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Joel S. Kahn

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Introduction

This book is primarily about a form of peasant economic activity predominant among the Minangkabau of the modern Indonesian province of West Sumatra during the period of field research between 1970 and 1972, that is to say, the production and distribution of commodities on a small, often individual scale. It is at the same time an attempt to account for the predominance of this economic form in a specific place and time.

This focus on the economy I feel needs little justification in the context of modern Indonesia, and indeed questions of poverty and underdevelopment are central concerns of the people themselves. A study of the rural peasant economy is particularly relevant when estimates have it that as much as 60 per cent of national income is derived from rural areas, and 85 per cent of the people earn their living outside the towns (see Mackie in Glassburner, 1971, p. 22).

Any study of Indonesian peasant economy must inevitably come up against a number of particularly thorny questions. Why, for example, in spite of the relative richness of Indonesia's natural resource base, has rural income failed often to keep pace even with population growth? What are the reasons for the relative technological backwardness of peasant enterprises and the general absence, at least in the modern period, of large-scale enterprise in the peasant sector? Is class differentiation among the peasantry an inevitable result of contact with a capitalist economy? These questions lead one to consider the origins of this form of economic activity and, a more central political problem, the conditions under which the peasant economy may be transformed to yield a better living to the millions of small-scale producers and traders who eke out a living at a standard many times lower than that enjoyed in the capitalist metropolis, much of the wealth of which

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has nonetheless been derived from countries like Indonesia. It is particularly important here to assess the degree to which conditions in West Sumatra are and have been the product of the integration of the region into a world capitalist system. This is indeed a more general problem for anthropologists and other social scientists who base their analyses on findings in a particular region.

For anthropologists especially the application of techniques designed to build a deep understanding of relatively self-contained social units, presuming these ever existed, to discontinuous segments of societies of ever-increasing scope has given rise to a large number of ethical, methodological and theoretical problems. The difficulty has, of course, long been recognised. Redfield, for example, asked: 'What forms of thought are available to us for conceiving and describing a whole that is both inclosed [*sic*] within other wholes and is also in some part permeated by them?' (1955, p. 114). Leach in his classic study (1954) of the oscillation between egalitarian and hierarchical forms of political organisation in highland Burma attacked the idea of neat cultural, social and tribal boundaries posited in the approach of writers like Radcliffe-Brown who had argued in 1940 that anthropologists could build up models of social structure of any particular society on the basis of research in 'any convenient locality of a suitable size' (in Radcliffe-Brown, 1963, p. 193).

In the twenty years since Redfield, Leach and others raised these questions, however, it does not seem as though anthropology has provided satisfactory answers. As evidence for this conclusion I would simply draw attention to the term used to describe societies like Minangkabau – 'peasant society'. The use of this term has given it the status of an evolutionary stage, while in fact the 'peasantries' described by anthropologists are no such thing, but have rather developed in conjunction with other classes in feudal, colonial and neo-colonial social systems.

In itself this is not a particularly interesting or original conclusion. Pick up almost any monograph and you will find an introductory statement about the outside society, the total social whole in which the village is embedded, the importance of extra-local ties, etc. And yet I would argue that in most of such cases this holistic view is set aside, and the total social structure ignored in favour of detailed analyses of purely local phenomena. The anthropologist

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in many cases accepts the peasants' own equation of physical space – the world outside – with social distance. Marriot, for example, was content to treat the Indian village of Kishan Garhi as a 'definable structure . . . a system' in itself in the light of 'the concerns and emphases that the people of the village express' (1955, p. 171), demonstrating only that while economic and political structures may not be geographically bounded, ideologies often are.

It may well be that anthropology, as a discipline which almost always requires fieldwork as a necessary exercise for its practitioners, is not likely to produce an unbiased answer to this question. And it is perhaps significant that more recently the question has been raised in other quarters. Andre Gunder Frank's radical rejection of the 'dualism' of modernisation theory is in many ways a sign of a period when some classes in the newly independent nations found they were not as independent as they had imagined. Similarly the liberation struggles of recent decades have both sought inspiration in, and inspired in turn, Marxist theory – hence giving rise for some Marxist theorists to the problem of reconciling the appearance of pre-capitalist social forms in a predominantly capitalist world-economy with the classical imperialism theories of Lenin, Bukharin and Luxemburg.

The recent debate between so-called world-systems theorists and those who advocate a concept of the articulation of modes of production has again brought to the fore the question of internal versus external influence on socio-economic organisation in the Third World.

Marxists themselves, of course, differ quite significantly on this issue. Friedman, for example, in taking issue with the concepts of mode of production and social formation maintains that the proper starting-point in such analyses is what he terms the 'system of total reproduction'. Local conditions within such a totality are said only to 'constrain and limit local variation, determine the limits of productivity, surplus extraction, intensification etc. in the short run' (1976, p. 10). Similarly Wallerstein, in positing a 'world-economy', maintains that it allows him to 'explain changes in the sovereign states as consequent upon the evolution and interaction of the world system' (1974).

In opposition to this one-sided emphasis on the totality, others give a greater role to the effectiveness of local modes of pro-

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duction. Pierre-Phillipe Rey, for example, one of the few writers to take the concept of the articulation of modes of production to its logical conclusion, implies that in transitional periods in the development of capitalism, certain branches of the economy remain largely outside the capitalist system, resisting as it were the impulse of capitalism towards the proletarianisation of the direct producer (see Rey, 1973). Any attempt to go beyond an internal description of the peasant economy, to attempt to account for its emergence, reproduction and transformation, clearly must consider this issue.

While, therefore, in one sense this book is extremely specific, in that it is a monograph in anthropology describing a particular form of economic organisation in a remote corner of the world within a brief span of time, in another sense it expresses more general concerns with the problems of underdevelopment, as well as with the pertinence of Marxist concepts like mode of production, social formation, relations of production and value in the analysis of a concrete situation.

The organisation of the book reflects this concern. The first part is an attempt to get at the nature of the West Sumatran economy, and will seek particularly to establish the primary importance of petty commodity production in the period of research. This is done largely through a detailed discussion of a single village in the highlands of West Sumatra, the home of an important blacksmithing industry. At the same time these chapters will place the blacksmithing industry in its social and economic context. After an introduction to the region, Chapter 2 presents a general survey of the village of Sungai Puar. In Chapter 3 I turn to village society, and particularly to the relation between kinship and subsistence agriculture. Chapter 4 takes up the theme of subsistence production, while in Chapter 5 I turn to the analysis of blacksmithing as an example of petty commodity production. In Chapter 6 I present a general discussion of the organisation of commodity production in the local and regional economy in order to demonstrate the significance of this particular form of peasant economic organisation.

The following part of the book turns to the problem of accounting for the emergence and reproduction of petty commodity production. Chapter 7 presents an abstract and structural analysis of petty commodity production in order to establish the structural

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conditions necessary to its emergence, as well as the conditions necessary to its reproduction. Chapters 8 and 9 are concerned with the historical development of this economic form. The former chapter attempts to lay out the historical baseline, as it were, not in a traditional and timeless society, as modernisation theory would have it, but in a 'traditionalised' society which was in fact a product of colonial mercantilism. The latter chapter then considers the breakdown of this system and the transition to the modern economy, still tied to a larger system, but in different ways and with different consequences, one of which is the emergence of petty commodity production as if not the dominant form of economic organisation certainly the *pre*-dominant one. This means taking issue with those who see differentiation of the peasantry as the inevitable product of capitalist expansion, as well as those who would characterise the peripheries of the world-economy as simply capitalist. While Chapter 9 considers the historical conditions under which petty commodity production emerged in West Sumatra, the final chapter takes up its reproduction within a world capitalist social formation, as well as attempting to look at the conditions under which petty commodity production has been and may be transformed. While therefore the second part of the book begins with an abstract structural analysis, it returns to the concrete historical situation of Minangkabau peasants in the 1970s through an examination of the historical and structural conditions of existence of the peasant economy.

Before turning to the analysis of the specific economy of the village of Sungai Puar, it is necessary to say a brief word on the region as a whole. The Minangkabau represent, in many ways, a typical object of anthropological study. Although the Minangkabau people today are just so many citizens of the Republic of Indonesia, in their own eyes, and in the eyes of observers, they have often been depicted as a unique ethnic group, sharing a language, a subculture, a religion, a homeland and apparently a rather special position within the Indonesian economy. The Minangkabau language is a dialect of the national language, Bahasa Indonesia. The subculture is known as *adat* Minangkabau, an often vague term taken to refer to that complex of matrilineal custom taken by Minangkabau and ethnographers alike to be a heritage from a 'traditional' past. Their religion is Islam, which, although often

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said to claim the adherence of 90 per cent of Indonesians, is said to be found in Minangkabau in a purer form known among Indonesianists as *santri* (cf. Geertz, 1960). Their homeland is the Indonesian province of West Sumatra (Sumatera Barat) with a population of some two million, the overwhelming majority of which is said to be ethnically Minangkabau. Some writers, however, estimate that almost as many Minangkabau live outside West Sumatra in other parts of Indonesia and overseas. As for their economic position, the Minangkabau are said to be active small-scale entrepreneurs, migrants in search of profitable trade and one of the few ethnic groups capable of competing successfully with Chinese traders and shopkeepers in Indonesia.

Not only do the Minangkabau represent in popular ideology and in the writings of scholars a unique ethnic group, eminently suitable for anthropological study, they are also seen to be undergoing processes of change typical in many ways of the changes experienced by other 'traditional' peoples in the modernising Third World. Matrilineal custom has been breaking down in the face of the pressures of colonialism and then national independence. Matrilineal *adat* is also seen to be in conflict with the demands of a purist Islam. Corporate groups are disintegrating in the face of Western-induced commercial pressures, and the power of 'traditional' elites is waning under new political conditions.

The radical changes brought by the twentieth century have, it is argued, brought forth often violent response from the Minangkabau themselves. The anti-tax rebellions of the first decade of this century, the abortive communist uprisings of the 1920s, the sweeping tide of nationalism in the period of the war for independence and the regionalist movement of the late 1950s are all taken to be responses, however incoherent, to the pressures of modernisation and commercialisation. The Minangkabau have also responded at the level of national politics. Numerous prominent national politicians are and have been ethnic Minangkabau.

In short the Minangkabau seem to provide us with an ideal subject for the study both of a traditional society, and of social change as it is at present being experienced in the newly independent nations of the Third World.

This rather facile impression of Minangkabau seems to provide the modern researcher with easy explanations for much of what is observed in the field. Ethnographers such as this one, with an

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interest in analysing both the reasons for the relative economic success of Minangkabau entrepreneurs and the causes of the underdevelopment of the region as a whole, might be tempted by explanations which rely on the cultural characteristics of the Minangkabau as an ethnic group subjected to rapid social change in the twentieth century.

However, this book is an attempt to dissolve the simplistic accounts offered above, or, to use the terminology of structuralists and Marxists, to penetrate behind the appearances in order to understand them.

Before this attempt I will present here and in Chapters 2–6 a discussion of modern Minangkabau, with particular emphasis on the economy.

The homeland of the Minangkabau

The traditional homeland of the Minangkabau is the highland area of western Sumatra – the second largest of some 3,000 islands which make up the present-day Republic of Indonesia. The modern province of West Sumatra is bordered on the north by Sumatera Utara, homeland of the Batak peoples, on the south by Jambi, on the east by Riau, and on the west by the Indian Ocean. Sumatra itself straddles the Equator, which runs just to the north of the old Dutch town of Fort de Kock, now known by its indigenous name of Bukit Tinggi.

The provincial capital and largest city in West Sumatra with a population of just under 200,000 is Padang on the west coast, which can be reached by air from Jakarta and Singapore or by boat to its near-by port of Teluk Bayur.

The Minangkabau highlands are part of a mountain chain (the Bukit Barisan) which runs from north to south along the western side of the island, rarely more than thirty-five miles from the Indian Ocean. The mountains are dotted with longitudinal rift valleys which form a discontinuous trough along their length. Blockage by volcanic debris in some of the deeper depressions in the trough has led to the formation of spectacular mountain lakes like Maninjau and Singkarak in West Sumatra. Rainfall and water from mountain springs flow through the trough, which is drained primarily by rivers which flow eastwards towards the broad alluvial lowlands of Sumatra's east coast and then into the Straits

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of Malacca. The highland valleys and plains are the site of much of the irrigated rice cultivation that is carried out in scattered areas throughout the island.

Today the province is divided into eight districts (*Kabupaten*) and six municipalities (*Kota Madya*). The districts are further divided into subdistricts known as *Kecamatan* which are in turn composed of villages called *nagari*.

Minangkabau was traditionally divided into two main regions known as Darat and Rantau. Darat refers to a geographical area as well as to a cultural phenomenon – the highlands and the culture core respectively. Rantau is taken to mean the outlying districts to the south, east and west of the Darat. This includes the coastal plain on the Indian Ocean side of West Sumatra, and the hilly regions to the south and east. The term *rantau* can also be taken to refer to any area outside the Darat populated by large numbers of Minangkabau migrants.

Early political and economic history

According to *adat*, or customary law, the Darat is divided into three main regions known as *luhak*. These are called Agam, Tanah Datar and Limopuluah Koto and their boundaries correspond largely to those of the modern districts of the same name. This division of the highlands appears to date from the period of the Minangkabau kingdom, of which not a great deal is known from the time of its founding in the fourteenth century. Traditional history maintains that the first king of Minangkabau was a Javanese aristocrat known as Adityawarman, while Minangkabau myth has it that the kingdom, and indeed Minangkabau itself, was founded by Maharajo Dirajo, one of the three sons of Iskandar Zulkarnain or Alexander the Great.

In the myth the modern forms of Minangkabau *adat* originate from two Culture Heroes – Datuak Katumungguangan and Datuak Parapatiah nan Sabatang – the former a direct patrilineal descendant of the original king, and the latter his half-brother whose father was a commoner or a sage. It was in the period of the Culture Heroes that Minangkabau was divided into village settlements known as *nagari*, that the matriclans or *suku* were formed and clan heads known as *panghulu* are said to have been installed as representatives of the king in the *nagari*.

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Elsewhere (Kahn, forthcoming) I have dealt in more detail with the significance of this myth in terms of the little history we know of the Minangkabau kingdom. I have attempted to show that Minangkabau, like other important kingdoms in the region, was an offshoot of the large trading empire of Srivijaya centred on South Sumatra, that in fact a system of dual descent was in operation, whereby royal power passed in the patriline while control of land and inheritance lay with localised matrilineal clans, and that royal power was based on an extensive regional, and indeed overseas, trade in gold, spices, cloth and forest produce.

Contrary to the picture presented in the opening pages, Sumatra has long had contact with the West. Marco Polo apparently visited North Sumatra in the thirteenth century, and Portuguese travellers like Tomé Pires visited other parts of the island. Pires collected information on Minangkabau from other visitors in the sixteenth century. By the early seventeenth century ships from the Netherlands had become involved in the pepper and gold trade on the west coast, an involvement which resulted in a series of contracts with local rulers in the latter half of the century which aimed to preserve a trade monopoly, with a charter from the Minangkabau king, for the Netherlands East India Company (V.O.C.). The British also visited the west coast, and governed their possessions from Fort Marlborough Benkulu. It was these possessions in West Sumatra which they traded to the Dutch in exchange for the port of Malacca on the Malay peninsula in the early 1800s.

When the V.O.C. was dissolved, and a colonial government took control of its possessions in the East Indies, West Sumatra again became an important focus of colonial activity. In 1847 West Sumatra was one of the few places outside Java to be subjected to the infamous *Cultuurstelsel*, or Culture System as it has been rendered in English. This was a system of forced extraction of export crops, and in the latter half of the nineteenth century the highlands of Minangkabau became a major exporter of coffee.

While the restrictions on private capitalism imposed under the Culture System were lifted in Java in 1870, West Sumatra remained closed to the expansion of plantation capitalism until just after 1910. The abolition of the Culture System in Minangkabau was followed by the rapid growth of a commercialised peasantry, and we are fortunate to have a detailed report by a Dutch sociologist on this period (cf. Schrieke, 1955) which describes at

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length both economic and social changes which followed this shift in the economics of colonialism.

Apart from being an important centre for indigenous commercial development in this century, Minangkabau has also exhibited in concentrated form the basic political changes and conflict found in other parts of Indonesia. Commercial development led to a growing class of local entrepreneurs, merchants and petty capitalists who often found themselves in opposition to the colonial powers. At the political level this generated the so-called Kaum Muda (literally Young Group) movement influenced by the strong current of Muslim modernism in the early decades of this century. The Kaum Muda set themselves against the 'traditional' hierarchy of *adat* officials and religious teachers upon whom the Netherlands had relied for the administration of the Culture System. Not surprisingly, however, the growth of a modernist movement among Indonesians brought the Kaum Muda into conflict with the colonial authorities as well.

Sarekat Islam, founded in Java, which listed among its demands greater participation by Indonesians in the governing of the colony, found widespread support in West Sumatra after a branch was established in Padang in 1915, as did other modernist organisations like Muhammadiyah, Budi Baik (founded in Bukit Tinggi in 1918) and the Sarekat Combinatie Minangkabau founded in the following year (cf. Abdullah, 1971).

A more radical political movement emerged from the heart of Sarekat Islam itself, and in 1921 radical modernists were forced out of the party. They banded together in the Sarekat Rakyat (People's Union), which was to be the organisational base for the Indonesian Communist Party (the P.K.I.). In March 1923 a Padang branch of the P.K.I. was set up, and in the same period a certain Datuak Batuah turned the famous Sumatera Thwalib school in the highland town of Padang Panjang into a centre of 'Islamic communism'.

West Sumatra was a fertile ground for the P.K.I. in its early years, and the party had considerable success until the warnings of the national and provincial leadership were ignored and a revolutionary committee called on leaders at the local level to take up arms against the Dutch. The short-lived rebellion which broke out in the village of Silungkang in January 1927 was quickly put down, and this was followed by an extended period of political