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The Experience of Old Age in West Sumatra, Indonesia: Culture Shift and Cultural Consonance in the Modern Era

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Abstract: The past four decades have seen enormous social change in Indonesia as the nation continues to experience rapid urbanization and social pressures in the globalized economy that have led to tensions between traditional cultures and the modern mainstream around the nation. This cultural shift has been felt strongly in West Sumatra, a region of Indonesia inhabited almost entirely by members of the matrilineal Minangkabau ethnic group. While the traditional social values of the area remain strong, they are eroding, and the Minang are becoming more like other Indonesians in terms of their family structure, occupations, and lifestyle. This has had a significant impact on the experience of old age as social and culture change has affected the traditional matrilineal structures that supported and ensured care for the elderly in past generations. This paper will describe the ways in which traditional institutions accommodated older individuals and describe how these systems have changed in the present day. Case studies across generations will be presented to illustrate the ways in which traditional matrilineal social structures are, and have been, perceived in the context of aging. Further, the paper will describe what this means for the elderly and their families in terms of cultural consonance in today’s society, and discussion will focus on the changing experience of old age in a society in transition against a backdrop of rapid urbanization and modernization.

Keywords: Elderly, West Sumatra, Cultural Consonance, Social Change

Introduction

The modern Indonesian province of West Sumatra roughly corresponds to the area traditionally inhabited by the Minangkabau people, one of Indonesia’s more than 500 ethnic/linguistic groups. The Minangkabau are part of the larger Malay world that encompasses groups in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere whose languages are related to or derive from proto-Malay and whose specific cultural practices contain common elements seen across the region. The Minangkabau are unusual, however, in that their traditional culture is matrilineal, a form of social organization that is not seen elsewhere in Indonesia. In this case, there is no doubt that matriliney long precedes Islam, the religion of the Minangkabau and of the Malay peoples in general (see Navis, 1984).

As has been the case around Indonesia, the Minangkabau people have experienced enormous social change in the years since the nation’s independence in 1945. In particular, the New Order government of President Suharto (1965-1998) was a period of intense economic development, resulting in the availability and modernization of facilities across Indonesia as well as a much stronger emphasis on modern, western-style education and employment for both men and women. While the New Order government was viewed by many Indonesians (and outside observers) as extremely problematic (see, for example, Aspinal and Mietzner (2010)), it is also the case that the standard of living and the availability of opportunities increased greatly in many parts of the nation, including in West Sumatra.

Following the fall of the New Order, Indonesia entered a period often referred to as Reformation [Reformasi], during which there was a concerted effort to undo or redress some of the control the New Order had exerted on the public. In 2001, regional autonomy was implemented nationally, changing public administration from a highly centralized system based in the capital, Jakarta, to a highly decentralized system which places the authority for a wide range of public
services at the local level. For West Sumatra, the transition has been difficult due to a lack of experience at lower levels of government and also to regionalism, similar to what has been experienced all over Indonesia (Suryanto et al, 2010). While there are now many more opportunities at the local level, strong preferences for people who come from the area in question are often observed, and there have been numerous disputes over resources and policy between neighboring regions (Fahmi, 2009). In West Sumatra, this rapid political change, along with dramatically rising income and access to technology, has greatly stressed traditional social structures and societal institutions as the public tries to adapt and adjust.

The Matrilineal Culture in West Sumatra

In traditional Minangkabau society, women head extended families centering on a female ancestor, her daughters, and their children. Each individual remains a member of his or her mother’s family for life. For this reason, men retain an obligation to their maternal line and a special responsibility for their sisters’ children. Extended family groups control all real property, and the women who head the family are the prime decision makers. Land and resources are allocated to the female members for their use, but this property cannot be sold without the consent of the extended family. Traditionally, men were expected to work their wife’s family land and contribute to the income of their nuclear family but also retained an interest in the property of their mother’s family. The earnings of both men and women through their own initiatives (such as from formal employment) was their own property that could be used however they wished (see Hakimy, 1994a, 1994b, for a detailed discussion of Minangkabau matriliny).

Minangkabau men traditionally participated in a process of temporary migration where they left their region of origin to work or participate in education in another place before, ideally, returning to their village to settle. This was possible because male children did not play a role in the management of family property, and, in fact, this process of temporary migration carried great social value to the individual as well as to the community. In practice, however, many Minangkabau men did not return and settled permanently in other locations often marrying non-Minangkabau women. Over time, this has given rise to large communities of people of Minangkabau origin in the provinces bordering West Sumatra, in Jakarta and other parts of Indonesia, and in the state of Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia.

One of the strengths of this traditional matrilineal system is that it provided a place for every member of society in his or her mother’s family. Women and children were protected economically in cases of divorce or abandonment, and the elderly were also accommodated. For the duration of a couple’s married life, the husband resided with his wife among her extended family, while still playing a role in his own mother’s family. For women, who remained with their family for their whole life and enjoyed the use of family property and land, death of a husband had little impact economically, and elderly women enjoyed a position of respect and social influence among their daughters and granddaughters. If they remarried, their new husband would live with them and their extended family. For men, the death of their wife often meant they would return to their mother’s extended family for the remainder of their life or until they remarried when they would join their wife’s extended family. Men’s social role as guardian of their sisters’ children was a lifelong responsibility that ensured them a place in their maternal family.

In modern Indonesia, the Minangkabau are unique in maintaining this type of social structure, as the majority of the nation’s ethnic groups have a patrilineal social structure. However, the rapid changes to Indonesian society in both the political and economic sectors and the demands of participation in the modern state are contributing to the disintegration of traditional social structures in West Sumatra (Ilyas, 2012). As more individuals, both male and female, achieve higher levels of education and increasingly work in modern contexts, more Minang are living away from their places of origin separate from extended families, and nuclear families are becoming the
norm. The result is that the experiences of most Minang are very different from those of their parents and grandparents.

**Cultural Consonance**

Culture is the shared set of knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and practices that are associated with a particular group. Language, religion, and common origin are often components of culture and help define groups with similar practices. For a given culture, there are often specific factors that represent an ideal or aspirational experience that is part of the worldview of the group in question. For the Minangkabau, for example, the way in which the extended, matrilineal family functions is part of this social ideal.

Cultural consonance refers to the extent to which the personal experience of a member of a cultural group aligns with the model provided by the culture of which the person is a part (Dressler, 2005, 2007). Individuals recognize a set of experiences that are meaningful in the context of their culture and that contribute to the person’s social position and role relative to others (Romney et al, 1986). The alignment of their own life events with those that are most salient in their cultural environment determines the degree of cultural consonance a person perceives. It has been shown that a lack of cultural consonance may be associated with negative health outcomes (Dressler et al, 1998; Dressler et al, 2005).

Low cultural consonance may result when a person is unable to achieve social goals that are significant in his or her culture and, as a result, does not have the experiences that are generally acknowledged to be important in the community in which he or she lives (Dressler, 2012). In Indonesia, low cultural consonance is a factor in the lives of many elderly people, due in part to the rapid social change of the past several decades that has resulted in the decline of traditional patterns of living along with the changing aspirations of younger people. Depression and related disorders are an increasing problem among older people in Indonesia (Wada, 2009; Ng et al, 2010) and are frequently associated with living alone, lacking family support, and being separated from children and other family members, all of which have intensified in recent years.

The problem of depression and other psychosocial complaints is significant in West Sumatra (Departemen Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2004), and lack of cultural consonance among the elderly is an increasing problem, although there has been no detailed study of this issue to date. Some work exists on the impact of migration on the elderly (see, for example, Kreager, 2006; Indrizal et al, 2009), but these studies have not considered cultural consonance specifically. The present work seeks to fill this gap. The case studies presented here were collected over a period of years from residents of the Tanah Datar region of West Sumatra. Using a narrative ethnographic approach, elderly individuals were asked to describe their experiences and discuss the changing nature of their extended family, community institutions, and the society in which they live. They were also asked to describe the experiences of their own parents. The material presented here is part of a larger study of cultural consonance, social change, and health in this community.

**Case Studies**

Kenine, Abdullah, Sarna, and Mansur were all born in the village of Koto Panjang in the Tanah Datar region of West Sumatra. Sarna and Mansur are alive today. Kenine and Abdullah were members of an earlier generation whose experiences took place before the social and political change that emerged at the end of the New Order period and has shaped current society.

Kenine died in 1977 at the age of 102. At that point, she had been a widow for 25 years and lived in the house she had grown up in with four of her children and 23 grandchildren. She had been the only daughter in her family and, as a result, came to control a large amount of productive land as well as the home of the extended family and other assets upon the death of her mother. In addition she had four daughters who, along with their husbands and children, lived with her,
providing support and assistance. When her husband died, Kenine’s life did not change much, and her economic situation did not change at all. She had been one of her husband’s three wives, and he did not spend much time with her. During the day, he was at his mother’s house managing his family’s land and business, and most nights, he went to the house of one of his other wives. Kenine had been raised to manage the family’s property from a young age and also to expect economic certainty and material and emotional support from members of her matrilineal family, which she did enjoy. In the context of Minangkabau society, Kenine’s experience was ideal and accorded with the cultural and social norms of her community, providing her with a secure place, the love of her family, and great respect from others around her.

Abdullah died in 1955, having survived his wife by a number of years. This was a very difficult situation because he had been living, as was the norm, in his wife’s family’s home with her three older sisters and their children, his wife’s younger unmarried sister, and his widowed mother-in-law. One of his wife’s two brothers lived elsewhere in the village with his wife but spent a great deal of time in the family home. This brother and Abdullah’s mother-in-law managed the extended family’s business and other affairs. Abdullah himself had not spent much time there during his married life and was there mostly at night as he had to help his mother and sisters with their family business. After his wife’s death, Abdullah moved in with his widowed sister and her two daughters. There was no bedroom available for him, so his sister partitioned off part of the living room and put a mattress there for him to sleep. Abdullah got along well with one of his nieces, but the other disliked him, complaining he treated her sister better. He admitted this but claimed it was because of her own behavior. Despite the fact that Abdullah and the one niece often quarrelled, he got along well with his sister and her other daughter who provided him with everything he needed. He knew he had to accept the problems between himself and his niece because he contributed to them by his own behavior.

Sarna is one of Kenine’s daughters and, at the time of this writing, is 98 years old. She has been a widow for 20 years and lived her whole life in the village where she was born. She too has four daughters and also four sons. Until Kenine’s death, Sarna lived with her mother. At that time, the family assets were divided among her and her three sisters, but there was more than enough to support them all, especially as many of the children had good jobs to supplement the family wealth. Unlike the previous generation, however, all Sarna’s children finished school and some earned university degrees. Sarna herself had not finished elementary school, and Kenine had been illiterate. All of Sarna’s daughters had moved to other parts of Indonesia, first to study and later to live. When her husband died, many of Sarna’s children were still in the village, she was economically secure, and expected to grow old among her extended family as her mother had. However, when her eldest daughter married, she moved to Jakarta with her husband. Her younger daughters followed suit, leaving her alone in the village. Sarna missed her children and grandchildren and openly expressed her dissatisfaction with life. Three years ago, she had a stroke and needed a great deal of help. One of her sons lives in the village and would often come to her house to assist her, but this was not the same as having a daughter to support her because her son had obligations to his own wife in whose house he lived. Sarna could not live with them because this would not be socially acceptable. Although she realized she could no longer live alone, Sarna was reluctant to move to Java to live with one of her daughters because of the financial burden that would cause them; in the village, she controlled the family assets and would have been able to support her daughters and their families if they had lived there. She was also afraid to be in an unfamiliar environment and uncertain of how her grandchildren, all of whom had been born in Jakarta, would feel. They knew nothing about the matrilineal ways of the village, and a maternal grandmother might mean little to them. A year ago, Sarna suffered a second stroke, and her oldest daughter decided to bring her to Jakarta to live with her. Sarna was forced to accept but with great regret. She is unhappy in Jakarta although her daughter and grandchildren treat her kindly. She misses the village, however, and wishes she could live there with at least one of her daughters.
Mansur died in 2011 at the age of 84. His wife died sometime before that, and two of his sisters had long since left the village with their husbands. A third sister had lived in the village but had died a few years before. The children of this sister did not want Mansur to live with them. This crushed Mansur because he and his sister had been very close, and he assumed he would live with this sister and her family if anything happened to his wife as the sister had been occupying their mother’s house on the family land. After the sister’s death, however, a bitter dispute about the inheritance of family property had destroyed Mansur’s relationship with his nieces and nephews. Mansur had no choice but to beg his own children to let him live with them. Two of his five children lived in the village and reluctantly agreed. Mansur was desperately unhappy because the whole village was talking about what a bad person he must be to have been abandoned by his own family and now had to live at his wife’s house, even though she had died. Mansur was deeply ashamed and stopped leaving the house. He even stopped going to the mosque for the Friday prayer because he could see people were talking about him and his aberrant situation.

Discussion

The matrilineal social system of the Minangkabau, in its ideal form, ensures economic and emotional support for women in their family home from birth to death. Men remain integral parts of their mother’s family and have a permanent place and right to support, especially during periods of their life when they are unmarried. The system is based on ancient patterns of agricultural work, large families, and low levels of mobility. Extended families typically controlled rice fields and other productive land on which members of the extended family worked and whose produce supported group. Private income earned by individual members, who were often men but increasingly women as well, could be used for the needs of the individual’s nuclear family or to supplement the larger group. In the past, the system worked reasonably well because its preconditions were often fulfilled, and members of the community had a vested interest in supporting the matrilineal institutions because there were few, if any, alternatives.

Individuals who reached old age up to the early years of the New Order government were often able to achieve a stable position that accorded them respect and economic support. They were also able to maintain lifelong family networks that provided companionship, assistance, and recognized relationships with relatives that conferred social status and purpose in the community. For Kenine, for example, old age conformed in every respect to the ideal cultural conceptualization of the role of older women in Minangkabau society. She enjoyed increasing respect and status, a great deal of authority, and constant stimulation and activity as the center of her large, extended family. Abdullah, a member of the same generation, experienced less ideal circumstances, due in part to the composition of his family as well as its financial means. Nonetheless, he had a place within his matrilineal family, social status as the maternal uncle, and respect within the community. The situation where a woman predeceases her husband has always been problematic in Minangkabau society, but the larger families of the past as well as individuals’ willingness to accommodate others to whom they had a traditional responsibility meant that most people were able to benefit from the system.

In 1978, a year after Kenine died, electricity came to this part of Indonesia, followed by television a few years later. All children had the opportunity to go to at least elementary school by this time, and many continued to high school in a nearby town. This generation, made up of the children of people like Sarna and Mansur, aspired to higher education and modern jobs. More important, it was the first in Indonesia to have significant exposure to television and, with it, to the national culture. A strong national culture, using Indonesian rather than one of the nation’s hundreds of local languages, centered in Jakarta, and depicting a westernized, modern lifestyle of individual achievement in the public realm, was part of the legacy of the New Order. Despite the political problems of the era, young people growing up during the second half of the Suharto years experienced greatly enhanced educational opportunities (and massive competition to take
advantage of them), increasing standard of living, and the development of a national identity parallel to their ethnic identity. The subsequent era of regional autonomy has increased the pace of modernization and urbanization, especially in relation to access to technology, travel, and business opportunities through deregulation and the loosening of social control.

The result of this has been that younger members of Minangkabau society, like their counterparts in other parts of Indonesia, are increasingly participating in the institutions of modern Indonesia, such as higher education and formal work. Fewer of them are interested in a life in the village and in agricultural work on family land which is owned communally and whose profits must be shared. Most are living in nuclear families in homes that they purchased or built themselves and hence are outside of traditional inheritance lines. While many still feel a strong bond to their village of origin as well as to their parents and other elderly relatives, their economic and living situation often precludes them doing much for these family members. This is especially the case when the younger generation has moved away, as in the case of Sarna’s children, and is no longer integrated into the matrilineal system. As older Minangkabau, and especially women, are frequently reluctant to leave their village and completely give up their claims to family assets and the accompanying social status, many are left without appropriate social and material support.

In terms of cultural consonance, this has created a serious psychosocial burden for older Minangkabau of both genders. Ill health and emotional pressure, as in Sarna’s case, may make it extremely difficult to remain in the village. Social change has contributed to this situation, making life in the village less and less desirable, or even possible, for younger family members who could provide care and companionship for ailing older relatives. In some cases, like Mansur’s, older people are forced into living situations they find shameful and difficult because social structures have deteriorated, their personal situation has been unfortunate, and they have no other alternative. For people like Sarna and Mansur, however, their expectations for old age have changed little from those of their parents and grandparents whose later years they witnessed firsthand. These individuals reached adulthood during a period when the traditional matrilineal social structures were much more intact and expected to live out their lives within those traditions.

Social change of the kind experienced in Indonesia is not unique and has been felt in many locations around the world. The accompanying social phenomenon where younger people are more interested in a modern lifestyle and are not personally invested in traditional institutions is also comparable to what has occurred in other places. In West Sumatra, however, the matrilineal system is sufficiently different from the Indonesian mainstream to make it impossible for many young people to reconcile what would be their traditional obligations as members of extended families with their modern responsibilities as wage earners and parents in the context of nuclear families. For example, a large number of Indonesians work in modern occupations and do not have the time or expertise to manage the traditional affairs of an extended family, even if they live in their family’s place of origin. Similarly, large numbers of Minangkabau men and women have spent their adult lives in other parts of West Sumatra or Indonesia where they moved to attend a university or to work. Their children, like Sarna’s grandchildren, were born there and, in many cases, do not even speak the Minangkabau language, preferring Indonesian, the language of formal education, government, the media, and so forth. In some cases, these younger individuals also speak the local language of the place where they were born and grew up and are acculturated into that community rather than Minangkabau society of their older relatives. To these young people, elderly maternal relatives are simply grandparents, great aunts, and great uncles, and do not have the special social status that Kenine and Abdullah did.

The resulting problem of depressed, unsupported elderly people, often with no family, is of increasing significance in West Sumatra. Approximately 10% of the population of the province is over 60, and this proportion is increasing rapidly. Similar to other parts of the world, the majority of this elderly population is female, reaching a ratio of 8:1 by the ninth decade of life (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak, 2012). The rate of depression among the elderly in this region has been estimated to range from 8-15% (Departemen Kesehatan Republik
Indonesia, 2004). For those living in institutions for the elderly, a new but increasingly significant situation among the older population that has no family members in the area or that, unlike Mansur, cannot tolerate a socially inappropriate living situation, the rate of depression reaches 58% (Ausrianti, 2010).

Depression and related conditions are not traditionally recognized as illness in Indonesia or West Sumatra. The health care professions are familiar with them now and use loan words, such as *depresi*, to label them in patients. Individuals, however, characterize their feelings as sad, anxious, uneasy, or ashamed and report being unable to sleep, having no interests or initiative, or being unwilling to associate with others. While there are many possible causes of depression in the elderly, it is common for older people in West Sumatra to say that they feel useless, that their life is empty, and that they have no social role (Syukra, 2012). These self-characterizations relate directly to a lack of cultural consonance where the rapid changes to Minangkabau society have made it difficult for many elderly people to experience the kind of later life they expected based on the precepts of their culture and the situation they observed in relation to their own parents and grandparents.

For the elderly of West Sumatra, social conditions have changed faster than culture due to a combination of political evolution, the tension between national and local identity in Indonesia, the advent of technology, and increased opportunities for the young. The result has been a shift in the relative importance of the local matrilineal culture and its institutions as compared to mainstream Indonesian culture such that younger people are much less invested in maintaining the traditional structures of society. Without the support of younger generations, the social roles for the elderly as senior members of the matrilineal community are disappearing, and many individuals have been left without the social and economic support they need and, equally importantly, were conditioned by their earlier life experiences to expect.

**Conclusion**

The problem of elderly people without family or community to support them is of increasing significance in Indonesia and is seen as a looming crisis (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Kesejahteraan Rakyat, 2012). In Indonesia, the term applied to this group of older people who lack a network of family and place in the community is *lansia terlantar*. *Lansia* is an acronym for *lanjut usia*, ‘(people of) advanced age’. *Terlantar* means ‘abandoned, neglected’ and can also be applied to vacant houses, rundown buildings, and so forth. While the individuals profiled here do not fall into this category because they still have family members they can rely upon, the problem of these abandoned elderly is particularly serious in West Sumatra (Akmal, 2012) perhaps because the matrilineal social structures that protected them and created a social role for the elderly were highly functional in the past such that the community as a whole did not have to develop alternatives until very recently. Now, however, this part of Indonesia must try to catch up as the population of elderly expands, and the serious health and well-being issues of its members move to the forefront.
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