Frederick Errington tried to offer theoretical approaches, and this paper will examine these approaches. Moreover it will also attempt to look at the historical developments from a structural point of view. It will be argued that the historical development and its structural analysis will help to understand the society in West Sumatra. Such a structural perspective could also be useful for the research of other societies in order to understand the inherent elements of a specific culture.

Introduction

In this paper I want to look at one society, namely the Minangkabau in West Sumatra. This culture has fascinated many researchers due to the co-existence of contradictory elements. There is a matrilineal family structure and inheritance regulations on one side and an Islamic way of life which stresses the father as provider of the family on the other side. For the anthropologist this is exciting, as in a matrilineal society the brother of the mother is the most important person for the upbringing of the children of his sister. How can such a way of life persist through history? This question is important in this time of globalization where changes and modern developments enter the village community at an incredible speed.

A look at the historical developments will be given in order to analyze certain structures. Even though there are theoretical approaches which deal with the topic of change and continuity and which will be described briefly, this paper will offer a new perspective. Hopefully such a perspective can be used in the context of other societies.

The Minangkabau society

West Sumatra is the homeland of the Minangkabau. They form the largest matrilineal society in the world (Metje, 1995, p. 23). According to recent statistics (2010) there are more than four million Minangkabau who reside in West Sumatra (Badan Pusat Statistik, n.d.). But millions also live in other areas, particularly Jakarta and Negeri Sembilan. The center of the Minangkabau culture is the highland of West Sumatra. This highland is ‘traditionally’ divided into three regions: Limapuluh Koto, Tanah Datar and Agam (Kato, 1982, p.36). All the areas outside (even the coastal areas of West Sumatra) are called *rantau*.

The term ‘traditional’ is used in this article but it is a quite problematic term (Kahn, 1993). Therefore it is written in quotation marks. Whenever I write about the ‘traditional’ way of life of the Minangkabau, I mean the matrilineal way of life which was introduced by the legendary ancestors Datuak Katumangungan and Datuak Perpatih nan Sabatang.

The life in the core areas was defined by a matrilineal way of life. This means there are certain kinship groups which follow the female descent of a mother. The woman's brother is responsible for her children rather than her husband.

In a simple way the lineage system in the highland of West Sumatra consists of clans (*suku*) which are divided into sub-clans and parts of sub-clans. The terminology differs amongst the authors. For most visitors the traditional houses are the extraordinary features of the province (Figure 1). Such a house is the home of a sub-clan. One mother with her daughters live there. In the back part of the house there are the rooms for the daughters. Whenever a daughter marries, the husband moves into the house of his wife.



Figure 1: A traditional house in West Sumatra

Nowadays there are not so many traditional houses, but this way of life is still prevalent. The only difference is that the husband and wife live in a modern bungalow which belongs to the family of the wife.

The matrilineal organization presides over inheritance and property. One sub-clan owns a certain amount of land. This is called *harato pusako*. On the other side there is the individual acquired property (*harato pancaharian*) (Benda-Beckmann, 1979, p. 149). The inheritance of communal land follows the matrilineal way, which means from the brother of the mother (*mamak*) to his nephews. The other property (*harato pancaharian*) follows the usual way from the father to the son. But from this moment on the classification of those property changes and will be classified as communal property (*harato pusako*). Later the son will pass this in his function as a *mamak* to his nephews. The *adat* itself is more detailed as it differentiates between low ancestral property and high ancestral property. As soon as it is inherited the self earned property is turned into low ancestral property and after several generations it becomes high ancestral property (Evers, 1975, p. 88).

The conclusion of researchers about the 'traditional' way of life often looks as follows:

The Minangkabau matriarchaat has managed to resist and accommodate the patrilineal influences of immigrant kings, traders, and religious proselytizers ... Today the Minangkabau people are aware of the threat to their "matriarchal" customs posed by modernity. (Sanday, 2002, p. x).

Theoretical approaches

Two important theoretical concepts have been formulated which have tried to explain the continuity of the 'traditional' way of life within the highland of West Sumatra. Here the main points of these approaches will be mentioned briefly.

The approach of Taufik Abdullah

According to Taufik Abdullah, the customary law (*adat*) is able to integrate new elements. If a new element collides with the *adat*, then the *adat* can change so that something emerges which contains two elements, the new and the old:

In Minangkabau, the conflict is not only recognized but institutionalized within the system itself. Conflict is seen dialectically as essential to achieving the integration of society. (Abdullah, 1966, p. 3)

A good example was the family of the Sultan, which was organized patrilineally, whilst the clans of the villages around were organized matrilineally.

Probably the most important new element that appeared in West Sumatra was the religion of Islam:

Islam did not begin the conversion of Minangkabau by addressing itself to structural problems. At the early stage of the process, Islam was basically 'anti-structure' if *adat* could be taken to represent 'structure'. (Abdullah, 1985, p. 148)

Taufik Abdullah here uses two terms of the anthropologist Victor Turner (1989): structure and anti-structure. Victor Turner uses these terms in his analysis of *rites de passage*. Famous examples could be the rituals of puberty or marriage. There is a former stage (for example childhood) and after the ritual the person enters a new stage (for example adulthood). In a simplified way the whole process works as follows: There is the 'usual' structure (in this case the *adat*) and something opposing collides with it, the anti-structure (in this case the religion of Islam). A new kind of structure appears which contains both elements. The statement '*adat* is based on *syarak* (Sharia), *syarak* is based on *kitabullah* (Qur'an)' (Abdullah, 1985, p. 145) is the result of such a process.

The approach of Frederick Errington

Frederick Errington made a remarkable distinction. He stressed that the *adat* has core and peripheral elements:

The peripheral elements can usually be allowed to change as long as the core elements remain fundamentally the same. (Errington, 1984, p. 37).

An example can illustrate this: The people have to respect the head of a clan (*panghulu*). This is a core element. The way in which the people respect such a person can vary as it is a peripheral element. However the core element (the respect) remains untouched.

Historical development in West Sumatra

A very brief overview of the historical events will give us a better understanding of the continuity and change of Minangkabau society. The history of West Sumatra can be divided into the following major stages:

1. The pre-Islamic period
2. The pre-colonial period (in the 18th and 19th centuries)
3. The colonial period
4. The post-colonial period

In this article only certain major traits will be mentioned. The researcher should look at these traits in a structural perspective. One of the main features of a structural perspective is the existence of binary oppositions which can be discovered. An inherent structure with general features lies behind the obvious historical developments. I will try to work out such a structure step by step.

The pre-Islamic period

The people were living in their village communities when a new force from outside entered West Sumatra. In the middle of the 14th century, this area became a kingdom under the rule of Adityawarman (Josselin de Jong, 1952, p. 8). Probably he was an officer of the Majapahit kingdom (Poesponegoro & Notosusanto, 2008, p. 108) with Minangkabau blood (Toeah, n.d., p. 92). The authors have different opinions about whether he was Hindu or Buddhist. It is clear that a new power entered the highland and that pairs of dichotomous oppositions can be discovered if we look at it from a structural point of view. The ‘traditional’ way of life is represented on the left side.

Traditional Way of Life	New Elements (of a Hindu/Buddhist Kingdom)
old animistic religion	Hinduism/Buddhism
democratic village life	autocratic Sultanate
matrilineal clans	patrilineal organization of the Sultan’s family

Table 1: Dichotomies during the pre-Islamic Period

The *adat* accepted an opposing element. But not all the new elements became part of the village community. There are indications that elements of a Hindu/Buddhist civilization could be found in parts of West Sumatra. In the year 2002, the Jakarta Post reported that archeologists found six Hindu and Buddhist archeological sites (Kasparman, 2002). Nonetheless it can be said that this new religion was not widespread as six Hindu/Buddhist places is still a small number. These elements appeared to be foreign. Heidhues is of the opinion that Adityawarman followed a tantric form of Buddhism (Heidhues, 2000, p. 30). Probably this new religion was related to the kingdom with its autocratic rules whilst a whole *adat* tradition (*Bodi Caniago*) was more democratic and egalitarian. The other *adat* tradition (*Koto Piliang*) was more hierarchical. The original four clans of the Minangkabau were called *Koto*, *Piliang*, *Bodi* and *Caniago*. They belong together in pairs (Josselin de Jong, 1952, p. 12). Both groups followed their own *adat* tradition. Usually a village community follows one of these two traditions. This means that either the *Koto Piliang* or the *Bodi Caniago* group

occupies a dominant position in that village community (Josselin de Jong, 1952, p. 12). The *Bodi Caniago* tradition was prevalent in Agam, whereas the *Koto Piliang* tradition was prevalent in Tanah Datar (Kraus, 1984, p. 40). This was probably the reason why the seat of the king was in Pagarruyung (Tanah Datar).

The pre-colonial period (in the 18th and 19th centuries)

The main feature of the pre-colonial period is the appearance of a new religion, namely the religion of Islam.

The sultanate of Aceh played a crucial role in the Islamization of the West coast of Sumatra. Gold and pepper was very important for Aceh and an attempt was made to control their trade. Therefore the Acehnese Sultan Alau'd Din Ri'ayat Shah (1537–68) sent his son Mughal to the harbor of Pariaman. With him appeared a new religion in West Sumatra, the religion of Islam.

For the further spread of Islam the brotherhoods (*tarekat*) played a major role. They had their own networks and slowly the Islamic scholars built their own networks too. One scholar could be an expert in Islamic law whilst another one could be an expert in Arabic. The students moved from place to place in order to study. Step by step the new religion spread from one area to another.

The life in the highlands was not safe for the merchants and travelers. Robberies and thefts were a daily occurrence (Dobbin, 1974, p. 328). As a consequence scholars became increasingly stern in implementing the Islamic law.

In the 19th century the Padri movement became very influential. The founders were pilgrims from Makkah who came back and wanted to abolish the *adat*. They secured power in certain regions. Finally one Padri leader Tuanku Lintau decided to have a feast in which he and his followers killed most of the Sultan's family. Two of the sons escaped and asked the Dutch for help (Dobbin, 1974, p. 340). The Dutch decided to intervene. This was the beginning of the Padri wars (1821–1837).

The consequence of these historical developments was a more orthodox Islamic interpretation which could be seen in daily life. New positions like Imams were visible and influential in many villages. Islamic rules like the five daily prayers became an essential part in the life of the people. Parts of the *adat* were categorized as ignorant and un-Islamic (*adat jahiliyyah*) while others were seen as following Islam (*adat islamiyyah*).

If we look at these events from a structural viewpoint then a number of dichotomies can be seen:

Pre-Islamic Society	New Elements (of Islam)
<i>Panghulu</i>	Imam
<i>adat laws</i>	Islamic laws
<i>adat jahiliyah</i>	<i>adat islamiyah</i>
<i>adat clothes of the panghulu</i> (black)	Islamic clothes of the Imam (white)
<i>adat titles (Datuak)</i>	Islamic titles in West Sumtra (<i>Tuanku</i>)

Table 2: Dichotomies during the pre-colonial period (in the 18th and 19th centuries)

The *adat* representatives were more challenged than before. Therefore the *adat* accepted and institutionalized such dichotomies. It must be stressed that the concept of the *adat* mainly accepted the male view (Sanday, 2002, p. 212). So it can be presumed that these *panghulu* decided what they accepted. Step by step the Islamic elements entered the *adat* side. For example the clans started to consider more the Islamic values and therefore the children should get an Islamic education in the prayer houses (*surau*) (Radjab, 1995). The *adat* could accept the new elements as long as certain core elements remained untouched.

The colonial period

1837 marked the end of the Padri wars and the Dutch became influential in the highlands of West Sumatra. They decided to strengthen the *adat* representatives. The most important thing for the colonial power was to secure a high profit. New posts were created which helped to control the coffee trade.

The world of the Minangkabau became part of the world economy with the introduction of money-based trade. New ideas and ideologies were imported into the interior of West Sumatra. Communist ideas became widespread which culminated in a communist rebellion in the year 1927.

At the religious level there were new reform ideas which soon became very popular. The younger generation (*kaum mudo*) promoted these ideas.

If we look at the historical developments from a structural point of view, then the level of binary pairs of oppositions became more complicated. Two levels must be differentiated:

- a) There was an element which entered into the ‘traditional’ society in a more energetic way:

Pre-colonial Society	New Elements (of the Dutch colonial power)
Minangkabau society/culture	Dutch society/culture
former <i>adat</i> positions	new <i>adat</i> positions
subsistence economy	world economy
<i>adat</i> ideals	Western ideologies

Table 3: Dichotomies during the colonial Period (in West Sumatra as a whole)

- b) The second level was inspired from the outside world but developed further within the society:

Existing ideologies (within the village community)	New Reform Movements
<i>kaum tuo</i>	<i>kaum mudo</i>
secular <i>kaum tuo</i>	secular <i>kaum mudo</i>
religious <i>kaum tuo</i>	religious <i>kaum mudo</i>

Figure 4: Dichotomies during the colonial Period (within the Minangkabau society itself)

The Minangkabau society became more complex and this can be seen in the above tables. The *adat* itself became divided but was still influential and could maintain the ‘traditional’ lifestyle.

The post-colonial period

The independence movement was very influential amongst Minangkabau intellectuals. Many famous independence heroes like Sutan Syahrir, Haji Agus Salim or Mohammad Hatta were born in West Sumatra. This was the result of the fact that the Dutch promoted their school system in that area. The Western school system in West Sumatra was quite widespread but it still had no effect within the villages.

In the following years it became obvious that the Minangkabau were part of a greater Indonesia. In the year 1945 there was the declaration of independence, and when Indonesia finally became independent in the year 1949, it was not easy for them to adjust their ‘traditional’ way of life within a bigger state. There was even a rebellion in the year 1958 but it was soon suppressed (Mossman, 1995).

The lifestyle in the last thirty years seems to have changed dramatically. The impression that the *adat* has become less important has increased. If we look in a ‘superficial’ way then this impression can be correct. For example the amount of traditional houses decreased (Gura, 1983, p. 207) and the importance of the ‘traditional’ council seems to have decreased as well. Reenen writes:

The autonomy of the *nagari* and the prestige of the village council has greatly diminished through a combination of external and internal factors, notably the intervention of the colonial and post-colonial government and the massive outflow of *penghulu* to the *rantau*. In 1990 we were told that the village council had not convened for years. (Reenen, 1996, p. 246)

The central government tried to restructure the administration. There should be similar and comparable village units around Indonesia. These villages were called *desa* (Kato, 1989, p. 43).

Some anthropologists predicted that the ‘traditional’ way of life would disappear (for example Maretin, 1961 or Swift, 1985) but if we look at the developments since the 1990s then we can get a different impression. During these years the provincial government introduced a school subject that teaches the Minangkabau culture. These school books contain different parts of the Minangkabau culture (for example the book of Syamsir, 1995). Furthermore the titles and clan names like *Datuak* are still important if someone is addressing a clan representative.

In the year 1999 the central government promoted an autonomous regional government in the various districts. This policy wanted to support the numerous cultures and societies of the country. Many local governments in West Sumatra promoted the unique Minangkabau way of life. The term *desa* was replaced by the term *nagari* in the year 2001 (Sanday, 2002, p. 223). Many government buildings use the ‘traditional’ architecture. These are signs that the local government wants to promote the established lifestyle.

The structure of the post-colonial development can be divided into two levels:

- a) This level is under direct influence of the central government.

Policy on the Village Level	Policy on the Level of the National State
regional <i>adat</i> policy	central government policy
<i>adat</i> rules	national law

Table 5: Dichotomies of the Minangkabau society (in regard to a greater national state)

- b) This level is within the village community in which the policy of the central government will be implemented.

Traditional Administrative Elements	New Administrative Elements
<i>adat</i> positions like the <i>panghulu</i>	government positions like the mayor
‘traditional’ education in the prayer houses (<i>surau</i>)	national education in schools
<i>nagari</i> (‘traditional’ village community concept)	<i>desa</i> (government concept of a village)
<i>adat</i> inheritance and property laws	Indonesian inheritance and property laws

Table 6: Dichotomies within the village community (of the post-colonial period)

The two levels cannot be separated. In level a) the decisions were made by the central government and then had their impact on level b) at the village level.

Discussion

These historical stages show that there is a dualistic concept within the society of the Minangkabau. The dualistic organization became more and more complex. The question is whether this kind of organization contributed to the survival of the matrilineal system of the society.

In all the four historical stages, it is obvious that an element from outside entered and collided with the ‘traditional’ way of life. A polarization within the society itself was the consequence: *adat* representatives versus Padri, *kaum tuo* versus *kaum mudo* etc. It has to be considered that the new elements entered the Minangkabau heartland from the areas outside (*rantau*). It is a well-known fact that the Minangkabau men leave the highlands of West Sumatra in order to find working opportunities outside. The reason could be that land which is available is limited to feed a certain number of people (Naim, 1985, p. 116). Some of these emigrants were inspired by new ideas and when they came back to the village these new ideas collided with the ‘traditional’ way of life. For example this happened when the Padri returned from Makkah. The people had to decide which way of life and elements they could accept. It seems that some core elements remained ‘untouched’ because of the acceptance of an opposing element. In all levels the *panghulu* were on the side of the ‘traditional’ society whilst other counterparts were on the other side. There is something which remains untouched

particularly the matrilineal way of life which was introduced by the ancestors Datuak Katumanggungan and Datuak Perpatih Nan Sabatang (Anwar, 1997, p. 53).

The untouchable elements allowed and even institutionalized a conflict in order to become unassailable. If a new element appears then there will be an oppositional mode in which the *adat* remains untouched. Some new elements will be completely rejected whilst others will be integrated. Such a dualistic concept helps the ‘traditional’ lifestyle to survive and the new elements can become part of it. This structure can be seen throughout the history of the heartland of West Sumatra. But a structural model cannot explain the adaptation sufficiently. In order to understand why some elements are accepted and others are rejected, it is necessary to look into the *adat* itself. The *adat* distinguishes between different levels (the definitions in parentheses are my translations):

- *adat nan sabana adat* (the *adat* which is truly (*sebenar*) *adat*). This *adat* is like the root of the Minangkabau way of life. It is related to the religion. This means it rules what is allowed or forbidden according to the religion (Anwar, 1997, pp. 56–57). But it also contains the matrilineal way of life (Amir, 2007, p. 74).
- *adat nan diadatkan* (the *adat* which was made to *adat*). This part of the *adat* takes as points of reference the words and sayings which were conveyed by the ancestors Dt. Perpatih nan Sabatang and Dt. Katumanggungan. Parts of this *adat* never change (Anwar, 1997, p. 57). It could be considered to be a core element. But there is also a flexible element. It allows the acceptance of decisions which were passed through consensus.
- the other two forms of *adat*, namely the *adat istiadat* the *adat nan teradat*. The *adat nan teradat* (the *adat* that became accidentally *adat*) contains the lifestyle like for example the wearing of blue jeans (Amir, 2007, p. 75) and the *adat-istiadat* regulates the daily ceremonies like marriage, birth etc. These are different from village to village. For this explanation in the field of continuity and change, these two forms of *adat* will not be explained.

It can be seen that the *adat* itself is dualistic if we neglect the *adat* at the village level. But how can new elements be integrated? In order to understand this question the *adat nan diadatkan* must be analyzed in more detail. The two ancestors brought different forms of ‘traditions’: a more authoritarian form (*Koto Piliang*) and a more democratic form (*Bodi Caniago*). Within the *adat nan diadatkan* there are four ‘words’: Some of these were brought by the two ancestors and cannot be changed. These words are written down. But there are words and decisions which will be made through discussions and consensus (*kato mufakat*). The *panghulu* discuss the daily matters. This part of the *adat* can be changed and adjusted to the matters which come from outside.

It can be said that Frederick Errington’s approach seems to be suitable for the description of this society. There is a core element within the customary law which will not change but there is also an element which can change.

Concluding remarks

This article has looked at the Minangkabau society and tried to answer why matrilineal structures could survive throughout time. The answer was that there were core elements (in the sense of Errington) which allow an opposition (in the sense of Abdullah) and so it can reach a new stage without touching this core.

Structural perspectives are very rare nowadays but nonetheless I think they can be useful in order to analyze Indonesian cultures as such a dualism is nothing new:

Historically speaking, we have the remarkable resilience of Indonesian cultures towards foreign cultural elements, which they neither rejected nor simply adopted, but Indonesianized, and thereby integrated into the indigenous cultures. Secondly there is the conceptual system he calls 'socioeconomic dualism'. (Josselin de Jong, 1984, p. 2)

The topic of a dualistic form of organization in Indonesia has been described by Josselin de Jong and other authors (Levi-Strauss, 1977, p. 155). Nowadays a structural approach is sometimes called old-fashioned (Deliege, 2004, p. 2). Many anthropologists agree with Victor T. King and William D. Wilder who asked whether too much is read into the materials and whether valid questions are being made (King & Wilder, 2003, p. 135). These are legitimate questions but I just want to give a kind of stimulus which could be useful for further research. A structural point of view can do that (Amborn, 1992, p. 359).

It would be interesting to look at dichotomies in other Indonesian societies in order to get new insights and a further basis for discussion. A famous differentiation was written by Clifford Geertz in the context of Java. There are practicing Muslims (*santri*) and nominal Muslims (*abangan*) (Geertz, 1976; Mulder, 1990; Pavaloi, 1993). However this differentiation is not so clear and Mark Woodward suggests that Geertz accepted a definition of Islam which was given by neo-fundamentalists (Woodward, 2011, p. 6). If we look at the Islamic spectrum in Java, then we can see a distinction between traditional Muslims who are more Sufi oriented on one side and a more modernist Islamic interpretation on the other side (Daniels, 2009, p. 6). Nevertheless such a dualistic view does not consider the emergence of neo-Wahhabi groups (Woodward, 2011, p. 6). It can be concluded that the situation in Java is more complex. Moreover there are also Javanese who are Christians and Buddhists. It is a question whether a structural approach would be useful. There are some 'rough' binary pairs of oppositions, like Muslims versus Non-Muslims and modernists versus traditionalists. In a time of globalization it is essential to understand the way how the people of a certain culture react. The understanding of the world view is important. According to Magnis-Suseno it is important for Javanese society to follow the duties in order to preserve harmony (Magnis-Suseno, 1989, p. 61). It is not necessary to eliminate the other part to maintain this harmony. The Minangkabau are part of the Austronesian language family. This language family extends from Insular Southeast Asia towards the islands of the Pacific (Fox, 1996, p. 6). The differentiation between the outside area and the heartland plays an important role.

A further theme is that many Sumatran societies also value the periphery or the 'tip of the tree' in the botanical idiom. The cleverness and trickery of the newcomer and the spiritual power of the younger brother or royal outsider are ample illustrations of this alternative theme. It is important to recognize in this context that historically, most cultural changes (e.g. Islam) were initiated from the periphery and Sumatra has a long history of trade. (Reuter, 1993, p. 517)

If the researcher looks at the theme in a broader context then it seems that the Minangkabau topic of how to deal with a foreign element is not something special. It can be found in other societies as well. The foreign element comes from outside and becomes integrated into the old system.

G. B. Milner is a researcher who looked at the dualistic concept within Austronesian societies. There is often a dichotomy between the original settlers and the newcomers.

Furthermore there is often a dichotomy between male and female. But it seems that there is the possibility of a synthesis:

This raises an interesting possibility, namely that societies which are, if one may say so, obsessed with binary oppositions and socio-cosmic dualism, yet allow, if only virtually or theoretically, for the genesis of a synthesis from the confrontation of thesis and antithesis, even though this may only occur in myth or in marginal, not to use the term abnormal phenomena. (Milner, 1984, pp. 15–16)

There are people within a culture who do not want to follow the ‘traditional’ way of life like for example transvestites. Blackwood conducted research amongst lesbians within the Minangkabau society (Blackwood, 1998). They behave like men and cannot be categorized easily. Such persons are an important field of study as they comprise both the male and the female element.

In sum it can be said that this article has described the dualistic concept of the Minangkabau society throughout history. There are structural traits which are similar throughout the centuries. However, in order to understand the reason how the matrilineal *adat* could persist throughout the historical events, it was necessary to look at the concept of the *adat* in more detail. It was stressed that there is a core element which will not change and there are elements which do adjust. It was also mentioned that the dualistic concept can be seen in a broader frame which gives opportunities for further research.

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