

101783

**Kristin Pauka. Theater and martial arts in West Sumatra:
randai and silek of the Minangkabau. Athens: Ohio
University Center for International Studies, 1998 (Monograph
in international studies, Southeast Asia series, 103)**

CHAPTER 4

PERFORMERS OF RANDAI

THIS CHAPTER gives an overview over the composition of randai troupes and highlights the various roles and functions that members of a group share. It also includes information on the framework of performances such as the setting, duration, and performance occasions.¹

Composition of Randai Troupes

There are an estimated 250 active randai troupes in all of West Sumatra.² Each randai group is structured according to the functions and obligations of its members (Harun 1992, 78–79). Typically, the group is headed by the *pangkatuo randai*, an elder who no longer actively participates in the performance but who in the past had considerable performance experience. He possesses knowledge about many aspects of the art form; he knows the lines, the songs, the lyrics, the proper execution of the dances, and so forth, and he is consulted regularly concerning changes in or improve-

ment of the performances. The next two important positions are held by specialized teachers: one for the martial arts and dance, the *guru-tuo silek*; and one for the songs, the *guru-tuo dendang*. Like the pangkatuo randai, they teach the active members and normally do not participate in the performance themselves.

All active performers of the randai are generally called *anak randai* (children of randai). Among them several other positions are held by the more experienced performers. The leader of the circular dance (*galombang*) is the *pambalok galombang* (leader of the circle) who is often also referred to as *tukang goreh* (master of shouts) due to his ability to vocally cue and coordinate the dance. Most frequently a male senior silek practitioner,³ he guides the dancers, initiating his movements by yelling out syllables like *hep*, *ta*, and *ai* so that the other performers can synchronize with his movements. Often, two performers share the position of the *pambalok galombang*, since the frequent and forceful yelling is rather tiring, and often the *galombang* performers also act in the scenes and cannot rest between dances. Another responsibility of the *galombang* leader(s) is the choreography and arrangement of any silek fighting sequences within the scenes.

The main singer holds the title *pambalok gurindam* (leader of lyrics) or *tukang dendang* (master of songs) and is often female. Generally she or he is supported by a second singer, called *tukang jajak*; both alternate in singing the verses. The remaining members of the *anak randai* frequently function as a chorus and join in the refrain of each verse. The remaining leading position is held by the *pambalok curito*, the senior actor or actress. Although not necessarily acting the lead, he or she is nevertheless responsible for the proper delivery of the lines and the acting style.⁴ Overseeing the overall routine training is the *pelatih*, the coordinator and practice leader, who is responsible for arranging practice sessions, notifying the members of performance arrangements, and so on. This position is often held by one of the *pambalok*. In recent times some troupes also have a playwright, who is often one of the actors. New stories are constantly written and old ones are adapted and rewritten.

In addition to the actual troupe members, many groups have an official advisor and protector, in former times normally the *panghulu* (village chief)⁵ or a high-ranking *datuak* (head of a lineage). At present, this position is also often given to government officials like a mayor or governor (*kepala desa* or *camat*). In response to a questionnaire, all but 9 percent of groups stated that they receive support and advice from government officials in their village, district, or even on the provincial level.⁶ The most consistent support comes from the village head, and less frequently from higher offices like the district chief, provincial governor, or the local officers of the national Ministry for Education and Culture (DepDikBud; Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan) and the Ministry of Information (DepPen; Departemen Penerangan).

Another guardian besides the officials or clan elders is the *sipatuang siriah*, a shaman (*pawang*) and more intimate protector of the troupe. His responsibility is to ensure the safety of the members and the success of their performances. His duties include arranging pleasant weather, inducing benevolent behavior in the audience, and deflecting any black magic that might endanger the troupe.⁷ This is especially true for the more traditional troupes from the remote highlands. Troupes from the larger towns in the rantau regions (especially the capital Padang) and troupes sponsored by government offices generally dispense with the shaman, mainly because it would be considered backward. For troupes from the central darek regions, the *sipatuang siriah* is especially indispensable when a performance is scheduled in a faraway location, where the danger of black magic is believed to be greater than in the home community.

Groups today typically are highly flexible entities. Female members normally stop performing as soon as they are married and take on more responsibilities in their family. Male performers, due to the Minangkabau tradition of *merantau*, frequently leave to search for adventure, experience, or employment in a different region. Therefore, groups constantly search for and integrate new

members. Often, several important members of a group leave, so that the group disbands. Former members then seek other groups, where they replace those that have left for the rantau, or else they form a new group. All this accounts for a highly flexible art form and for vivid exchanges of story material, song melodies and lyrics, silek and dance techniques, and overall performance styles.

Performance Occasions and Duration

Performances today are normally commissioned to celebrate a wide variety of social occasions, which can be divided into four broad categories. The first type of performance occasion is closely linked to adat celebrations. In this context, randai is commissioned by an individual host to entertain guests during private festivities, the most common being weddings and inaugurations of village headmen or clan chiefs (panghulu or datuak). This type of occasion can also include farewell parties for young men leaving for the rantau or welcoming parties when they return. A second type of performance occasion is traditionally linked to larger, seasonal community events, such as planting and harvesting. Here the performances are sponsored by the village chief or by a group of wealthy members of the community. The third type is linked to religious festivals, as when randai performances are commissioned to celebrate Idul Fidri (indicating the end of the fasting month of Ramadan) and other Islamic holidays. The fourth type are typically sponsored by the government and are commissioned for national holidays, such as the Indonesian Independence Day, or other national events, such as National Education Day.

In all these cases, the performances are paid for by a private or community host, and the performance is free to the public. Tickets are sold only when troupes donate their performance for a fund-raising event, for instance to collect money for the building of a new communal surau or school building, or the improvement of roads or irrigation systems. Such fund-raising performances go

hand in hand with the Indonesian concept of *gotong-royong* (mutual assistance), in which all participants are expected to volunteer their time and labor. Randai performers in this context volunteer their time and entertainment, and the villagers are encouraged to buy tickets and otherwise contribute to the common project. This fund raising through ticket sales is a recent development in both West Sumatra and throughout Indonesia.

Another recent addition to the performance occasions has arisen in the form of randai festivals. Major festivals, with over 150 participating groups, are typically organized every three to five years, smaller ones, with under twenty participating troupes, are put on throughout West Sumatra almost every year.

Depending on the popularity of the individual troupes the frequency of their performances vary greatly. On average they perform once or twice a month, although during seasonal, religious, or national celebrations there tend to be more invitations to perform. Half the troupes surveyed perform once or twice a month. A smaller percentage (18%) perform more than twice a month. A few of these groups are so popular and famous throughout the region that they frequently tour and perform up to three times a week in many different locations (see graph 4 in appendix A).

The duration of performances is flexible, depending on the performance setting, the preference of the host, and other circumstances. About half the performances last between two and three hours, while some last four to five or more (see graph 5 in appendix A). On special occasions, such as the inauguration of a village chief, a performance can extend to a maximum of two or three nights, with each segment lasting over four hours. Popular troupes that frequently go on tour often spend several hours traveling to the site. The artists typically arrive two to three hours before the scheduled performance time, and are served food and drinks by the hosts and have a chance to rest before preparing for the show. After the performance they normally return home, unless they have been performing in a faraway village, in which case the host will be expected to provide sleeping quarters for the artists.

None of the performers is a professional and traditionally troupes are paid very little for their efforts.⁸ They receive a small donation to cover their transportation costs, in addition to food, coffee, and cigarettes. Money donations do not go to individual performers, but to the troupe, and are used to buy and maintain costumes and headdresses and, nowadays, to acquire better sound systems.