

Social change in a centrifugal society: the Minangkabau of west Sumatra

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Deskripsi Lengkap: <https://lib.ui.ac.id/detail?id=20251485&lokasi=lokal>

Abstrak

In West Sumatra, surrounded by the three mountains of Gunung Merapi, Gunung Sago, and Gunung Singgalang, there lies one of the most fertile lands in Indonesia. This region is called darek (the inner highlands in contrast to the rantau (the outer areas or frontiers). Darek is the cradleland of the Minangkabau who, in their legends, trace their ancestor to Alexander the Great. Maharaja Diraja, one of Alexander's three legendary sons, and his retinue are supposed to have arrived Gunung Merapi when that mountain top was only as large as an egg and when all other lands were still under the sea. What follows is a study of the people who created these accounts--an attempt to understand their society, history, and tradition. The Minangkabau are one of some 1402 ethnic groups scattered over 3,000 islands in Indonesia. According to the 1930 Dutch census, their share among the native population was only about three percent,³ yet if rural population density is any indication of the land's capacity to absorb population pressure, the darek, particularly the Agam plateau, is indeed fertile. The Agam plateau (237 persons per sq. km.) is the second most densely populated area outside of Java—Madura, after South Bali (453 persons per sq. km.) (Volkstelling 1930 Vol. VIII:38). As Hildred Geertz pointed out, the number of ethnic groups enumerated depends on how they are classified. The number represented here is adopted from the ethnic categories applied in the 1930 census (Volkstelling 1930 Vol. VIII: 44). Geertz (1967:24) herself gives a number of more than three hundred ethnic groups.