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MARRIAGE AND FAMILY AMONG
THE MINANG KABAU OF WEST SUMATRA, INDONESIA
Endonezya Bati Sumatra Adasındaki
Minankabu Kabilesinde Evlilik ve Aile
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Introduction

This exploratory study hopes to examine how marriage and the family have been impacted by modern developments in West Sumatra among the Minangkabau who constitute the largest matrilineal group or community in the world. The Minangkabau are, in fact, famous for exhibiting three interesting characteristics or behavior associated with: their attachment to Islam (both traditional and especially reformist/modernist); the resilience of their matrilineal culture (in which their women enjoy far much higher social status than they do in many other Muslim and non-Muslim societies); and their tendency to migrate (merantau) in search of economic opportunities both within and outside the country. Within this context, Minangkabau adat/customary norms as well as Islamic influences have affected marriage behavior and family institution despite the sustained impact of modernization which has taken its toll and has left its imprint on the changing patterns of courtship, among other things.

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Around the globe married partnerships and the family institution have been undergoing gradual erosion due to the impact of modernity. As a result, for instance, no longer can one take for granted that couples will remain married for life or that their families will continue to exercise the type of influence that they did in the past. While the extended family has, in fact, disappeared in the West it has survived but is under tremendous pressure/strain especially in major urban centers of many non-Western societies around the world.

Given that the Minangkabau have entered the modern economy like other groups in Indonesia this means that their institutions have felt the severe strains of modernity which tends to (as it is asserted) erode traditional values of family and the community. From the mid-1990s onwards (although the process began earlier) when I started visiting West Sumatra and Indonesia, for instance, the system of courtship had already evolved and adapted to these pressures. Before the late decades of the twentieth century, to give just one specific instance, it was the parents who selected a partner for their son or daughter for marriage. Increasingly, however, this has changed: in this age of over-dramatized soap operas of Indonesian television, Hollywood and Bollywood movies and, of course, the ubiquitous cell phone to call or text-message your partner, romantic pursuit of one's future partner (even among those who display identifiable visible symbols of Islam such as the women's head-cover) has, to a large extent, replaced arranged relationships by parents or elders especially in the cities. This is not necessarily to suggest that these influences causally impact local romantic courtship practices but simply to indicate that they reinforce such practices.

Modernization and its Impact on Marriage

The post World War II period has witnessed a change in social and economic life in many parts of the world. These changes, a product of modernization, are hypothesized to have a significant impact on patterns of
marriage and family life. Earlier scholars such as William Goode (1963) developed theories of the outcome of industrialization along with modernization on marital and family relationships.

Building arguments based on this presumed causal link between the modernization process (highly developed in the West) and marriage and divorce patterns which are said to be functionally interrelated, a number of scholars such as Cherlin (2004) have shown that marriage in the industrial or post-industrial West has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization, that is, a process of weakening of the social norms that define people's behavior in a social institution. Factors that have contributed to this include: changing division of labor in the home as a function of both men and, equally so, women participating in the paid workforce; increase in childbearing outside marriage; a steep rise in divorce rates to unprecedented levels; the growth of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage; the dramatic increase in the proportions of men and women who never marry and who do not opt for cohabitation; and the same-sex marriage that has emerged in the Western countries and particularly in the US as a hot political issue since the 1990s right into the twenty-first century [Cherlin 2004: 849]. Thus the meaning of marriage in the West has changed since the late decades of the twentieth century though in some instances for the better as the roles of wives and husbands have become more flexible and even more open to negotiation [Cherlin 2004: 852]. Marriage has become more individualized with partners seeking self fulfillment rather than satisfaction through building a family. It is argued that the process of industrialization, urbanization and increasing individual freedom of the modern secular age have impacted the family in general and marital stability in particular [Cherlin 2004].

The above observations notwithstanding, other scholars note that marriage as an institution continues to be of significance for promotion of well being of the individual based on its quality. For instance, married persons are relatively less likely to commit crime, suicide or other anti-social behavior than unmarried ones. While the practical importance of marriage
has declined in the West (given the options of cohabitation, autonomous partnerships that do not involve cohabitation and other arrangements) its symbolic importance continues to be high and explains why we have the phenomenon of serial monogamy (individuals who are through their second or even third marriages).

By way of comparison, in Latin America (a region for long in the hegemonic orbit of the West and under its cultural domination) there has been a persistence of marriage which is almost universal despite the socio-economic changes and political instabilities associated with the region. Marriage is considered to be central to social life as families (through household survival strategies or safety net networks and organization of alliances) serve as a significant cultural institution for countering the ups and downs of the economy [Fussell and Palloni 2004].

**The Minangkabau Society: Islam, rantau (migration) and matrilineal system**

The Minangkabau are one of the numerous ethnic groups in Indonesia, a country made up of 27 provinces and the most populous Muslim country with the fourth largest population in the world (240-250 million). The Minangkabau inhabit a homeland (the province of West Sumatra consisting of probably over 500 villages and a number of urban centers scattered all over) and a diaspora in the Malay/Indonesian world. Three most important characteristics of these people are: their strong attachment to Islam (well supported and thrives wherever the Minangkabau are found); the practice of merantau (out-migration within and outside the country which has tended to reduce pressures on land within the province); and a matrilineal family system which is quite unique in the Muslim and non-Muslim world.
First, the Minangkabau matrilineal family system has been described as follows:

"Duolocal because men still stay very attached to their mother’s matrilineally extended family and household, often returning during daytime[if they live nearby] for various activities; uxoriloc because today men are increasingly becoming attached, both residentially and in terms of activities and commitment, to their wives’ matrilineal households; matrilocal because women do not need to change homes - an adult woman can continue living in the home of her mother, the home where she grew up; and neolocal for those women and men who live their natal village to go to nearby or very distant urban area, sometimes obtaining a new house of their own in this new place."

As has been noted by scholars and my own observations during my visits to West Sumatra on four different occasions in 1996, 2000, 2007 and again in 2012, this matriliney (which has survived both the coming of Islam and the Dutch colonial experience) is a matter of identification and pride among the Minangkabau. It has survived alongside the custom of merantau (migration) by which young men move to another village, town, province or even another country either for short or long periods of time to establish themselves financially. Increasingly, however, women are also now participating in merantau in pursuit of their higher education, seeking employment in one of the major urban centers or simply joining a spouse in the area of migration whether this be in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, the Arab Emirates, Holland or the United States of America. Previously women would simply stay behind in their matrilineal home and take care of the farming of the matrilineal lands and also perhaps do some other work at home while waiting for the return of the husband.

The movement of people to cities, particularly coastal ones, have been in response to trading and other wage employment opportunities. This process

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1 Turner, 1982: 129-130.
was accelerated by the economic developments in the post-independence period when migration became the norm. Similarly, by the late decades of the twentieth century out-migration from West Sumatra increased dramatically. The Minangkabau diaspora (consisting of families and their children and grandchildren) had become a major feature of Indonesia’s larger towns and cities of Indonesia where the Minangkabau are known to excel in petty trade, restaurant business (rumah makan Padang) and other opportunities to improve their standards of living [Chadwick 1991: 48-49]. Some Minangkabau businessmen have even done as well as the Chinese in their business ventures.

The Minangkabau have also been equally noted for their attachment to Islam. Clifford Geertz’s observations are particularly apropos here: “Mosque and Market have been a natural pair over much of the Islamic world, paving one another’s way in the spread of a civilization interested equally in this world and the next.” As much as they seek to excel in their worldly affairs, the Minangkabau also attempt to observe as best as they can the religious teachings of Islam and do so with relatively far more regularity than do other Indonesians such as those, say, in Java. In fact, Islamic modernism attracted its staunchest supporters in this region that has had quite a history of Islamic involvement. For instance, growing trade and large scale commercial revival that West Sumatra witnessed in the transition period from being a one-time producer of gold for external trade to becoming an important supplier of export commodities such as coffee to Europe, contributed to the Islamic revival (Padri) movement of 1784-1830. This movement was initiated by Minangkabau pilgrims (who had witnessed the rule of the “Wahhabi” puritans in Makka), with the objective of promoting Islam in West Sumatra and at the same time safeguard trade by protecting traders and also by establishing the rule of one law over a large area.

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3 Geertz, 1968: 68.
While the Padri movement may have had some Wahhabi overtones (though its leaders moderated their views with time), there is, however, a less legalistic understanding of Islam among the Minangkabau given that Islam was spread in Indonesia by traders many of whom were Sufis. This means that Minangkabau Islam has been of the reformist kind indicating the influence of the Arab Muslim reformers such as Muhammad Abduh of Egypt. The emphasis on modernist jihād-driven Islam has allowed local Muslims to support modern education and to be the pioneers of Muslim organizations. It has also provided them with the platform to put forth modernist interpretations of Islam that simultaneously permit for accommodation of Minangkabau adat even as they try to bring some parts of it closer to Islam. Nevertheless, these Muslim reformers have not advocated doing away with Minangkabau matrilineal structure, for instance, the matrilineal communal/lineage ownership of rice land and fruit trees (the basis of the village system), of ancestral movable property, and of houses, with only usufruct held by an individual woman (which can be used by a married couple as long as the wife is alive).4

It is clear therefore that the Minangkabau have played a major role in the modernization of Indonesia. They were its earliest prolific writers of the colonial era producing novels in the 1920s and taking up discussions on “progress” in the 1930s in the major urban center of Padang.5 Not surprisingly, therefore, Islamic reformism or modernism attracted its staunchest supporters in this region which witnessed a diffusion of education embracing both traditional Islamic education and modern subjects. That was not all; the Minangkabau participated in articulating the ideology of Indonesian independence and produced such major political leaders as the first Vice-President of the country Mohammad Hatta. Evers 1975] The educated Minangkabau have pursued the out-migration (rantau) to the megacity (Jakarta) and other urban centers where they have left an

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indelible mark. They have clearly sought to get their share of the wealth of this world. This is evidenced by individual accumulation of wealth (harta pencarian in contrast to matrilineal communal resources known as harta pusaka) and high rates of urbanization that encourage young men to venture beyond their immediate home in search of economic opportunities to improve their living conditions.

**Modernization theory and its Application to Minangkabau society**

Modernization theory continues to underpin much social research on non-Western societies despite the challenges to its legitimacy and its ability to predict family change in all societies that have been impacted by modernization forces. As some scholars have pointed out, the process of social change is less linear and monolithic than it is made out to be and there is, in fact, no neat or clear set path of transition from traditional to modern sets of values. The two could co-exist as they, in fact, do. Delayed marriages for men and especially women of the urban centers are one of the products of modern education and pursuit of career goals. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there has been a transition from family to individual orientation that tends to lead to putting of marriages until a later age. As noted by Malhotra and Tsui (1997) there is a coexistence of the traditional and modern ideas in many Asian societies.

The Minangkabau have experienced emphasis on choice instead of the family/kin initiated marriages of the past. This, however, has not translated into a demonstrated preference for nuclear as opposed to extended family. For instance, even in cases where couples are in Marantau (migrants) in Padang they will attract relatives of the wife (such as mothers, sisters and other relatives etc) from the villages to come and stay or live with them continuously for short or long periods of time. This confirms the preference for matrilocal living arrangements, that is, the matrilineal principle of residence with the wife's family. While modernization is supposed to promote economic and social independence of women, nevertheless, this
assertion has to be weighed against the relatively favorable position within the family and society that Minangkabau women enjoy and have traditionally enjoyed even prior to the modern period. The Minangkabau traditional family forms (especially in matters of marriage) reveal remarkable resilience that can be easily glossed over when applying analytical categories expressed through modernization theory and family involvement in which traditional and modern forces have intermingled.6

It has been noted that divorce (bacari) was quite common among the Minangkabau. To just give one example, in 1962 statistics for one West Sumatra sub-district involving 11 villages showed divorce rates ranging from 2 percent to 44 percent per year [Nancy 139] Similarly, in the 1970s in some regions of Indonesia and Malaysia nearly 40 percent of men and women who were interviewed reported that a previous marriage had concluded with a divorce.7

The incidence of high divorce rates can be explained as indicating, among other things, the choice that young women have of being able to leave their husbands knowing that their matrilineally extended family household will take care of them. In other words, divorce tolerance was related both to the availability of socio-economic support from the wife’s kins after the break up of marriage and to the lack of social stigma associated with divorce as is the case in some societies. Interestingly enough, moreover, in cases of separation [bacari] it is the man who has to temporarily leave the household of his wife’s matrilineal extended family (and this indicates his vulnerability) pending the results of reconciliation efforts. If the man as an urang sumando (“unmarried male”) also happens to be a wife beater the wife’s kinsmen will most likely evict him from the house. In case of death or divorce any property a man has accumulated after marriage must be left to his wife and her children though (in the case of divorce) sometimes some

6 Malhotra and Tsui, 1996: 476-490.
7 Hirschman, 2003 215; Anju, 436.
formulae may be suggested or may be worked out through the courts by which this may be done. In any case, marriage is a financial asset to a girl’s parents and at the same time a loss for a boy’s parents. All this indicates the high status of women not only in West Sumatra among the Minangkabau but also generally among southeast Asian societies. In fact, scholars have noted that Minangkabau marriages are about the “exchange of men,” as men are symbolically transferred to the wife’s lineage.

Within the next couple of decades, contrary to what you expect following the modernization theory, a different picture began to emerge with respect to divorce rates in Indonesia and Malaysia. As noted by Hirschman10: “With exposure to modern education, urbanization, changed laws and social mores, and new expectations about the role of marriage, divorce rates in these societies have plummeted and are now below those in most Western countries.” The question, then, has to be asked as to what may have contributed to low divorce rates?

To begin with, the impact of the economic boom (and with it modernization) that these countries experienced in the 1980s and the 1990s created a growing proportion of women with post-elementary and post-high school education. This resulted in more women participating in the modern labor force. The combined effect of women achieving higher educational attainment plus entering the labor force in increasing numbers with marriage taking place at a later age decreased the likelihood of marital disruption. [Hirschman 2003: 216] In other words, increasing self-selection of spouses is considered to be a contributing factor in the sharp declines in the divorce rates. The age of marriage has also risen but only more so for the well educated. To provide some relevant statistics, in 1991 the divorce rates

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in Indonesia had fallen from their all time high of 40 percent in the 1960s/70s to 23 percent for rural areas and 19 percent for urban areas.\footnote{Malhotra, 1997: 436.}

It is important to mention in this context that since the 1980s scholars have paid more attention to the expression of romantic love in non-Western societies. Many, however, due to ethnocentric bias see romantic love as mainly the province of the West or, due to the functionalist bias, as being shaped by socio-economic processes, including industrialization, modernization, urbanization, and Westernization.\footnote{De Munck, 1996: 698-716.}

The idea of romantic attachment among the Minangkabau is not something new or novel that has its origins in the 1980s or 1990s at the height of Indonesia’s economic prosperity before the onset of the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s. Rather, the Minangkabau ideal of romantic love has its origins in the past and is captured both in song and dance and more so in the literature (short stories and novels) produced as early as the first few decades of the 20th century. There is, in fact, a legendary folktale among the Minangkabau that goes further back in time regarding the consequences of a loveless marriage between a young beautiful woman named Siti Nurbaya who, awaiting the return of her beloved who had gone to Java, is forced to marry an older wealthy businessman by the name of Datuak Maringgih as payment for her father’s debt to this hated man. This famous story, unfortunately, has a tragic twist to it first with the girl ending up dead poisoned by a husband whom she could never love, followed by her scheming beloved young man who had returned home disguised as a foreign soldier ready to fight for her, also being killed along with the hated man in their ensuing struggles. There is a mountain in Padang which attracts tourists from near and afar who climb up to its summit to view the monuments recounting this tragic story.
Leaving this legend aside, the reality of the lived situation, however, was that older relatives were more often than not responsible for mate choice undertaken though within the context of an inclusivist decision making process (mupakaik) involving consultation, consensus and, ultimately, the consent of the girl.\textsuperscript{13} This selection process was taken quite seriously in the past as marriage fostered an alliance between matrilineal kin groups. Needless to say, what we have described was the norm in the past though a number of modifications have taken place due to societal transformations. The most important of these has been the dramatic expansion in post-elementary education for both male and female in the decades following Indonesia’s attaining of independence in the mid-1940s. What facilitated this process was again the merantau (migration) culture of the Minangkabau that made it easier for boys to leave villages for towns to pursue their high school education. Similarly, for girls especially those who pursued post-elementary education they had necessarily to put off marriage and continue with their education to high school and even beyond to university level. The changing timing for marriage (postponed for the sake of education or even work experience) and the concomitant choice selection for spouse that came with it instead of kin-arranged marriage have been among the most visible signs of the impact of modern education.\textsuperscript{14} The expansion in high school and college education has created opportunities for romantic attachments between young people to develop. The ideal of romantic love that was previously relegated to the domain of songs and short stories and novels in the early part of the twentieth century had now become a full-fledged reality.

To digress here slightly, I am not aware of any comprehensive or systematic study on the impact, if any, direct or indirect, of the Hollywood or Bollywood movies, not to mention the even more popular Indonesian locally produced television soap operas, on the romantic life of Indonesians.

\textsuperscript{13} Turner, 1982: 131.
\textsuperscript{14} Turner, 1982: 134; Kato, 1981.
Yet this impact is discernible and is part of the growing influence of internal and external forces of modernity. Quite apart from the carefully packaged attractive TV and radio programs, are the ubiquitous DVD cassettes and especially audio cassettes that are played in the homes, the buses, cafes, and in many other settings. The growth of the audio-visual media has fostered the establishment of a hybrid culture (with a taste for romantic love songs) that has reinforced a certain cultural consumer consciousness so much in evidence in the major cities.

In terms of demographic distribution, Indonesian groups based in urban centers are more likely to privilege romantic love as a criterion for selection of a spouse. While this trend began first among the relatively educated and elite populations of the urban centers as far back as the 1960s this fashion has trickled down among many other segments of the population both in towns and to a certain extent eventually even in the villages. One can generalize by saying that today many young people choose their own spouses and the expectation to do so is much more widespread especially among those still in school.

The changes that we have described above regarding mate selection as well as the role that young couple will play in society are still embedded in webs of kinship that still characterize marriage in Minangkabau society. The marriage relationship fosters a continuing bond between lineage groups especially among those who live closer to their home area. In other words, though the selection of marriage partners is increasingly a matter of individual choice, the stability and sustainability of marriage still depends, above all, on negotiating kinship ties.

Massive levels of migration within West Sumatra and out-migration to other areas of the country and beyond have not meant that the Minangkabau have lost links with their home or homeland. They continue to maintain ties with their extended/lineage families and communities. The Minangkabau who live in Java and other parts of Indonesia, of course, may strike up
romance that end in marriage with non-Minangkabau partners. In such cases the couple will frame their relationship in personal terms and in terms of the local culture or local kinship structure of the area of rantau/migration.

It should come as no surprise that diaspora Minangkabau who live and work outside of West Sumatra find mates from members of other ethnic groups. That is to be expected as young people, particularly those living in what has been noted to be the more fluid and urbanized environment of Indonesia, are likely to meet their mates at the place of work or at school or at some public or private function. Ideally, of course, the parents hope that their son or daughter will marry someone from West Sumatra and preferably from certain lineages. Increasingly, however, inter-ethnic marriages have become a reality of the urban centers which encourage mixing of young people as a by-product particularly of pursuing higher education. Not all romantic involvements, however, progress to marriage; couples may break up and move on to newer romantic conquest or partnership. In this instance, it is important to point out that Indonesian television and film industry (both foreign and local) represent and reinforce a growing Indonesian fascination with the model of romantic love.

Conclusion

We have seen that in the West personal choice has not meant marital continuity and divorce is and has been far more common whereas in southeast Asia among the Minangkabau personal choice combined with pursuit of higher education has strengthened marital stability especially in the last couple of decades. Moreover, marriage in the West has very little to do with kinship matters which are important for success of marriages in other non-Western societies where modernity and tradition intermingle. Furthermore, slightly late marriages have been accompanied by higher educational levels and improvements in social welfare. Even more tellingly, modernization has not seriously undermined the family and the institution of marriage and the religion of Islam that the Minangkabau continue to
practice. On the contrary, increasing number of women are now donning the head cover and I see more and more with each visit to Indonesia. Even the Tsunami and other natural disasters that have plagued this region and have taken the lives of a couple of hundred thousand people on the island of Sumatra (with Aceh on the extreme west of the island being at the epi-center of the tragic Tsunami) have led many people to become either more observant of Islam (and even donning the head cover among some women) or at least to be more conscious of their faith.

References


