

MINANGKABAU WOMEN AND CHANGE

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Abstract

This article discusses the changes faced by Minangkabau women. Firstly, the paper traces Minang women's position within the traditional Minangkabau adat. Next the article deals with changes faced by women in the colonial and post-colonial periods and their role in embracing progress through the examination of their contribution in education and the mass-media (newspapers). Finally, the article concludes with the challenges faced by the Minangkabau today.

Keywords: matrilineal society, women's role in education, women's role in the mass-media, culture change, adaptation to change

Introduction

When I was first asked to talk about Minangkabau women, I felt self-conscious partly because I always take my culture for granted. I was unaware of the peculiarity of the Minangkabau matrilineal system despite the fact that I was brought up in *rantau*, which is surrounded by a patrilineal society.

It reminds me of the surprising reaction of my academic advisor when he once suggested that I take a women's studies course, and my answer was that I was more interested in taking, if any, a men's studies course. As a Minangkabau woman, I thought of men as more insecure, a more challenging subject to study. Now I realize that men's security (or insecurity) is closely related to and determined by Minangkabau perceptions of women. In other words, understanding Minangkabau men is only possible through understanding women's position in Minangkabau culture, or *adat*.

Women in Traditional Minangkabau *adat*

The Minang, is the way Minangkabau people call themselves and they are very concerned with their culture, or *adat*. They used to refer to themselves proudly as the people of the *adat*. As *adat*-conscious people they take it as a serious insult if they are accused of having no *adat* (Anwar, 1999: 55). The word *adat* refers to custom or tradition, but for our purpose it means culture in the broadest terms. Therefore, throughout this paper I will use the terms *adat* and culture interchangeably.

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The Minang believe that the founders of Minangkabau culture established their *adat* based on their perceptions of nature or the world (*alam*). Most *adat* teachings make use of *adat* maxims containing aphorisms and metaphors from nature. The Minang consider themselves a part of nature itself, as a Minangkabau proverb says “*Alam Takambang Jadi Guru*” (This expanding world is our teacher). They seek answers to their questions from nature or *alam* and not from unknowable things (Anwar, 1999:57). When explaining about the genesis of the Minang, for instance, they would boast that they are descendants of Alexander the Great and not of mysterious or mythical figures such as gods or goddesses. Moreover, the Minang describe their country as *Alam Minangkabau* (Minangkabau world).

The Minangkabau world consists of *darek* and *rantau*. *Darek* is the original settlement in the inner highland. It covers three *luhaks* (district) or “*Luhak nan Tigo*” (The Three Luhak): Luhak Tanah Datar, Luhak Agam, and Luhak Lima Puluh Koto. *Darek* (The Three Luhak) is considered the heartland of Minangkabau culture, whereas *rantau* is the outer border, frontiers, and new settlement for the Minang.

In community life the Minang follow two different *adat* laws (moieties): Koto Piliang and Bodi Chaniago. Koto Piliang system or *lareh* is more class-conscious and therefore emphasizes social stratification, while Bodi Chaniago is more democratic and egalitarian. The Minang consider both systems of equal importance and believe they form the core of their *adat* (Anwar, 1989:58).

The idea of learning from nature may also explain why the Minang people’s ancestors decided to observe matriliney. It was only natural that the bloodline and kinship systems follow the female line. Nature taught them that it is a mother who bears children and takes care of them, a mother who would do anything to secure and protect her offspring. Thus for the existence and continuation of a clan, the role of women is indispensable.

Accordingly, in the Minangkabau matrilineal system women secure a very high and respectful position. This respect and appreciation for women is reflected in the Minangkabau traditional concept of the ideal woman, which was represented by the central, ideal, and mythical figure of Bundo Kanduang, the True Mother.

Bundo Kanduang, is described in *Kaba*, the Minangkabau oral literature, as a queen who stood by herself, was created together with the creation of this universe, and was the counterpart to the King of *Ruhun* (Turkey), the King of China, and the King of the Ocean (Abdullah, 1974: 9) She is portrayed as an elegant, wise, and enigmatic woman, and is believed to be the source of knowledge, wisdom, and truth. Bundo Kanduang, the legendary queen mother, successfully educated her son who later became the Great King of Minangkabau. Furthermore, Bundo Kanduang’s position in society is described as:

Bundo Kanduang,
limpapeh rumah gadang,
umbun puro, pagangan kunci,

hiduik tampek banasa,
mati tampek baniek.

(Bundo Kanduang,
the ornament and joy of the house,
the holder of the ancestral treasure,
while she is alive, the one to pay respect to,
when she died, the place to pray)

Despite all privileges and honors, Bundo Kanduang was never a formal decision-maker. Decisions were made by the Great King or the King of the World (Raja Alam Minangkabau). In ruling his kingdom, the Great King was assisted by two other kings: the King of *Adat* (Rajo *Adat*) of Buo, who took care of *adat* matters, and the King of Religion (Rajo Ibadat) of Sumpur, who dealt with religious affairs. In the Minangkabau power structure, Bundo Kanduang did not have a formal position and was not known to make decisions in the public domain. Nevertheless, she remained a central figure in the decision-making process. No decision could be made without her consent.

In real Minangkabau social life, Bundo Kanduang refers to a central figure or a senior woman in a lineage or sublineage. In Minangkabau kinship the senior woman enjoys a certain privilege and higher authority, higher even than that of the *penghulu* (chief of the clan) (Manan, 1990: 7). When it comes to important matters related to lineage or sublineage, her consent is imperative even though she needs her male kin as spokesman for her lineage in public.

The appreciation or respect of women is translated into a more concrete and realistic concept of *adat* laws. Kato identifies at least four characteristics of the traditional Minangkabau matrilineal system: (1) descent and descent group formation are organized according to female line; (2) a matrilineage group is a corporate descent group and possesses communally owned properties; (3) the residential pattern is duolocal; and (4) authority within a lineage or sublineage is in the hands of the *mamak* (maternal male), not the father (1978: 51-52; 1978: 1-4).

Like other *adat* teachings, the implementation of these *adat* laws always takes into consideration the principle of equilibrium. The distribution of authority and responsibility between man and woman is always obvious in every *adat* system. The decision to observe matriliney, which determines descent line through the female, makes women very important in the *adat* since the continuation of a descent group depends on them. However, Minangkabau society also considers men of equal importance. If there is no woman, a lineage or sublineage will die out. Likewise in the absence of a man, the lineage would be diminished by other lineages, for man is considered guardian of the lineage (Amir, 2001: 1). Thus, complementary roles, if practiced with fair-mindedness, would hopefully entail equilibrium.

Adat maintains that communal or ancestral properties (*harato pusako*), which are regarded *pusako tinggi* (high properties), should be inherited by or passed down to

women, but the ownership is not final or absolute. A woman's entitlement to this kind of property is only limited in the form of usage rights (*ganggam bauntuak*). She can use the property, and produce, or get income from them, as long as she lives, for her own sake or for the sake of her children, but the right to manage and control property is always in the hands of her male kin known as *mamak* (maternal uncle). These communal properties could not be sold unless in emergency situations, as specified by *adat*: *mayik tabujua di tengah rumah, gadih gadang indak balaki, rumah gadang katirisan, mambangkik batang tarandam* (to cover the costs of burial, to marry girls off, to build or restore an *adat* house, and to initiate a new chief of the clan). Males in the sublineage (the woman's brothers or *mamak*) should see to it that the property is used properly and, if possible, to increase it for the prosperity of his female kin and for the pride and dignity of his sublineage (Navis, 1984; Hamka, 1968).

The residential pattern for man is duolocal. After marriage a husband stays in his wife's house at night and often goes back to his mother's during the day to take care of his maternal business. A Minangkabau husband is regarded as an 'invited guest', a progenitor for the continuation of his wife's lineage, and therefore is respected in his wife's house (Kato, 1978, Amir, 2001: 2). If there is a divorce, the husband should leave; the wife stays in her own or her mother's house. If the wife dies, the husband will be sent back to his mother's house with a special ceremony. Submissiveness to the husband is not a characteristic of Minangkabau women; this is because a traditional Minangkabau wife does not depend on her husband for her livelihood. As mentioned in a Minangkabau saying, the position of the husband is like "a fly on a buffalo's tail". If a Minang woman does not like her husband she can easily get rid of him, or like "dust on a tree trunk", he can easily be blown away by the wind (Hamka, 1968; Anwar, 1989). A husband, however, like an honorable guest, can also easily leave his wife. In an extreme situation, such as if he or his maternal family is discontented with his wife's services; he can divorce her or practice polygamy. Consequently, the traditional marriage bond is not strong and divorce rates are relatively high.

Unlike the ancestral properties (*pusako*), which are inherited by women, the communal or ancestral *adat* title (*sako*) is inherited by men. The title will be passed down to one of their *kemanakan* (sons of a sister). That way the *adat* title will never go to another clan. This system also adds to the importance of men to the clan. If there is no man in the lineage or clan to continue the *adat* title, others will look down on it "*bak ijuak indak basaga, lurah indak babatu*" (like *ijuk* tree without *saga*, or bottomless or stoneless ravine), for man is equated with the fence of the village, the defender and protector of the clan (Amir, 2001:1). Formal authority within a lineage or sublineage is in the hands of the *mamak* (maternal uncle) or the *penghulu* (chief of the clan). If women are guaranteed power in the *rumah gadang* (*adat* house), men of the same *rumah gadang* are authorized to represent them in the *balai adat* (*adat* council hall). Like Bundo Kandung in the traditional *adat* concept, women are believed to have potential but men are needed to realize it (Abdullah, 1970; Navis, 1990; Manan, 1990).

Women in the twentieth Century

As a concept that derives from nature, Minangkabau *adat* anticipates and even considers change as necessary and natural.

Sakali aie gadang, sakali tapian baraliah.
Sakali tahun baganti, sakali musim bakisa.

(Once the big flood passes, the bathing place moves.
As the year changes, the new season starts)

It is this adaptive capacity that makes Minangkabau *adat* a living entity, not only for survival purposes but more importantly to show its dynamic capacity in shaping, reshaping, correcting, and renewing itself as stated in the following Minangkabau proverb:

Adat dipakai baru,
kain dipakai usang
Usang-usang dipabarui,
lapuak-lapuak dikajangi

(When it is used, *adat* becomes new,
clothes become old.
When it gets old, renew it;
if it is weak support it)

Accordingly, the Minang people themselves expect changes or adjustments to their *adat*, particularly in the so-called “*adat babuhua sentak*” (the loosely-knotted *adat*), which mostly regulates daily life.

Nan elok dipakai nan buruak dibuang
Kok singkek mintak diuleh, panjang mintak dikarek
Nan umpang mintak disisik

(Take the good ones, leave out the bad.
If it is too short, extend it; if it is too long, cut it,
if incomplete, complete it)

Change is only impossible for the “*adat babuhua mati*” (the tightly-knotted *adat*), which basically concerns nature’s laws as suggested by the Minangkabau saying:

Adat lamo, pusako usang,
Indak lapuak dek hujan,
Indak lakang dek paneh.

(Old *adat*, aged heritage.
Neither decays in the rain,
nor cracks in the sun)

The flexibility and adaptability of the Minangkabau *adat* and its people was tested by the influence of Islam and Dutch colonization. Unlike many predictions, the coming of Islam did not weaken *adat*. The Minang do not consider *adat* and Islam contradictory, even though there was resistance from *adat* conservatives at the beginning. In its later development, Islamic teaching was more than welcome in Minangkabau, because the Minang believe Islam provides enrichment to their *adat* (Nasrun, 1957:24). Before the coming of Islam an old Minangkabau maxim says:

Adat basandi alua jo patuik,
Alua jo patuik basandi bana,
Bana badiri sandirinyo.

(*Adat* is based on propriety and decency,
propriety and decency are based on truth,
truth is self-evident).

With the coming of Islam "the truth", originally meaning nature and its laws, took on a new interpretation and meaning through Islam. Therefore, the *adat* maxim now goes:

Adat basandi syarak,
syarak basandi kitabullah

(*adat* is based on shari'a, Islamic Law,
the syarak is based on the holy book, the Koran).

One example of the 'perfection' of *adat* by Islam is the inheritance of *harato pancaharian* (self-earned or individual properties). These acquired or self-earned properties are considered *harato pusako randah* (low properties). Unlike ancestral or communal properties, which are considered *harato pusako tinggi* (high properties), these earned properties are inherited according to Islamic Law (the *Faraidh* laws). When the parents who acquired them are still alive, they can give and divide these properties as they like to their children, but upon their death these low properties will be inherited, by both sons and daughters, according to Islamic laws. However, this usually only applies to the first generation. For the second generation, the inheritance will be passed down by the heirs (sons and daughters) to their daughters only, and from these daughters the properties will, again, be inherited following the female line as suggested by *adat*. That way low properties (*pusako randah*) will become high properties (*pusako tinggi*), which, will be inherited according to *adat* laws. By so doing, the communal properties (*pusako tinggi*) will not only survive but may even increase. The ability to combine contradictory things in life and accommodate a synthesis of seemingly opposing elements is characteristic of the Minang. As stated by Anwar, such cultural-religious syncretism is not an anathema to Minangkabau minds (1989:5).

Islam also influences other aspects of life and soon becomes a new identity for the Minang. The Minang's attitude toward religion is more pragmatic than philosophical or intellectual. They are far from being fanatics. They used to say, "For living you need reason, for death you observe faith". Muslim leaders of Minangkabau descent are followers of the modern Islamic reform movement with its strong democratic orientation (Anwar, 1999:60).

The Dutch occupation also brought modernization with all its complexities to the Minangkabau. Economic development encouraged by the Dutch saw the development of mining companies, plantations, railroads, ports, and government offices. The emergence of cities as new centers of life soon followed (Navis, 1990: 3), which, in turn, encouraged urbanization, a money economy, and education.

Education is very important for the Minang. They are always fascinated by the idea of learning or knowledge. They look up to someone who is smart and knowledgeable. Intelligence is often considered more valuable than wealth:

Katiadaan ameh bulieh dicari,
Ketiadaan aka putuih bicaro.
Tak ameh putuih tali,
Tak baraka taban bumi.

(if no gold, it can be acquired,
if no thought, you are speechless.
without gold, as if the rope you hang on is cut,
without thought or knowledge, the earth you step on collapses under you)

The Minang soon realized that the strength of western culture lies in their mastery of scientific knowledge reflected in every aspect of life (Manan, 1990: 11). Islamic reform and Dutch political and economic dominance opened up the Minang's perspectives. They became aware of the need for change and reform (Maeda, 2001: 4). They were inspired to catch up with modernization, which was known as *kemadjoean* (progress and modernity). This idea of *kemadjoean* occupied both men and women. Minangkabau women themselves realized that even though their status in *adat* was relatively high, their roles in the public sphere were very limited. Some educated men from the well-to-do families like Dt. St. Maharadja, a prominent *adat* dignitary, also realized that women should be involved in the process of *kemadjoean*. In 1907 Dt. St. Maharadja pioneered the establishment of a school for girls. Meanwhile some women already joined *Sekolah Raja* (the Dutch Kweekschool) in Bukittinggi (Manan, 1990:12), and since then women have been involved in *kemadjoean*.

In the twentieth century, we can single out at least some prominent women who strived to work their way to a better position in society and to take part in various aspects of life. Roehana Koedoes was among the first to realize that Minangkabau women lagged behind their contemporaries in other parts of the world. Roehana Koedoes is considered the first to initiate a feminist movement in Minangkabau, the first woman to establish a school in Minangkabau and the first woman journalist in Indonesia (Abdullah, 1971; Maeda, 2001; Djaya, 1980).

Roehana Koedoes was born on December 20, 1884 in Koto Gadang, Bukittinggi. Like her friends in those days she never went to school and was educated by her parents' friends at home. In 1892, at the age of 8 years or so, her father moved to Simpang Tonang, Talu, Pasaman. There she began to gather her friends at her house and introduced them to the earliest process of learning by teaching them to read and write. More or less eight years before Kartini started to send letters to her friends,

Roehana Koedoes had already started teaching her friends in the neighborhood during the day and reciting the Koran every evening (Djaya, 1980: 21). In the afternoon she read newspapers out loud for her town folks. In 1897 she returned to her village at Koto Gadang and once again opened the same kind of school. She turned her house into a school that occupied six rooms of the *rumah gadang* with the help of her grandmother. In 1911 she founded an association for women called 'Kerajinan Amai Setia' (The Amai Setia Craftmanship), which was soon followed by the Amai Setia School. This association and the school helped girls in her village not only learn general subjects but also realize their potential. They facilitated and trained them in traditional female activities like handicraft and embroidery. The association also functioned as a trading cooperative for home industry products thus acquainting women with embryonic entrepreneurial skills. In 1916 she established the Roehana School. Unlike the schools she had run before, the Roehana School was not free of charge, it became a professionally-managed school.

Education was not the only thing that occupied Roehana Koedoes. In 1912 she succeeded in persuading Dt. St. Maharadja, who had already established the newspaper *Oetoesan Melajoe*, to publish the first newspaper for women in Indonesia *Soenting Melajoe*. *Soenting Melajoe* was published for the first time on July 10, 1912, under the editorship of Roehana Koedoes herself and Dt. St. Maharadja's daughter Zoebaidah Ratna Djoeita. This made them the first women editors in Indonesia. One year after the publication of *Soenting Melajoe*, Roehana published a newspaper *Saoedara Hindia* in her village. This time it was a newspaper for both men and women. In 1920, Roehana became editor of another newspaper *Perempoean Bergerak* in Medan, and in 1924 she became the editor of *Radio*, a newspaper in Padang.

The spirit of *kemadjoean* was not only supported by *kaum adat* (the old *adat* conservatives) but also by the *kaum muda* (the progressive youth groups); the western educated *kaum muda*, and Islamic modernist *kaum muda*. In 1918, Saadah Alim, following Roehana Koedoes, published *Soeara Perempoean*. Unlike *Soenting Melajoe*, which was supported by the *kaum adat*, *Soeara Perempoean* was sponsored by the western-educated *kaum muda*. If *Soenting Melajoe* was aimed at promoting and enhancing women's progress within the *adat* system, *Soeara Perempoean* was more westernized with the idea of *vrijheid* or freedom for women (Maeda, 2001: 5). The newspaper was more skeptical and critical of Minangkabau society, which many thought as not very supportive of women's freedom in making life choices in the *kemadjoean* era (Manan, 1990: 12). Because of its progressive and obvious advocacy of *vrijheid*, which was considered too westernized, this women's movement was not supported by many people (Maeda, 2001: 5).

Another group that played an important role in the *kemadjoean* was the young Islamic modernists. In their attempt to reform Islam in Minangkabau this group of young reformists paid serious attention to education. They began to establish a new style of Islamic schools following the western educational system introduced by the Dutch. More schools emphasizing Islamic teachings were established in Minangkabau society. In 1909 *Sekolah Adabijjah* (The Adabijjah School) was founded in Padang. The *Sumatera Tawalib* was established by Hamka's father, H. Abdul Karim Amrullah, in

Padang Panjang in 1911, and in 1915 Zainoeddin Labay el Joenoessij founded *Sekolah Dinijjah* (the Dinijjah School) in Padang Panjang (Saleh, 1969:5).

Most schools at the time were for male students although some were for both male and female students; no school was exclusively founded for female students. Rahmah el Joenoessijah, Zainoeddin's sister, was a former student of the Dinijjah School. She was a critical and skeptical student who insisted on having thorough discussions on every subject she learnt. However, she felt that as a female student she had to pass through a cultural barrier to get close to the mostly male teachers, which prevented her from being involved in the intensive learning process (Saleh, 1969: 5). This dissatisfaction inspired her to establish a school for women where even shy girls could discuss things freely with their female teachers. In 1923, Rahmah el Joenoessijah founded a boarding school, the *Dinijjah School Poeteri* (the Dinijjah Girls' School), with the help of her brother, Zainoeddin Labay el Joenoessijah. This school not only provided a good religious foundation for girls and trained them in useful female matters, but also gave students the knowledge and skills needed for a post-school public life. Some graduates worked as officers, entrepreneurs, and teachers and some even became political activists. The school was also known outside of Sumatra, and had students coming from all over Indonesia and Malaysia. In 1937, Rahmah established a women teacher's school, *Al Madrasatul Mu'alimat el Islamijjah*, which in 1940 changed its name *Kulliatul Mu'alimat el Islamijjah* known as the KMI

One of Dinijjah Poeteri's alumni was Rasoena Said, a woman who was actively involved in education, journalism, and political movements in Indonesia. Before independence, she was also active in the struggle against Dutch occupation. In 1932, she was imprisoned by the Dutch for her provocative speeches against the 'wild' school regulation (*wilde scholen ordonantie 1932*), a Dutch rule regulating 'unauthorized' schools. During the Japanese Occupation she helped found *Pemuda Nippon Raya*, a national youth movement, in her attempt to spread awareness against the Japanese. After Indonesia's independence, she joined the Indonesian National Committee (KNIP) and became a member of parliament (DPR) and was also a member of the Advisory Council (DPA).

Minangkabau Today

As previously discussed, Minang people consider change natural. This attitude toward change makes Minangkabau society a relatively open and dynamic society in Indonesia. They easily accept new technology and ideas as long as they do not threaten the existence of their *adat* and, better yet, if these can enrich their culture (Sairin, 1992:34). Nevertheless, changes that lead to cultural setbacks or decadence always make the Minang concerned and apprehensive.

Minangkabau used to be recognized as a prolific society that produced many intellectuals and prominent Indonesian leaders. Some of whom played significant roles and held key positions in national politics and international diplomacy. A few of these notable people include: Hatta, the first Indonesian Vice President, Syahrir and Natsir, former Prime Ministers, Agus Salim, a respected diplomat; and Dr.

H. Abdul Karim Amrullah and his son Hamka, who were known as Islamic reformists and were notable *ulama*. Taufik Abdullah, as quoted in Zed (1992:9), said that of the prominent Indonesian politicians in 1930, 30% were of Minangkabau origin. This is very significant because the population of the Minangkabau was only 3% of the total Indonesian population.

Today the Minang no longer play a significant role in national politics, and Minang women in particular have suffered serious setbacks. Despite their high participation in education, Minang women's involvement in the current public sphere is very limited. The 2002 data on gender development in the provinces of Indonesia indicate, as quoted in Emilia (2004:2), that together with Bali, West Sumatra shows the lowest participation in the parliament - 6.1% compared to that of West Java, which reaches 11.1%. Of the 30% quota for women representatives, only 9% is filled in the parliaments of West Sumatra (DPRD). Minang men have also suffered the same political representation setback. In the first cabinet after *reformasi* (the 1998 reformation), for instance, not one of its members are of Minangkabau descent.

Questions arise among the Minang and other groups in Indonesia as to why Minangkabau women's participation in the public domain has decreased. Attempts have also been made to explain Minang men's withdrawal or seclusion from the political arena and other public positions. In 1992, as an example, a seminar on social changes in Minangkabau was held in Padang. A similar concern with this Minangkabau setback also became a main issue in national magazines and newspapers (Zed, 1992:1). Among the factors that may help explain this pathetic condition are urbanization, the PRRI trauma (the Revolutionary Government of Republic of Indonesia), and Suharto's New Order.

The emergence of cities created job opportunities and affected the Minangkabau social system. Many Minang men took their families to the cities where they soon absorbed the urban way of life. In the city, men's position in the family gradually shifted from merely 'honorable guests' to family breadwinners. Men, especially those who worked for the government, married women with lower status either in education or economic background (Navis, 1990:3). As wives became more and more dependent on their husbands because they followed them and went away from their 'shelter' or 'shell' resulting in the loss of protection from the *adat* community, the role of *mamak* (maternal uncle) gradually decreased and the nuclear family bond became stronger. However, the changes mostly occurred among the urban Minang while in most Minangkabau villages women's important position remains intact. The Minangkabau *adat* is very much alive.

Another factor that is believed to have undermined the Minang's confidence was the failure of the PRRI. The loss of this war, which some considered a rebellious act, left the Minang traumatized and stigmatized, and worse yet, caused them to lose their confidence. Minang men and women underwent a serious de-identification, which led to their hiding even their identity as Minang people. After the PRRI, many Minang parents gave their children Javanese names. Many Minang boys were named with the "o" ending, such as Widodo, Mulyuno, or other Javanese names like Bambang, and for

girls' names such as Sri and Wati were used. Or, they would simply give western names to their kids. I have come across a Minang student named "John Kennedy". These "disguises" were due to the difficulties the Minang would face if they were known to be of Minangkabau origin, such as being tacitly discriminated against.

All these disadvantages make the Minang prefer to work in private sectors such as business. After all, they are better known as tough and good entrepreneurs rather than government officials. In this sphere they try their best to exist without attracting too much attention for they cannot afford to stand out in a crowd. Unfortunately, that goes against their nature. The Minang actually love living under the spotlight and admire riches both in private and in public. A Minangkabau saying sums this up as: "you lose your color because of illness; you lose your *tuah* (supreme quality) because you have gone bankrupt" (Anwar, 1999:57). Therefore, the Minang work hard to earn as much money as possible and obtain the best education in order to gain high social prestige, better status, and respect in society.

The Minang withdrawal and seclusion was worsened by the coming of Suharto's New Order. During the New Order, Suharto tried to control every possible threat to his power by making everything uniform. People did not dare to be different, otherwise they would be considered dissidents. This uniformity nearly destroyed the dynamic culture of the Minang. One of the most important Minangkabau philosophies is the appreciation, and expectation of differences. For the Minang it is difference that keeps the spirit of learning alive and which makes the *adat* and the people dynamic as stated in the *adat* aphorism "*basilang kayu dalam tungku, disinan api mako kanyalo.*" (it is the crisscrossing of the firewood that makes the fire flare up violently).

Adaptability has always been a characteristic of the Minang; ideally, it is only intended for the good. The best of the Minang character tends to come out in a just society. Unfortunately, the Minang people's adjustment to bad conditions allows bad characteristics to emerge. This does not help them at all, and in fact, it worsens an already bad situation. This is best described by Anwar (1999: 57):

A Minangkabau has a strong sense of justice and fair play, as he understands it. He will obey the ruler only if he is a just ruler, and he will oppose him if he is unjust. But when he sees injustice in society, and he is powerless to do anything about it, he will save his own skin first, he will try to cheat if necessary, and he becomes a cynical person. The Minangkabau tend to show their good character when the society is open and free, when foul play is not acceptable. But their bad character tends to come out when there is no freedom of expression, when foul play has been used to dominate society.

The reformation, which is still in progress in Indonesia, will hopefully help heal the historical wounds suffered by the Minang, which, in turn, will revive the best in the Minang, restore their confidence and significant participation in building up the nation. Last but certainly not least, the ongoing reformation is an opportunity for the Minang to restore and resume their place as a respected ethnic group in Indonesia.

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