

Joke van Reenen. *Central Pillars of the House: Sisters, Wives, and Mothers in a Rural Community in Minangkabau, West Sumatra*. Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1996. 284 pp.

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In 1914 Carrie Catt wrote about the Minangkabau in *Harper's Magazine*: "The people are now taking an intelligent view of their own comparative status among the peoples of the world, and more than one possesses a fair knowledge of ethnology." This ethnographic self-awareness was in part due to fashionable *Indoloog* (scholar-bureaucrat) interrogations by Dutch officials, and in part to the forced defense of Minangkabau cultural peculiarities in the face of Wahabi-inspired Islamic reformism. By Catt's day the Minangkabau people had already had fifty years to become familiar with "anthropological" discourse. Today's researcher, eager to wring another ethnography from West Sumatra, is forced to engage a people who—for the past 150 years—have learned to tell anthropologists *exactly* what they want to hear. Codified first in the nineteenth century as the "Tambo Alam Minangkabau," and revived in more recent books,¹ the notion of a Minangkabau-wide *adat* (custom) is one of the most stifling monoliths of Minangkabau cultural studies. And a general familiarity with anthropological expectations concerning *adat* make the Minangkabau particularly adept at undermining foreign researchers' well-intended projects. Conversations with *adat* law experts usually elicit the same, automatic, rehearsed speeches. While these *adat* experts are extremely receptive to the fieldworker, their responses can be mystifications and stock reiterations of the anthropological theory that was to be tested in the first place.

Joke van Reenen's dissertation cuts through the generalizations and *adat* dross. *Central Pillars of the House*—published as a monograph by the Center for Non-Western Studies—is an exceptionally rigorous, localized study of a single Minangkabau village. Van Reenen spent enough time doing research in West Sumatra so that she can weigh these generalized *adat* proclamations against the data gathered in the village of Rao-Rao. Backed by nine years of field experience in West Sumatra, *Central Pillars of the House* is a fine contribution to both kinship and gender studies, and an important addition to the expansive literature on the Minangkabau.

The lure of Islam and Matriliney is irresistible to anthropologists. Since the publication of Josselin de Jong's *Minangkabau and Negeri Sembilan* in 1951, Minangkabau as a subject for case-studies has been locked firmly into the anthropological canon. In the past three years, there have been at least four American dissertations seeking to analyze gender in Minangkabau. This is the literature that van Reenen addresses in her study. She writes, "The principal aim is to examine the view, experiences, and strategies of adult village women as actors within networks of family and kin, in the context of a rapidly changing environment." (7)

The book can be divided into two parts. In the first four chapters, van Reenen discusses the village of Rao-Rao—the site of her fieldwork—and the implications of her

¹ These books are, principally, M. Nasroen's *Dasar Falsafah Adat Minangkabau* (Djakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1957), and later A. A. Navis' *Alam Berkembang Jadi Guru* (Jakarta: Grafifi Pers, 1984).

observations in the context of Minangkabau studies. By her own telling, she was first sent to West Sumatra in 1984 to help Andalas University in Padang establish a program in anthropology. Her appointment at Andalas lasted over five years, and her research continued until 1993, during which time she participated in two separate research projects. The first was a study on "survival strategies of female-headed households" sponsored by the national Biro Pusat Statistik (Central Bureau of Statistics), and this project provides data for the initial quantitative chapters. After a detailed review of the anthropological literature on Minangkabau, the book launches into a demographic analysis of the "socio-economic context" of the village, Rao-Rao. There are a few important observations in this first section, most notably that the household traditions of Rao-Rao seem to undermine the Koto-Piliang Bodi-Caniago customary dichotomy that is considered so essential in Minangkabau. (72-74)

The second half of the book will appeal to readers who are less concerned with nitty gritty Minangkabauist statistics. Drawn from van Reenen's second project—a study on gender and kinship—the work is qualitative, offering life-histories to complement the data in chapter four. The study was carried out by van Reenen and a group of assistants from Andalas University. Having sloughed off the methodology and associations of the government's statisticians, the new research is more intimate and ethnographically rich. Van Reenen's narratives are well selected to humanize her discussion of the relationships between women and their siblings, marriage arrangements, and marriage and divorce. Through interviews van Reenen seeks to explain the transformations in Minangkabau marriage practices over the past twenty years—illuminating the specific demands placed on a marriage by a matrilineal and matrifocal society, and investigating the implications of the exceptionally high divorce rate in Minangkabau.

Curiously, there is no reference to the impact her presence might have had on the village; she was, at times, a representative of the Central Government research team, taking notes and asking questions. Both in the settlement of land disputes and in the definition of the village polity, Jakarta has played a controversial role in Minangkabau throughout the past decade. Given van Reenen's various positions of power in the village and her changing links to outside authority, it is striking that she never feels the need to explore the problems associated with her presence there. In the face of so many other self-indulgent, reflexive ethnographies, it is almost refreshing to read an "I"-less text. But I wonder whether her use of the corporate "we" throughout the book is the result of a stylistic decision, or a reflection of the nature of the research.

Central Pillars of the House is, in depth of research and understanding, the best of the handful of recent Minangkabauist ethnographies. But like these other studies that claim to foreground gender, van Reenen nods to some vague body of "male-centric" literature analyzing gender in Minangkabau in her decision to focus almost exclusively on women. In fact, no study has ever considered masculinity or gender in Minangkabau from male perspectives. And despite all claims to the contrary, no ethnographies have focused on the thoughts of Minangkabau men regarding marriage and home life. Van Reenen—as well as other scholars—would do well to consider the opinions of Minangkabau men in the course of research, rather than relying on books by Navis and Datuk Rajo Penghulu which are less than representative. In van Reenen's study it would have been nice to have some male voices to make this "gendered"

analysis less one-sided. It is unfortunate, too, that the writings of Minangkabau women like Rohana Kudus, Rahmah el Yunusijjah, and Saadah Alim are not consulted. Minangkabau women have been actively debating gender roles since the 1910s, and likely earlier. Finally, as a source-conscious historian, I am troubled that van Reenen relies on an unpublished and inaccessible autobiography by Sutan Sinaro. Such texts are not uncommon in Indonesia; they should almost be treated as manuscripts, with storage locations given in the bibliography.

Central Pillars of the House is an important book for anyone who is interested in the anthropology of Minangkabau. Van Reenen, in concentrating on the village of Rao-Rao and conscientiously relating her findings to the scholarship on Minangkabau generally, has given us the best gauge of the validity of the Minangkabau-wide claims made by *adat* experts and foreign scholars. While the monograph is probably not the "contribution to the theoretical debate on gender and kinship" that van Reenen hopes it will be (8), it is an important addition to the burgeoning field of "Minangkabau studies." (243)