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Inter-ethnic relations in Padang of West Sumatra

Navigating between assimilation and exclusivity*

MINA ELFIRA

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the discussion on how inter-ethnic relations challenge cultural boundaries, in this case Minangkabau matrilineal-Islamic culture in Padang of West Sumatra, Indonesia. This paper will focus on how Minangkabau people establish relationship with other ethnic groups in Padang, a multi-ethnic city. The paper argues that matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) and Islam are the defining aspects to be considered by Minangkabau people in maintaining relationship with other ethnic groups. Moreover, there is some interplay between the need to protect Minangkabau Islamic-matrilineal *adat* in maintaining inter-ethnic relations by Minangkabau people and their assimilation and exclusivity interests.

KEYWORDS

Minangkabau, Padang, inter-ethnic relations, identity.

INTRODUCTION

*Orang Minang bisa jadi orang Padang,
tapi orang Padang belum tentu orang Minang.
'A Minangkabau can be a Padangnese,
but a Padangnese is not necessarily Minangkabau.'*

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Modern buildings with buffalo horn-shaped roofs (*bagonjong*) attract the visitor's attention on entering Padang, the capital city of West Sumatra province. The buildings, most of which are local government offices and public activity centres, have become a sign to travellers that they are in the land of Minangkabau (*ranah Minang*). It seems that the Rumah Gadang (Big House), also called Rumah Bagonjong, has been appreciated and interpreted as a powerful symbol of the Minangkabau, who are not only well known as the world's largest matrilineal society but also as one that coexists amongst the mostly Islamic societies within Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. However, it was Dutch architects, not the Minangkabau, who popularized the buffalo horn-shaped roof as a symbol of the Minangkabau, the sixth largest group of approximately one thousand ethnic and sub-ethnic groups that currently exist in Indonesia.¹ Inspired by the style of Minangkabau houses, this roof style was used for other modern buildings from 1933 on. In 1933, for example, a Catholic church adopted this style by having a horizontal trellis-work with the characteristic bow-shape of water buffalo horns at the end (Colombijn 1993: 65). Colombijn, in his study on urban environment of Padang, concludes that urban symbols in Padang underline Minangkabau identity, which was encouraged by local authorities (Colombijn 1993: 65). It can be seen from the fact that since 1990 this construction has become obligatory for government offices, based on the municipal by-law, *Peraturan Daerah* No. 6, year 1990 (Colombijn 1993: 66). Moreover, Peter Nas and Gerard Persoon argue that this symbolism is strongly linked with ethnicity and identity and that house forms play an important role in expressing these ideas (Nas and Persoon 2003: 4).

Interestingly, one of the main features that makes Padang distinctive within West Sumatra province is its multi-ethnic composition. It can be said that the city is a pluralistic society in which ethnic groups with various backgrounds and lifestyles coexist. The existence of these groups can be traced to the establishment of places, spread around Padang city, that are named after these groups, such as Kampuang Jao (Ward of Javanese), Kampuang Nieh (Niasan ward) and Kampuang Cino (Chinese ward). According to Colombijn, a variety of other ethnic groups constitute Padangnese society. In colonial times it was Eurasians, disappeared after 1958, that held the locus of power (Colombijn 1994: 359). But, arguably, the Minangkabau is the dominant ethnic group in Padang and their dominance is growing demographically, economically and politically. This, arguably, has implications for inter-ethnic relations in Padang.

This paper contributes to the discussion on how inter-ethnic relations challenge cultural boundaries, in this case Minangkabau matrilineal-Islamic

¹ Based on the 2000 Population Census conducted by the Indonesian Central Statistics Bureau. It must be noted, however, that most ethnic and sub-ethnic groups sampled are very small in number. Actually only fifteen of the ethnic groups have a population of over one million. The major ethnic populations are Javanese (41.71 percent), Sundanese (15.41 percent), Malay (3.45 percent), Madurese (3.37 percent), Batak (3.02 percent), Minangkabau (2.72 percent), and Betawi (2.51 percent) (Suryadinata et al. 2003).

culture in Padang of West Sumatra, Indonesia. This paper will focus on how Minangkabau people establish relationship with other ethnic groups in Padang, a multi-ethnic city. The paper argues that matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) and Islam are the defining aspects to be considered by Minangkabau in maintaining relationship with other ethnic groups. Moreover, the need to protect Minangkabau Islamic-matrilineal *adat*, in maintaining inter-ethnic relations Minangkabau people "play" with their assimilation and exclusivity interests.

In order to explore these issues and to examine the way Minangkabau people balance their assimilation and exclusivity interests, I will rely more on qualitative data, obtained using qualitative methods. As Nancy Lopez argues, qualitative methods capture the contextual, real-life, everyday experiences of the individual interviewed (Lopez 2003: 7). The method is effective in exploring ethnicity which is still a sensitive issue in Indonesia. However, this method, while providing rich contextual data, also has limitations. Its common limitation is that only a small number of cases can be studied in this intensive fashion (Lopez 2003: 7).² In addition, Clive Seale argues that "there is a danger here of imagining that a particular interaction format (the unstructured interview) is an automatic guarantee of the analytic status of the data that emerge" (Seale 1999: 209). Because of these limitations, I will also flexibly utilise quantitative data based on surveys conducted by both central and local Indonesian government institutions to support my analysis. The paper is based on fieldwork focused on "gender relation, *adat* and Islam in Minangkabau daily life" and conducted between 2002 and 2010 in Padang and Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia where there is an extensive Minangkabau diaspora and has become the main destination for Minangkabau migrants. I did in-depth interviews 64 women from different background and "classes" as my main respondents. My respondents also included men from different positions and roles such as *panghulu* (*adat* leaders), *alim-ulama* (religious leaders), *cadiak pandai* (scholars), *mamak* (maternal uncles), husbands, and sons. Respondents quoted in this paper have been given pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy.

PADANG: A SENSE OF PLACE OF MINANGKABAU IDENTITY

Padang was originally a small village, named Kampung Batuang or Kampung Batang, located between Aur Duri and Seberang Padang areas. Most of its inhabitants, who came from the more peripheral areas of Minangkabau, worked as fishermen, salt makers, and traders (Dhavidia 2001: 6). Padang came to play an important role when the *Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* (VOC, Dutch East India Company) established Padang as their trading headquarters on Sumatra's west coast by building a *loji* (fortress) in 1666 (Colombijn 1994: 41; Dhavidia 2001: 9). Padang became more important in the early nineteenth century, since the territories over which the Netherlands exercised direct rule

² See also Caldwell et al. (1988) on the values and limitations of using qualitative methods.

were limited. Padang was the only place on the west coast of Sumatra that remained under Dutch control (Locher-Scholten 2003: 51). In 1906 Padang became a *gemeente* (municipality) (Colombijn 1994: 41; Asnan 2003: 208). In 1913, The Dutch Administration divided Padang into seven districts: Tanah Tinggi, Batang Arau, Koto Tangah, Pauh IX, Sungkai, and Lima Lurah (Pauh V). The seven districts were part of a *luhak*, headed by an assistant resident, known as Tuanku Luhak (Dhavida 2001: 15).

After Indonesian independence Padang became the capital city of West Sumatra province. The people of Padang celebrate "Padang Day" on 7 August. This day was chosen as a commemoration of the day in 1669, when the Pauh/Koto Tangah people of Padang attacked the VOC which symbolized the Dutch colonization of Padang. As a result, that year the VOC formally acknowledged the Minangkabau King Pagaruyung's authority over the coastline of Minangkabau (Amran 1986: 330-331).

Today, in terms of local government, Padang consists of eleven districts, eleven *nagari* and 103 *desa* (village) with 638 People's Associations (Rukun Kampung), and 2,235 Neighbourhood Associations (Rukun Tetangga). Padang's population (734,421 people) is the largest of the cities/regents within West Sumatra province. In 2002 the total population of West Sumatra province was 4,289,647. The densest population is situated in the North Padang district.³ Padang is now the ninth largest and ninth most densely populated city within Indonesia, compared to a census conducted in 1930 when its rank was seventeenth.⁴ This change demonstrates the rapid growth of the Padang population and area. The rapid growth of the Padang population is partly due to immigration resulting from Padang's previous establishment as a sea port, attracting migrants from other towns. Padang has also experienced several waves of migration of different ethnic groups (Colombijn 1994).

Padang has been a key gateway between Minangkabau and the "outside world". This role became more important during Suharto's New Order era, when Padang was a central site for the diffusion of New Order laws and attitudes which spread to the *darek*, (the inland and heartland of Alam Minangkabau, the Minangkabau realm). Padang has also been a bridge connecting Minangkabau people in the *rantau* (outside of the heartland) and the heartland itself. In addition, Padang has played a significant role in the migration process. On one hand, Padang has acted like a "stepping-stone" for immigrants, especially from the island of Java for moving further into the *darek* area of Alam Minangkabau or, even, to other parts of the island of Sumatra, such as Jambi, Pekanbaru (Riau) or Medan (North Sumatra). On the other hand, Padang symbolizes a "departure point" for local Minangkabaus, either from *darek* or *pasisia* areas, for migration to outside Alam Minangkabau. Because of that, members of the Indonesian community term Minangkabaus as *orang Padang* (Padang people), despite the fact that not all Minangkabau migrants are from Padang. The Minangkabaus prefer to call themselves *urang Minang*

³ BPS Propinsi Sumatera Barat, 2002. See also BPS Kodya Padang, 1999.

⁴ Rutz (1985: 134-135), cited from Colombijn (1994: 50).

(Minangkabau people) or *urang awak* (our own people). This unique position makes Padang a vital location for charting changes within Minangkabau culture. In Padang a process of acculturation of various cultures, introduced by Padang people either from outside or inside Alam Minangkabau itself, occurs. Moreover, in Padang the transferral of culture also takes place among people who use Padang as a transit point.

Although scholars consider that the Minangkabau are the first settlers of Padang, and the Acehnese represent the first foreign migrants (Colombijn 1994: 39), many inhabitants of Padang believe the original inhabitants of Padang were Nias people, despite the fact that the Niasans migrated to Minangkabau. They were brought to Padang as slaves by the Acehnese and the VOC around the seventeenth century (Asnan 2003: 203; Colombijn 1994: 54). When I interviewed my informants in Padang and inquired whether they were natives of Padang (*urang asa* Padang), many of them replied that Niasans (*urang Nieh*) were the natives of Padang. It can be assumed that because of this belief many Minangkabau in Padang (the descendents of Minangkabau's first settlers) were reluctant to identify themselves as natives of Padang as they did not want to be identified as Niasans. As a result, Padang is still considered by some of Padang's inhabitants as the *rantau* land (or the closest *rantau* land). Almost all the Minangkabau people living in Padang are still identified and identify themselves according to the place from which they originated in the Minangkabau homeland (outside Padang). The first question that is commonly asked when two Minangkabau people meet for the first time relates to their birth place in *darek*: *Asa dari maa?* Which translates as 'Where are you from?' For example, Bani (a 42 year old lecturer), one of my respondents, identified herself as a person from Luhak Agam (Bukittinggi), although she has lived with her family in Padang for about twenty two years. Despite this act, however, it seems that Minangkabau in Padang consider Padang as part of their Alam Minangkabau.

When I socialized with Minangkabau Padang people, either inside or outside Padang, I often heard the apparently jovial statement that *Orang Minang bisa jadi orang Padang, tapi orang Padang belum tentu orang Minang* this translates as 'a Minangkabau can be a Padangnese, but a Padangnese is not necessarily Minangkabau'. This statement can be understood as a sign of their awareness that Padang is a multi-ethnic city. This joke, however, also indicates indirectly that Minangkabau consider Padang as a part of Alam Minangkabau. The statement expresses the idea that a Minangkabau, who is not living in Padang, can identify or be identified as a Padangnese as Padang is considered a part of Alam Minangkabau. On the other hand, it also indicates that other ethnic groups (non-Minangkabau) cannot automatically identify themselves as Minangkabau despite the fact that they live in Padang. Consequently this statement expresses the Minangkabau assumption that they have more of a claim to Padang than other ethnic groups. A street banner, hung on a street in central Padang a few days before *Lebaran* (Islamic festival in celebrating the end of the fasting month), stated: *Selamat datang di ranah Minang para dusanak*

dari rantau nan pulang basamo (Welcome back to Minangkabau, families from *rantau* land). This can be taken as an example of a Minangkabau's perception that Padang is a part of Alam Minangkabau. This perception, arguably, has implications for inter-ethnic relations in Padang.

INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN PADANG: NAVIGATING BETWEEN ASSIMILATION AND EXCLUSIVITY

In his paper "Ethnicity and social change", Daniel Bell contends that in the modern world "ethnicity has become more salient [than class] because it can combine an interest, [an advantageous one], with an affective tie" (Bell 1975: 169). The main focus of ethnicity is, undoubtedly, ethnic groups. John Milton Yinger (1994: 3-4) generally defines an ethnic group as a segment of a larger society whose members regard themselves and are regarded by others to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture. In addition, these members participate in shared activities in which the (real or mythical) common origin and culture are significant factors that cause them to be perceived, either by themselves or others, as different. These significant factors constitute their basic identities.

According to Gordon Allport, identities tend to condense around symbols or cues (Horowitz 1975: 120).⁵ A symbol of identity, however, "may be ignored or interpreted quite differently in the next [future], depending on the shape and significance of the underlying criteria of identity" (Horowitz 1975: 121). Glazer and Moynihan (1975: 17) have hypothesized that "ethnic groups bring different norms to bear on common circumstances with consequent different levels of success hence group differences in status". Therefore the deliberate ignorance or re-interpretation of a symbol of identity that is of the highest importance in one society is one strategy that an ethnic group may employ in order to survive or gain a better status in their world. These theories will be used in analysing inter-ethnic relations in Padang.

Arguably, a matrilineal principle (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) is one of the defining aspects to be considered by Minangkabau in maintaining relationship with other ethnic groups (see Picture 1. A Minangkabau mother and her child). It can be seen from the fact that *kawin anta suku* or *kawin anta nagaro* was still a "taboo" or, at least, a non-preferred choice, as expressed by Tuti (60 years old) who married a Minangkabau man in 1970 on her maternal grandmother's advice:

Regarding a marriage partner, grandma let us choose as long as a Muslim ... if it is possible, a Minangkabau. It is because she had a principle that: 'No matter how good an Indonesian [a non-Minangkabau] is, his customs are different from ours ... it might create a problem for yourselves ... if we [she and a marriage partner] have a similar *adat*, we come from a similar environment, it will not be difficult to interact.'⁶

⁵ Gordon W. Allport 1954, cited in Horowitz (1975: 120).

⁶ Based on the interview conducted in Padang, October 2002.



Picture 1. A Minangkabau mother and her child (Photograph by the author, 2003).

Based on Tuti's comment that even being a Muslim is not good enough to be chosen as a marriage partner. It seems that Tuti also transmitted this idea to her children, as can be seen from the fact that all her married children chose Minangkabau spouses, although not all of them were from the Padang area (see Picture 2. Minangkabau traditional wedding procession). Fear of losing Minangkabau identity may be one reason why a Minangkabau mother might tend to forbid her children from marrying a non-Minangkabau. That is why Minangkabau society is more concerned with preventing marriages between Minangkabau men and non-Minangkabau women rather than vice versa, as expressed by Niar (a forty one year old housewife with three children):

If it is possible it would be better if my son marries a Padang woman because she will have better knowledge of the tastes, *adat* and customs of Padang people. On the other hand, it is all right if my daughters marry non-Padangnese [Minangkabau] men.⁷

I think that the main reason why she did not mind about having a non-Minangkabau son-in-law was because she knew that her grandchild could still be called a Minangkabau. On the other hand, if her son married a non Minangkabau woman, her grandchild could not be called a Minangkabau anymore because of the application of the matrilineal descent system. Niar, like other respondents, did not dare talk openly about ethnicity, due to its sensitivity in Indonesia.

⁷ Based on the interview conducted in Padang, October 2002.



Picture 2. Minangkabau traditional wedding procession (Photograph by the author, 2002).

Besides matriliney, Islam is another defining aspect to be considered by Minangkabau in maintaining relationship with other ethnic groups. After the coming of Islam, the word of "Islam" has become an inseparable part of the Minangkabau identity. The recodification of *adat* (a collective term for Minangkabau laws and customs) can be seen from the establishment of Adat Islamiah. It means *adat* that is in accordance with Islamic principles. Adat Islamiah is ordained as *adaik nan sabana adaik* (*adat* which is truly *adat*) (Abdullah 1967; Azra 2003). There is no doubt that the dissemination of Islam into Minangkabau has significantly impacted on the way Minangkabau maintain relationship with other ethnic groups, as can be seen from the fact that Minangkabau society tended to dispense some sanctions, whether moral or material, or both, for Minangkabau people who were involved in interreligious marriages which were carried out according to another religion than Islam. These people may lose their rights and responsibilities provided by the *adat*. They can even be excluded from the community of Minangkabau *adat*, as illustrated in Nina's case. Nina was a second daughter. After the death of her eldest sister, who was the eldest child, Nina replaced her sister as the representative of her family⁸ and the successor of her mother's position. However, after her union with her Javanese husband in a Christian marriage, Nina's parents transferred all rights and responsibilities to Nina's younger sister. Nina and her children also lost their rights over maternal ancestral properties (*harato pusako*). Nina's mother told me that Nina would not even

⁸ As a result of its matrilineal principles, in Minangkabau, it is a daughter, not the son, who will be the bearer of family line. Because of that, a family is considered unlucky if it does not have any daughters. It means that the future of the family may vanish as the family line is passed on through daughters.

get the parent's self-acquired properties (*harato pancaharian*).⁹

Arguably, the need to protect Minangkabau Islamic-matrilineal *adat*, consisting of matrilineal and Islamic principles, in maintaining inter-ethnic relations Minangkabau people "play" with their assimilation and exclusivity interests. It can be seen from the interactions between the Minangkabau and other ethnic/race groups in Padang, such as Chinese, Javanese and Niasans.

The Minangkabau are renowned throughout Indonesia as highly competent traders. Indeed, they are often represented as the only ethnic group who can compete with ethnic Chinese traders. The Minangkabau are given the nickname *Minangkiauw*, a reference to Chinese traders who are called *Hokkiauw* among Indonesians.¹⁰ The Chinese are the only ethnic group in contemporary Padang that can compete economically with the Minangkabau. Most of them work as traders. Because of this the Chinese, as a group, appear to threaten Minangkabau interests in that they may take over the Minangkabau's domination in the trading area.¹¹ Moreover, which can be taken as the main reason, contrary to the Minangkabau, the Chinese are patrilineal and predominantly non-Muslim (they are mostly Christian). As a result, the relations between the Minangkabau and the Chinese in Padang tend to be superficial and confined mainly to daily commercial transactions, in spite of the fact that the Chinese have lived in Padang since the time of Dutch colonization. Despite the fact that Minangkabau acknowledge the Chinese people's ability to compete with them economically, Minangkabau tend to look down on this group, as can be seen from the experience of one of my informants, Ani (a 43 year old). Ani had to break off her relationship with her Chinese boyfriend. Her Minangkabau family considered that her choice of partner would disgrace them as they say: *sarupo indak ado laki-laki lain nan sadarajat jo awak* (it would seem that there is no other man of the same status level as us anymore). Ani then married a Minangkabau man. It can be said that in maintaining relationship with Chinese, especially in "private" matters, such as marriage, Minangkabau tend to develop their exclusivity interest.

It seems that, compared to the relationship between Minangkabau and Chinese people or people of Nias, the relationship between the Minangkabau and Javanese, who mostly work as civil servants, in the military and as domestic helpers, appears to be relatively harmonious. This inter-ethnic harmony can be seen from the fact that relations between Minangkabau and Javanese people occur not only in public life and working areas, but also in private life through marriages.

⁹ This information is based on an interview with Nina's parents and extended family in Padang in January 2003, with Nina in Jakarta in February 2005, and with Nina's patrilineal extended family, in Jakarta 2010.

¹⁰ For comprehensive discussions of Indonesian Chinese ethnicity, see Coppel 2002; Suryadinata 2005; Lindsey and Pausacker 2005.

¹¹ During my fieldwork I heard several times this issue to be discussed among Minangkabau themselves. As this issue was raised by some Minangkabau, from different backgrounds and areas, it seems that they are really concerned with the possibility that Chinese traders could become economically dominant in Padang.

Based on my observations, it can be said that, in general, Minangkabau people can accept marriages between these two ethnic groups. The fact that both groups share Islam as a common religion may explain this inter-ethnic harmony. Despite this acceptance, marrying a Javanese Muslim is still a less-preferred choice for a Minangkabau, as expressed by Tuti and Niar before.

Although some socialization has occurred between the Minangkabau and the Niasans, the relationship between the two ethnic groups has not been smooth. This may be due to the fact that the two groups have different social systems: Nias is a patrilineal, predominantly Christian society. From my field work observations, it appears that most Minangkabau are somewhat patronizing and/or racist towards people from Nias. The experiences of one of my main respondents, who married a Nias man, attest to this. Although her husband has converted to Islam and has lived according to Minangkabau Islamic ways, she, her husband and children have still been ostracized and devalued by her extended family and neighbours. In an informal discussion with some respondents, I raised this issue. Most of them agreed that the reason why the Minangkabaus disrespect the Niasans is because of certain negative stereotypes about Nias people that are passed on from one Minangkabau generation to the next. My respondents assumed, for example, that the main motive for a Nias man to marry a Minangkabau woman was to obtain access to landed property. Moreover, most of them distrusted Nias men's conversions to Islam, which they saw as a tactic to later coerce wives and children to convert to Christianity. They cited various names of Minangkabau women who had converted to Christianity after marrying Nias men. Equally, I gained the impression that some Niasans living in Padang felt ashamed of their background. This rejection of their cultural background varies significantly from Dutch colonial times, when reportedly Nias dance groups proudly performed their dances on stage (Colombijn 1994: 54). Most of the Niasans I met for the first time in Padang, seldom admitted that they were non-Minangkabaus and Christian, disguising their ethnicity and "passing" as Minangkabau: it was difficult, indeed, to recognize them as being from Nias, as they spoke fluent Minangkabau and generally practised some Minangkabau *adat*.

Regarding the interactions between the Minangkabau and other ethnic groups in Padang, it can be said that most Minangkabaus have not yet fully assimilated with other ethnic groups. Despite the fact that there is tolerance, it seems that most Minangkabau in Padang tend to feel exclusive or to differ themselves from other groups, as expressed by one informant, a Minangkabau woman who married a Niasan.

They say that it is not good, even an insult, marrying a person whose background is different from ours...here there are too many rules ... [it can be said that] Minangkabau people here are still self-centred ... Above all marrying a Nias person is the worst thing..it is a really an insult for them ... it is even better to marry someone from other ethnic groups such Menadonese or Javanese but not a person from Nias. They think that it would be better to marry a Westerner than a

Niasan as their family will be in the lowest position. That is the fact. For example, not far from here there is a Minangkabau woman who married a Westerner, who built a house in this area. In the beginning the woman's parents disagreed but later on they accepted the Westerner and never insult him, unlike they may do to a Nias man.¹²

Based on this and similar interviews, it can be said that in Minangkabau society in Padang an "ethnic hierarchy" exists. Moreover, this interview indicated clearly that the visible display of certain ethnicities may result in a person experiencing social exclusion within Padang society, in spite of Minangkabau professing egalitarianism.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, this paper's conclusion has three main points. Firstly, despite the fact that Padang is a multi-ethnic city, there is a strong tendency, either by local people or local government, to identify Padang with Minangkabau culture. Secondly, as the dominant ethnic group in Padang - and their dominance is growing demographically, economically and politically - the Minangkabau has significantly contributed to the nature of inter-ethnic relations in Padang. Finally, matrilineal principles (descent and inheritance through the maternal line) and Islam are the defining aspects to be considered by Minangkabau in maintaining relationships with other ethnic groups. Moreover, the need to protect Minangkabau Islamic-matrilineal *adat*, in maintaining inter-ethnic relations Minangkabau people "play" with their assimilation and exclusivity interests.

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¹² Based on the interview conducted in Padang, December 2003.

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