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Minangkabau Oral Literature in the Post Orde Baru Era

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Abstract

Minangkabau women, symbolized as limpapeh Minang (the central pillars of Minangkabau) have a privileged status and play significant roles in their community. However, the interpretation and the practice of the matrilineal adat has been very much influenced by changing political and social conditions. This paper contributes a discussion about how literature ha s been used and regarded as one historical source in search of local identity. This analyzes KCM, commonly used by Minangkabaus as a source of adat--a collective term for Minangkabau laws and customs. It is evident that there is a tendency among Minangkaba u people to return to their oral literature as one of the main sources. Political situation is one of the influential factors in making oral literature, such as KCM, once again, playing an active role in contemporary Minangkabau society after the implementation of autonomy laws. The dual function of Minangkabau oral literature within Minangkabau society, may contribute to the discussion of redefining of the concept of literature within global context.

Keyword : adat, Kaba, Cinduo, Mato, law, custom, contemporer., ,

Daftar Pustaka :

1. **T. Abdullah,, (1967).** Minangkabau 1900-1927: Preliminary Studies in Social Development . . New York. : Thesis, Cornell University,
2. **T. Abdullah, (1970).** Some Notes on the Kaba Tjindua Mato: An Example of Minangkabau traditional literature. . : Indonesia 9
3. **R. Amran,, (1981).** Sumatra Barat hingga Plakat Panjang.. Jakarta : Penerbit Sinar Harapan.
4. **G. Asnan, (2003).** Kamus Sejarah Minangkabau. . Padang : Pusat Pengkajian Islam Minangkabau
5. **E. Blackwood,, (2001).** Representing Women: The Politics of Minangkabau Adat Writings. The . : Journal of Asian Studies 60 (1)
6. **H.W. Bruford,, (1973).** Literary Criticism and Sociology. In: J.P. Strelka (ed). Literary Criticism and Sociology.. University Park and London : The Pennsylvania State University Press,.
7. **P.E. De Jong,, (1980).** Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan Socio-political Structure. . Den Haag : Martinus Nijhoff.

Minangkabau Oral Literature in the Post *Orde Baru* Era[1]

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ABSTRACT
Minangkabau women, symbolized as *limpapeh Minang* (the central pillars of Minangkabau) have a privileged status and play significant roles in their community. However, the interpretation and the practice of the matrilineal *adat* has been very much influenced by changing political and social conditions. This paper contributes a discussion about how literature has been used and regarded as one historical source in search of local identity. This analyzes *KCM,* commonly used by Minangkabaus as a source of *adat*--a collective term for Minangkabau laws and customs. It is evident that there is a tendency among Minangkabau people to return to their oral literature as one of the main sources. Political situation is one of the influential factors in making oral literature, such as *KCM*, once again, playing an active role in contemporary Minangkabau society after the implementation of autonomy laws. The dual function of Minangkabau oral literature within Minangkabau society, may contribute to the discussion of redefining of the concept of literature within global context.

Key words: adat, Kaba Cinduo Mato, law, custom, contemporer.

Introduction

Among anthropologists, Minangkabau is known as the world's largest matrilineal society. By virtue of the society's matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) Minangkabau women, symbolized as *limpapeh Minang* (the central pillars of Minangkabau) have a privileged status and play significant roles in their community. These roles include being bearers of descent, as owners of ancestral property, and as managers of their families. Minangkabau women also play a large part in determining the success or failure of decisions made by men (*mamak* 'a maternal uncle' and *penghulu* 'a clan leader'). These claims are supported by the research of other writers on Minangkabau society and culture, including Joanne C. Prindiville (1981), Lucy A. Whalley (1993), and Joke van Reenen (1996). The matrilineal *adat* seems to be part of Minangkabau identity. When I conducted research in Minangkabau of west Sumatera, during my discussions with my informants, I got the impression that large numbers of Minangkabau people, both male and female, have strong feelings of pride about being Minangkabau and being different from other ethnic groups, especially within the Indonesian nation, the country with the largest moslem population in the world.

However, the interpretation and the practice of the matrilineal *adat* has been very much influenced by changing political and social conditions. This was especially the case during the rule of *orde baru* (new order) lead by Suharto's (second Indonesian president, 1966-1998), when he established a centralized system for government programs. In the subsequent reform era (since 1998), once again the implementation of *adat* into Minangkabau daily life is being challenged by outside social developments. This time these resulting from the new Indonesian autonomy laws. The new autonomy laws, implemented in 2001, have given regional governments an opportunity to establish their own laws to manage their communities, as long as

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they do not conflict with national laws. While most Minangkabau people have agreed to use this opportunity to restore their *adat*, they have still debated precisely what kind of *adat* should be restored. Most of them look to oral literature as their reference point about *adat* laws in order to legitimize their opinions. One of the widely used sources of oral literature is *kaba cindua mato* (hereafter *KCM*). Using *KCM*, they reinterpret power and gender within Minangkabau society. Their new interpretation of *adat* may impact upon their local identity, as Blackwood argues that the terms of *adat* constitutes the foundational discourse for Minangkabau identity and ethnicity (Blackwood, 2001:126).

Using findings taken from my fieldwork in Minangkabau society in 2002 -2005, I want to contribute to a discussion about how literature has been used and regarded as one historical source in search of local identity. In this paper I will analyze *KCM*, commonly used by Minangkabaus as a source of *adat* (a collective term for Minangkabau laws and customs), as an example how Minangkabau oral literature, as a representative of local literature, can be part of world literature in the context of current local and global politics.

Minangkabau oral literature as a source in search of local identity

The regional regulation of west Sumatera province no. 9, section 5 article 2 and 3 , year 2000, states that a Minangkabau woman can be a member of *badan perwakilan anak Nagari* (*adat* house of representative assembly), *badan musyawarah adat dan syarak Nagari* (the *adat* advisory assembly), and the right to be appointed as w*ali Nagari* (the head of *nagari*, the smallest territorial unit). Despite the fact that the gender candidate for *wali Nagari* is not stated, it is still an issue for women candidates. While women's privileges in the private sphere are still highly respected, their roles or positions in the public sphere, especially regarding their leadership capabilities, are questioned. Both, those who support and oppose the issue of women's leadership, use *adat* laws to legitimize their opinions. One of their main sources about *adat* laws is *kaba cindua mato (KCM).*

KCM has a special position in Minangkabau traditional literature. According to Imran Manan, a Minangkabau scholars, *KCM* cannot be separated from Minangkabau social life because the story reflects the values of *adat* and Islam, which together formed the foundation of the Minangkabau people's way of life at that time (Manan, 1967:81). Moreover, P.E. de Josselin de Jong, a pioneer of Minangkabau studies, also used *KCM* (Van der Toorn's version) as the basis of his analysis of Minangkabau political organisation system, and matrilineal and patrilineal positions. De Jong argues that within Minangkabau political and social life, the matrilineal and patrilineal concepts are inter-related (De Jong, 1980:97-115). It is undoubtedly true that many Minangkabau people from different generations have been familiar with this version of *KCM*. For example, referring to Taufik Abdullah's accord, during 1924 t his *kaba* was frequently referred to by the Minangkabau intellectual migrants in Java for their campaign to establish a Minangkabau regional council (Abdullah, 1970:1).

KCM has many different versions. There are thirty three written version of *KCM*, which are kept in three libraries outside of west Sumatra. The Indonesian national library holds eight texts, the university of Leiden library has twenty four texts, and Koninklijk *instituut voor taal-, land- en* Volkenkunde has one text (Yusuf, 1994:72). This *kaba* was also edited into eleven editions, published both inside and outside Indonesia (Yusuf,1994:9). Despite the fact that most Minangkabau people were educated in this Minangkabau classic *kaba* (news or report), it seems that their knowledge about this *kaba* is partial. During my fieldwork, I found that very few Minangkabau people, especially amongst the younger generations, knew the basic plot of the 'original' story. Many of them are only familiar with the title.

The main reason why *KCM* is invoked both by parties, who support the idea of women's leadership, and those who do not is because it describes the life of' *bundo kanduang* ('the Womb Mother'). *Bundo kanduang* is a mythical female ruler of the Minangkabau. According to Edward Djamaris, within Minangkabau historiography, *tambo* (history, genealogy, is

historiography of traditional Minangkabau) and *kaba*, only in *kaba* is the name of *bundo kanduang* explicitly stated, while in *tambo* her name is rarely mentioned. Moreover, in *tambo* the central figures are *datuk katamagungan* and *datuk papatih nan sabatang*. It is believed that they codified Minangkabau laws (Djamaris, 1991:65). *KCM* is also known among Minangkabau people as *carito bundo kanduang jo cindua mato* (the story of *bundo kanduang* and *cindua mato*). Minangkabau people use the figure of *bundo kanduang* in order to answer some questions such as 'who holds the power within Minangkabau society?' and 'is it possible for a woman to be a leader in Minangkabau *adat* society?". These questions revolve around the issue of whether Minangkabau society is *matriarchaat*, an identity that is proudly carried by most Minangkabau people, both female and male.

The legend of *bundo kanduang* and *kaba cindua mato* have attracted some researchers who are interested in analyzing gender politics within Minangkabau society. Taufik Abdullah's article 'some notes on the *kaba tjindua mato*: an example of Minangkabau traditional literature', published more than 30 years ago, is still one of the classic works on gender politics in Minangkabau society. Scholars of Minangkabau studies continue to refer to it as an authoritative work on power and authority within the traditional Minangkabau political system. Regarding *bundo kanduang*'s authority Taufik Abudllah argues that:

> " …but inspite of her function as a source of wisdom, Bundo Kanduang could not make any decisions. She was neither the authority on adat, which was under the jurisdiction of the Rajo Adat and the Bendahara, nor the expert on sarak, whic h was under the Raja Ibadat and the Tuan Kadhi. *Bundo Kanduang* was powerless because she had no official position in the hierarchy of the Minangkabau political system (Abdullah,1970:16).

The party, who disagrees with women's leadership, usually quoted Ta ufik Abdullah's opinion, based on his analysis of *KCM*, as the foundation of their argument. Based on their interpretation of *KCM*, *bundo kanduang* was only a ceremonial leader without authority. They favour an interpretation in which *bundo kanduang* functioned only as an adviser to the king while true authority remained in the hands of men. Because of that, they argue that it is not appropriate for a woman to be a leader of her community.

Using their interpretation on *KCM* as their reference, the party, who challenge women's leadership in public sphere, also argue that identity of Minangkabau is not *matriarchal*, in which women hold the power, but is rather a *matrilineal* society, in which power is still in the hands of men despite the fact that women get some privileges.

The other party, on the other hand, has a different opinion. The party which supports women's involvement in authority affairs also use *KCM* as the foundation of their argument but they interpret the text differently. In their opinion *KCM* is an evidence that a woman has leadership capability, as shown by the figure of *bundo kanduang*. According to this party's interpretation, *KCM* shows that in the past within Minangkabau society it was acceptable for a woman to be a ruler. Following this interpretation, this party then argue that Minangkabau *adat* is *matriarchaat (*matriarchy*)*, a term used by Dutch colonial officials in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to describe the Minangkabau *adat* (custom and tradition) and that as a society it is matriarchal. Because of that, this party used the term *matriarchaat*, a term used by Dutch colonial officials in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to describe the Minangkabau *adat* (custom and tradition), indicating women's legitimacy i n matters of power. Although this concept has been rejected by most anthropologists within Minangkabau studies, on the grounds that authority is still in the hands of men (brothers, mother's brothers, and *penghulu* the head of clan), during my fieldwork I found that those who supported this idea persistently used this term.

Bundo kanduang is also claimed as an authoritative ruler is also raised by Ranny Emilia, a Minangkabau scholar. According to Emilia, considering the existence of *bundo kanduang* as

the first legitimated queen of Pagaruyuang [3], it can be argued that the first Minangkabau political organisation was dominated by women's influence and power (Emilia, 1996:48). My own reading of *KCM* concurs with Emilia. Contrary to Taufik Abdullah's interpretat ion that *bundo kanduang* is powerless, I found that *bundo kanduang***,** is indeed, possessed of full authority, based upon broad, acknowledged responsibilities and rights as the ruler of Pagaruyuang (Elfira, 2004).

There is no doubt that interpretation of the *KCM* of Minangkabau matrilineality, such as is espoused by Ranny Emilia, were not uncommon interpretation prior to the reform era in Indonesia. Anthony H. Jhons's interpretaion is one example (Jhons, 1958). However, seemingly, it was put aside thereafter, especially under the new order government, which intentionally marginalized the position of women in the public sphere. In post new order era, especially after the implementations of new Indonesian autonomy laws, it seems that a broader range of interpretations is once again possible. This kind of interpretation is particularly voiced in the seminars or events, questioning the lack of women's involvement in the public domain and reevaluating Minangkabau *adat* values, especially in relation to women's lea dership roles in public life. Examples are provided by the seminar 'discussion on women's roles in Minangkabau customary laws' organized by the *bundo kanduang* organization for the wives of senior officials from every regency of the west Sumatra province on 19 October 2002, and the three days workshop, the Intensification of Minangkabau customary laws, organized by the regional government for elementary and junior high school teachers around west Sumatera from 21 until 23 October 2002. It is worth noting, t hen, how interpretations of *KCM* have been shaped by political factors, i.e. return to question of ethnic identity.

The important point to be taken from these debates is that there is a tendency to use literature, in this case Minangkabau oral literature, as an alternative historical source. It is true that using Minangkabau oral traditions, in this case oral literature, as a source to write Minangkabau history is not a new phenomena. It is evident from the closing ceremony of '*seminar sejarah dan kebudayaan Minangkabau* (conferences of Minangkabau history and culture)', held in Batusangkar 1-7 August 1970 and attended by prominent Minangkabau scholars and *adat* leaders at that time, in which *tambo* and the elders' narratives (*kitab-kitab tambo dan tutur paparan orang-orang tua*) were drawn up as some of the relevant historical sources (Simulie, 2002:xxi). The seminar did not directly mention oral literature as an historical source. But given that *tambo*, in practice, is usually delivered through *kaba* the seminar can be seen to have indirectly legitimized the use of oral literature as an historical source.

However, in the new order era it seems that scholars, especially historians, were reluctant to use it. For example, Rusli Amran, a Minangkabau scholar, writes: '*bahan-bahan yang didapat dari penuturan belaka atau kaba-kaba, tidak boleh dianggap sejarah* (sources gathered from the elders' narratives or *kaba* cannot be considered history)' (Amran, 1984:34).

In post new order era, especially after the imple mentation of new Indonesian autonomy laws, it seems that these scholars reluctant attitude towards the use of oral literature as one of historical sources in reconstructing Minangkabau history has softened. Some Minangkabau historians have re-looked, certainly with careful approach, to oral traditions, including oral literature, as significant sources for better understanding/re-constructing Minangkabau history. As an example of this new approach towards oral traditions can be seen from collaborative research activity , funded by west Sumateran government, between centre of humanities of the university of Andalas and museum Adtyawarman of west Sumatran province. This research, conducted by some Minangkabau historians, explores a possibility of the relat ion of the figure of *bundo kanduang*, exposed in *KCM* oral literature, with the history of Minangkabau. Conducting

[3] Pagaruyung was the central government administration of Minangkabau rulers. It was established in 1343 by Aditiawarman, who was a descendant of Majapahit royal kingdom (see Navis, 1984:15).

this research may confirm their assumptions about the existence of this mythical figure and her strong relationship with Pagaruyuang kingdom.

Using oral traditions as historical sources is not a new phenomena within historical science. Some Indian scholars, who involved in subaltern studies group, have popularized it, as pointed out by Edward Said: "…one important historiographical prerogative of the subaltern Studies group is to rewrite the history of colonial India from the distinct and separate point of view of the masses, using unconventional or neglected sources in popular memory, oral discourse, previously unexamined colonial administrativ e documents" (Said, 1988:vi). In addition, Jacqueline Aquino Siapno, a Southeast Asianist, who raises the issue of gender and the problem of power in history and historiography, also uses oral traditions, in this case some Acehnese oral and written lite rature, as some of her analysis sources (Siapno, 2002).

In contemporary Minangkabau society after the implementation of Indonesian new autonomy laws, it seems that the awareness of the importance of oral literature as an alternative historical source in se arch of local identity is not only own by the historians and practised in academic circle, but also common people, in general. As an example can be seen from the case of a society, located in an area of *air haji* which is part of *Pasisir selatan* of west Sumatra province. This society has just elected their new *datuk* (head of clan). In order to have a further understanding of their culture or local *adat*, and to rewrite the history of their society, these people, lead by their new *datuk*, not only use Dutch colonial administrative documents, but also oral traditions, such as elders' narratives, folklore, myths, and legends. Their seriousness in using oral literature as one important sources for writing their society history and for gaining information and further understanding on their local *adat* can be seen from the fact that the new *datuk* hired a Minangkabau scholar of literature to collect and analyse the society's oral stories. In addition, in order to entertain his people, the new *datuk* also organised a performance, conducted by local *kaba* tellers, in which the *kaba* tellers narrated to the audiences their local oral stories. It can be said then that in this society oral literature has 'dual function' providing both historical source and entertainment.

The way Minangkabau people in general, and this society in particular, in appreciating and using oral literature may raise a question regarding a redefinition of literature concept. Thomas Hohle (1966) says:"…a work of literature, as an aesthetic phenom enom, is an autonomous entity and stands, in respect of its aesthetic nature, in no connection with social reality…" (Bufford, 1973:7). Moreover, Walter H. Bruford argues that 'he (E.M. Foster) too believes that pure poetry is to be appreciated and judged entirely from within, by an effort of the imagination' (Bufford, 1973:8). These two arguments raise two factors in related to literature,: outside social reality and imaginative. But, the way current Minangkabau society appreciate their oral literature, in this case *KCM*, touches the complexity of the relationship between literature and real or actual experience. In short, in case of Minangkabau oral literature , it seems that imaginative and facts are separated only by a blur line. This paper is only an introduction to this issue, a further analysis need to be taken.

Conclusion

This paper has raised some main points. Firstly, it is evident that there is a tendency among Minangkabau people to return to their oral literature as one of the main sources, u sed in exploring and asserting local identity, involving, among other factors, a redefinition of gender and power in the society. The *kaba cinduo mato* is an important example of this trend, sparked to a large degree by the passing of the Indonesian new au tonomy laws. It can be further argued that Minangkabau oral literature is thus not only a collection of stories, but also an alternative historical source in reconstituting Minangkabau identity. The second related point is that political situation one of influential factors in making oral literature, such as *KCM*, once again, playing an active role in contemporary Minangkabau society after the implementation of autonomy laws, which give every ethnic group within Indonesian state 'more room' to re -establish their own *adat*

or culture. The last point is that the dual function of Minangkabau oral literature within Minangkabau society, may contribute to the discussion of redefining of the concept of literature within global context.

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