

Rabab Pariaman

Rabab Pariaman is an oral performance tradition originating in West Sumatra. The Pariaman region covers the western coast of the province of West Sumatra, most of which is included in the Padang Pariaman administrative district. Within the traditional geopolitical system of the Minangkabau people, Pariaman is a 'rantau' region, an area to which Minangkabau people (and culture) traveled and spread from their original homes in the interior. As in other Minangkabau areas, the people of Pariaman ascribe to a matrilineal system. In some cultural aspects, however, Pariaman culture has been influenced by Aceh which established hegemony over this area in the 16th century. Within the Minangkabau region, Pariaman is seen as the fount from which Islam flowed to the rest of the Minangkabau region. In Ulakan is located the grave of Syekh Burhanuddin, a famous Muslim proselytizer, that is visited by huge numbers of pilgrims each year.



Performance

The tukang rabab sits crosslegged, with the rabab held vertically in front, the neck loosely clasped between left thumb and fingers so that he can also pluck the strings, and the bow in his right hand.

Performances usually take place in the evening, beginning after Isya prayers and ending just before dawn prayers (approximately 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m.). The 'stage' is any gathering place with a traditional atmosphere, indoors or outdoors — the coffee stall (*lapau*), a wedding party, a *nagari* (historical political unit) celebration, and festivities celebrating the installation of a new *penghulu* (head of a matrilineal unit).

Although Rabab Pariaman is reputed to have once had a religious nature, it has since taken on a more profane nuance and may never be presented in religious places or at festivities of a religious nature. Perhaps this is related to the content of the stories presented today, which generally highlight the struggle for success in life. The heroes face great difficulties in their search for success, and this evokes lively response from the audience.

There is no distinct boundary between the audience and the presenters in the Rabab Pariaman performance. In fact, the audience is expected to become involved. Reactions take the form of shouting and commenting. At a wedding party, for example, some guests may sit around the tukang

The Rabab Singer

The recitation is presented in song form by a tukang rabab, who is always a man, today mostly old men, although a few of relatively younger age are still to be found in the Lubuk Alung area. The tukang rabab are all natives of Pariaman. They rarely leave to perform outside Pariaman, perhaps because there is not much of a demand elsewhere, since the texts are strongly dialectical (in the Pariaman dialect). This is the case, too, with the *sijobang* recitations favoured in Payakumbuh and the vicinity, which are presented in the Payakumbuh dialect. Thus performances are essentially non-commercial.



In several districts in the Pariaman region, rabab players can still be found, such as in Padang Alai, Tandikek, Pungung Kasik, Sicincin and Lubuk Alung. Villages frequently hire them to perform at wedding ceremonies and festivals. Amir Hosen (above) from the village of Salibutan, within the subdistrict of Lubuk Alung, is one such rabab player.

THE DESTINY OF MINANGKABAU MEN

Following is an excerpt from *Jalan Kuliliang Bilang Nagari* as sung by Amir Hosen from the village of Salibutan in Lubuk Alung. The tale describes the names and histories of villages in the Minangkabau region. Nevertheless, the singer inserts his own views on the custom of Minangkabau men leaving the region to seek their fortunes elsewhere. It is a "tragedy", he says, for a young man to have to leave the village from not being able to compete with the rich.

*Dimulai di renab Pasa Padang
Taluak Bayua labuab(s)an kapa
Nangkodo tagak di kamudi
Kok lamo dalam kampuang urang
Jangek layua gigi lab tangga
Lab malu pulang ka nagari ei...*

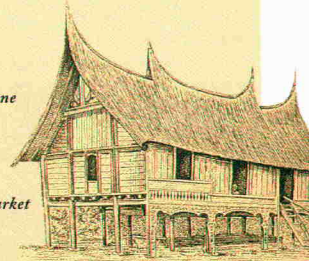
*Bukik Putuuh Rimbo Kaluang
Dirandang jaguang diaguibsi
Di kida jalan ka ka balai
Tampak galanggang pacu kudo
Ukun putuuh badan tabuang
Dipandang kampuang ditangisi
Sadang bansaik badan marasai
Duya dikisai 'rang nan kayo ei...*

*Kondak dek ganuang nan maambek
Jaleh tasiun Pulau Aia
Sinan tasiun pangabisan
Labuab kureta ka Muaro
Tak sia raso ka diupek
Nan malang untuang siriab aia
Mudo lab nan tidak bajunjuangan
Alamaik lapuak dek tajelo ei...*

*In the domain of Padang town
In Bayur bay where ships abound
Captains stand fast at their helms
When being away from home too long
And one's skin is shriveled and teeth are gone
One is too ashamed to come back home!*

*Putus Mountains, the Keluang Forest
As corn too long on the spit is charred
To the left of the road on the way to the market
The horse race track is visible
No legal recourse, no physical strength
to fight the tears when seeing the village
and the poor in their misery
where the world is held in the palm of rich men's hands!*

*If mountains were not in the way
One could see Pulau Air
The final station, the last stop
for the train to Muara
Who is it that should be cursed
Such a poor fate has the betel vine
If the sprout has no support
it will be broken by the wind's bashing!*



(Above) A traditional Minangkabau house with its 'horned' roof.

rabab but others will sit further away to play cards and dominoes. They continue to listen, however, with the aid of loudspeakers. As they throw down their cards or dominoes, they respond loudly to the *tukang rabab*'s verses. Women also listen to the performance, but they do not actively participate.

Traditionally, the Rabab Pariaman is a solo presentation with the *tukang rabab* acting as musician and singer. Today, however, performances may involve two *tukang rabab*. Sometimes one will bring a friend along if he has a following. Or a maestro might bring along a student to acclimatise him to facing an audience.

At dawn the performance ends and those who do not choose to return home sleep at the village *surau*, a house of prayer where young men and boys once spent their nights.

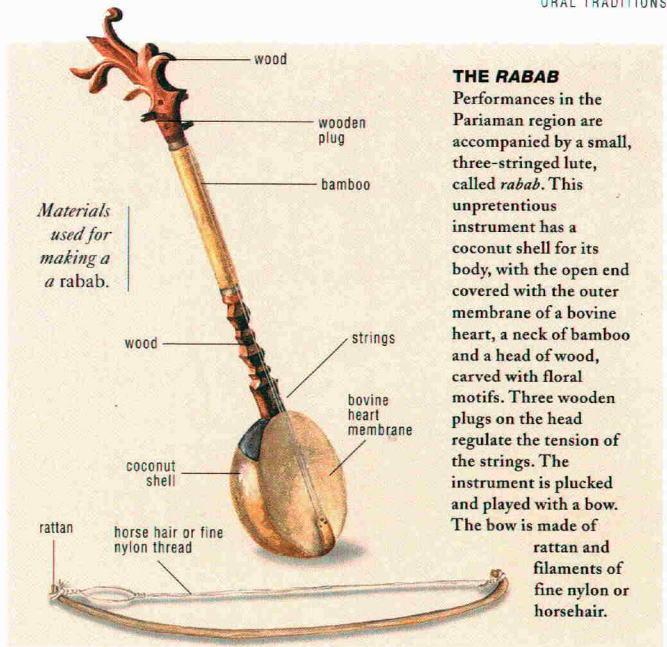
Texts: Dendang and Kaba

A Rabab Pariaman text consists of two components, the *dendang* and the *kaba*. The *dendang* takes the form of *pantun* verses (verses of four or more lines) with an a-b-a-b rhyming system. The first half of each verse is somewhat nonsensical; the content is in the second half. The number of lines in a verse is always even, except when there is repetition of a certain line, which is dependent upon rhythm. The content of the *dendang* concerns the struggle to survive: poverty (resulting in a loved one turning to a richer person), bad fortune (when abroad seeking one's fortune), homesickness (because one is too poor and therefore embarrassed to return home). Tension is relieved with the injection of amusing verses called *pantun jenaka*. The overall feeling is one of sadness, which, to a certain extent, may be looked upon as a reflection of social reality as experienced by Minangkabau men.

The tunes of the *dendang* vary. They carry such names as *lagu pelayaran*, *lagu ampek-ampek*, *lagu dendang panjang*. The influence of the tunes is apparent not only in the musical aspect, but also in the different types of filler words employed.

The *kaba* is the story. A number of *kaba* are presented in the Rabab Pariaman, a number which has remained relatively static throughout its history. A large proportion of the *kaba* are classic in style, set against a background of a kingdom with supernaturally strong personages. It takes several nights to recite a complete story, and so the tendency is to select only one episode that can be finished in a single night.

A rabab performance at the Lisan Festival of Oral Traditions, Jakarta, 1993.



Materials used for making a rabab.

THE RABAB

Performances in the Pariaman region are accompanied by a small, three-stringed lute, called *rabab*. This unpretentious instrument has a coconut shell for its body, with the open end covered with the outer membrane of a bovine heart, a neck of bamboo and a head of wood, carved with floral motifs. Three wooden plugs on the head regulate the tension of the strings. The instrument is plucked and played with a bow.

The bow is made of rattan and filaments of fine nylon or horsehair.

Only one non-classic *kaba* is known in the Rabab Pariaman tradition, the *Kaba Siti Baheram*. People believe that this event actually did take place in 1917 at Sungai Pasak (east of Pariaman town). It concerns a young man who had the gambling fever and had the heart to hurt his mother and murder his female relatives to gain the inheritance to support his gambling. In the matrilineal Minangkabau society, inheritance is passed through the female line, until there are no more women. As a result of this heinous crime and his mother's curse, the young man's life ended in the gallows.

The *kaba* does not use as much tune as the *dendang* and the rhythm is, therefore, relatively constant throughout. The themes of the stories revolve mostly around conflicts in the royal courts and amongst the royal family (because the *kaba* are classical in nature).

Rabab Pariaman texts are prose-lyrical. Lines contain an average of eight to 12 syllables, excluding filler words. This rule appears to pertain to all texts in Minang performances, *kaba* and other forms. The language is extremely connotative, formal, archaic, dialectic, replete with symbolic expressions, allusions, examples, parables and allegories; it is not colloquial but formal with a literary character; and very strongly influenced by the Pariaman dialect. This makes the Rabab Pariaman presentations sound strange to younger Minangkabau ears.

It seems that the Rabab Pariaman tradition, everything must be presented in couched terms, and this could well be the reason why it is so difficult for young people today to learn the art of Rabab Pariaman presentation.

CASSETTE RECORDINGS

Recordings of Rabab Pariaman performances are available in cassettes that are sold in stores throughout West Sumatra and adjacent regions. Most are produced by Tanama Record and Sinar Padang, both of which are located in Padang. Most cassettes contain either *dendang* or *kaba* performances. A *dendang* performance, being relatively short, would take only about two 60-minute cassettes but a *kaba* performance might take as many as 20 cassettes. These commercial cassettes are most popular among adults and people who were born in the region but have long lived outside their home villages in Jakarta and other provinces. Rabab Pariaman no longer occupies the position of preliminary orality that it once enjoyed and most people now listen to cassettes.

