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Articles

The Traditional Decision-making Process of *Berkaul* in Tanjung Emas, West Sumatra: Its Nature and Significance

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Berkaul is a traditional practice associated with the rice cultivation cycle in West Sumatra, Indonesia, intended to seek consensus within the local community about agricultural practices and management of water for irrigation. *Berkaul* is deeply rooted in the *adat* and worldview of the region but is much less commonly practiced today than in the past and has disappeared in many parts of the region. This article describes the process of *berkaul* in Tanjung Emas, West Sumatra, places it within the context of Minangkabau *adat* and tradition, and considers its value in fostering participation, empowerment, and social inclusion in the context of rural development.

Keywords: *adat*, agriculture, *berkaul*, empowerment, Indonesia, irrigation, Minangkabau, participation, rice, West Sumatra.

Background

Indonesia is unique in the variety of its cultures, languages, and people. While this diversity is perhaps most apparent between different ethnic groups, considerable differences are also observable within a given ethnic group at the local level. The customs that are traditional in a particular community in Indonesia are intertwined with the particular *adat* (local law and customs) practiced in that area and shape the institutions of regional society.

Adat maintains a position of particular importance in West Sumatra among the Minangkabau people, who pride themselves

on their traditions and social structures. While the origins of many aspects of *adat* lie in the distant past, it is still possible to observe ancient practices in some parts of the region. A number of these customs relate to agriculture and especially to the cultivation of rice, the primary crop in the area. As is the case in other parts of Indonesia and the Malay world, rice enjoys a special significance, and the demands of its cultivation define the yearly agricultural cycle today as they have since before recorded history.

The traditional practice of *berkaul* associated with the rice planting cycle described here was observed in 2009 in Tanjung Emas, located in the Tanah Datar region of West Sumatra. Tanah Datar is one of the three original *luhak*, or regions, occupied by the Minangkabau people in the Sumatran highlands near Mount Merapi. This Minangkabau heartland is traditionally referred to as the *darek*, the centre of Minangkabau culture from which the people spread to form new communities in the *rantau*. The *rantau* is everywhere beyond the *darek*. In ancient times, it referred mostly to the coastal area along the Indian Ocean where the modern provincial capital of West Sumatra, the city of Padang, is located and other areas that are now part of the province. Gradually, the *rantau* expanded to include regions in neighbouring provinces (Jambi, Bengkulu, etc.) where large numbers of Minangkabau reside as well as more distant areas, including Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia.

Today the traditional spatial division of the Minangkabau world into the *darek* and *rantau* is still significant and is closely related to the traditional practice of *merantau*, leaving home to seek one's fortune. Originally, many of these *perantau* (those who left) were expected to return to the village where their experiences in other places were viewed as beneficial to the community and supporting their participation in its social life. In practice, however, many *perantau* settled permanently in other places, accounting for the large communities of Minangkabau in regions adjacent to West Sumatra, Jakarta, and beyond. Nonetheless, these Minangkabau, as well as those in the original *rantau* areas now in West Sumatra, still tend to view the practices and traditions of the *darek* as representing the

most authentic manifestations of their culture. Not surprisingly, the *adat* of these *darek* regions tends to show greater continuity over time and less adaptation to outside influences than that of the *rantau*. It is for this reason that traditional practices in villages like Tanjung Emas are worthy of observation and provide insight into the original culture of this region and its people.

Berkaul as a Tradition in the Agricultural Cycle

Berkaul, the act of making a vow to be carried out if a particular venture is successful, has been a part of the agricultural cycle in Tanjung Emas, Tanah Datar, for generations. This event takes place at the start of the rice planting period when the rainy season is beginning. *Berkaul*, which is also known as *turun ke sawah* (going to the rice fields), marks the point at which the planting cycle can begin anew. Most of the rice fields in this area rely on availability of ambient water, which must be expertly managed to ensure a successful crop, and planting starts with the onset of the rainy season. *Berkaul* involves everyone who owns rice fields in the same contiguous area and provides an opportunity for discussion of any aspect of the agricultural process. Each stage of activity, from ploughing the fields to harvesting, must be planned in advance, and every individual is free to participate and contribute to discussion. This process of consensus is a central feature of traditional Minangkabau society, the importance of which is stressed throughout the traditional literature of the region.

Consensus, in this context, requires that the group discuss and come to an agreement about the issue at hand. The process of give and take inherent in reaching a decision is viewed as valuable in itself, and a course of action that has been reached in this way is considered superior to a decision made unilaterally by one party. These ideas are reinforced in proverbs and other traditional expressions that are well known to the public and used in ordinary interaction. An example is the common proverb *Bulek aia ke pambuluah, bulek kato ka mufakaik* (Water is collected in the bamboo pipe, agreement is

reached through consensus). The metaphor of this utterance likens the decision-making process to the flow of water in the rice fields, where small streams of water (individual views) run into a collecting conduit and are made into one large stream (consensus). A similar idea is expressed in another proverb using a different metaphor. *Lamak kato dilega buni, siriah lega carano* (Words sound good when everyone has spoken, betel nut tastes good when the dish has been passed around) expresses the importance of everyone present having an opportunity to contribute his or her ideas. *Bulek baru digolekkan, pipieh baru dilayangkan* ([It has to be] round before [it can be] rolled, [it has to be] flat before [it can be] thrown) describes the conditions necessary for putting a plan into action. The way forward has to be shaped by the views and opinions that have been given by those involved. Once agreement has been reached, it is possible to act, just as an object has to be round in order to be rolled or flat in order to be thrown. There are many other similar expressions using a variety of metaphors that convey similar ideas (for a complete discussion of this, see Fanany and Fanany 2003). A related utterance is used as the motto of the province of West Sumatra, *Tuah sakato, cilako basilang* (Good fortune [lies in] agreement, disaster [comes with] discord).

As is the case in most of Indonesia, the people of West Sumatra are dependent on rice as their staple crop and main food source, and it also represents a source of wealth. It is for this reason that traditions such as *berkaul* centre on the rice growing cycle and the agricultural year is structured around the demands of its cultivation. The importance of rice, as food as well as a symbol of wealth and status, is also embodied in the traditional literature of the region. Utterances like *Dek padi segalo manjadi* (If [you] have rice, everything works out) make this idea explicit. Rice is also an important metaphor for other desirable qualities, as in *Alemu padi nan ka dipakai, makin berisi makin marunduak* (The wisdom of the rice should be used; the fuller [it is], the more [it] bends). Images of rice and consensus even appear together in some utterances, like *Padi samo tumbuhan jo siangan, adaik samo tumbuhan jo sengketo* (Rice grows together with weeds; *adat* grows together with discord). This proverb describes what

appears to be a paradoxical situation where weeds (and hence the need to remove them) appear to help the rice grow and, similarly, *adat* is made stronger by discussion and disagreement over its nature and applications.

Presumably the consensus reaching process of *berkaul* was once part of the agricultural activities all over West Sumatra. It is now beginning to disappear and has certainly lost much of its significance as a means to reaffirm social relationships and facilitate cooperation at the local level. Despite the fact that the regional media in West Sumatra have occasionally run articles outlining the importance of *berkaul* in the context of traditional agricultural practices (see, for example, Agustinus 2009) and local officials have also stressed its value (Antara 2009), this event is rarely seen in most of the region and has, in fact, disappeared in many locations. Even so, there has been renewed interest among members of the public in some villages in recent years which seems to relate to a broader return to local practices following the inception of Regional Autonomy in 2001 (see, for example, Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 2001; Henley and Davidson 2008; Achman and Ganie-Rochman 2009). In fact, the increased importance of local administrations as part of Regional Autonomy has created new opportunities for traditional practices as a much broader range of functions are now controlled at this level.

Berkaul in Tanjung Emas

In July 2009, a group of farmers in the Sungai Ameh area in Tanjung Emas decided to hold a *berkaul* event in anticipation of the new planting season. These farmers all work rice fields in the same general area and make use of the same water system. They call themselves the Sawah Darek Farmers' Group, where *sawah darek* is the traditional designation for their fields in this area. Their leader is a forty-three-year-old local man named Jasman.

Members of the group all contributed to the cost of the event through the dues that they pay to belong to their farmers' group. Groups or associations of this kind, called *kelompok tani*, are found

throughout Indonesia and provide a means for small farmers in a particular area to pool their resources to generate more buying power (for seed, agricultural chemicals) and are also utilized as forums for disseminating information and innovation. For this reason, the Department of Agriculture as well as local authorities often interact with farmers through these organizations, which in some places also operate as mutual aid societies. Records of farmers' groups around Indonesia are kept by the Department of Agriculture and they are frequently the focus of its programmes (see, for example, Zakaria 2009). The formation of these groups and use in this manner has been established by a ruling of the Minister of Agriculture (Departemen Pertanian 2007) and they have frequently been the subject of academic research in Indonesia (see, for example, Supadi and Nurmanaf 2006; Suharyon 2007; Matatula 2009).

In Tanjung Emas, the individual dues paid to the farmers' group depend on the quantity of seed used by a member. Dues are paid in rice using a one-to-one calculation. For example, if a farmer uses one *gantang* of seed, he is required to contribute one *gantang* of rice. The *gantang* is a standard unit traditionally measured with a section of bamboo. In Tanah Datar, one *gantang* is about 2.8 kilograms and is subdivided into four *cupak*. The dues collected by the Sawah Darek group amounted to about a ton of rice. This rice is referred to as *padi bondoa* in the local dialect of the Minangkabau language, where *bondoa* is an irrigation ditch or channel. The term derives from the usage these dues are put to, namely to compensate those members who manage the water for the rice fields.

The individuals in charge of water management are called the *siak bondoa*. They are entitled to half the rice collected in dues from members of the farmers' group in recognition of their extremely important role in overseeing the irrigation system and ensuring that water is available to all the members at the times required. Three *siak bondoa* are chosen from the members of the group to serve at any one time. They have a joint responsibility to maintain the flow of irrigation water to the members' rice fields and are paid from the *padi bondoa* paid as dues by the members. The *siak bondoa* themselves

collect these dues and hence the rice paid for this is named after their role. Members of the farmers' group must make their contributions after the harvest, when the *siak bondoa* come around, either to their fields or to their homes. Once the *siak bondoa* have taken their share, the rest of the rice is used to cover costs that benefit the larger community. In the case of the Sawah Darek group, these include to pay for the leasing of the land where the local school is located, for upkeep of the community leader's office, and to cover the costs of *berkaul*.

A day before the *berkaul* event is to take place, members of the community work together to repair the irrigation channels to their fields. Efforts are made to complete this work before *berkaul* so that everyone will be more relaxed and can participate fully. On the appointed day, tents are erected for the community members and any invited guests. The event typically is a lunch at which *gulai kambing* (goat curry) is traditionally served.

Before the meal begins, the *niniak mamak* will say a few words about the purpose of the event and will invite someone to recite a prayer. The *niniak mamak* are heads of extended families and clans who understand the meaning and applications of *adat* and who are charged with overseeing the affairs of the groups they are responsible for. One important aspect of their role is to manage the equitable use of property by members of the family as defined by *adat*. Because most land and real property belongs to extended families, it cannot be sold or otherwise disposed of by individuals. This includes rice fields, and the decision whether land will be worked or left to lie fallow as well as which member of the extended family will work it is a very important aspect of property management in this region.

The *niniak mamak* represent one third of the traditional leaders in Minangkabau. They, along with the *cadiak pandai* (intellectuals) and *alim ulama* (religious experts), are viewed as inseparable elements that make up a functional set. They are said to be *Tungku nan tigo sajarangan, tali nan tigo sapilin* (Trivets which necessarily come in threes; a rope composed of three strands). Trivets are supports which hold up a cooking pot over the fire. Without them, the food would

spill and be ruined. Ropes, to the Minang, are strongest when made up of three twisted cords. A rope of two parts breaks too easily, while one of four cords is bulky and cannot be easily handled. As the metaphors suggest, the three types of leaders must be present and must act in unison to carry out their proper role in society, namely providing effective governance for the community. Representatives of the other two groups are normally present on occasions like *berkaul*. The *cadiak pandai* might be represented by members of the local government, while local religious leaders would represent the *alim ulama*.

The prayer that precedes lunch consists of a request to God that the harvest be good that year and that it will proceed without any problem. Everyone present stands for this, after which the food is served. The Minangkabau people are Muslim and among Indonesian ethnic groups are considered conservative and religious. Islamic practices overlay every aspect of daily life and coexist with *adat*, which is much older. This situation is recognized and acknowledged in society, as in the saying, *Adaik nan manurun, syarak nan mandaki* (*Adat* went down; religion went up). According to the legends contained in the various Minangkabau *tambo* (traditional legend cycles), the origin of the Minangkabau people was in the central heartland of West Sumatra, Tanah Datar (where Tanjung Emas is located), Agam, and Lima Puluh Kota. As the population spread out from these three original areas, people travelled down the mountains to the coastal areas. This proverb holds that *adat* travelled with them and hence is associated with the oldest traditions. Religion, in this case Islam, came from outside the original homeland and travelled up from the coast into the Minang heartland.

The lunch menu is the same for everyone present, and food is divided equally among all. Invited guests, who might include local administrators, are given a sheltered place to sit, but in practice there is little differentiation between individuals in this or other contexts. The concept of equality and shared lot is central to the Minangkabau social system, as in the precept *Duduak samo randah, tagak samo tinggi* ([When we] sit, [we're] all the same low height; [when we]

stand, [we're] all the same tall height). Those in positions of authority are expected to have earned their status and must be able to justify the respect they command. This idea is also well documented in traditional literature as exemplified by the proverb, *Rajo adia rajo disambah, rajo lalim rajo disanggah* (A just king is a respected king; a cruel king is a hated king), suggesting that leaders are judged by how they treat their people and have to bear the consequences for any unwise behaviour.

The reaching of a consensus on how the rice planting cycle will be carried out is the aim of the *berkaul* event. Following the meal, any representatives of local government or the Department of Agriculture who might be present might be permitted to say a few words, but consensus must be reached among members of the community without outside influence or interference. The issues to be addressed include when planting will be done (this is referred to as *naik benih*); what kind of seed will be used; what rates will be paid to individuals hired to help with ploughing, planting, and day labour; and who will be appointed as the new *siak bondoa*. Each of these issues, as well as any others that may arise, are discussed openly, and any proposed action is put to the group, whose members may offer counter proposals after discussing the suggestion. Plans agreed to by a majority of those present are adopted, but everyone present is bound to accept these decisions as the will of the group.

In 2009, the questions of payment for ploughing, planting, and other work were of greatest interest to those present. It was originally suggested that the wage for ploughing be raised from the previous year's rate of Rp 15,000 per *gantang* of seed. This cost determination was possible because members of the farmers' group know exactly how much seed is required for each rice field, and this amount serves as a more reliable external standard as it is not affected by the labourers' speed, facility with the plough, unforeseen problems in the field, and so forth. In the end, however, it was agreed that wages would be paid at the same rate as previously, namely Rp 15,000 per *gantang* of seed for ploughing and Rp 15,000 per *gantang* of seed for planting, with other field work paid at the rate of Rp 40,000

per day for male labourers and Rp 25,000 for female labourers. The differentiation in wages reflects a perception about the amount of work male and female workers are capable of in a day, which begins around 8:00 a.m. and ends at 4:00 p.m. In general there is no difference in the type of work done by male and female workers, although in the past certain jobs were performed by members of only one sex. For example, planting used to be done exclusively by women but is now done by men as well.

Once these pay issues were settled, the group choose new *siak bondoa* from among their members. These three farmers would be responsible for managing some 1,800 metres of irrigation channels, with the work involved as well as payment divided among them. Six members of the farmers' group wished to act as *siak bondoa* for the next planting cycle, and it was suggested that a vote be taken. But because it was already late afternoon it was finally decided that they should draw lots. Both methods of choosing were regarded as fair and appropriate by the community as they seemed to preclude any possibility of unfair advantage to any individuals.

The Significance of *Berkaul*

In Tanjung Emas, as well as elsewhere in West Sumatra, *berkaul* provides a forum for determining the rules by which the rice cultivation cycle will be carried out; to manage a scarce resource, namely water for irrigation of rice fields; and to offer an opportunity for the community to reaffirm the social values embodied in *adat* and religion. *Berkaul* is no longer commonly practiced, however, and there is evidence that younger people in particular do not view it as relevant to their own experience. It is for this reason that a number of reports documenting the practice of *berkaul* in West Sumatra have suggested that it is an outdated and rarely seen event (Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 1992; Esde et al. 2003). There is at least some local concern over this, as evidenced by the occasional news article stressing the importance of the process at the local level and detailing the support for such activities on the part of local officials

(see, for example, Antara News 2009; Agustinus 2009; “Panen sukses” 2009). This recent interest in traditional practices like *berkaul* in West Sumatra seems to be associated with a resurgence in local identity that has developed over the last decade in conjunction with Regional Autonomy, which came into effect in 2001.

The importance of cultural identity under Regional Autonomy has been discussed by a number of authors (see, for example, Erb et al. 2005). In West Sumatra, the reestablishment of traditional administrative divisions such as the *nagari* and, with it, a return to traditional practices specific to local areas has been very pronounced. This is demonstrated by phenomena such as the Return to the Surau (*Kembali ke Surau*) movement (see, for example, Abidin 2005), which has found considerable support among the public (Daud 2005; Harian Singgalang 2008; Malalak 2009) and the perceived need to re-establish the role of traditional leaders in modern society (“Tantangan pemberdayaan” 2003; Akmal 2010; Antara News 2010). This heightened awareness of local differences is often referred to as *daerahisme* (regionalism) and has been observed as a largely negative force across Indonesia in the last decade (see, for example, Badan Kepegawaian Negara 2003; Ratnawati et al. 2003; Bahtiar and El-Hujjaj 2004; Blegur 2007). In West Sumatra specifically, as well as elsewhere, the new authority available to local governments under Regional Authority seems to have emphasized cultural and linguistic differences between areas and, in some cases, has exacerbated longstanding conflicts (Saptono 2006; Haris 2007; Kinseng 2008).

In this context, traditional practices like *berkaul*, that provide a means by which the residents of particular locales can discuss their views, take on greater importance, especially where the individuals involved accept that consensus must be reached. As noted above, the idea that an agreement acceptable to all must be reached in all important matters involving the whole community is deeply rooted in the traditional worldview of the Minangkabau people. Even if this represents an ideal that cannot be achieved in every situation and under all circumstances, traditional processes that facilitate community participation in decision-making serve a clear purpose in

modern society where longstanding practices like rice farming coexist with a range of new demands and challenges. Many of these are associated with continuing globalization of knowledge and culture, competition for resources, and the need to compete nationally as well as internationally and have effects that are felt even in rural areas of Indonesia (see, among others, Bardhan 2006 and Aggarwal 2006 for a discussion of this issue). The importance of traditional knowledge systems in resource management and adaptation to these changing conditions has been recognized and discussed in relation to Indonesia as well as other locations (Alcorn and Royo 2000; Armitage 2003; Stringer et al. 2006), and it is no less important in West Sumatra which has experienced rapid change during the period of Regional Autonomy since 2001 and whose *adat* and traditional institutions supply appropriate models that are adaptive as well as socially inclusive.

Social inclusion and empowerment of individuals represents a major theme in development activities in Indonesia and is seen as an important part of poverty alleviation and improvement of social welfare (see, for example, Feinstein and Picciotto 2000; Santiso 2001; Edstrom 2002; Marshall 2008). In West Sumatra these are important issues, especially in rural areas like Tanjung Emas, and programmes aimed at increasing participation in economic activities have had some success in these locations (Dendi and Shivakoti 2003). Few programmes, however, have aimed at incorporating existing traditional practices that encompass some of the goals of modern development into economic or social improvement efforts. As the example of *berkaul* in Tanjung Emas suggests, however, traditional practices may in fact further these goals. In this case, the concepts of consensus and participation inherent in the event, the traditional role of the *siaik bondoa* in managing a resource important to all, and the focus on continuity in the agricultural cycle are all desirable in the context of rural development and economic empowerment. As noted, the upsurge of interest in traditional practices and methods of governance in West Sumatra has its roots in Regional Autonomy and the resulting heavier focus on local conditions and needs, but,

in the case of *berkaul*, there is also a fortuitous aspect of this interest if it leads to a revival of traditional social processes and activities that embody the precepts of *adat*. These in turn may support attitudes that could foster economic improvement, particularly in rural areas, and serve as a basis for future development activities at the local, regional, national, and international levels that are relevant, appropriate, and acceptable to their target communities.

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