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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

RANDAI, FOLK theater of the Minangkabau, is a unique and exciting Southeast Asian performance art. This chapter introduces the basic characteristics of randai and provides background information on the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra. Their history, customs, and religion all contribute to the understanding of randai theater as a cultural expression of the Minangkabau people.

What Is Randai?

Most readers, even those familiar with the performing arts of other areas of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, probably have heard of randai only in passing. Due, perhaps, to the predominance of Java and Bali in the realm of Indonesian performance studies, the Sumatran form of randai has been somewhat overlooked.¹ However, randai theater is the principal folk performance art found throughout a large area of Sumatra and has been performed and cherished for decades by the Minangkabau, the largest ethnic group

in West Sumatra. It is a highly refined dance-drama form, comparable to (better-documented) Southeast Asian theater genres such as the Malay *mak yong*, Thai *likay*, Javanese *ludruk* or *ketoprak*, or the Philippine *komedya*.

Randai theater—until recently an all-male tradition—is a unique blend of martial arts, dance, folk song, instrumental music, and acting. Its most outstanding feature is its close link to the indigenous Minangkabau martial art form called *silek*.

If a visitor today was to come across one of the randai performances that are staged throughout West Sumatra, he or she would instantly be alerted to the impending event by the commotion created by villagers from the surrounding areas who walk in small groups toward the performance space, chatting animatedly in anticipation of a long night of entertainment. An exciting tapestry of instrumental music played on gongs, horns, flutes, and drums welcomes the spectators and announces to everyone around that the troupe has arrived and a performance is about to start. Once the audience is assembled around the open lot in a tight circle (kids crowding in as close to the center as they are permitted), the performance commences. An even number of dancers, arranged in two rows, enter the performance space with an initial dance consisting of martial arts steps. In this opening dance a transition from the two rows into a circle takes place. The resulting circular martial arts dance is called *galombang* and it is the basis of all following dances. As the first *galombang* ends, the dancers sit down in a circle. One or two performers step into the center of the circle to sing a greeting to the audience, ask forgiveness in case they should make any mistakes, and announce the story to be performed. Another circular *galombang* follows, accompanied by an introductory song that sets the mood for the first scene. Then two or more performers step inside the circle to deliver the dialogues of the first scene. The dancers again sit in a circle around the action and quietly watch until, after the last word is spoken, they rise at once at the vocal cue of the leader and perform a different circular dance to a new song. This continues for several hours, with alternating scenes

and circular galombang dances, and typically culminates in a major fighting scene through which the conflict that was laid out in the story is resolved. A final closing dance is then performed to a standard tune, indicating the end of the performance. The performers file out of the circle in two rows, the musicians play a closing tune, and the spectators scatter to the nearby food booths and coffee stalls to exchange their views on the story and discuss the skills of the performers, especially their proficiency in the martial art silek.

Silek was seminal to the emergence and development of randai. It still serves as a major topic in randai scripts; and it exercises a continuing influence on randai's current performance features, including staging, costumes, music, acting, and most important, movement repertoire. Since martial arts are a prominent feature of randai and are also part of many other theater arts throughout Asia, an examination of the relationship between martial arts and theater in randai is relevant in the larger context of Asian performance studies. The fact that the martial arts have played a crucial role in the development and shaping of randai and are still prominently featured as part of each performance today makes randai stand out among the performing arts of Asia and invites comparison with other martial arts related theater forms such as Indian *kathakali*, Javanese *sandiwar*, or Thai *khon*.

As a matrilineal society, the Minangkabau have been the subject of many anthropological studies. These, however, have not been extended to include a look at the fascinating performance arts that have developed as an outward expression of the unique traits of this ethnic group, a look that might likely enrich the understanding of the Minangkabau from an anthropological point of view. The fact that randai was until recently an all-male tradition linked to the indigenous martial arts is a case in point. The traditional matrilineal social structure and the segregation of living quarters into the *rumah gadang* for women and the *surau* for unmarried men most likely furthered the practice of silek and randai as initially

all-male activities which were practiced in the proximity of the surau. The fact that living arrangements have slowly been changing over the past 30 years and female and male spheres of influence have begun to overlap more is reflected in the way randai now integrates female performers.

The following chapters present randai as a living performing art of the Minangkabau and focuses on its relationship to silek. I therefore include an examination of silek, especially its training methods, techniques, and aesthetics, and investigate how they influence randai. Randai itself is then presented in all its key elements including scripts, staging, costume, music, acting, and dance—again, with highlights on the influences of silek on each of these features.

In addition, a brief survey of active groups will be included to provide an overview of the current state of randai in regard to group composition, repertoire, and performance schedules. In this context the emerging role of women in randai is also addressed. The phenomena of their recent integration into this formerly all-male tradition and their rising importance as active performers might shed light on changes in the Minangkabau society.

In a sense, we are witnessing changes in randai that reflect changes in the society as a whole. The integration of women is just one aspect of this change. Other changes are related to the spreading of modern life styles and urbanization. These developments in turn influence the creation of new scripts dealing with issues of modernization, the political situation in Indonesia, and the conflicts between traditions or customs (*adat*) and modernity. Modern technology and staging methods are altering randai performances in a very real sense. Staging methods move away from the traditional open-air, level, circular performance space to a raised, roofed, single-focus, proscenium stage. The ever-increasing reliance on electronic amplification alters performance values and aesthetics and puts pressure on troupes to adjust to their new dependence on technology.

Despite all these changes and outside influences, randai seems to be able to persevere and preserve its traditional link to the Minangkabau culture, to a large extent through its strong bond with silek.

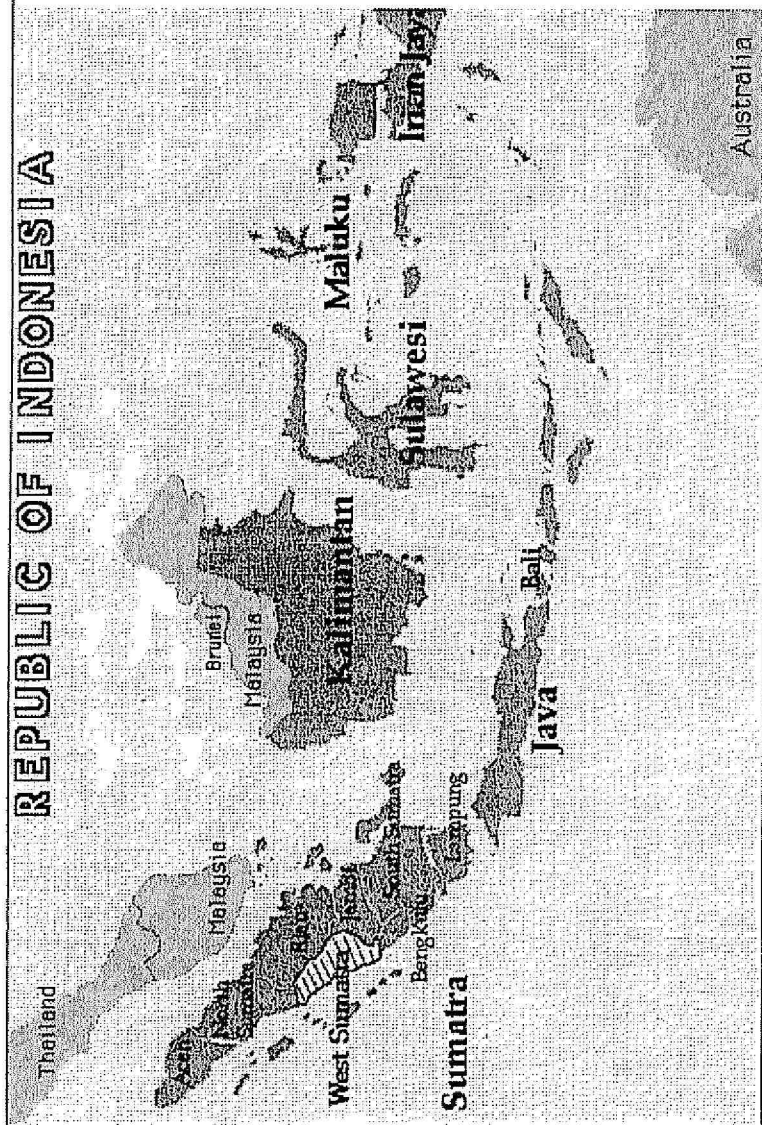
The Minangkabau People

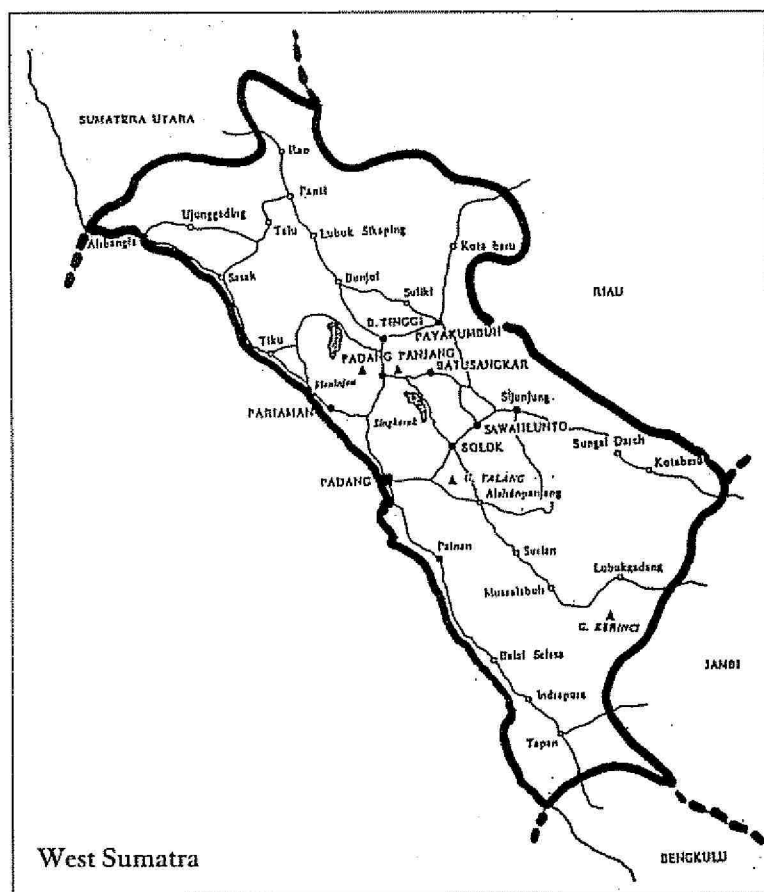
The densely populated central highlands of West Sumatra are the original home of the Minangkabau people, the largest ethnic group on this westernmost island of the Indonesian archipelago. Ethnically they are Deutero-Malays, a subdivision of the Malay ethnic group that populates a large area from the Malay peninsula to the eastern islands of Indonesia. Their language, Bahasa Minang, is part of the western division of the Austronesian language group, closely related to Bahasa Malayu and Bahasa Indonesia. The Minangkabau comprise the second largest matrilineal society in the world and at the same time are devout Muslims, a fact that has invited much interest and debate among scholars.²

The name Minangkabau, according to a popular folk legend, is derived from the words *menang* (to win), and *karabau* (water buffalo). According to this folk etymology, when the Javanese under Adityawarman invaded the island of Sumatra in the middle of the fourteenth century, the Minangkabau struggled to retain their autonomy. At one point in the ensuing war, the opposing military leaders decided to let two *karabau* fight to determine the victor. The Javanese selected the strongest bull they could find, whereas the clever Minangs devised a trick. They starved a calf for ten days, then, on the day of the tournament, they mounted a sharp iron point on its nose. The calf, confused and desperate for milk, charged at the bull, piercing its belly with the iron horn. Thus the Minangkabau won, and named themselves after the victorious water buffalo that aided them in their struggle for autonomy.³

Taking tremendous pride in their ethnicity and distinct culture, the Minangs cherish their arts. The cradle of their culture lies in

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the original three heartland districts (Tanah Datar, Agam, and Limopuluah Koto), known as *darek* (upland, hinterland). The remaining districts of West Sumatra were in the past considered *rantau* (outer reaches, frontier) but today are part of the Alam Minangkabau (world of the Minangkabau).

A distinguishing feature of the Minangkabau has to do with this *rantau*. *Merantau* (to go to the *rantau*) refers to a voluntary and temporary migration. Originally it implied going to the "frontier" areas surrounding the central *darek*, but increasingly, the destinations for this temporary migration expanded to include other areas

of Sumatra as well as parts of the Indonesian archipelago and the Malay Peninsula. Merantau always implies that a return to the homeland is planned.⁴

Merantau is an institutionalized activity primarily for young Minangkabau men. They are required by custom to leave home for a period of time before marriage in order to seek further education, experience, employment, wealth, and, of course, adventure. Success during their travels typically raises their status within the Minangkabau society and improves their prospects of finding a bride upon their return. However, some young men do not return home, but establish permanent settlements abroad (Murad 1980, 34). Merantau is an institutionalized activity so deeply ingrained in the culture that it is a prominently featured topic in most of the indigenous folk arts and is an integral part of almost every randai story.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Minangkabau are basically a rural society relying on agriculture in the fertile plains of the West Sumatran highlands, and on trade. Evidence of a Minangkabau kingdom can be found in inscriptions as early as the fourteenth century. The Minangkabau kingdom was seen as an expansion of the Malayu kingdom that was founded by Hindu colonists in mainland Southeast Asia around the seventh century A.D. A second source, a poem from 1365 A.D., lists Minangkabau as one of the countries that paid tribute to the Javanese kingdom of Majapahit under King Adityawarman.⁵ Although he lost in the legendary buffalo fight mentioned earlier, the Minangkabau "allowed Adityawarman to become their king as long as he respected their *adat* [customary law]" (Frey 1985, 68). Nominally, the Minangkabau kingdom ruled over all of central Sumatra and collected tribute from the rantau areas of West Sumatra, but the actual power of the ruler was limited. Even before colonization by the Dutch, the kingdom was weakened by internal

quarrels, a lack of heirs, and, most important, by the warfare with the Padri movement (fanatical Muslim puritans) set on converting the Minangkabau heartland to their version of Islam, and in the process dividing the region into warring factions. The Dutch appeared on the scene in 1821 and, by allegedly supporting the legitimate authority of the remaining members of the royal family against the Padri, the colonialists gained access to the Minangkabau heartland and subsequently included the Minangkabau lands in their "possession" of the Dutch East Indies. The Minangkabau kingdom formally existed until 1815, when leaders of the Padri sect persuaded members of the royal family and their officers to attend negotiations at Saruaso, where the Padri assassinated most of them. A few escaped and fled to other regions. The last Minangkabau ruler died in 1844 far away from the royal palace, which in the meantime had been burned to the ground. By then, Islam was firmly established in the entire coastal region, and in most parts of the highlands.

The Dutch retained their control over the region, especially over trade, along with the rest of the Dutch Indies until the occupation of Indonesia by the Japanese during World War II. After the war, Indonesia declared its independence on 17 August 1945, but had to endure a prolonged and bloody struggle for almost five years until it finally reached autonomy as a nation. A treaty establishing the Republic of Indonesia as a sovereign nation was signed in 1949. Thus, West Sumatra became one of the twenty-seven provinces comprising the republic, and today is subdivided into administrative units (*kabupaten*) in accordance with the central government in Jakarta. The republic's motto, Diversity in Unity, as part of the national *Pancasila* program is embraced by the Minangkabau. Diversity in Unity is intended to recognize the diverse ethnic groups that live in the Indonesian islands and acknowledge their cultural differences, while at the same time honoring the national unity of the Republic of Indonesia that transcends ethnic differences. Accordingly, the Minangkabau take pride in their

unique culture, which is distinct from that of other ethnic groups in Indonesia, and cherish their various traditions and performing arts, including randai.

CUSTOMS

Adat refers to the indigenous customs and traditions of the Minangkabau.⁶ One aspect of adat was mentioned earlier, the custom of merantau, or temporary migration. Merantau is just one of the unique elements of Minangkabau adat; on a larger scale, adat is the foundation of the social and cultural life and dictates relationships between individuals and society. Adat comprises laws and guidelines regulating and prescribing all aspects of life; they are permanently encoded in vast collections of oral literature.⁷ These traditional stories (*kaba*), legends (*tambo*), proverbs (*pantun*), and wise sayings (*pepatah-pepilih*) continue to be used to educate and advise the younger generations about adat. Adat prescribes basic life principles that are necessary to help maintain order, balance, and harmony in the community, including the principle of consensus that guides all kin group decision making (*mupakaik*).⁸

Adat establishes codes for the proper behavior for all members of society: for example, younger members have to obtain permission from their elders before undertaking important activities like going to the rantau. Adat laws outline the relationships among kinship groups (clans, subclans, lineages, and families) and regulate property ownership and inheritance. Adat regulations provide a framework for proper decorum from birth to death. Ceremonies like circumcisions, weddings, installations of lineage heads, and burials follow strict protocols dictated by adat. For all ceremonial gatherings there are set, highly formalized speeches (*pidato*) that celebrate the link between the participants and their ancestors, a bond upheld by the continued practice of the appropriate customs. It is considered essential by the Minangkabau to know one's adat well and behave accordingly.⁹ If the bond is broken, the community will fall into chaos. The importance of adat as the fundamen-

tal sociocultural fabric that holds the community together is reflected in *randai*, where *adat* is the underlying fabric of its plays.

The single most distinguishing aspect of *adat* is the fact that it prescribes a matrilineal and matrilocal social structure. The smallest matrilineal unit is the *sabuah paruik* (one womb), consisting of one female elder, and all her direct descendants, including her brothers and younger sisters. They traditionally live together in one house, the *rumah gadang* (big house). A household is identified by the name of the most senior female of the family. This house and the family compound are owned by the eldest female and upon her death are passed on to her daughters. This practice also applies to the family's land, and a variety of other precious family heirlooms, all of which are considered *harto pusako*, heirlooms that cannot be sold and have to be handed down the female descent line. Women have considerable power in inheritance and ownership of property. Besides being responsible for the day-to-day management of domestic affairs, they also hold essential public, economic, and ceremonial roles of importance (Prindiville 1985; Tanner 1985).¹⁰

Males derive their importance from their relation to their female relatives.¹¹ A woman's oldest brother, her *mamak* (uncle), has two functions. To the outside society, he is the family representative; within the family, he shares responsibilities for matters such as the maintenance of the house, compound, and fields, as well as the education of his nieces and nephews (*kemanakan*). While the uncle has traditionally significant influence in family matters, the father has much less. A husband (*urang sumando*) holds local residence in two places; only at night does he visit his wife, where he is considered a guest of honor. During the day he is expected to function as uncle and be available at his sister's house to assist with work and the education of her children. As husband and father a man remains an outsider to a well-established and strong family unit that is centered around the female descending line. This is not to say that there are no strong emotional bonds between husband and wife or father and children; indeed there are. But if a marriage does not work out, it can easily be terminated by either side.

Although in recent years the traditional rumah gadang has given way to smaller family residences that house subunits centered around one mother and her children, plus the father, the matrilineal social structure remains intact. Property continues to be inherited along the female descending line, as prescribed by adat. In sum, despite the fact that Islam is now the major religion of the Minangkabau people, adat—and with it the matrilineal system—have survived from pre-Islamic times.

In the context of randai theater, however, the traditionally strong role of women is often de-emphasized, and the plays focus more on the roles of men as uncles, fathers, teachers, or religious leaders. Considering that randai was until recently an all-male tradition, this is maybe not too surprising.

RELIGION

Two major religious forces are of importance when considering the Minangkabau: animism and Islam. Animism as the indigenous religion of the Minangkabau has today been largely supplanted by Islam. However, many animistic traits still remain and deserve our attention in the context of the martial arts and the theater.

According to animistic beliefs, each living being, as well as inanimate objects, possesses a spirit or soul, called *semangat*. A complex belief system surrounding these spirits led to the rise of a spirit specialist or shaman, called a *pawang*. The pawang's obligation was to control and appease the spirit world, often with the help of magic. The belief in spirits is still widespread today, as is the belief in the magic powers of individuals. Pawang are still consulted to cure illness, predict the future, influence the weather, and otherwise communicate with the spirit world. However, since Islam has become the dominant religion, many of the spirit beliefs are now condemned as blasphemous and backward. Nonetheless, some of the beliefs in ghosts, spirits, and magic have been incorporated into a more mystic branch of Islam, and pawang often expand their important spiritual positions by incorporating Islamic teachings, es-

pecially in the more remote inner highlands of West Sumatra. Randai troupes from these regions typically still have a spiritual guide that ensures the well-being of the troupe. He is responsible for making offerings for favorable weather and for assuring that no black magic will interfere with a performance. He will typically include prayers to both indigenous spirits and Allah.

The advance of Islam into the Minangkabau lands was slow, which might also explain the persistence of older animistic practices. Due to the relative isolation and inaccessibility of the heartland of the Minangkabau culture, Islamization here took a different path than in Java, where the rapid conversion focused on the power center of the royal palace, the *kraton* (Abdullah 1985, 148). In West Sumatra, Islam first took hold in some of the rantau areas along the coast, mainly in the small port towns on the West coast, and via the east coast rivers by seafarers and traders who came from the other parts of the Malay world and from as far away as India. This early formative period of the Islamic tradition concentrated on these coastal regions and had little impact beyond. It eventually spread further inland via the institution of the *surau*, or men's house. The *surau* were traditionally an integral part of the matrilineal system, providing young unmarried males of a clan with a place outside their mothers' house, which was reserved for women and children. The communal *surau* therefore had always been a place of learning for young men, where they were instructed in *silek* and the rules of *adat*. It is easy to see how it became a place to study the teachings of the Qur'an as well.

This was made possible by the fact that, in the early Islamic centuries, Muslim brotherhoods (*tarekat*) had sprung up in response to a popular need for a more intimate communication with God than that provided by the dry legalism of the official doctors of Islam. Devotees of these brotherhoods, called Sufis, concentrated on following the *tariqa* (Arabic: path, way) laid down by a teacher of *syekh*, in whose school they gathered, often for many years. These *tarekat* and their schools could fit into the existing *surau* system of the Minangkabau without the least disruption and so become an

acceptable addition to village life in certain villages. (Dobbin 1983, 121)

These small centers of learning had no major impact on the traditional way of life and existed more or less on the fringes of Minangkabau society until the extremist Padri movement spread from the Middle East and penetrated into the Minangkabau hinterland via pilgrims that returned from their hajj to Mecca in the late eighteenth century. With their return and their increasing power more and more of the Alam Minangkabau became engulfed in a violent struggle and was thoroughly Islamicized, often under considerable military pressure from the well-armed and well-trained Padri cadres (Dobbin 1983).

Today, most Indonesians consider themselves Muslims and Islam is the most widespread and dominant of the religions officially recognized by the government of the Republic of Indonesia.¹² Among the many ethnic groups that find themselves a part of the Indonesian state, the Minangkabau are among those who most strictly adhere to Islamic teachings.

The presumable incompatibility and resulting conflicts between Islam and adat have been constant topics of discussion among scholars. However, the two systems continue to coexist.¹³ As Abdullah (1966) points out, the Minangkabau society is comprised of many conflicting systems, of which adat and Islam are just two.¹⁴ The effort to harmonize opposing systems and to integrate new influences is in fact a central element of Minangkabau adat itself. It recognizes the continuous need to adapt to change.

Over time, the relationship of adat and Islam has been redefined. The earliest written manuscripts on adat, from the nineteenth century, already incorporate references to Islamic law: they state that "adat is based on propriety, and religion is based on religious law" (*adat basandi alur, syarak basandi dalil*), implying the mere coexistence of the two systems. Later texts determine that "adat is based on religion, and religion is based on adat" (*adaik basandi syarak, syarak basandi adaik*). Here, an interdependent relationship is es-

tablished between two equally positioned systems. The latest aphorism decrees that "adat is based on religion, and religion is based on the Qur'an" (*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*). This now attempts to transform adat into an outward expression of the Qur'an (Abdullah 1970, 12). At the same time, it legitimizes the continued importance of adat from the viewpoint of Islam.

These transformations and changes in the relationship between adat and Islam are also reflected in other aspects of Minangkabau culture. An example is that silek, the indigenous art of self-defense, originated well before the arrival of the first Muslims. However, in an effort to integrate Islam into the foundations of Minangkabau society, some of the first Islamic teachers are now credited with introducing this martial art form into Sumatra.