

Merantau: A Traditional Form of Outmigration and Its Patterns. Ethnographic Observations

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Abstract

Merantau is a traditional form of outmigration that is widespread in Indonesia. The Minangkabau in West Sumatra are one of the most renowned societies that engage in this type of migration. In this research paper, the researcher describes his ethnographic observations in brief. Long-term research was conducted sporadically, and lasted for around two decades. It was discovered that the matrilineal kinship system is a social network that attracts people from the village to contact the kin in the city. It was also detected that the direct members of the sublineage could stay longer with the relatives. Moreover, there have been alterations in the outmigration patterns compared to previous periods. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of people temporarily migrating in search of medical care at well-equipped institutions. In general, close relatives accompany the patients in order to show their support.

Keywords: *Merantau, Minangkabau, Pekanbaru, Traditional Outmigration.*

1. Introduction

The Minangkabau society, situated in West Sumatra, Indonesia, has attracted considerable interest from researchers due to its fascinating attributes. It is one of the largest matrilineal societies. This means the family system follows the maternal side. Let's say a couple has some children. In such a case, the children belong to the matrilineage of the mother and not to the matrilineage of the father. In addition, the father relocates to the residence of the wife (matrilocal).

Leaving the village and looking for some fortune outside has a huge tradition, and in Indonesian it is called merantau. It is a significant component of the Minangkabau culture. Consequently, the Minangkabau people are dispersed over numerous locations in Indonesia. In specific areas, they have even achieved a majority position, as seen in the Malaysian state of Negeri Sembilan. Therefore, it is not surprising that these characteristics of the Minangkabau society attracted many researchers.

1.1 An Introduction to the Minangkabau Society

The primary objective of this paragraph is to provide a comprehensive overview of Minangkabau society. There is a substantial body of literature available about the Minangkabau society. One plausible explanation could be the concurrent existence of a matrilineal and an Islamic way of life.

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The landscape of West Sumatra is very picturesque and attracts many visitors. The traditional longhouses (*rumah gadang*) are the home of a subunit of a matrilineage. Such a subunit is called *paruik*. This term means ‘stomach’ and refers to the fact that the inhabitants of such a house may trace their lineage back to a common maternal ancestor. In general, the house is divided into two parts. Located in the front section, a substantial area is designated for visitors to convene and engage with the people of the house. In the back part, there are small rooms. In these rooms, the female members of the *paruik* reside and their husbands visit them in the evening according to the traditional ideal. Normally, the couple resides in one of the rooms and shares the kitchen and washroom with the other inhabitants of the house.

The maintenance of a traditional house incurs significant expenses. Therefore, many residents moved to small bungalows, where the way of life is similar to the way of life in a *rumah gadang*. There is a living room, in which there is usually a sofa. The guests sit there and talk with the people of the house. On the side are rooms in which the female members and their husbands and children stay. In general, the way of life is still according to many traditional regulations.

1.2 Merantau and Minangkabau Society

Merantau (outmigration) is a very well-known Minangkabau cultural feature. An Indonesian joke is as follows: “Question: What was the first thing Mr Neil Armstrong saw when he landed on the moon? Answer: A Padang food restaurant” (retrieved 26/10/2023: <https://www.kelanadmc.com/sights-stories/padang-restaurants-everywhere/23>).

The restaurants that serve the local food of West Sumatra are called ‘Padang restaurants’, named after Padang, the capital of West Sumatra. The joke shows one significant feature, namely that many people of West Sumatra relocate to other places in order to make business. Nevertheless, there are other significant reasons to consider. In the past, many students departed from their place of origin with the intention of acquiring knowledge. Particularly the students who wanted to get better knowledge in Islamic science left their village and moved to distant places. The famous Minangkabau scholar Shaikh Burhanuddin (1646–1704) left West Sumatra and pursued his studies in the region of Aceh (Bustaman et al. 2000). Another example is Dr Abdul Karim Amrullah, who left his hometown in order to study in Mecca (Hamka, 2010).

Scholars have been captivated by the notion of outmigration. What was the reason that the Minangkabau was one ethnic group that encouraged it? Some scholars assumed that the marginal position of men encouraged them to leave their hometown and refrain from coming back. A good example is the scholar Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi who studied in Mecca and declined to return to his homeland (Ulum, 2021).

The surrounding region, known as *rantau*, and the interior highlands, known as *darek*, are distinguished in the traditional Minangkabau worldview. The interior consists of three districts (*Tanah Datar*, *Agam*, and *Limapuluh Koto*).

In the traditional Minangkabau historiography (called *tambo*), there is a mention of a first village community. This village community is located near the volcano Merapi and is named *Pariangan Padang Panjang*. The forefathers became aware that the people must move out and look for other fertile land. Therefore, they moved to the other areas. So, it can be said that from the very beginning of Minangkabau history in Sumatra, migration was important and encouraged.

The scientists and local experts distinguish between original settlers and newcomers. The local land belongs to the matrilineages of the original settlers. So, whenever new settlers come, they have to be adopted. Within the Minangkabau society, various clans exist. For example, there is a clan with the name *Caniago*. So, if the new settlers are from the same

clan, they might ask to settle in the same area of the village community and become 'adopted'.

During the 20th century, there was a transformation in the nature of merantau. New forms of industries, like the oil industry in the province of Riau, offered a new opportunity for many young men who originated from the agrarian areas of West Sumatra to find a better income that would enable them to invest the money in other businesses and to marry.

Several researchers provide a macro-sociological viewpoint that offers a comprehensive overview. This article aims to examine a small-scale case in order to gain another perspective on this traditional form of outmigration. The researcher looks at a concrete case in order to detect patterns that might show the features of a traditional form of outmigration.

2. Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review is to gain an initial comprehension of the characteristics and potential patterns of merantau. Some Minangkabau themselves are well aware that it is an important element of their society, and therefore this topic became part of the literature (Pardi, 2022). A good example is the Islamic scholar Hamka who wrote a number of novels in which he thematized topics related to it. One of these novels is *Merantau ke Deli* (Hamka, 2015) which shows the marginal situation of a person who is not in his home village. He lacks the ability to exert influence over the decision-making process and is obligated to adhere to regulations that were determined without seeking his input. Hamka inspired many scientists to look into the way he described the concept of merantau like Ibrahim Nurul Aina and Siti Nuranis Muhammad Apandi (2021) or Ikhwannuddin Nasution et al. (2023). Nevertheless, Hamka was not the sole novelist who depicted the consequences of merantau. Another more recent example could be the novel *Negeri 5 Menara* which was written by Fuadi (2009) and led to an analysis by Downes and Kobbe (2016).

Merantau is a topic of great importance for many scientists. They conducted empirical studies and published their work. The work of two researchers is highly influential, namely the book of Tsuyoshi Kato (1982) and the publications of Mochtar Naim (1979 & 1985). Kato's book gives a fascinating overview and embeds the topic of outmigration in the field of Minangkabau studies. He describes the history and economic developments and how they influenced the behavior of outmigration. It is also noteworthy that the traditional rantau areas that form a border to the interior of West Sumatra can be distinguished: there is a region on the West coast (called rantau pesisir) and a region on the East coast (called rantau hilir). For our research, it has to be stressed that Pekanbaru is located in the eastern part of Sumatra. Kato looked at more than 200 village communities and gave a good macro perspective.

Mochtar Naim's work is valuable as he describes some interesting developments regarding merantau. He mentioned that in recent years there has been a tendency towards a permanent form of merantau which is called merantau cino (Chinese merantau) (Naim, 1985). One of the possible factors could be the changes in the traditional matrilineal way of life.

Several recent papers have examined the correlation between emigration and Minangkabau society. A significant motivation for numerous males to emigrate is to enhance their living standards. Outside, they have the opportunity to learn entrepreneurial behavior (Rahman, 2016).

Siregar et al. (2022) used a different approach and checked whether the system of merantau is according to Islamic law (shariah). The authors found out that this system

emerged from matrilineal customs that were prevalent in West Sumatra before the upcoming of Islam.

Merantau is not only significant in the sphere of business but also in the field of acquiring knowledge. This point was stressed by Yeni Angelia and In'amul Hasan (2017). The pursuit of knowledge is a highly encouraged aspect of Islam.

3. Research Method

This article focuses on a particular family's experience of relocating from the interior of West Sumatra to the city of Pekanbaru, which is the capital of the Indonesian province of Riau.

The research methodology employed in this study involved conducting ethnographic observations spanning a duration of approximately two decades. The researcher made sporadic visits to Pekanbaru and observed the transformations and characteristics of individuals who migrated from their rural villages in West Sumatra in pursuit of improved employment prospects in the urban center of Pekanbaru. Every time the researcher visited the student hostel of Ibu Zaynab, he was impressed by her unselfish behavior and her assistance to the people of her village.

The researcher gathered data through the process of observation. This was not only limited to Ibu Zaynab and her family but also to the social network. In general, the Minangkabau form a network and meet each other on a regular basis. Often, the traditional coffee shop (*lapau*) was the place where the men met and discussed politics or sports.

Another strategy employed for data collection involved conducting unstructured interviews with Ibu Zaynab and the migrants residing on her premises.

3.1. Research Objectives

The following research objectives were formulated:

- A) To describe merantau of one extended family by considering the social network.
- B) To detect patterns that are related to the Minangkabau kinship system.

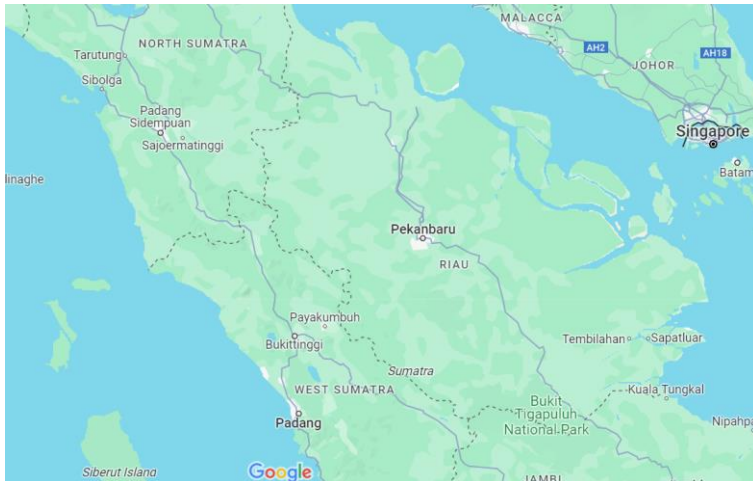
4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Background

In the middle of the 1990s, Ibu Zaynab and her family moved from a small village that was located in the area of Limapuluh Koto to the outskirts of the city of Pekanbaru². The distance to her village is around 180 km (around 4 to 5 hours by car)(Map1 and Plate 1). The village is surrounded by paddy fields, leaving the inhabitants with the options of either engaging in agricultural labor or seeking employment in nearby administrative towns such as Payakumbuh.

² The researcher uses pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of the people.

Map1. The Distance from Pekanbaru to the Village of Ibu Zaynab



(<https://www.google.com/maps/@0.7667107,100.2689398,7.38z?entry=ttu>, retrieved 18/12/2023) (The village of Ibu Zaynab is around 12 km outside of Payakumbuh)

Plate 1. The village of Ibu Zaynab



(Taken from Stark, 2018, p. 84. With permission by the author)

In the 1990s, Ibu Zaynab purchased a small plot of land and built a house on the outskirts of Pekanbaru. During that time, the municipal government and a few local investors constructed multiple residential areas that provided cost-effective housing options for the residents.

Pekanbaru is a fast-expanding city and attracts many people from the surrounding provinces. In many areas of West Sumatra, the people live from agriculture, like the cultivation of rice. Therefore, Pekanbaru is an attractive destination for merantau. Moreover, the city is known for the oil industry. Minangkabau who choose to relocate to that area will discover a substantial community that shares their language and can offer valuable guidance regarding employment opportunities.

Ibu Zaynab altered the house by building a small student hostel in the back yard of the house. This idea was promising, as two famous universities were not far away. She lived together with her husband, Budi, and her children (one son and one daughter). She also built a small store in which the people of the housing complex could buy their daily goods. Later, she also built a laundry.

During the time of the observation, it became evident that various migrants, known as perantau, from Zaynab's village resided either in the student hostel or in her house. Some

stayed only a few days or weeks until they found a new job; others stayed over a long period of time.

4.2 Patterns of Merantau

When the researcher observed the different types of migrants from the village, it became clear that nearly all of them were male. Only one perantau was female. She was a student at the nearby university. In Table 1, there is an overview of the people who contacted Ibu Zaynab in order to stay in her house or hostel.

Table 1. People who migrated from the highlands and stayed in Ibu Zaynab's House or hostel.

No.	Type of Relation	Gender and Number	Reason for Out-migration	Duration (in Ibu Z.'s House)
1.	Nephews of the same matrilineage	Male, 3 persons	Look for work.	Some months
2.	Husband of the sister	Male, 1 person	Look for work.	Some weeks
3.	Daughter of the son	Female, 1 person	Education	Permanent
4.	Villagers	Male, 6 persons	Look for work.	Some days
5.	Nephews of the Husband	Male, 3 persons	Business	Some days

A) The paruik component: The persons who were close related to Ibu Zaynab, could stay for a long period of time and were supported by the owner of the house. It was natural that they could stay without paying for the accommodations. This component shows that the matrilineal kinship system is still important.

B) The bako component: The term bako denotes the paternal family side. Even though the Minangkabau kinship system is matrilineally organized, the paternal side still plays an important role (Stark, 2020). The bako component has greater complexity compared to the paruik component and has undergone notable transformations within the Minangkabau community during the past century. In many old books, like in the mentioned novels, merantau is described as an outmigration that concerns men. However, in Table 1, we can see that one female person emigrated from the highlands in order to pursue her studies at the public university of Riau. "Nowadays, a good education is important for men and women," was the response of her father when the researcher asked him about the fact that she will live in a major city far from his house.

Within a matrilineal community, the brother of a sister assumes the responsibility of caring for his nephews and nieces (*kemanakan*). The family of Ibu Zaynab was no exception. It was accepted that the father (the husband of Ibu Zaynab) had to support his *kemanakan*. For the children of Ibu Zaynab, they belonged to the bako. In the village, it would be easy to contact them. They could just stay in the house of their wives. However, in the outer regions (*rantau*), the situation was not that easy. Therefore, they contacted their *mamak*, and he helped them to stay for a short period of time. They were provided with food and could go around and search for a suitable job. In that concrete case, they bought things and goods that were only available in Pekanbaru. After some days, they left and could sell these goods in remote villages.

C) The village component: For many villagers, Zaynab's house was the first destination. They left the village and visited Zaynab, where they inquired about the possibility of lodging in one of the rooms at the hostel. Zaynab and her husband always accepted them, and it was an unspoken rule that they were willing to leave as soon as possible. However, the villagers gained a greater sense of assurance in departing from the village, as they were aware of the presence of fellow villagers in the city who were eager to provide assistance.

4.3 Types of Merantau

Merantau can be classified into three distinct categories:

A) A permanent form: Ibu Zyanab and her family are a good example. In that form, the emigrants usually settle down in the city with the whole family. However, the emigrants (perantau) maintain a connection with their village. Ibu Zaynab still has a house in her village that is rudimentarily maintained. The house is uninhabited. However, the matrilineage still owns rice fields, and the family of Ibu Zaynab takes care of them.

B) A semi-permanent form of merantau: This type of outmigration is the one that is described in the literature. The young males go to the urban area with the purpose of engaging in employment and accumulating financial resources. Usually, this form of outmigration lasts a few years. Sometimes, the level of savings is substantial, allowing individuals to establish their own small business, such as a restaurant or shop. Occasionally, new business is opened near the hometown and sometimes in the city. If it is the second type, then it might evolve into a permanent form of outmigration.

C) A short-term outmigration: This form lasts only a few months. Often, it consists of merchants. They buy goods in the city. After that, they drive to remote villages and sell these products at higher costs. The researcher also observed a new type of short-term outmigration that is not mentioned in the literature. These emigrants are medical patients who are treated in the city of Pekanbaru. The hospitals in the city have better equipment. However, sometimes the treatment might last many months. It might involve chronic diseases, operations, and the time for recovery. In general, many relatives accompany the patient in order to support him or her. Normally, they rent a room that is close to the hospital.

4.4. Effects on the village

There were clearly visible effects on the village of Ibu Zaynab. There were more female residents than male residents. One of the reasons is the matrilineal way of life. The women are responsible for the maintenance of the houses. In the case of Ibu Zaynab, the consequences could be seen by everyone. The house, which is on the land of her paruik, was not well maintained. The windows and sections of the roof sustained damage, and the traditional ponds fell into disrepair.

Ibu Zaynab's case was not unique. Many residents of the village moved outside and decided to stay in the rantau permanently. For elderly people, the social situation was sometimes problematic as they had to stay in their homes without company.

5. Conclusion

In this article, the researcher wanted to illustrate some features of merantau by looking at one concrete case. It was detected that the matrilineages are a kind of support system that helps the people from the village. The traditional form of outmigration is still dominant. It consists of young men who emigrate and work for a limited time in the rantau. Once they have accumulated a certain sum of money, they can establish their own company.

In the village, going out and looking for business possibilities is still a concept that concerns mostly men. There are some reasons for that. In general, the matrilineage is the

owner of the land. The land encompasses the area surrounding the house, including ponds, rice fields, and others. The villages located in the highlands primarily rely on agriculture. However, some people have to work in other fields. Sometimes this requires seed capital. Therefore, the young men work hard in the major cities to get a good income. Other jobs require a good education, so it is not surprising that many villagers move to the city in order to further their studies.

This article has also shown that the network of family relatives encourages mostly young men to emigrate. With the upcoming of a more permanent form of merantau, this social network becomes stronger as the perantau invest more money in their new homes and offer new possibilities for the villagers who intend to emigrate. They might have easy access to accommodation or job opportunities.

In this paper, it was shown that merantau itself is not static but adapts to new forms of living. Education is now important for men and women, and cities are an attractive destination.

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