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MIN YUEN (PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT)

See Malayan Emergency (1948–1960); Briggs Plan

MINANGKABAU

Minangkabau is the name for a region and a people located in the central highlands of Sumatra. The Minangkabau call their homeland the *Alam Minangkabau*, or “the world of Minangkabau.” The *alam* includes Minangkabau territories in the high plateaus of central Sumatra, the *darat*, and frontier regions or *rantau* that reach down to the coast in both east and west Sumatra.

Numerical divisions abound within Minangkabau, and the highlands are divided between three principal territories or *luhak*: Agam, Tanah Datar, and Limapuluh Kota. The three highland valleys are spread around two sizable lakes, Lake Maninjau and Lake Singkarak, lying, respectively, to the north and south of the towering volcanoes Gunung Merapi (2,891 meters) and Gunung Singgalang. The volcanic soil of these valleys is highly productive and intensively cultivated, supporting a population that has developed a complex and distinctive culture. Over time Minangkabau men have ventured beyond the highlands, traveling into the *rantau* regions and beyond, a process known as *merantau*. In this way the Minangkabau have come to have an influence far beyond their homelands and have settled in many parts of the archipelago.

Minangkabau society has attracted considerable attention from anthropologists, who have frequently focused on a system of descent and

inheritance that is reckoned through the female line. Members of the society are also divided into two moieties, or *laras*: Bodi Caniago and Koto Piliang, which have coexisted, over the centuries, in a relationship of ritualized rivalry that appears to have been governed by local *adat*, or custom. The complexity of Minangkabau social structure is legendary, and descriptions of Minangkabau society emphasize that each of these *laras* is further divided into four *suku*, a term that implies a matrilineal clan or family. The Minangkabau of the highlands have traditionally lived in *nagari*, autonomous settlements governed by elders in accordance with the provisions of the customary *adat*. Family groups focus on an ancestral communal house (*rumah gadang*, “big house”), which passes down through the female line; these houses are famous not just for their elaborate decoration but also for their distinctive shape, which is said to be modeled on the horns of the buffalo. In addition to a distinctive social structure, kinship system, and material culture, the Minangkabau possess their own language, one that is closely associated with Malay, and numerous written and oral accounts of their *adat* and of their legendary ancestors. Despite these sources, known as *Kaba* and *Tambo*, our knowledge of the details of Minangkabau's history are surprisingly sparse. This is largely due to the fact that the Minangkabau highlands were, until the nineteenth century, largely inaccessible to foreign travelers.

Little is known about the prehistory of Minangkabau. Menhirs, or megalithic standing stones, are found in several districts in the highlands, and some of these are decorated with elaborate, and probably pre-Islamic, carvings. We have little information about the people who erected these stones, but they point to an early connection between Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan, on the Malay Peninsula, where groups of similar menhirs are also found. The close parallel between Minangkabau *adat* and that of Negeri Sembilan, including matrilineal descent and inheritance, is well established, and it is generally assumed that groups from Minangkabau migrated and settled on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula sometime before the sixteenth century.

Future archaeological work may tell us much more about the early history of Minangkabau, but in the meantime historians are dependent

on written records, which commence in the fourteenth century. Between 1347 and 1375 a ruler named Adityawarman established a series of stone inscriptions in Minangkabau that allow us to make some tentative deductions about the nature of his kingdom. The inscriptions are written in Old Malay, and they indicate that Adityawarman was a devotee of a syncretic form of Siwa-Buddhism known as Kalacakra, which was also practiced by the Javanese kings of Majapahit (to whom it is thought Adityawarman was related) in the same period. In the inscriptions Adityawarman referred to himself as a Great Lord of Rulers (Sri Maharajadiraja) whose dominion was absolute. The inscriptions appear to refer to ritual sacrifice, but also speak of the ruler's benevolence and the blessings that would flow to loyal subjects.

The question arises as to why a ruler practicing Mahayana Buddhism should appear, apparently quite suddenly, in the Minangkabau highlands in the fourteenth century. One reason may have been a change in conditions in the Melaka Straits, close to which earlier Sumatran kingdoms, such as Śriwijaya and Malayu, had been based. Another possibility may be found in Adityawarman's description of himself as "Sovereign of the Land of Gold," an apparent reference to the deposits of alluvial gold that were found in the highlands and for which Sumatra had long been famous among foreign merchants. The scanty evidence suggests that control over the gold-rich interior may have prompted a member of the Malayu dynasty to move inland in this period, but the details remain a mystery. It is interesting to note that the Minangkabau *Kaba* and *Tambo* do not deal with this period. These tend to ignore kingship and to relate instead the history of the two legendary ancestors of the Minangkabau laras, Datuk Perpatih nan Sebatang and Datuk Katumanggungan. This fact, coupled with the absence of any historical information about Adityawarman's immediate successors, has given rise to the perception that kingship was an anomaly in Minangkabau history and that the existence of a royal lineage sat in tension with adat and with the autonomous character of the Minangkabau nagari. The difficulty for historians in trying to substantiate any of these theories is that the local sources are rarely dated, and it is often necessary to rely on meager external accounts for a chronology of

events. While these are scarce before the seventeenth century, Dutch records from that period offer some new insights into circumstances within Minangkabau.

The Dutch United East India Company (VOC), which established itself on the west coast of Sumatra in the 1660s, wanted access to Minangkabau gold and sought a relationship with the rulers inland who, they hoped, could influence the flow of trade. Possibly this intervention gave new currency to the institution of kingship in the period; certainly the VOC encountered an established lineage that had the ability to affect the gold trade. But the Minangkabau court was not as easy to manipulate as the VOC had hoped, and it soon became clear that the prestige of the rulers in the coastal regions (where they were regarded as "almost holy") was a potent political force. Emissaries from the court appeared in the rantau bearing elaborate letters that were treated with veneration by the population and were used as signs of power on which rebellions against the Europeans might focus. Although emanating from a court that was by this period Islamic, these letters, or *surat cap*, recall Adityawarman's language of threats and blessings and assert the king's role as an intercessor with God. The reports of troubled VOC officials reveal a culture of communication between the darat and the rantau that enabled the ruler's presence to be represented in the coastal regions while his person was still hidden inland. Despite his absence, the ruler still offered a source of authority for coastal communities, which were increasingly beleaguered by Dutch trading monopolies around the coast of Sumatra. By the early eighteenth century Minangkabau royal emissaries helped to lead a holy war against the Dutch and encouraged rebellions in other parts of the archipelago.

Despite the idealized picture of social and political organization found in the local sources—the *Kaba*, *Tambo*, and *Undang-Undang*—there is probably no stage of Minangkabau history at which we can point to a static "traditional" society of the type they describe. Moreover the complex balance between different sources of authority in the interior appears to have varied over time. By the later part of the eighteenth century, Minangkabau's gold had been exhausted and new products—crops such as coffee and gambier—were in demand.