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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Caged in on the Outside:

Identity, Morality, and Self in an Indonesian Islamic Community

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

by

Gregory Mark Simon

Committee in charge:

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2007

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2007

DEDICATION

To Jenny.

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- Islam and the Anthropology of Religion
- Person and Self
- Indonesia and Southeast Asia
- Morality
- Emotions
- Person-Centered Methods and Ethnography
- Men and Masculinity
- Modernity and Identity

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Caged in on the Outside:
Identity, Morality, and Self in an Indonesian Islamic Community

by

Gregory Mark Simon

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, San Diego, 2007

Professor Steven Parish, Chair

This is an ethnographic study of moral personhood among Minangkabau people in the city of Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The ethnography is based on field research carried out between January 2002 and November 2003. Data was gathered through participant-observation and through recorded and transcribed

interviews, most of which employed a person-centered approach: a small number of respondents were interviewed repeatedly over a period of months, using a loosely-structured interview schedule that allowed their answers to shape the direction of the conversation. Thirteen people – nine men and four women, of varying ages and backgrounds – completed a full series of such interviews.

In part, this dissertation reflects an interest, extending back to Mauss, in public representations of personhood. However, also drawing from an interest in the experience of self that can be traced to Hallowell, the dissertation suggests that such representations can best be understood as moral arguments that people take up in the management of fundamental tensions in the experience of self. This ethnography argues that Minangkabau moral personhood is characterized by a tension between a moral orientation that imagines human beings as fundamentally and most properly integrated with others, and one that imagines human beings as fundamentally and most properly autonomous individuals. It suggests that this tension, manifest in a particular engagement with Islam, grows out of both a complex social system as well as the multidimensional nature of the human self.

The ethnography is presented in six chapters, organized around the following themes: 1) the historical and socioeconomic context of life in Bukittinggi; 2) Minangkabau ethnic identity, expressed through traditional culture and conceptions of character; 3) expressions and experiences of social integration in everyday interactions in Bukittinggi; 4) the ways that (im)morality is understood to move in and out of persons; 5) “personal” spaces of autonomy as an arena of creative self formation; and

6) the role of Islam as a site for elaboration and crystallization of tensions in Minangkabau moral personhood, with special attention to the role of belief and the practice of prayer. A concluding chapter assesses the ethnographic and theoretical perspectives offered in the dissertation.

INTRODUCTION to the DISSERTATION

This dissertation is an ethnography of moral personhood among Minangkabau people in the city of Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, Indonesia. The Minangkabau – also referred to simply as “Minang” – comprise an Islamic ethnic group that dominates most of West Sumatra and is one of Indonesia’s largest and most influential minorities. As an ethnography of life in Bukittinggi among Minangkabau people, this dissertation touches on a broad range of topics, among which are included ethnic identity, the etiquette of everyday interactions, conceptions of evil, emotions, the realm of the supernatural, and the ritual of Islamic prayer. In declaring this an ethnography of moral personhood, however, I mean to imply that the dissertation examines all of this with a particular eye on how people in Bukittinggi imagine what it means to be human: what human beings are and, being that way, what they should do about it. These are questions that exist at the intersection of religion, identity, cultural psychology, and self.

I believe, as Charles Taylor (1989) has shown us is the case in formal philosophical accounts of personhood, that formulations of conceptions of personhood are always necessarily moral arguments: given the existence of particular human capacities, what should one do about it? How must human beings deal with the existence of these capacities so that they realize something of value in their existence? It is with this in mind that I pursue personhood and morality in a single ethnographic account.

In part, then, this dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of concepts and public representations of personhood, working in an anthropological tradition that extends back to Mauss (1985 [1938]). My approach, however, is to situate this focus on public expressions of personhood within the broader approach to self experience pioneered in Hallowell's (1955, 1976) work. I make the case for seeing selves as formed by processes that pull together multiple kinds of experience and integrate them into the living of a particular life. I argue that cultural representations – those moral arguments about the nature of persons – play a powerful role in this process of integration by providing resources through which enduring contradictions of selfhood can be expressed and managed, but that this management involves active work on the part of individual selves.

My central goal in this dissertation is thus to ethnographically illuminate the ways in which processes of self formation take up the moral arguments formulated in cultural conceptions of personhood among people in West Sumatra. As an ethnographic project, I believe this can especially shed light on ways that Islamic ideas and practices come to be engaged in particular projects of self formation that arise in the context of particular economic and social conditions. Modern Minangkabau society – as it exists today and as it has been unfolding over the course of at least the last two centuries – presents a case in which such Islamic ideas and practices confront both a social system rooted in a Southeast Asian communal ethos as well as an economic system built on the imperative of continuous individual endeavor in the

marketplace. This context gives both shape and possibility to the ways Islam comes to life within Minangkabau society, and within the lives of individuals.

Although much of this dissertation is dedicated to describing cultural patterns, I do not believe that the material I present suggests that there is single, neat “Minangkabau” system for defining the nature of human beings or for determining how human beings should come to realize value in their lives. One of the main points I wish to make in this dissertation is that even the cultural patterns that we can clearly identify in the lives of people in Bukittinggi do not provide such neat answers. Often, they represent patterns of management of enduring tensions between multiple and conflicting dimensions of personhood and morality. I am especially concerned throughout the dissertation with the tensions that arise between a moral orientation that imagines human beings as fundamentally and most properly integrated with others on the one hand, and a moral orientation that imagines human beings as fundamentally and most properly autonomous individuals on the other. I suggest that both of these kinds of moral orientations are characteristic of Minangkabau culture, have firm roots in Islamic traditions, and that they grow out of both a complex social system as well as, at a more fundamental level, the nature of the human self.

In not seeing Minangkabau culture (or, for that matter, Islam) as a neat system that provides set answers, but rather as patterns used by people for thinking through and managing tensions, it becomes clear that this culture cannot by itself shape what people think and feel. Culture only exists as individuals use it in particular ways and in particular contexts. Much of imagining what it means to be human, and figuring

out what one should do about it, comes in experiencing oneself as a particular person – that is, in forming, making sense of, and living as a particular self. Self and culture do not exist as opposing forces, but rather self and culture emerge in collaboration, each serving to organize the other. This is no doubt more difficult for an ethnography to demonstrate than are the general cultural patterns in question – which, fortunately, are worthwhile objects of study in their own right. This greater level of difficulty is made clear in that understanding how (or at least that) this collaboration takes place requires first of all a great deal of general contextual framing through a discussion of general cultural patterns. I have nevertheless taken some steps to demonstrate that collaboration in this dissertation by paying significantly deep attention to individuals.

The first chapter of the dissertation, “The Village and the Marketplace,” will serve to introduce the ethnographic setting and the research I carried out in that setting. I begin by providing a brief history of Bukittinggi and of West Sumatra more generally, outlining the ways that Minangkabau society and Bukittinggi formed themselves in the image of an Islamic trading society in reaction to disruptions caused by an expanding marketplace and the intrusions of colonialism. I follow this with a sketch of the city and its inhabitants as I found them in 2002 and 2003. I will also introduce the conceptual distinction made by people in West Sumatra between “the village” and “the city,” both of which may be found within Bukittinggi itself. I will suggest that this distinction reflects larger tensions between multiple moral orientations that play a role in the lives of Bukittinggi’s residents, something that I will continue to explore in the body of this dissertation. I then describe how I situated

myself in Bukittinggi as an ethnographer. I outline the methods and logistics involved in carrying out the research on which this dissertation is based, and offer a few comments about the way I have presented my data in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation bears the title, “Adat and Autonomy: Dimensions of Minangkabau Identity.” The central purpose of this chapter is to provide a portrait of what it means to be “Minangkabau” for people who claim this as an identity. I argue that public discourses about Minangkabau identity, as engaged in by Minangkabau people themselves, serve to outline some of the major themes and tensions of moral life in Minangkabau society. I demonstrate that there are two somewhat different conceptualizations of Minangkabau identity. The first is tied to “*adat*,” the objectified traditions of an imagined authentic Minangkabau society, emphasizing collective identity and the integration of individuals into a moral, Islamic community. I describe the outlines of *adat*, situating the dissertation in the ethnographic literature on Minangkabau. I then turn to examine ideas about Minangkabau character, showing that this dimension of Minangkabau identity celebrates a different relationship between the individual and the community: individuals must be clever at maneuvering their way through the challenges posed by living with others, deftly finding ways to assert their autonomy without disturbing the larger social order.

Chapter 3, “Social Selves in Everyday Interaction,” explores the real power that expressions of social integration exert on the everyday interactions of people in Bukittinggi. This includes discussions both of self-consciously proper social

interactions, *baso-basi*, as well as more informal practices. I examine the various ways that such daily interactions suppress the expression of individual difference and individual will, and celebrate instead the integration of the individual into the moral community. I use this discussion as an entry into anthropological theories of self and person, and argue that conceptions of self and person always make moral arguments for how human beings should realize their value. It is possible to read the moral arguments expressed by the socio-centric interactions described in this chapter as indications that Minangkabau people conceive of persons – and perhaps experience themselves – as defined by their integration with others. I argue that there are both theoretical and ethnographic reasons for believing that such a conclusion is, if not entirely incorrect, certainly incomplete.

The discussion that follows in Chapter 4, “Moral Selves in an Immoral World,” is designed to offer a broader Minangkabau cultural psychology, though one framed particularly by questions of how (im)morality is understood to move into and out of persons. I frame the chapter with a discussion of Islamic conceptions of evil and the centrality of *sombong* (arrogance) in Minangkabau moral life. I use these as an entry into what I see as an essentially dynamic realm of moral experience that involves multiple and sometimes conflicting dimensions of the self. I explore these dimensions in part through a discussion of human capacities as conceptualized and experienced in West Sumatra, including those related to thought, feeling, bodily appetites, rationality, conscience, and so on. It is through these capacities that Minangkabau people imagine themselves as engaging with the world, and by which

they imagine that parts of their own selves reach out into the world, and parts of the world reach into their selves, blurring the distinction between the two and introducing the possibility of the self becoming corrupted by the world. It is the challenge of making sense of *both* the distinction between self and world *as well as* the integration between them that I take as key to understanding the way individual Minangkabau people take up the cultural conceptions explored in the chapter, using them in particular ways in particular circumstances. I demonstrate this with accounts offered by several respondents.

In Chapter 5, “Public Interactions and ‘Personal’ Identities,” I return to examining the patterns of social interaction in the daily lives of people in Bukittinggi. My concern in this chapter, however, is not merely with the surface appearance of these interactions, and what they appear to express overtly, but with what is going on, and what is imagined to be going on, beneath these surfaces. I am particularly concerned in this chapter with the pervasive use of indirect forms of communication in West Sumatra, and the ways people use them to manage conflicting moral demands for social integration and for protection and autonomy from dangerous outside forces. I use extended examples from individual respondents to explore the ways that the norms of public interaction in Minangkabau social life define a social and psychological space of the “personal” in which essential pieces of self are formed and preserved. I argue that while these processes of self formation take up culturally defined concepts and employ culturally recognizable patterns, they must be

understood as examples of selves creatively reshaping culture as much as they are examples of culture shaping selves.

The final ethnographic chapter of this dissertation, Chapter 6, is titled, “Islam, Integration, and Autonomy.” While Islam plays a role throughout the dissertation, here I take it as the central organizing principle. I am interested in this chapter in the way that Islam, as a key cultural arena, becomes engaged with the push and pull of the different moral orientations explored in the previous chapters. I am especially concerned with the way that Islamic conceptions and practices are used in attempts – not always successful – to reconcile the contradictions entailed by these multiple orientations. I examine how the nature of Islam itself is imagined in West Sumatra, stressing the idea that it is understood as something objective, apart from and more real than everyday human experience. I will then examine what it means for people in West Sumatra to “believe” in this perfect realm of existence, and how the demand for such belief leads to a struggle to reconcile individual experience and consciousness with what is, by definition, True. In the final portion of the chapter, I will continue this discussion by focusing specifically on prayer. I will argue that the tensions between moral selfhood as realized through integration and moral selfhood as realized through autonomy are crystallized in the ritual of Islamic prayer. This discussion of Islamic prayer raises larger questions about how we should understand the relationship between self and the cultural stories (ideologies, narratives) that offer representations of self. I argue that while such representations of self must not be conflated with self, neither are they merely packaging for it.

In a concluding chapter, I continue to address the questions raised at the end of Chapter 6, drawing in material from all of the previous chapters. In this final chapter, I first review and link together the key points from the ethnography presented in the previous chapters. I then argue that the cultural construction of moral personhood in West Sumatra cannot be understood as an integrated ideology in which either integration or autonomy is valued while the other is suppressed or hypocognized. I see the push and pull of these different moral orientations as ultimately grounded in what Jerrold Seigel (2005) has called the multidimensional self, in which relational, bodily, and reflective elements of experience are constantly being pulled together in attempts to form a life as a particular individual. These elements of experience are then reflected back to individuals through cultural representations that present them with moral arguments about how those pieces and their contradictions should be managed. These arguments provide possibilities, but never final solutions. It is the dynamic between these dimensions of self and the cultural representations that are used to manage them that I believe emerges in the ethnographic material that I present in this dissertation. It is also a dynamic that always transcends the ability of any single cultural representation of personhood to encompass, requiring continual work on the part of selves to make anything of it at all.

Chapter 1

THE VILLAGE and the MARKETPLACE

A City, Its History, and its People

How Bukittinggi Came to Be a City

Along the western coast of central Sumatra, the lowlands rise steeply into the Bukit Barisan, the mountainous spine of the thousand-mile long island. The foothills and highlands, blessed with cool tropical weather and rich volcanic soil, were known by outsiders in the seventeenth century primarily as the source of the gold, pepper and other goods that were taken down the mountain trails to the ports along the western coast, and down the rivers to the more distant coast in the east (Drakard 1999). In coastal ports, traders from Aceh, an influential state at the northern tip of Sumatra, had long mixed with those from India, China, Arabia and Java, and now faced new competition from European expeditions, particularly from England, Portugal, and the Netherlands. Most significantly, the VOC (the Dutch East India Company), holding a monopoly on Dutch trade in the Indies, was building a strong position in many parts of the archipelago, running its business out of Batavia (today known as Jakarta), a port in western Java. Along the west coast of central Sumatra, the VOC took advantage of the waning power of Aceh and became a major player in the local economy.

In 1665, just before establishing their local administrative center at the west coast port of Padang, the VOC had made their first efforts to have direct contact with the royal court sitting in the west Sumatran highlands, sending representatives to

establish good relations with the king of the Minangkabau people (Drakard 1999). These highlands were understood to be the center of the Minangkabau world, the source of the gold and other products traded on the coasts, as well as the source of the Minangkabau migrants who had established themselves down the mountains, along the island's coasts and beyond. It was hoped that securing favor with the widely revered, if somewhat mysterious, Minangkabau king, would give the VOC an edge—better yet, a monopoly—on west coast trade.¹

Despite this and later attempts to use the influence of the highland royal court in their favor, for the most part the VOC remained, for the following century and more, active primarily along the coasts. Further inland, the rugged terrain made large-scale excursion prohibitive as the area lacked inroads and, unlike the eastern side of the island, navigable rivers. The VOC's primary concern with the highlands was that it kept producing a smooth flow of goods for coastal trade. From Padang, it established itself as the major player in coastal trade, making and breaking local alliances, clamping down on regional rebellions, and making the west coast of Sumatra one of many VOC outposts throughout Sumatra and the archipelago. The only interruption in Dutch presence in the area came in the early nineteenth century when, as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain took control of all Dutch areas in the region.

¹ There was, and still is, much uncertainty as to the nature of Minangkabau royalty and the power of Minangkabau kings. Chapter 2 below contains a discussion of traditional Minangkabau society as it is now imagined; see Josselin de Jong (1952) and especially Drakard (1999) for extended examinations of the nature of the Minangkabau kingdom in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In 1819 west Sumatra witnessed the return of the Dutch, now in the form of pure colonialists: the VOC had been dissolved in 1800 and all its properties transferred to the Dutch state. But by this time gold supplies in the region had been scarce for several decades, and the importance of other products for trade, such as coffee, cassia, and gambir, had grown (Ricklefs 2001, Dobbin 1983). It was now trade in coffee rather than gold that was seen by the Dutch to present a particularly attractive opportunity in the area (on the importance of coffee see Kahn 1993, Dobbin 1983).

But the early nineteenth century was a difficult time to reassert authority over the region. The decline in gold supplies had helped to trigger a power struggle among factions within Minangkabau society itself, pitting Minangkabau royalty and its supporters against Islamic reformers and traders involved in the emerging markets for coffee, cassia and other products that were not controlled by royalty (Dobbin 1983; Ricklefs 2001). Muslim traders from India and the Middle East had been active along Sumatra's west coast for centuries, and Islam had come to the highlands of west Sumatra and been embraced by some Minangkabau royalty three hundred years earlier (Marsden 1966 [1811]). By now, in the early nineteenth century, Islam had spread widely, if not deeply and evenly, through the region. Some entire villages still remained unconverted, and mosques were generally marginal to villages in which they were located (Dobbin 1983). Wealth being generated by the expanding trade in village cash crops allowed an increasing number of Minangkabau Muslims to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, and in 1803 a number of Minangkabau pilgrims witnessed the conquest of Mecca by Wahabis, representatives of a movement stressing the need

for society to return to a pure form of Islam, and advocating the use of force, if necessary, to achieve this end. Impressed by what they saw, some of these migrants, who came to be known as Padris,² returned to west Sumatra to found an Islamic revivalist movement along Wahabi lines.

This movement severely divided Minang society. Some elements of society, concentrated particularly in areas such as the hills around the Agam valley where coffee thrived, were eager to receive the Padri call for social reform (Dobbin 1983). These were areas that were most struggling to adapt the changes brought about by the expansion of trade in coffee and other cash crops. In these areas, tensions had grown over the control of land and the regulation of the individually controlled gardens and other property that lay outside the traditional kinship controls for rice-land, and a desire had grown for a way to more tightly regulate commerce in a world that was frequently disturbed by banditry, commercial disputes, and the volatility of gambling, drinking, and opium use in the expanding marketplaces. Many people in these areas responded to the Padri call to bring greater moral order to society, and to regulate property and trade according to Islamic law. These were also the areas that had been most economically (and symbolically) marginalized by the Minangkabau royal family and its trade in gold.

The royal family, and those areas most closely associated with it and the now-waning trade in gold that supported it, had reasons to be wary. First, despite their long

² The name “Padri” is apparently derived from the port city of Pedir, located at the northern tip of Sumatra in what is now the province of Aceh. The port served as the point of embarkation for Minang pilgrims to Mecca (Ricklefs 2001).

rhetorical association with Islam, the Minangkabau royal system had Indic roots. Traditional claims by Minangkabau kings to be representatives of God on earth could easily be seen as sacrilegious in a Muslim context, and were likely to damage their legitimacy in the eyes of some of the population (Drakard 1999). Further, the Padri call for social reforms largely focused on establishing a social order to regulate commerce free from the control of royal interference. In an era when commercial opportunities that lay beyond the boundaries of village life were expanding and regional systems of authority were already weakening, Islam's egalitarian and individualistic framework for trade, rooted originally in ecological conditions of the Middle East (Lindholm 1996), must have been especially appealing for many people marginalized by royal authority.

The Padri approval of the use of force to further their cause meant that the clash between those areas that found Padri tenets attractive and those that resisted them, was a violent one. Padri raids on resisting villages— which were, like villages in the region, well fortified— were accompanied by looting, fire and other destruction of property, and sometimes by the kidnapping of women and the taking of slaves. The Padris built large, central mosques in villages, and in areas that willingly joined the Padri movement they often brought about progress in commerce, prosperity and social order. They also enforced a strict code banning tobacco, alcohol, betel, opium, gambling, gold jewelry, and silk clothing, and insisted that women veil their faces and men grow beards, and that everyone pray five times a day.

As a result of the Padri movement, by the time the Dutch returned to west Sumatra in 1819, much of the royal family had been killed and the moral supremacy of Islam in Minangkabau society had been greatly expanded (Ricklefs 2001). But Minang society was still divided. Remnants of the royal family, as well as other leaders of the old elite tied to the trade in gold and the trade connections developed by the Dutch from Padang, were now in a position of great weakness. It was from this position that they symbolically surrendered much of Minangkabau to the Dutch, relying on the alliance to shore up their waning powers. The Dutch, in turn, were eager to take control of the trade in coffee, which was now mostly in the hands of Padri villages. From 1821 until 1837, in the Padri War, the Dutch used military force and trade blockades to eventually subdue the Padris and take control of regional trade. Meanwhile, the moral edge of the Padri movement had itself softened (Dobbin 1983). Partly, this was a result of new reports coming from pilgrims to Mecca, where the Wahabis had been driven from power. Strict prohibitions against such things as tobacco and silk clothing now seemed less necessary, and the use of violence for religious purposes was now morally questionable. Partly, it was probably the result of the desire among many villagers to ease restrictions on such things as smoking, and common resistance to some Padri rules, such as those regarding women's dress.

The Padri move to reform Minang political life was thus stalled, although not reversed. Minangkabau was no longer a kingdom. And while Minangkabau clan titleholders, or *pangulu*, drawing their power from the matrilineal clan system, had preserved their place in local leadership (with some having worked closely with Padri

religious leaders), they were now to be co-opted into a system ultimately controlled by the colonial state.³ Also as part of their military strategy during the Padri War, in 1827 the Dutch completed Fort de Kock.

Fort de Kock, the name for both the fort and the town that grew around it during the colonial era, sits on a strategic site. It rests on one end of a curved hilltop looking out over the Agam Valley, one of the three districts in the highlands that together form the *darek*, the traditional Minang homeland.⁴ It is this feature of the landscape that lent the city its indigenous and official post-colonial name: Bukit (meaning “hill”) Tinggi (meaning “high”). Dobbin describes Fort de Kock and other major Dutch forts built for the Padri War, as having quickly attracted people and economic activity:

[The forts] became economic magnets for nearby villages, which began to specialize in provisioning their denizens [...]. Bukit Tinggi by 1837 possessed not only a flourishing market which attracted two hundred to three hundred people every day, in addition to the thousands on the weekly market day, but the place was already becoming urbanized: ‘...it has become a small town. Many small traders, Europeans, Koodjas⁵ and Chinese have established themselves here and carry on a profitable trade.’ (1983: 153)

By 1904, she reports, “a Dutch official at Bukit Tinggi counted 29,000 individuals on nearby roads on their way to the market there, and this he considered not to be a particularly busy day” (238). The nineteenth century thus saw Bukittinggi

³ It is possible that the “traditional” role of the *pangulu*, as it is normally thought of today, came into being as a result of Dutch involvement in the region (Kahn 1980, 1993). See Chapter 2 for more on the role of *pangulu*.

⁴ The other two are the Lima Puluh Koto and Tanah Datar. The Singkarak-Solok valley, to the south of the others, is sometimes also considered part of the central Minang homeland.

⁵ This is a term referring to a Muslim merchant.

grow from this hilltop military station to a market town to a regional center of trade and education, eventually the largest in the Minang heartland. The Minangkabau people, and Bukittinggi, itself were to play important roles in unfolding history of the Netherlands East Indies, and of Indonesia itself.

Minangkabau and the Indonesian Nation-State

For the last half of the nineteenth century, into the beginning of the twentieth century, west Sumatra was subject to a form of the *cultuurstelsel* system, in which the indigenous population was required to cultivate and deliver to the Dutch particular cash crops – in this case, mostly coffee. This system was actually maintained in west Sumatra long after it was abolished in most areas of the Dutch East Indies, although it met with declining success. Increasingly, Minang villagers, who had once turned to coffee cultivation as a means to escape the restrictions inherent in village life, found that Dutch demands, price controls and commercial regulations made coffee production an unrewarding chore (Dobbin 1983). Often, growers and traders adapted, turning to other products that allowed them to escape these restrictions. Forced cultivation was finally abolished in 1908 in favor of a monetary tax, also widely unpopular. Meanwhile, in the towns and cities, notably in Bukittinggi, local schools had greatly expanded, and some Minang people found that adapting to new economic and social realities meant pursuing positions in the civil service. By this time, the beginnings of nationalism were stirring in parts of the Dutch East Indies, particularly in Java and in west Sumatra.

West Sumatra was one of several regions (the others were all on Java) in the Dutch East Indies in which an ill-fated, communist-inspired rebellion broke out against the Dutch in 1927. But communism and nationalism in Minang society generally took less ideologically confined forms than they did in other areas of the archipelago. Kahin (1999) notes that Minangkabau nationalists were inspired by a mix of traditional stories characterizing Minang people as underdogs triumphing over aggressors, a traditional and Islamic emphasis on egalitarianism in social relations, and by the wide scale of nationalist vision brought back to west Sumatra by the many migrants who had been abroad.⁶ Additionally, the Minangkabau heartland had become the leading center in the Dutch East Indies for the Modernist Islamic movement. This movement emphasizes the need to return to the pure principles found in the Koran and in the life of the prophet Mohammed, and apply them to the context of the modern world, its technologies and political developments, while, conversely, avoiding the distorting practices and ideas that had permeated Islamic practice through the influence of local traditions. All of these influences helped to create a complex political and intellectual environment in west Sumatra that fed into nationalism. Kahin notes that “the dynamic for the nationalist movement in West Sumatra rested less on the modernizing instincts of a narrow, Western-educated bureaucratic elite, than on the overlapping interests of religious, educational, and entrepreneurial elements in the region, which embraced the ideals of an Islamic trading society” (71) –

⁶ As discussed in Chapter 2 below, in traditional Minangkabau society, young men were expected to go abroad (*marantau*) to seek knowledge, experience, and fortune. This once meant primarily traveling to regions outside the Minang heartlands, such as the Sumatran coastlines, but could also include going “abroad” to Java, the Middle East, or Europe.

the same ideals, we might note, that attracted some Minangkabau people to the Padri movement and helped to firmly established the moral supremacy of Islam in West Sumatra in the previous century. While different individuals were inspired by different parts of this mix, rather than create competing camps, the overlapping involved made it possible for someone to be “at the same time the traditional head of a lineage (*penghulu adat*), a good Muslim, a merchant, and a radical nationalist or Communist” (88).

In the nationalist movement that grew in the early 20th century, culminating in Indonesia’s proclamation of independence on August 17, 1945, Minangkabau people played a disproportionately large role. Only leaders from Java, the population of which was many times larger than that of west Sumatra – and which was home to the colonial capital of Batavia – outnumbered them. Tan Malaka, Muhammed Yamin, and Sutan Sjahrir (Indonesia’s first prime-minister) were just a few of the Minangkabau people among the most prominent leaders of the era. The list also includes, most importantly, Mohammed Hatta, a man with family roots in Bukittinggi, who became (with Sukarno) Indonesia’s co-proclamator of independence, then the country’s first vice-president, and later its prime minister. Minangkabau people had created a reputation for themselves as the nation’s intellectuals, combining a strong moral sense, rooted in Islam, with a keen ability for complex social and political analysis.

Bukittinggi had been the Sumatran military headquarters for the Japanese army during their occupation from 1942 until their World War II defeat in 1945. As the

Dutch tried to reassert their control over their former colony after the war, Bukittinggi acted as the regional capital for the republican government, which while loyal to the Indonesian Republican government based in Yogyakarta (on Java), acted more or less independently from it in practice (Kahin 1999). With the Dutch controlling a coastal enclave in Padang, and later the lowlands around it, people fled to the mountains. Bukittinggi's population more than tripled, from thirty thousand or so to something like one hundred thousand people. Partly because of its mountain location, Bukittinggi was also identified as the site for the emergency capital of the government, should the Dutch occupy Yogyakarta. But the Dutch not only wrested control of Yogyakarta away from the Republic, it also bombed and then occupied Bukittinggi. By this time, the city's population bubble had burst, as it had been almost completely evacuated. The Republican "capital" was moved to an obscure location further east in the west Sumatran mountains.

Despite west Sumatra's prominent role in the national movement and during the revolution, its relationship with the Republic of Indonesia's central government in Jakarta was not smooth in the years following independence, which was finally wrested from the Dutch for good in 1949. In Kahin's (1999) analysis, Minangkabau expectations for the nature of the Indonesian polity can be contrasted with the assumptions of the Javanese, which were more influential in forming the actual nature of the state. Java was a relatively hierarchical society, and power and resources in the Indonesian state were increasingly dominated by the central government in Jakarta, with regional input marginalized. In west Sumatra (as in other regions), resentment

grew over a lack of local autonomy, widespread corruption, the perceived unfairness in the central government's use of locally-generated revenue, and a the lack of influence of Islamic parties in comparison to nationalist and (especially) communist parties in the capital.

Nevertheless, when in 1956 local military leaders established a regional government separate from the central government's authority, their declared aim was not to split from the Republic. Rather, they claimed to be taking temporary measures that were necessary until the central government was able to return to what many Minangkabau people saw as Indonesia's original ideals: egalitarian, democratic, and able to accommodate within its unity each region and ethnic group's desires for self-determination. For more than a year a dialogue was maintained with President Sukarno's government in Jakarta, but by 1958 the confrontation was pushed beyond the point of no return. The "Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia" was declared in west Sumatra, and was quickly joined by another rebel movement on the island of Sulawesi. Its capital was Bukittinggi, and it claimed that it would cede power back to Jakarta when an acceptable central government was created (with the role of Sukarno and communists diminished, and the influence of Hatta – who like many Minang people was apparently sympathetic to the goals but not the tactics of the rebellion – reestablished).

Bukittinggi and west Sumatra again witnessed war. Despite some American backing (due to the rebel's anti-communist bent), the rebellion was no match for Jakarta's military power. Bukittinggi and other cities in west Sumatra were bombed

from the air and eventually occupied by troops, mostly Javanese in origin, who were loyal to the central government. Although the rebellion continued on from bases in the countryside – and Bukittinggi itself still witnessed violence – by 1961 it collapsed.

Even if the rebels had intended to save Indonesia, they were now seen as traitors, and Minangkabau society was seen as suspect in its loyalty to the nation. The province was now overseen by left-leaning, mostly Javanese military units (brought in originally because they were eager to put down a rebellion marked by anti-communist sentiments), and largely governed by Javanese administrators. Many Minang people now found it necessary to be at least nominally aligned with left-leaning or communist organizations in order to secure their positions and avoid suspicion. This ended up placing many people in an even more difficult position when anti-communist hysteria swept the nation in the aftermath of the events of 1965, which saw General Suharto take control of the country in response to a supposed attempted coup by communist forces. Across Indonesia there were hundreds of thousands, perhaps even more than a million, people killed by government forces, by political and religious militias, and by their fellow villagers and neighbors. Most of these were in Java and Bali, and most were killed due to their (real or alleged) communist ties. Although many thousands of people were arrested in West Sumatra, and anti-Chinese disturbances did rock Bukittinggi, there were very few killings in the region (Kahin 1999).⁷ Nevertheless,

⁷ According to information gathered by Kahin (1999), although there were tens of thousands of people arrested in West Sumatra for their alleged communist ties, almost all of these people were later released. A few were then killed by fellow villagers, although no one knows how many. However close it is to being accurate, the estimate that Kahin cites of perhaps only fifty killings in the region linked to this political upheaval indicates that communist and anti-

many people in West Sumatra now felt condemned for *both* anti-communists and communist movements that had characterized the past decade, leaving them, Kahin's (1999) words, "demoralized and unsure of [their] identity as a society" (250).

Up until today, West Sumatra and Minangkabau people have never again played the prominent role in national events that they once enjoyed. Under Suharto's New Order government, from the late 1960's until the late 1990's, West Sumatra took its place as one among all other Indonesian regions dominated by the central government in Jakarta. West Sumatra's economy, like that of the country as a whole, saw marked improvement during this period, although resentment remained at the way the central government used locally-generated revenue.⁸ Some of the same concerns that had led to the rebellion remained current. Indonesia's government was more centralized, authoritarian, and corrupt than ever. Although communism had been purged, Islam was pushed out of politics as well, and political parties were either abolished or emasculated. The state increasingly forced the regions to fit its standardized, Javanese-inspired vision of Indonesia. In West Sumatra, for example, the traditional local polities, the *nagari*, were essentially replaced by the *desa* (Indonesian for "village") system, which assumed much smaller local units (like Javanese villages). Although there were attempts to install a sense of ethnic pride in the region – such as placing Minang-style roofs on all government buildings in the

communist movements in Minangkabau society had no where near the violent destructive force that they had in other parts of Indonesia. Kahin does note, however, that it seems likely that many who had been arrested for their alleged communist ties felt it necessary to emigrate from West Sumatra in the following years.

⁸ This was even more of a concern in provinces that produced a great amount of revenue for the state, such as Aceh (natural gas), Riau (oil), and Irian Jaya (mining). Ongoing separatist movements in Aceh and West Papua (the former Irian Jaya) are directly linked to this issue.

province—Minang political traditions seemed to now be largely irrelevant (Kahin 1999).

By the 1990's, as Kahin (1999) records, concerns were growing in West Sumatra about increasing corruption and the overall fairness of Indonesia's Jakarta-centric economic and political system. These same concerns were growing across Indonesia. She also notes, however, that there were some concerns specific to West Sumatra, where many worried that "West Sumatra no longer surpassed other regions in the quality of education its children enjoyed, and that its people no longer were relatively highly represented in Indonesia's intellectual and political life" (265). In 1997 Indonesia was hit very hard by the Asian economic crisis. This, combined with increasing displeasure over Suharto's authoritarian policies, led to anti-Chinese riots and anti-Suharto rallies in many parts of the nation. In West Sumatra, students – primarily in Padang – participated in anti-Suharto rallies. Anti-Chinese rioting broke out in Padang, the province's largest city, and Payakumbuh, the provinces third largest city, but Bukittinggi, located between them and representing the second largest city in the province, remained calm. Suharto was forced to offer his resignation in 1998, ushering in the period of *reformasi* in Indonesian politics. By 2002, although some moves had been made to devolve power from the center, to introduce a significant degree of democracy into the political system, and to expand the freedom of the press, the overwhelming consensus in West Sumatra was that corruption was worse than ever, the economy was getting worse, and that Minangkabau society was slipping ever further from its peak of intellectual, moral, and political influence.

The City and its People

Established with an eye on controlling west Sumatran commerce, Fort de Kock has now become a commodity itself, sold as one of Bukittinggi's tourism highlights. Although there is little of historical interest to see at the site, it does attract a regular flow of local families and young couples, domestic tourists, and the occasional foreign visitor, willing to pay a small admission fee to stroll around the tree-shaded hilltop, view the rusty roofs and domed mosques of the surrounding city, and take the bridge across to the other side of the hilltop, where the recently renovated zoo can be found. The city that surrounds the fort, spilling down the hillsides, running up to the edge of the Sianok canyon and bleeding out into the villages and jungles of the Agam valley, is now home to almost 100,000 residents (all city statistics come from *Bukittinggi Dalam Angka 2002*⁹). This makes it the second largest city in the province of West Sumatra, after Padang,¹⁰ and the largest city in the Minang highlands. The official borders encompass a relatively compact area of less than ten square miles, and every day thousands more people come from other towns and villages to shop, work, and study.

As is the case with any city, the structure of Bukittinggi reflects and informs the organization of life and thought of its residents. The links between Bukittinggi's

⁹ *Bukittinggi Dalam Angka* ("Bukittinggi in Numbers 2002"), by Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Bukittinggi & Badan Pembangunan Daerah Kota Bukittinggi ("The Bukittinggi Central Municipal Agency for Statistics & The Bukittinggi Municipal Agency for Area Development") 2002.

¹⁰ Padang, the provincial capital, lies on the coast and is home to over 700,000 people. The province as a whole is generally estimated to be home to over four million people.

urban form and its cultural life could be easily overlooked, considering that it did not emerge through anything like an indigenous Minang urban tradition (as traditional Minang society is essentially rural), but is clearly a product of its colonial history. At first glance, Bukittinggi has little structure to note, and having lived in the city of Yogyakarta in Java, I first experienced Bukittinggi, in contrast, as unremarkable in this respect. Yogya, centered on the royal *kraton* (palace), with the central mosque off to one side and the central market off to another, conveys a sense of sacredness. That city is located on an axis between the sacred mountain, Merapi, and the sacred Indian Ocean, a line that also is marked by national monuments and the graves of former sultans. The closer one gets to the center of that city, to the palace, the more infused with power one's surroundings are said to become, the more refined, indeed the more essentially Javanese the people there are understood to be. In contrast, Bukittinggi is not a royal city, nor does it have an obviously sacred character. In West Sumatra, urban areas like Bukittinggi are more likely to have a significant percentage of non-Minang people in their population than do rural areas; and, they are seen as being more thoroughly influenced by "foreign" culture.¹¹ Also, although much of the population of the city considers itself to be "native," descended from the people who lived in the villages from which Bukittinggi grew, a substantial part of the city is occupied by Minangkabau people who consider themselves "native" to other parts of West Sumatra. However, as I became more familiar with what went on in the city,

¹¹ The same, of course, is actually the case in Yogyakarta, which is a national center of education that attracts thousands of people from around Indonesia, as well as some from abroad. The center of Yogya, however, is occupied by the Javanese *kraton*, and by a long-standing native Javanese population, and is conceptually very Javanese in character.

what initially struck me as simply a negative example, an absence of meaning, came to look quite different. To see how this is the case, let us take a brief tour through the city, starting at its core.

The fort provided the seed for the city, but today Bukittinggi's heart beats on another part of the same hilltop. On this spot stands the city's most widely recognized and most highly visible landmark, the Jam Gadang ("Big Clock"), a freestanding clock tower built by the Dutch in 1926, but now sporting a distinctive Minang-style roof on top that mitigates its colonial roots. The Jam Gadang serves as the unofficial symbol of the city, its image sold on t-shirts and recreated on signs that mark the city border. It is the tallest structure around and is surrounded by an open square, as if the city crouches at a respectable distance around it.

The square is small (it takes only a minute to walk across it), mostly covered in concrete, and it sports a few trees and benches, an ATM, and a set of public telephones adorned with the same Minang-style roof. As a symbol of the city and of tourism, it has been nicely maintained and has been redesigned and landscaped in recent years. It often hosts families of domestic tourists snapping photos of the clock tower, groups of boys lounging about in school uniforms, or people racing remote-controlled cars, the latest fad in 2003. Of the young women who walk by, many wear a *jilbab*, a symbol of Islamic identity that covers the hair, ears, throat and neck, leaving the oval of the face exposed – something that only became common in the latter half of the 1990's. At the same time (often literally at the same time on the same body), many of these young women wear clinging sweaters and skin-tight jeans.

The heart of the city marked by the Jam Gadang is not dominated by a fort or a palace, nor is it anchored by a mosque or a city hall; the clock tower stands overlooking the marketplace. With limited room to expand, Pasa Ateh, or Upper Market, is actually the smallest of the city's three major marketplaces, but it is also the most fashionable, specializing in retail consumer goods. In a multi-story building (ravaged several times by fires—twice in the late 1990's),¹² and along lanes spilling out past its edges, small shops, stalls and stands offer clothing, watches, music cassettes, plastic goods, cosmetics, textiles, fruit, iced drinks, or the city's trademark *karupuk sanjai* chips made from fried cassava. Aside from the impression made by a few scattered beggars and one or two *urang gilo*, "crazy people," wandering through, the marketplace feeds the senses with suggestions of abundance and prosperity. The smell of roasting *sate* drifts through on smoke, and the sounds of varied musical styles—heavy metal and rap, Bollywood film scores and local Minang pop—compete for attention. In the narrowest aisles on the busiest days, the throngs of shoppers (not to say buyers) jostling each other seem to be mirrored in the tables of goods crammed one against the next. You can't help but brush against goods for sale as you make your way by. The sheer amount of things available – though not always the actual variety of choices – is impressive. There is a visceral feeling of *stuff* here that cannot be matched in any spacious, orderly mall.

¹² The marketplace was also reportedly damaged by an earthquake that shook West Sumatra in March 2007.

The centrality of the marketplace to the city is not only spatial, but conceptual as well. In local usage, *pasa*,¹³ literally meaning “marketplace,” can also refer to “the city” in general, and it can be used to distinguish more urban areas from the *kampung*, meaning a residential neighborhood or village. This distinction between marketplace and village can be traced back several hundred years: Dobbin (1983) reports that in the early colonial period before there were any urban centers in the Minangkabau heartland, marketplaces were usually located outside of a village or were even “entirely unconnected with a nearby village” (49). This kept daily village life at a remove from the violence that was prone to break out in the marketplaces, which were filled with armed men and were the site of commercial disputes, cockfighting, and opium peddlers. Perhaps in an echo of the colonial origins of urban life in west Sumatra, more than one person in Bukittinggi told me that “pasa” is not even *really* a Minang word, but rather came from the Dutch. A marketplace, I was told, is *actually* called a “*balai*” in Minang.¹⁴ This word is used primarily in Bukittinggi for its other, related meaning. That is, it usually refers to a public meeting hall such as the *Balai Kota*, City Hall. But whereas City Hall is located down the hill,

¹³ “Pasa” is the Minang equivalent of the Malay/Indonesian word “pasar.” Both pronunciations are used in Bukittinggi. In standard Indonesian, “pasar” does not generally refer to “the city.”

¹⁴ “Balai” also refers to the village hall serving as a meeting place for local leaders, and it is this definition that is usually used in the ethnographic literature. In the *Kamus Umum Bahasa Minangkabau – Indonesia* dictionary of the Minangkabau language (Usman 2002), the first definition of “balai” is a market. “Pakan,” referring to the general idea of a “market,” is also a commonly used in Minang. Other than these comments to me from several Bukittinggi residents, I have no reason to believe that the use of *pasa* or *pasar* has any direct connection to Dutch influence. Ultimately, of course, these terms are cognates of the English “bazaar,” sharing the same Persian roots.

out of the way, and visited only by those with business to conduct with the city bureaucracy, the *pasa* truly does work as a place for the public to come together.¹⁵

That “the city” and “the marketplace” have come to intermingle linguistically is understandable. To say that the market forms the heart of the city is also to say that the goods that flow through it, being bought and sold, are the lifeblood of Bukittinggi’s population. The activity of the *pasa*, buying and selling, is what makes the city live. West Sumatra as a whole has little in the way of large-scale manufacturing, and has no vast oil reserves like the province of Riau to the east, no large natural gas fields like the province of Aceh on Sumatra’s northern tip, and none of the endless miles of palm oil or rubber plantations blanketing much of North Sumatra province. Agriculture supports the majority of the province’s rural population, and many Bukittinggi residents have small gardens or own rice fields inside or outside the city borders; but only about five percent of the city’s working population actually makes a living this way. In contrast, over forty percent of the working population is involved in some kind of small business or trade.¹⁶

Most of the larger, and more expensive stores in the city (selling such things as electronics, cellular phones, photographic services, furniture, packaged groceries, relatively expensive clothing) are also located atop and down the slope of the city’s

¹⁵ The Indonesian “kota” is also used by Minang speakers to mean “city.” It is interesting to note, however, that its Minang cognate, “koto,” (which those familiar with Indonesian and learning to speak Minangkabau would naturally assume to be the Minang word for “city”) generally refers to a small village or unit of a village, and is rarely used to mean “city.” The etymology of the terms links them to the concept of fortification, and thus holds more of a sense of a closed, protected area rather than one open to anyone.

¹⁶ “Perdagangan,” also translated as “trade” in *Bukittinggi Dalam Angka 2002* (38). The second largest sector would be service, employing about 25% of the city’s workers, twice as many as employed in industry.

central hill, in what is referred to as “China Town” (*Kampung Cino*, M). These stores are still generally small, storefront enterprises. Although modern shopping malls have been sprouting all over Indonesia (despite the country’s extended economic difficulties) one has yet to appear in Bukittinggi. There is one international fast-food chain franchise, a KFC. Many of the businesses in this section of the city are indeed owned by Indonesians of Chinese descent, who almost always speak primarily Indonesian and are commonly fluent in Minang as well.

This is also the center of Bukittinggi’s tourism industry, particularly for foreign tourists. In all, there are over fifty hotels in the city, with over two thousand beds, though many may be empty on a given night. Although not coming close to rivaling Java’s Yogyakarta or, certainly, the island of Bali, West Sumatra is considered one of the larger tourists draws in Indonesia, and Bukittinggi is often referred to (locally, not nationally) as *Kota Wisata*, or “Tourism City.”¹⁷ Domestic tourism dominates, with over 130,000 official visits from domestic tourists recorded in 2002.¹⁸ These visitors are drawn by Bukittinggi’s cool mountain climate (it sits about 3000 feet above sea level), its marketplaces, and by its historical importance, and many are themselves of Minang descent. There were fewer than 12,500 recorded

¹⁷ Most of the foreign tourists who visit West Sumatra spend their time either in Bukittinggi or on smaller islands off the coast of Sumatra, where world-class surfing is the primary draw.

¹⁸ This is a curiously large jump over the 92,000 visitors recorded the previous year. In 1998, the first year for which I have statistics, fewer than 70,000 visitors were recorded, perhaps because the country had recently been hit with its economic crisis. Presumably, only tourists registering in hotels could be counted, while those coming in for the day or staying with friends and family would have no way of being counted.

visits from foreign visitors in 2002¹⁹ (*Bukittinggi Dalam Angka*, 2002). In China Town, foreign tourists are also catered to by a number of cafes. Lined with primitive art, beer ads, and pictures of Western pop-culture icons, they often provide guide services as well as a mix of Indonesian, Chinese and European style dishes. Several of the city's handful of internet centers, where the mostly adolescent clientele pays for access by the minute or hour, are located here as well.

Two other, larger marketplaces are located in the lower portions of the city. The Pasa Bawah, or Lower Market, which is the city's central market for vegetables, fruits, meats, and other foodstuffs, can be reached by descending one of the long stairways reaching down from the Upper Market. The Aua Kuniang market surrounding the central intercity bus depot is Bukittinggi's largest shopping area, and contains a great variety of wholesale and retail shops, stands, stalls, and sidewalk vendors. Both men and women of all ages buy and sell in the marketplaces, although there is some differentiation according to gender. Karupuak (the cassava chips) seem to always be sold by women, and vegetable and fruit vendors are often women as well, while men dominate the markets for meat and chicken (although women do most of the shopping and buying). Tailors setting up shop in the marketplace seem to all be

¹⁹ People in Bukittinggi generally agree that there used to be many more foreign (generally meaning white-skinned) tourists visiting the city than there are today, particularly before the 1997/98 economic and political crisis rocked the country. The aftermath of September 11, 2001 and the bombings at nightclubs in Bali on October 12, 2002 were generally thought to depress foreign tourism as well. It is difficult to measure the truth of this using official statistics, which show the largest drop in visitors (from over 20,000 to about half as many visitors) occurring from 2000 to 2001. About a quarter of the foreign tourists recorded in 2002 were Dutch, with another quarter evenly split between Malaysians and Chinese. (The number of Chinese visitors surprised me. Perhaps many are connected to Chinese-Indonesian families). Only 276 Americans were recorded as visiting Bukittinggi in 2002.

men, although many women make clothing to sell out of their homes. Consumer goods may be sold by either men or women, and many young men and women are hired to work in stores and small shops, minding the business in place of, or alongside, the owner.

Both 2002 and 2003 were almost unanimously considered by residents of Bukittinggi to be very poor years to be in business, much worse than the preceding years – even though the newspapers and television frequently reported that, by macro-economic measures at least, the national economy was recovering from the lows of the late 1990's. The markets would sometimes teem with people – particularly on market days (every Wednesday and Saturday), and during the weeks leading up to Hari Raya, the holiday at the end of the fasting month when almost everyone tries to wear new clothing. But at many other times, vendors would sit in boredom, waiting for people to walk by. They would be sure to make an attempt, at least a mechanical one, to lure in passers-by (“*Apo bali, ni? Singgahlah.*” “What do you want to buy, big sister? Come visit.”), but most would, indeed, pass by. Those who did enter seemed more likely to leave without even bargaining for an item. Those who bargained would all too often leave without coming to an agreement.

The small core of the city, consisting of the areas around the marketplaces and some of the major streets branching off from them, has a mild urban feel, though no pretensions to being a big city. Buildings line the streets one against the next, although even the taller ones are generally only two stories high. Traffic jams are not usually a problem, and there are only a few traffic signals in the city (some of which

are generally obeyed) but the streets can get dense with traffic and traffic noise. A few people own their own cars, but small motorcycles and scooters are the most common form of personal transportation, and there are also a number of different kinds of public cars and vans racing around town, honking their customized horns to keep others on the road apprised of their position, or to get the attention of potential passengers (or perhaps sometimes just to assert their existence). They compete as well with taxis and with *bendi*, neat carriages drawn by a single horse, each horse adorned with a colorful puff of material on its head. The hills make bicycles a less popular mode of transportation than they might otherwise be, and the *becak* pedicabs common in other small Indonesian cities are absent here. Trucks and intercity buses rumble along the larger arteries.

If you turn out from the main streets, or move just a bit further out from the center of the city, Bukittinggi's neighborhoods do not look radically different from other Minangkabau villages in West Sumatra. Even relatively close to the city center, where the homes may be built fairly close together, there are patches of open land. Residents recall that only two or three decades ago these neighborhoods consisted of scattered homes amid *hutan*, or jungle – meaning that much of the land had not been cleared, or was not being cultivated, and was overgrown. Only a little further away from the city center, the neighborhoods, referred to often as “*kampung*” (“neighborhoods, villages”), seem even more like other Minangkabau villages. Houses here sit next to occasional rice and vegetable fields, and domesticated animals (dogs, cats, goats, chickens, ducks, water buffalo) wander about or sit tied up by the

side of the road. Over the past twenty years or so, services have expanded to cover broad areas of the city: the electrical grid covers the city, many areas have telephone services available, and the municipal waterworks serves those areas closer to the city center. Most of the roads have been paved, though some of them have since deteriorated into a patchwork of loose debris.

The denser, more central neighborhoods are also more urban in another sense. The land there may be considered private property, as opposed to being controlled by a lineage, and the houses are likely to be owned privately or rented. While the large majority of the population in these areas consists of Minang people, there are Javanese, Batak, and Chinese Indonesians as well.²⁰ As for the Minang people living here, many do not consider themselves native to Bukittinggi, even if they were born and raised there. Instead, they will consider their native village (*kampung asli*) to be the place where their family – that is, their lineage – had once lived and – significantly, for the sense of connection to a place – held the rights to land.

In other neighborhoods, particularly those a bit further from the core of the city, most of the homes are, like those in rural Minangkabau villages, considered to be *pusako* property by the families that occupy them. *Pusako* property is property that is tied to a particular lineage, and the use-rights to which are passed down from mothers to daughters. In neighborhoods where *pusako* property dominates, there are networks of kinship ties running throughout the *kampung*. Many residents are thus deeply

²⁰ Among others, of course. “Batak” refers to a number of related ethnic groups from the northern part of Sumatra, many of which are associated with adherence to Protestant Christian churches.

connected to the community, and to the land. In these areas, most people consider themselves to live in their native villages – villages that just happen to fall within the boundaries of the city.

Native roots are significant in terms of ethnic identity as well. Each region of Minangkabau has its own particular version of Minang ritual and tradition, making it distinct.²¹ Towns and villages are conceptually divided in nagari, the traditional Minangkabau polity, consisting of a collection of villages and settlements that maintains its political independence and its own ways of doing things. While nagari no longer act as functioning political units (see Chapter 2 below), and the term “Minangkabau” has been largely adopted to refer to the ethnicity of all of the natives of the West Sumatran highlands, there remains an awareness of these cultural and social distinctions within the Minangkabau world.

Bukittinggi natives are not simply considered ethnically Minang, but also ethnically Kurai, a reference to the nagari (and its tradition), around which the city of Bukittinggi grew. Kurai people sometimes refer to the city as *Limo Jorong* of Kurai, or the “Five Corners” of Kurai, a reference to the five districts the area was once divided into. Today the city is divided primarily according to a plan laid out by the New Order central government, which divides it into three districts made up of twenty-four villages (*kelurahan*). Natives of any of these areas consider themselves to

²¹ Language is also distinct between different regions. Residents of Bukittinggi, even those whose origins lie elsewhere in West Sumatra, generally say that the Minang spoken in Bukittinggi is the most standard, or “neutral” of all Minang dialects, although the local Kurai dialect is characterized by a few identifiable habits.

be Kurai, and would sometimes speak of “Kurai” traditions, characteristics, values, and so on, rather than “Minang” ones.²²

Each of the twenty-four villages in the city is divided less formally into several identifiable neighborhoods, usually with several hundred people in each. Bukittinggi is not characterized by clearly differentiated impoverished and wealthy neighborhoods. There is no right and wrong side of any real or proverbial tracks. While there are a few areas that contain a relative concentration of elite homes,²³ almost all of Bukittinggi’s neighborhoods are dominated by families who are considered *biaso*, meaning typical or normal, and in this case meaning that they are not particularly wealthy. Sprinkled among the *biaso*, there are generally a few wealthier families in most neighborhoods. A good portion of Bukittinggi’s residential land is considered clan property rather than private property. This means that even for a relatively wealthy family, the location of their house may be determined by where they have use rights to clan land, rather than by their ability to choose a “better” neighborhood. When I looked for two neighborhoods in which to conduct household surveys, people I asked for suggestions had trouble coming up with two that offered a significant contrast with each other from a socio-economic perspective. No one could think of a particularly poor area, and while some people, after some prodding, mentioned relatively elite areas, my impression was that they did not really consider

²² On the other hand, because the Kurai area sits at the heart of the *ranah Minang*, or Minangkabau domain, Kurai people sometimes talk as if Kurai traditions are the most Minangkabau of Minangkabau traditions. People that live in parts of West Sumatra that are outside the traditional Minangkabau heartlands, such as along the coast, are sometimes discussed as having traditions and deviate from normal Minangkabau practices, and are thus seen as more marginally ethnically Minangkabau.

²³ Such as the *kelurahan*, or “village, of Belakang Balok, meaning “Behind City Hall.”

these to be real neighborhoods of the city.²⁴ I eventually settled for surveying one neighborhood closer to the city center, populated mostly by those who rented or had purchased their homes, and another neighborhood slightly further out where most of the residents were Kurai and living on pusako property.

The traditional Minang house takes a distinctive shape. These *rumah gadang* (“large houses”) are built around sturdy wooden posts supporting a floor elevated above the ground, and are topped by roofs shaped into one or more sets of curved, upward sloping protrusions, which taper off into points at each end in an effect that resembles the horns of a water buffalo. Inside, there is an open front room – what guests would see were they to enter – the back wall of which contains a number of doorways, each leading into a small bedroom. The open front room would act as a common area, while each bedroom would be claimed by one female member of the family, and used by her husband and young children as well. (The most recently wed woman in the house would occupy the best bedroom.) A kitchen would sit out back. A large number of people could thus share a single house.

The *rumah gadang* is the most pervasive symbol of Minangkabau. Its form appears on a hundred different souvenirs sold in the marketplace, in pastoral artwork on the walls in people’s homes, in the logos of sundry local businesses, as a theme in children’s drawings, and even as a design on Indonesian currency. Government buildings, along with some banks, larger restaurants, and other high-profile buildings

²⁴ I was also told that in elite households it was likely that no residents would be home to answer questions, unless I came at night, or settled for speaking with a household servant. Many of the areas more opulent homes also belong to families who spend most of their time living in Jakarta.

(including the clock tower) across West Sumatra are topped with a version of the Minang roof. But while a few scattered and usually aging rumah gadang (some occupied, others standing empty next to a more modern home) remain in the villages of the Agam Valley surrounding Bukittinggi, in the city itself they mostly exist as a symbol. Virtually no one lives in a rumah gadang today, and none are being built.

Older homes, particularly those dating to the mid-20th century, tend to be made of wood, bamboo, and other organic materials. Newer homes – and a large number of the homes around have been built since the 1980's – are more likely to be built from bricks, which are favored as a more durable and high-status material. Often a single plot of land, occupied by members of a single lineage, is the site of several houses, with newer ones built next to older ones to accommodate more family members and provide a measure of independence for separate family units. In any given neighborhood it is likely that there are at least one or two new, large, two-storied houses, perhaps adorned with a porch of white tile or faux marble, and topped with ceramic tiles. Such elite houses are, as a general rule, surrounded by a perimeter fence. These houses stand immediately next to more modest ones, and it would not be surprising to see, right next door, a small house of plaited bamboo or mismatched pieces of wood, topped by rusting sheets of metal.

Aside from houses, neighborhoods always contain a mosque or *surau*, prayer house, and a few *lapau*, small shops selling everyday items and often attached to the house of the shop owner. These are the places where public life is conducted. It is the sharing of *surau* and *lapau* that generally defines where one neighborhood ends and

another begins, though the borders are not hard. Days begin for many people before dawn when the mosque or surau broadcasts a recorded version of the call to prayer over loudspeakers. From anywhere in the city, several different calls can be heard at once, mixing with and endorsing each other. Some people sleep in, but others get up to pray. A few, most often older residents walk down to the surau to pray there, while everyone else prays at home. Some men then head over to the *lapau kopi*, the coffee house, for breakfast. Children dress in uniforms and walk to school. Some men and women leave for work. Meanwhile, other women may take the morning to do laundry at the surau's public pool, especially if they do not have enough water stored up at home. Back at home, they may begin to grind chili peppers in the kitchen, and make some new dishes to go with the day's rice. Members of the household will take food individually when they get hungry.

Later in the day, if the pool is stocked, men who are done with their day's work, or have no work to do, may come to fish there. The children come home in the early afternoon and play in the yards outside their homes, or change clothing and go to the surau for their religious lessons. For the women who have been doing domestic chores since morning, the afternoon may offer the opportunity to slow down a bit, perhaps even to socialize or nap, if they're not too busy watching small children. The call to prayer sounds around noon, and three times more by evening, but most people, if they pray, do so at home. The exception is on Friday, when many men gather at the mosque for the communal noon prayer and sermon, an Islamic obligation for men. At this time, the number of men in the marketplace and out in the streets drops

significantly—although I was often told that, in decades past, *any* man would have been ashamed to be seen in public outside of the mosque during Friday prayers. The sermons, like the call to prayer, are amplified over loudspeakers. The local prayer houses, as well as the larger mosques also are the site of daily evening prayers during the fasting month of Ramadan, as well as occasional religious lectures, attended most often by a relatively older and primarily female audience. While there are some large mosques around the city, most people’s religious life is conducted at home and in the local surau.

Quite often evenings are dominated by the television. It is unusual for a house not to have a TV. Most people, aside from a few who can afford a satellite dish, have two channels to choose from (although a third one made inroads in 2003), but almost everyone watches the same comedies, *sinetron* (Indonesian soap-opera dramas or comedies), and music shows on the RCTI network. Later in the evenings, young men might gather to play guitar and sing. In some neighborhoods, they may participate in *rondo*, or security “rounds,” during the middle of the night, keeping the neighborhood free of thieves and suspicious strangers.²⁵

Women tend to socialize in each other’s homes, or sometimes at small shops owned by neighborhood women. However, the *lapau kopi* (coffee houses) are

²⁵ During the period of my fieldwork, this practice was being revived in the neighborhood where I lived. I occasionally participated, and from my observations the practice seemed as much an excuse to gather and to assert neighborhood unity as it was a practical attempt to prevent crime. From what I was told, several decades ago, when the neighborhood was not connected to the electrical grid, the practice of keeping out any strange men during the night was taken very seriously.

primarily the domain of men.²⁶ They act as a kind of neighborhood living room for many men. During the day those men who are not working may gather here, and some men routinely spend their evenings at a particular lapau. Here men eat snacks, smoke, perhaps drink coffee or sweetened tea with egg yolk (*teh talua*), watch TV, and play games. The most popular game is dominoes, but *koa* (a kind of card game of Chinese origin) and chess are also popular. Games may involve gambling, but often the stakes are kept to what is affordable, meaning a pack of cigarettes or even a glass of coffee. Sometimes, more serious gambling may take place, and very commonly illegal but ubiquitous lottery tickets are purchased here. Men may also spend hours discussing winning or potentially winning numbers, and how to discover them. Such discussions involve dream interpretation (there is usually available a Chinese/Indonesian book linking particular dream images to particular numbers), and the creation of predictive algorithms. Some lapau also sell beer and, less openly and less legally, hard alcohol.

If it is a Sunday, people who are not selling in the *pasa* generally have the day off. Some children may attend a Sunday morning religious lesson, the proceedings of which may also be broadcast to the neighborhood over the loudspeaker. Sunday may be an opportunity to relax, or to go on a family outing to the *pasa*. But it is also the most popular day to have feasts, or *baralek*. The wedding party is the prototypical

²⁶ Women generally come in to *lapau kopi* only to buy items, and do not stay for an extended period. This is particularly true in the evenings. Some women will occasionally have breakfast at a *lapau*, or come to chat during the daytime if there aren't many men around. It is often true, however, that the *lapau* is run or co-run by a woman, who may not only serve but also chat with the male customers at any time.

alek, but they may also celebrate other events. Whatever the case, the location of a party is often identifiable by the plastic awning and chairs that go up in front of the house. There may also be a keyboard player and singer, with amplified pop music serenading the entire neighborhood. During popular times of the year for weddings and other parties, it is common to see groups of women, and sometimes men, dressed nicely, headed off to make a showing at one or several celebrations, where they will generally eat, pay their respects, and then leave.

The interior layout of houses, while representing an array of designs, nevertheless tends to be inspired by the general rumah gadang pattern. The front door of most houses leads into a guest room, sometimes doubling as a living room, or spatially divided to perform both functions: at the “top”²⁷ of the room, near the front door, there may be a sofa and coffee table where guests can sit and be served coffee or tea, while perhaps deeper inside the room is an area for the family to sit and watch TV. The décor in guest rooms or living rooms almost always includes family photographs up on the wall. Particularly common are formal wedding and graduation photographs. Small shelves with ceramic knick-knacks are common, as are artificial flowers, and art with Islamic themes.

Doorways – perhaps one, perhaps half a dozen – along the perimeter of this room, almost invariably covered by curtains (in addition to the actual door), lead to the bedrooms. If a wedding has recently taken place, the nicest bedroom (likely the one closest to the front door) may be decorated with an especially fancy, satiny curtain,

²⁷ The closer one gets to the front door of a home, the further *ateh*, or “up” one gets, according to standard terminology.

and reserved for the newly wed daughter. The kitchen and bathroom are generally furthest from the front door, in the back of the house, and sometimes are more properly described as attached to, rather than inside the house itself. The top of the house is thus an area of social distance, formality and respect: this is where there is a link between outside the house and inside the house, and it is a place for guests.²⁸

Further from the front door, where the TV is generally placed, the family and friends and relatives might relax in a more informal setting. Deeper yet into the house, in the kitchen and particularly the bedrooms, are the areas of greatest intimacy.

The differences between the areas of the house also become linked to gender. Women, in this matrilineal and matrilocal society, are traditionally the ones with the rights to use houses, and each bedroom is generally reserved for use by one of the adult female members of the family. Women also are expected to do most or all of the cooking. Kitchens and particularly bedrooms are therefore primarily the territory of women. The men married to these women, on the other hand, are said to traditionally have the status of a guest in the household, meaning that they are more closely linked to the more formal parts of the house that are closer to the outside world, and spend more time outside of the house altogether, whether for work or for socializing.

As mentioned above, I conducted a household survey that covered large portions of two neighborhoods of Bukittinggi. I carried out this with the assistance of

²⁸ Even within this space, increasing proximity to the front door is commensurate with increasing prestige and respect. At ritual events conducted by gatherings of men, efforts are made by individuals to sit at an appropriate distance from the front door relative to others present, and high prestige guests may (often after a ritual display of reluctance), be compelled to shift closer to this area. See Chapter 2, below, and also Errington (1984) for a description of how men attending such an event in a Minangkabau village maneuvered to sit in certain positions relative to others.

Yessi Asiswanti, a graduate of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Andalas University in Padang, and a native to a village just outside of Bukittinggi. She and I went house to house in these neighborhoods, asking questions about the composition of each household and the characteristics of each individual occupant. Both of the neighborhoods in question were considered “normal” neighborhoods in the city, although one was located closer to the city center than the other, and had a population that included a larger percentage of people who were not considered natives of the neighborhood. All together, the survey covered a total of 125 households housing about 600 people, approximately two-thirds of whom were adults over the age of eighteen. The survey thus covered over 0.6% of the population of the city, although because the sample was not randomly selected, it can be considered only suggestive and not statistically representative.

The household survey indicates that most households are fairly small, averaging fewer than five members each.²⁹ Although houses in the survey I conducted had anywhere from one to nine bedrooms apiece, in most the members of the household were split up into two, three, or four bedrooms. Many households include only two generations, focused around a nuclear family, although three generations sharing a house is common as well. There are some large families in which there are ten or more children, but many married couples today consciously limit themselves to

²⁹ Very similar numbers can be found by extrapolating from the official statistics listed for various neighborhoods in *Bukittinggi Dalam Angka 2002*. According to these statistics, there are 22,643 households and 94,350 people in Bukittinggi as a whole, making for an average of 4.17 members per household. In my survey, the number of occupants in a house ranged from 1 to 19, with the latter being an extreme outlier.

two or three children to avoid being overwhelmed by the financial burden of caring for more.

Almost everyone in Bukittinggi has had at least some formal education, and – as is the case in many parts of Indonesia – the vast majority of the population is functionally literate. According my household survey, 30% of men and 40% of women have advanced no further than elementary school, while about 50% of both men and women have achieved at least a high school education.³⁰ In general, younger people have tended to advance much further in their educations than their elders. About two-thirds of the adults in my survey who were thirty years of age or younger had achieved at least a high-school education, although the percentage of women in this category, 77%, was greater than the percentage of men, 54%. The number of high school graduates drops below 50% for those over thirty, and down to about 30% for those over the age of forty-five – 43% of men, but only 26% of women. For those over forty-five, 36% of men and 68% of women had no higher than an elementary school education.

The general trend in which men advanced further in their educations than women seems to have halted or even reversed in recent times, as indicated by the overall percentages of high school graduates mentioned above. According to the survey, 25% of adult men age thirty or less had not advanced beyond elementary

³⁰ The numbers from my survey tell us something about general trends, but cannot be taken as definitive for the city as a whole. This is principally because the survey was conducted in two city neighborhoods and cannot be assumed to be a representative sample of the city as a whole. As I mention below, these two neighborhoods represented slightly contrasting populations. In general, the population of the neighborhood closer to the city center was somewhat more highly educated than the population of the neighborhood closer to the city's periphery, with significantly more people having advanced beyond elementary school.

school, but this was true for only 6% of women in the same age category.³¹ In contrast, while only 8% of men in this age group had achieved some post-secondary education, 34% of their female peers had done so. It is quite likely that this gap represents population trends as well as education trends: a larger percentage of young, university-educated men may have left Bukittinggi for employment in larger cities. Women may be less likely to leave Bukittinggi simply because, as the inheritors of use rights for lineage property, they remain more tightly tied to their homes, which also provide a safety net for them.

In more than a quarter of the households I surveyed, at least one member of the household had achieved some kind of post-secondary education, though these individuals represented a smaller percentage (14%) of the adult population as a whole, and tended to be relatively young. Higher education may be obtained at a college or university (less than 10% of the population), or perhaps at one of the many one-, two-, or three-year degree programs (in such subjects as management, English, computers, or religion) offered in Bukittinggi, Padang, and other cities in West Sumatra. Judging by my observations as well as the survey data, these degree programs seem particularly popular among young, unmarried women.

Those who do earn university degrees may have trouble finding suitable work in Bukittinggi, unless they are interested in becoming a teacher, or are able to fill a

³¹ This trend continues for children currently of school age. My survey identified a small number of boys who had left school after elementary or middle school, most of whom were now working as laborers, drivers, or by helping in their parents' businesses. All of the girls in the survey who were school age were listed as students. There is little work available, and considered appropriate for adolescent girls, and they are considered too young to be married.

rare opening in another civil service position. If they do not move to Padang (or another, larger city in Indonesia), they may fall back on running a small business, like many people in the city. This is true for both men and women. Men are supposed to have a trade or occupation, although many try to scrape together a living from unsteady work as drivers, laborers, or petty traders. It is not unusual for women to work outside the home, in salaried positions such as civil service, as the head of a small business, or as a petty-trader in the *pasa*, although some find it difficult (even if often financially necessary) to continue to do so after they have children. About 40% of the adult women in the household survey were identified as *ibu rumah tangga*, an Indonesian term for “housewife” that more literally means “mother of the household.” Nevertheless, many of the women labeled as such may also work from or near their homes, sewing clothing or perhaps working in a cottage industry, like *karupuk* (cassava chip) production.

A few people in the city have control of land to farm. This is especially true in the outer regions of the city, where there are stretches of rice fields or trees producing oranges, bananas,³² cassia (a kind of cinnamon), and other products. Sometimes people who control this land lease it to others. In any case, few people control enough land to support themselves with it. Ultimately, surviving in Bukittinggi usually means finding some way to trade in goods or services. For most people in Bukittinggi, making a living is a competitive and often very individualistic pursuit.

³² In 2002 and 2003, however, many of the banana trees in the region were diseased and not producing edible fruit.

It is difficult to say what the average income is for people in Bukittinggi. I know of no reliable statistics. My own household survey included a question about income, but many people indicated that their incomes were unsteady and so they found it hard to give a figure. People in Bukittinggi generally distrust what others say about their incomes. People may exaggerate, embarrassed by their struggles, or understate them, not wanting to sound arrogant or be asked for assistance by others. Civil servants may make close to Rp.1,000,000 in monthly salary, or even more if they are particularly senior. At the exchange rate in 2002 and 2003, that amounts to more than \$3 a day. Particularly successful businessmen and women may make more than this. The rest of the population – petty traders, drivers, laborers, and so on – generally earn something closer to \$2 a day, when they are working.

The Pasa and the Kampuang

We have moved from the city's central marketplaces, out to its neighborhoods, into its homes, and then turned to look back towards its marketplaces, shops, businesses, schools and government offices, where many of its people make a living. We are now in a better position to tie the overall structure of the city to the social and cultural lives of its people. It almost goes without saying that the structure of the city reflects its history. I have already described how the city grew out of a colonial enterprise, focused on the domination of trade, that established a new center of demand for goods, and attracted traders from nearby villages as well as points further afield. Bukittinggi was thus not a village that grew into a city, but a locus of

commerce that became the gravitational center for the villages that surrounded it. Over time, the populations of the villages have been pulled toward and into the city and the city has pushed out into the villages.

We can see the city as a reflection of the “Islamic trading society” that Kahin (1999:71), as quoted above, identifies as the unifying ideological model of early 20th century Minangkabau society. Its members come together to do business as independent and egalitarian agents, just as the *kampung* of Bukittinggi gather together to meet in the marketplace as equals. (Recall that the few elite areas are considered part of the marketplace rather than real *kampung* in their own right.) While the state has become the prime authority in Indonesia, and a powerful one, its institutions are, geographically and conceptually, pushed aside. The marketplace that brings the people of Bukittinggi together is an institution with no formal hierarchy, no dominating structure of authority (though the institutions of the state are always lurking). Similarly, the egalitarian, decentralized conception of Islam that dominates religious life in West Sumatra (and many other Islamic areas of Indonesia) is reflected in the fact that most religious practice takes place in the autonomous institutions established in the neighborhoods, and in the individual homes of their residents. It will be clear throughout this dissertation that egalitarianism and autonomy remain important moral themes for most people in Bukittinggi.

There remains a conceptual distinction between the city as a marketplace, *pasa*, and its villages and neighborhoods, *kampung*, which surround this core. People – normal Minangkabau people – live in *kampung*, associated with the protection of

home, with kin, with social intimacy and cohesion, and with the ritual order of ethnic and religious traditions. Meanwhile, people come together to make a living in the pasa, associated with the opportunities of trade, with relationships founded on competition and detached calculation, with national and international institutions and influences, and with the pleasurable freedoms and dangers of chaos and depravity that come with such influences. These are the kinds of dangers, of course, that Dobbin (1983, as quoted above) suggests kept the pasa and the kampuang physically distinct in the first place.

These two worlds are not really separate, of course. There is no clear line between pasa and kampuang. What is kampuang from the perspective of the city center may be pasa from the perspective of its distant edges. The distinction is as much conceptual as it is geographical, and it remains salient, I think, because it overlays and helps to organize concerns that are important to people. Around the kampuang coalesce one set of inter-related ideas about the nature of the world and how to pursue a good and meaningful life within it; around the pasa collect a different set of ideas about these same matters. As abstractions, they perhaps pull in different directions, resisting the possibility of coexistence. Like the kampuang and pasa, however, both can and do exist in the same place, in the same lives, the border constantly shifting according to perspective. To live in Bukittinggi – or, for that matter, most anywhere in West Sumatra – is inevitably to live in both.

Doing the Research

Living in a Kampung

The research on which this dissertation is based was carried out between January 2002 and November 2003. I spent most of this time in the city of Bukittinggi, although I made frequent trips to the coastal provincial capital of Padang (mostly to deal with bureaucratic concerns, and occasionally to give a lecture or consult with faculty at Andalas University, which helped to sponsor my research). I also made occasional trips to other towns and villages in West Sumatra.

My plan going into the field was to live, along with my wife, in a Minangkabau household in Bukittinggi during the course of the fieldwork. I hoped that this would have several benefits: it would provide a conduit through which I could be introduced to others in a neighborhood, it would allow me to more closely observe an example of family life, and it would eliminate the need for us to do all of our own cooking, shopping and other work required to maintain a house. Before arriving in Bukittinggi, we had been warned by some Minangkabau people (e.g., by members of the social sciences faculty at Andalas University in Padang) that it might be difficult for us to find a household in Bukittinggi where we could live with a family. We were told that people would likely be reluctant to share their homes with people who were not members of their own family, and might worry about the reaction of their neighbors to having foreigners come stay with them.

However, we were fortunate. Within a few days of arriving in Bukittinggi, and letting it be known what we were looking for, we were introduced to a man, Inyiak Datuak, who offered us the opportunity to live in his home. I write “in his home,” although he did not live there himself. Rather, this is the home where Inyiak Datuak had grown up, staying there until getting married and moving to another home with his wife. Now, two of his younger sisters lived in the house, and two other sisters also considered it their home, though they lived in other parts of Indonesia during most of the time my wife and I were in Bukittinggi. Especially since their parents had passed away, Inyiak Datuak still felt responsible for looking after the home, his sisters, and his sister’s children. In this last respect, he played the proper role of the *mamak*, the mother’s brother, an authority figure in the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system. This was especially important for him because he holds a high title in his lineage, meaning that he is responsible for looking after the best interests of all the members of his lineage – essentially, of being a *mamak* to all of them. “Datuak,” in fact, is his title, indicating this position, while “Inyiak” is an additional honorific.³³

For most of the time that we lived there, there were five other people in the household. Besides the two sisters, there was the husband of the older sister, and their two children: a boy who was six years old when we moved in, and a girl who was a year and a half old when we moved in. Although we provided their household with an extra source of income, they provided us with much more, even beyond the food and

³³ “Inyiak” can literally mean “grandfather,” but it can be used as a term of respect as well. People who are respected are said to be *dituoan*, or “made old” in the way they are treated by others. Inyiak Datuak was in fact in his early to mid-thirties.

shelter they shared with us. Their companionship and assistance were essential in shaping our experience in West Sumatra.

There were several reasons that the situation at this home invited the possibility of having us live there. The first was the respect in which people held Inyiak Datuak. This would help ease the anxiety that might be aroused by having foreigners with unclear aims coming to live in the kampung. (Inyiak Datuak's father, although not bearing the same kind of high title, had also been a very well respected man before he had passed away in the 1990's. I was told that there had been a steady stream of visitors in the evening coming to seek his counsel.) The bedroom that was available for us had once served as Inyiak Datuak's bedroom, although it had never really been finished. In agreeing to live there, we also made finishing the room possible. We had a ceiling put in below the tin roof, had the brick walls plastered and painted, and had the room wired with an electrical outlet and an overhead lamp. More importantly, this bedroom was not actually inside the house, but rather attached to its side, built on as an addition. Although there were four sisters in the family with claims to the house, and only three bedrooms inside the house itself, I think the fact that we would be living "outside" the main house eased the sense that we were occupying a room that should be reserved for use by one of the women in the family.³⁴ This also meant that we had a separate entrance and could maintain some degree of privacy and independence. At the same time, we were able to share the common areas

³⁴ Still, before we left Bukittinggi at the end of the fieldwork, the family told us that they would not rent out this room to anyone else. Inyiak Datuak said that renting it to a local person would invite too many possibilities for conflict.

of the house – the living room, the kitchen, and the bathroom – with our host family, and share meals with them.

The house sits on a plot of land with several other houses, all belonging to members of the same lineage. The neighborhood is up in large part of people who consider themselves to be living in their native kampung, on property passed down through their lineages, although a few of the houses nearby are rented. To people near the center of the city, this is definitely kampung, village.³⁵ At the same time, we were close to main roads, and near enough to the center of the city that to those further out on its edges, we were (at least, when they wanted to make a rhetorical point) in the *pasa*. If you walk down a hill to the bottom of the street and look across some rice fields, you can see the Jam Gadang on the city's central hill. To reach it by foot takes about half an hour, but there are convenient public cars that can get you there with less effort. (Eventually, I acquired an old Vespa scooter to move around the city more quickly and freely.)

I learned a good deal about life in Bukittinggi by observing the habits and rhythms of people in my own neighborhood (and in my household), hanging out in one of its coffee houses in the evening, attending celebrations at its prayer house, and so on. These kinds of experience formed one pillar of my research. However, I did not focus all of my research in this one neighborhood. During the day, I spent much of my time in other neighborhoods (and other coffee houses), in people's homes in

³⁵ One woman who lived in an elite area at the center of the city expressed surprise and concern that we were planning to live “in the village,” as she put it, using English.

other parts of the city, or in the marketplace.³⁶ This gave me a wider view of life in the city, and the chance to meet and talk with a wider variety of people, some of whom became key respondents in my research.

Interviews

Much of the data used in this dissertation is taken from interviews, recorded on audiotape and transcribed by a Minangkabau person living in another part of West Sumatra. I interviewed a broad range of people in Bukittinggi, including both men and women ranging in age from their twenties to their eighties. I did, however, interview more men than women, and the majority of the people I interviewed were married, young or middle-aged adults. Some people were interviewed only once, or perhaps a few times, while a smaller group of respondents were interviewed repeatedly and in depth about a broad range of topics, as I describe below.

In all, one hundred and seventy six interviews were recorded, representing about one hundred and seventy hours of recordings resulting in well over two thousand pages of typed transcriptions. After each interview, I would also write a description of the interview and any significant impressions from it in my field notes. When I had time, I would listen to the recording of the interview in the days that followed. This would help me to plan for the next interview, and would also allow me

³⁶ My wife, meanwhile, spent a good deal of time teaching English – not merely because this was one of the most obvious organized activities for her to engage in while in Bukittinggi, but because this is in fact her profession in the United States as well. She stayed in Bukittinggi until about four months before the end of my fieldwork, when she returned to California to begin a graduate program.

to recall and record in writing more information about the interview (e.g., hand gestures, posture, references to events or conversations that had not been recorded) while it was still fresh in my mind. In recreating pieces of these conversations as they appear in this dissertation, I consulted the original audio recordings, the transcriptions, and my field notes.

The interviews took place in several different settings. When possible, I interviewed people in a small room I had secured, located above a small shop in the marketplace. This setting was private, relatively quiet, and allowed the respondents to be removed from most distractions while also being distanced from an environment (such as their home) that tied them to a particular position in their daily lives. However, many people were unwilling or unable to come to (or be taken to) this space to be interviewed. There were several reasons for this. For some people, it was simply too inconvenient, or their responsibilities and activities at home did not allow it. This was most often the case with women. Other people simply felt uncomfortable having to come to a strange place to participate in what was already a somewhat strange activity. It was too much like having to submit to something, some kind of a test or a bureaucratic procedure. It also put them in the uncomfortable position of being seen going out of their way to do something unusual (an issue I will return to in Chapter 3). There was also some sense of impropriety in women coming alone to my interview space and spending time with me there. This could also become a problem in other settings as well, but generally did not prevent interviews from taking place.

Most women, and some men, were interviewed in their homes. This occasionally presented problems of privacy, such that some interviews, or parts of interviews, were conducted within potential or actual earshot of other people. The advantage of conducting interviews in people's homes, however, was that it gave me a greater chance to observe the setting in which they lived and, at times, to get some glimpses into how they related to other people in their household. I made use of a number of other locations – rooms in houses or schools for example – to conduct the remaining interviews.

My research assistant, Yessi Asiswanti, was present for only a very small number of interviews. Most of these were not part of extended interview series, but isolated interviews, mostly with Islamic teachers and scholars. My wife was present for several – but still a relatively small minority – of the interviews with women (for the reasons described above), especially near the beginning of interview series.

None of the respondents were paid for being interviewed, although I provided snacks, drinks, and cigarettes when hosting people in my interview space, and sometimes brought such small offerings to other people's homes or treated someone to a meal. There were also occasional gifts and assistance of other kinds that I provided for respondents, although I certainly felt that I received far more than I gave. Only if the respondents enjoyed participating in the interviews could the exchange be considered balanced in any sense. Two or three respondents dropped out of participation in the research after several interviews apparently because they decided (or had been convinced by others) that they should be receiving direct payment. In

general, it was my philosophy that the richest and most interesting data would come from people who genuinely wanted to talk with me.

Thirteen respondents completed what I consider to be a full interview series, consisting of a minimum of at least six separate, substantial interviews. Nine of these were men, and the remaining four were women. These series generally took place over the course of several months, and lasted as many as fourteen interview sessions, with the great majority consisting of at least ten separate interviews. The interview sessions normally ranged from a little less than an hour to as long as two hours in length, with entire series ranging from less than ten to more than twenty hours of tape-recorded interviews. In some cases, I spent many more hours conversing with a respondent outside of the interview process and not on audiotape.

Interviews with these respondents followed a person-centered approach (Levy and Hollan 1998). I would generally come prepared with one or more topics I wanted to explore, but I would not necessarily stick to any set series of questions. I would allow the respondents' answers to determine the course of the interview, thus getting a better sense of their own concerns and the connections they saw between different issues and experiences. Some interviews stuck more closely than others to structured question-and-answer sessions, depending on the topic at hand and the tendencies of the respondent. In asking questions, I tried to tack back and forth between asking questions about cultural concepts and social practices in general, and question about the personal experiences and opinions of the individual respondent. The goal was to gather information – both from the content of their answers as well as their patterns

and emotional tenor – on their individual engagements with the cultural material we were discussing, along with gaining a greater understanding of the cultural material itself. I tried to gain insight into the way they experienced their own lives and also into the way they imagined the larger patterns of social life that are important in their social context. Among the broad topics which occupied the largest proportion of interview time were the following: childhood, marriage and family life, religious concepts and practices, emotions, gender roles, morality, the supernatural, and health, illness and the body.

Many of the people who appear in the following pages are respondents who completed an interview series, although this is not always the case. All of the names I use are pseudonyms, and I have occasionally changed some identifying details in order to better protect their anonymity. Minang people use a wide variety of kinds of names, some of them conventional and others created by parents, sometimes in order to represent a concept or commemorate a historical moment linked to the birth. Most names get shortened into nicknames when used, and I have chosen pseudonyms that match the feel of this phenomenon. Some of the names I have chosen, however, are actually derived from Minang words rather than names. In addition, in referring to the respondents and presenting passages from interview transcriptions, I have attached “Da” to the beginning of the names of the men and “Ni” to the names of the women. These are common shorthand for the Minang terms “*uda*,” “older brother,” and “*uni*,” “older sister.” In fact, a person would only use these terms when addressing or referring to someone older, though not more than a few years older, than themselves.

Here, I use them to help readers more easily recall which respondents are men and which are women.

Language

I conducted most of the interviews using the Minangkabau language, or in a mixture of Minang and Indonesian, the national dialect. The two languages share the same grammar and much of the same basic lexicon (though somewhat different phonologies, making them largely mutually unintelligible), making it easy to move back and forth between the two, or even mix them in a single sentence. Although there was a tendency for some people to want to speak with me in Indonesian at first – the language Minang people would use by default with non-Minang people – most respondents moved past this quickly. The respondents who most often used Indonesian with me were those who had most often used Indonesian for large parts of their lives, either because they had lived outside of West Sumatra, had spouses who did not speak Minang as a native language, or because they worked as civil servants in an office in which Indonesian was the default language.

The two languages are close enough, and mixed often enough, that it seemed unlikely that people would have radically different relationships with the topics of discussion depending on the language used. Nevertheless it is certainly true that Minang, as the first language of most people in West Sumatra, is most closely associated with people's family life, their close friendships, and their most salient emotions, while Indonesian is more tightly linked to more formal public interactions

and the mass media.³⁷ There did seem to be some tendency for certain topics – including the more formal aspects of Islamic practice – to inspire a greater use of Indonesian. Heider (1991) describes different cognitive “maps” for emotion terminology in the two languages among those who speak both fluently, indicating differences even when close cognates are in question.

I began my fieldwork already fluent in Indonesian, having spent several years studying and using the language, including more than a year living in Yogyakarta on the island of Java, and studying at Gadjah Mada University there. During the first five or six months in Bukittinggi, I hired tutors (native Minang speakers who were, by profession, English teachers) to help me to master Minang. At first, I spent about seven or eight hours a week with my tutors, eventually reducing that to about four hours a week before ending the formal lessons altogether. Most of the interviews took place during the second year of fieldwork, after I had become more comfortable using Minang.

When translating my respondents’ words into English, I have of course tried to convey what they said and the way they said it. At the same time, I have tried to avoid

³⁷ In general, Minang children grow up in West Sumatra speaking Minang, and only begin to speak Indonesian regularly once they attend school (where Indonesian is the prescribed language). However, by this age, most Minang children are at least passively fluent in Indonesian due to their exposure to it, especially through television. One Bukittinggi native who had raised her own children in Malay/Indonesian speaking areas of eastern Sumatra, and had used Indonesian in the household as a consequence, told me that when she became angry with her children, she would berate them in Minang without even knowing that she was doing it. Only after enough time had passed for her to calm down were they brave enough to ask her what she had been yelling about, and she realized that she had been using a language they could not understand. After moving back to Bukittinggi, her children complained to her that their teachers at school were always angry. It turned out, she explained to me, that the teachers would frequently make comments in Minang. Her children had learned to associate an authority figure’s use of Minang with anger.

an overly literal, or word-for-word translation that might have the unfortunate effect of making them sound awkward and stilted in a way that they do not sound when speaking their own language. Except when it seemed important in conveying emotional tenor or state of mind, I have cleaned up the translated transcripts by eliminating some stutters, pauses, and similar quirks of speech. Some information appears in brackets inserted into the passages of transcription. I have inserted information in brackets for the following purposes: 1) to clarifying meanings that might have been apparent during the context of our conversation, or according to the habits of Minang or Indonesian speech, but are lost when presented in writing or translated into English; 2) to convey some paralinguistic information, such as laughter, as well as important physical gestures; 3) to indicate the original Minang or Indonesian word or phrase represented in the English translation; 4) to indicate where I have deleted a few words or sentences – often repetitions or digressions that I am not referencing in my analysis – that might otherwise interfere with ease of reading, in which case “...” appears inside the brackets; and finally, 5) in places where a word or phrase on the original audio recording is unintelligible, in which case “un” will appear inside the brackets. In extended passages of transcription, “GS:” indicates that I spoke the words that follow, while respondents’ words follow their pseudonym and are marked by bold lettering.

Finally, I employ many Indonesian and Minangkabau terms in the following pages. In general, unless otherwise specified, the terms given are in Minangkabau or are Indonesian terms for which there is no commonly used Minangkabau alternative.

(Sometimes the Minangkabau and Indonesian terms are the same.) When I feel it is useful to specify whether a given term is generally considered to be Minangkabau, I mark it with “(M),” while I mark Indonesian terms with “(I).” This information also appears in the glossary, where relevant Minangkabau and Indonesian versions of a term are listed. In certain cases, both Minangkabau and Indonesian pronunciations of a term were used by my respondents, including cases where a single respondent used both versions of the term. For the sake of clarity, in cases where such terms appear repeatedly, I have sometimes made a decision to use only a single form, even in transcription passages where the respondents had in fact used the other form.

Chapter 2

ADAT and AUTONOMY:

DIMENSIONS of MINANGKABAU IDENTITY

Adat and Identity

Coming home after a trip to the pasa one day, I found myself getting off the public car at the same time as a man who was only vaguely familiar to me. Before we walked in our separate directions, the man approached me and told me that I could study Minang *adat* with him, that he had books and other materials, and that I could come to his house and learn all about it. I assented in a noncommittal manner, thanked him, and went on my way. I had little desire to follow through, at least not in the near future, and I quickly put the encounter out of my mind. This offer – and my reluctance – suggests something of the meaning and role of *adat* in conceptions of Minangkabau society and identity, as I will now explain.

*Adat*¹ is a concept central to many Indonesian societies, and is usually translated as “custom,” or “tradition,” but also sometimes “law” or even “manners.” In Minangkabau, the term covers a relatively wide conceptual area, leading at least one Minangkabau anthropologist to argue that, in Minangkabau, the term means more or less the same thing that anthropologists mean by “culture” (Manan 1984). Because the definition of “culture” is infamous for its slipperiness, this claim could be debated

¹ In Minangkabau, the word is often pronounced “adaik,” however the Indonesian form, “adat,” is often used, and seems to be standard in written works even when Minangkabau spellings are used for other key words. I have thus chosen to use the Indonesian form of the word.

endlessly, but it is sufficient to note that the most important difference between the anthropological use of “culture” and the Minang use of “adat” is that “adat Minangkabau” emphasizes the practices and concepts that are, according to social consensus, ideally linked to “Minangkabau.” Adat thus refers to those aspects of social life that distinguish ideal Minangkabau society from other societies – less like “culture,” and more like “traditional culture.”

As an example, gambling is something that a significant number of Minang people take part in, and can therefore be considered part of cultural life in Minang society, yet it is not considered to be part of Minangkabau adat. This is so because it is widely understood to be a morally suspect activity and therefore excluded from the ideal of “Minangkabau” social life. As a somewhat different example, the use of cell phones is something that has become quite common for many Minang people (particularly in cities like Bukittinggi), yet it is not considered part of adat because there is nothing particularly “Minangkabau” about it. Topics commonly associated with adat include the functioning of the kinship system, the proper behavior of men and women towards their kin, norms for the governing of the division of property or settling of disputes, and ritual speeches and traditional aphorisms that express the philosophy of living according to adat. Rites of passage and life-cycle rituals, are considered to be concentrated examples of adat in action, as they are ordered in particular, set ways that express adat values and philosophy (for other examples of these rituals, see Errington 1984, Blackwood 2002, and Sanday 2002). Some other aspects of traditional culture, such as traditional arts, are more likely to be included in

the category of *budaya*, an Indonesian word usually translated as “culture,” and generally referring to traditional or high culture.

Many people in West Sumatra, even some with relatively little formal education, are familiar with the field of anthropology, and understand it to be the study of traditional culture. It was usually assumed by anyone in West Sumatra who discovered that I studied anthropology that I had come to Bukittinggi to study adat and budaya. I often explained to people that I was not so much interested in focusing on adat – which, I would point out, has already been written about in numerous richly detailed books by both Minang and foreign authors – but in understanding what everyday life was like for people in Bukittinggi. Trying to keep me in my proper role, people sometimes countered that adat covered all aspects of life among Minangkabau people, although after further conversation it inevitably became clear that they meant it covered all aspects of an idealized “Minangkabau” life, not of their own lives. Further, in conversations with people, adat was only in certain instances used to frame the flow of their own lives and concerns. Perhaps more often, it was a compartmentalized topic, discussions of which would rarely stray into other aspects of life. Yet the model connecting anthropology to traditional culture was strong enough, and my own description of what I was doing obscure enough, that a good number of people ignored my protests, and I soon heard them explaining to third parties that I was studying adat. People often told me that I should be spending my time with this or that person, because they were the adat experts.

As a result, I sometimes found myself making a concerted effort to actually *avoid* spending my time talking with people about adat. This was not because I felt it was unimportant to life in Bukittinggi, but because I worried that without actively resisting this model, I would be channeled into a narrow and unproductive research path. For this reason, I did not want to pursue that man's offer to study adat with him, at least not until I had gotten enough momentum going in my research in matters other than adat.

Two days after his invitation, however, the man showed up at the door to the bedroom where my wife and I stayed (attached to, but with a separate entrance from the house of our host family). As soon as I opened the door, he pushed past me, sat down on the floor mat, and started talking about adat. He talked quickly, in a monologue uninterrupted by any pauses for questions or reactions on my part. He showed me some papers that he said were related to a book that he was writing about adat, to be used in local schools where a movement had been underway for several years to teach children about Minang adat so that it would not die out. He skipped from topic to topic, covering much of the same territory that most basic discussions about adat tend to address: fragments of stories from traditional Minangkabau historical accounts (*tambo*), Minangkabau sayings which embody observations about and philosophical comments on life (*papatah*), various prohibitions on behavior according to adat, the four different kinds of adat, the four different kinds of property according to adat, and so on.

More interesting than this standard content—more extensive versions of which can be found in a number of publications in Indonesia,² as well as (though usually in more fragmented form) in most any extended ethnographic account of Minangkabau life, including this one—was the way he talked about the topic of adat as a whole. His major message seemed to be that Minangkabau adat contains an enormous wealth of wisdom, but that most of this wisdom had been forgotten or suppressed due to Dutch colonial influence and the interference of the Suharto regime.³ Until the fall of Suharto, he said, he could not talk about adat, and in fact no one could. Now, he wanted to bring back this wisdom. As he described it, this wisdom helped to expose all kinds of currently hidden truths: the reason that Eastern Indonesia was colonized first (spices), the reason Minangkabau society was able to be colonized (immoral leaders), the fact that Minangkabau society was the original democracy in the world, and the fundamental similarities in the essences of Islam and Christianity and the reasons the two religious communities should be at peace with each other. He would teach me all of this, he said. I would take it back to America, put it in English, and it would be my dissertation. Everyone would find out about this true Minangkabau

² For example, *Alam Terkembang Jadi Guru: Adat dan Kebudayaan Minangkabau* by A.A. Navis (1984). Hamka has also explored adat in his writings, some of which are collected in *Islam dan Adat Minangkabau* (1984). Neither of these, however, was available in the bookshops of Bukittinggi or Padang during my fieldwork. New works on the topic have appeared, such as those by Amir M.S. (2003) and the *Lembaga Kerapatan Adat Alam Minangkabau Sumatera Barat* [The West Sumatran Association of Minangkabau Adat Councils] (2002). Also available was a series used in West Sumatran junior high schools, written by Drs. Zulkarnaini (1995). I was also able to purchase a two-cassette set containing lectures on adat by Yus Dt. Perpatih (2002), focusing especially on adat philosophy and how it is (or should be) put into action in Minangkabau social relations. All of these are examples of experts' discourses on adat.

³ See below for more on the impact colonialism and the Suharto regime had on adat.

culture, about this true history, and Muslims and Christians would make peace because of it. People in the neighborhood, he told me, think he does not know anything because he does not drive a car, or even a motorcycle – and no one knows all of this information about adat anymore, only little pieces of it. We would become heroes: he for being the source of this information, and me for bringing it to the rest of the world.

My head was spinning. It was the fasting month, and he had shown up only minutes before sunset, when the daily fast is broken. Still, it took the better part of an hour before my wife (who had returned home to find his monologue in full swing) and I, seizing on his desire for some coffee, could get him inside the main house where our host family, now done with their meal, insisted that we eat.⁴ In the living room, the man continued to talk about adat for another half hour before leaving with a promise to return.

The man's visit of course became a topic for discussion and gossip in the household, much of it concerning his lack of manners in barging in on me, and particularly for doing so right before the breaking of the fast. But more revealing than the critique of the man's manners, the complaints about the opaqueness of his monologue, and the analysis of his background and personality, was the reaction the following day of Inyiak Datuak, the man who had invited us to live in this house.

⁴ He had refused several offers to break the fast with us, explaining that a medical condition prevented him from fasting (a religiously proper excuse), and he had already eaten. He probably assumed that my wife and I were not fasting. While it was true that we were technically not following the rules of the fast, we were generally eating very little during the day and enjoying the breaking of the fast with our host family as our single full meal of the day. Once inside the house, he still refused to eat with us.

Recall that Inyiak Datuak holds an important lineage title. He has a reputation for knowing a good deal about adat. Inyiak Datuak surprised me with his reaction after someone told him about the man's visit. That man, he said, has problems. He goes from coffee house to coffee house looking for people to talk to, and all he wants to talk about is adat, all the time. He doesn't care if people get angry when he speaks to them rudely. It happens all the time. People get annoyed with him because there's no point to all of this talk about adat. Will adat make us rich? Will adat help us find money? These days, Inyiak Datuak said, if you have money, you can buy anything you want. What's the use of all of this adat talk? And, he added, the man is poor, doesn't own a car or even a motorcycle, so what does he know?

This anecdote serves to illustrate two sides of people's relationship to adat in Bukittinggi today. That man's take on adat seems to me to be an extreme version, by local standards, of one side of this relationship: adat is central to Minangkabau identity and pride, discussed with reverence and respect, and framed as a complete and integrated philosophy applicable to all aspects of life. Inyiak Datuak's reaction expresses the other side: adat is outdated, arcane, and irrelevant to the struggles and concerns of everyday life.

These two sides are not represented by two different camps of people. Inyiak Datuak, as I noted, holds a position of authority defined by the rules of adat, and is considered particularly knowledgeable and respectful of adat matters; and as we will see below, certain adat concerns are woven tightly into his life and touch him deeply. These two positions can be, and often are, held simultaneously by the same person.

The idea that adat is arcane, something for experts rather than common people, is neither a 21st century phenomenon, nor is it particularly a product of urban life. Joel Kahn conducted fieldwork in the rural setting of Sungai Puar (just outside of Bukittinggi) about thirty years prior to my own fieldwork. He reports that when he tried to ask detailed questions about certain adat matters, he was directed “to a succession of older and more venerated men” until finally, having reached the pinnacle of adat experts in the village, he was “referred to a book by some ‘Dutchman’” where he could supposedly find the information he was seeking (Kahn 1993: 39). Yet it was only certain aspects of adat that gave Kahn this trouble – for example, the subtleties of certain patterns of the kinship system. When it came to knowledge about adat rules for the control and use of land—an issue that had direct impact on the fortunes of the individuals he talked to—he found that people were much more engaged with the details. “Adat Minangkabau” clearly exists on more than one level: as a concept, it is an integrated whole, an object that exists apart from anyone’s particular knowledge of it, and one that helps people to think about their lives and identities; as practice, pieces of it work their way into people’s lives at particular times and places.

Much of this chapter will be taken up with a description of the institutions and practices that make up traditional Minangkabau society, and will thus provide some ethnographic details that are necessary for understanding life in Bukittinggi. However, the larger goal for this chapter is to provide a portrait of what it means to be “Minangkabau.” I want to sharpen the picture of Minangkabau identity that I began to

sketch in the previous chapter. By asking the question of what “Minangkabau” means for people who identify themselves as such, I think we can begin to see the outlines of moral discourse in this society. I believe this is so because public discourses about what “Minangkabau” means are also assertions of how Minangkabau people understand who they are, what kinds of lives they lead, and what is significant about those lives. To the extent that Minangkabau people adopt Minangkabau identity, these discourses act to organize a vision of their status as moral persons – persons whose lives involve the realization of something valuable.⁵ Each individual, of course, may adopt such an identity somewhat selectively, and in a different manner. However, it seems to me that by and large the shared Minangkabau identity was of great importance for the people I met in Bukittinggi, and something in which they took pride. It was more than a mere label.⁶

Discussions of Minangkabau identity inevitably entail discussions of adat. It is through adat that Minangkabau society is defined as distinct, and so I begin and frame much of this chapter in terms of this concept. It is thus important to understand at the

⁵ In linking identity to morality, as broadly construed, I am drawing from Taylor (1989). I will discuss the details of this theoretical approach in Chapter 3.

⁶ Of course, Minangkabau identity is not the only one that is important to people in Bukittinggi. Aside from identities specific to subgroups and to individuals based on their particular lives, widely shared identities include being Muslim and being Indonesian. The Muslim identity is interwoven with the Minangkabau one, as will become clear later in this chapter. I will discuss it more extensively in Chapter 6. Broadly speaking, people in Bukittinggi seem to organize the pride they took in their shared identities around “Minangkabau” and “Muslim” more so than around “Indonesian.” When I asked people specifically what they were proud of about being Minang, they usually had much to say; when I asked people the same question about being Indonesian, a few people mentioned Indonesia’s vast resources, but the most common answer was simply that there was nothing to be proud of about Indonesia. “Indonesia” was apparently most tightly tied to ideas about weak government institutions, corruption, poverty, and so on.

outset that adat is not merely a description of Minangkabau society – even of an imagined, traditional Minangkabau society. In identifying themselves as Minangkabau, and framing Minangkabau through adat, people in Bukittinggi use adat as a way of thinking about themselves and what is important in their lives.

Adat, however, is not the only frame around which Minangkabau identity is built. People in Bukittinggi also have ideas about the character of Minangkabau persons, and so I will examine these ideas in this chapter as well. The discourses surrounding Minangkabau character organize Minangkabau identity somewhat differently than those surrounding Minangkabau adat. While conceptions of adat are concerned with social institutions, conceptions of character are concerned with the manner in which individual Minangkabau actors tend to make their way in the world of those institutions.

These are ideas that are perhaps even more fundamental to people's identities than the ideas about adat and Minangkabau society more generally. They are less abstract, and relate more directly the experience of living in the world. They are also more holistic. What I mean by this is that they include general ideas about living in the world as a whole, whereas adat contains ideas only about those dimensions of the world that are distinctively and traditionally Minangkabau. This describes only a portion of the social world in Bukittinggi, something made quite clear in Inyiak Datuak's reaction to the man who seemed so preoccupied with adat.

This is also something that I foreshadowed in Chapter 1, where I discussed the conceptual divide between the *pasa* (the city, the marketplace) and the *kampung*

(villages, neighborhoods). In the *kampung*, life revolves around kinship and the ritual, social, and economic obligations that adhere to kinship roles; it revolves around the daily practices of Islam and the ordered functioning of a society in which each individual plays an assigned role. These are all matters of *adat*. It is in the *kampung* that the dimensions of life seen as essentially “Minangkabau” take place. However, as I have argued, the lives of people in Bukittinggi are lived – geographically, but more to the point, conceptually – in both the *kampung* and the *pasa*. Life in the *pasa* means making a living, and achieving status through wealth, education, and occupation – the things *Inyik Datuak* apparently had in mind. It invites a markedly different set of ideas about being a significant person.

The ideas about Minangkabau character that I will highlight in the latter portions of this chapter are as tightly tied to the world of the *pasa* as to that of the *kampung*. Minangkabau people describe themselves as clever and independent agents who refuse to be subjugated as they maneuver their way through the world. However, I will also demonstrate that the moral value of such cleverness and assertion is ambiguous. While refusing to submit to others, and maneuvering for advantage are considered valuable and admirable traits typical to Minangkabau people, they are also understood to be traits that are vulnerable to exploitation for immoral ends. I argue that the value of these traits is really not understood as being absolute. Rather, they must be balanced with other dimensions of ideal Minangkabau character: the humility, piety, and respect for tradition that characterize the realization of *adat*. Conceptions of

Minangkabau society and of Minangkabau persons ultimately exist in a dialogue, encompassing multiple visions of what it means to live a life of significance.

Adat: Conceptions and Practices of Minangkabau Society

Ethnographic Prelude: Attending an Adat Ritual

I saw through the window that the house was full of men sitting cross-legged along a rectangle that traced the edges of the main room, which had been emptied of furniture. Occasionally, more men would enter – coming in from the kitchen in back rather than through the front door – and there would be some jostling before they settled into spots on the floor. As I had been told would happen, when men first came in they would usually try to sit in the back, near the “bottom” of the room. Then, someone would force certain men, despite a show of reluctance, to sit closer to the “head” of the house, near the front door, which is a place of greater respect. The ones at the head were from the groom’s lineage, while those further down were the hosts from the bride’s lineage. Along the sides also sat respected people and Muslim scholars from the neighborhood. They all wore their *pici* (rimless, usually black, oblong hats that are worn for formal occasions as symbols of both Indonesian nationality and Islamic piety) and dressed nicely in long-sleeved, collared shirts.

The men were then served food by the women, who were gathered in back around the kitchen, and by some young men there to assist the women.⁷ Here in

⁷ As I will discuss again below, although my description of this adat ritual focuses on those parts of the ritual carried out by the men, the exchanges of food and work carried out by the women were at least as important in successfully completing it.

Sungai Puar (just outside Bukittinggi, but adhering to a distinct version of adat), ritual occasions are marked with the use of *jama* – large, round plates heaped with food. Groups of four or five people gather around each plate to eat together. Those with the most skill throw the food into their mouths so that they never touch their fingers to their lips. Not long after eating, most of these neighborhood men left, first stopping by one of the bedrooms where the bride was passing the time, to give her a bit of money. From what I was told, no one worries about how much to give. They each gave a small amount.

I went inside and soon I was sitting in the main room with the remaining men, only a half dozen or so. The men looked bored, for the most part, waiting for the groom to show up with his companions. They twisted their fingers, rubbed their feet. They tried occasionally to talk with me in Minang, but I had been in West Sumatra for less than two weeks, and my still halting abilities proved entertaining for only so long, so soon they sat quietly and yawned. This seemed to be an obligation to fulfill, not a time of excitement. Eventually, most of these men left as well, stopping to give a bit of money to the bride, of course. But around ten in the evening the room filled up with men again when the groom arrived. He was accompanied by three young, male friends who had escorted him to the bride's house. This would be his first night spent with the bride.

The groom was a singular presence. I thought at first glance that this suave young man with the *saluak* (a batik turban) and the jacket and tie worn over batik pants, was a big shot who had come for the occasion. His face was stoic, and he seemed to float above the interaction around him, barely acknowledging it. When he came in – through the back, though later it was said that this was a violation of his position that day, and he should have come in through the front door – he was directed toward the head of the house, and went directly there, head held high, no words spoken. Later, as the room filled up even more (again, the men sat only around the edges of the room, leaving the middle empty), he was directed to move over so that he was even closer to the front door, and again there was

little fuss. He sat the rest of the evening almost completely in silence, and little attention was paid to him directly. He looked impassive, but I had to wonder what he was thinking and feeling.

The next hour or two, as I struggled to stay crossed-legged, was taken up with eating and speech making. Food was served, and I ate again (I had eaten with the bride's family before the ritual had begun), sharing the food on a single jama with several other men. There was a second course of sticky rice cooked with coconut milk, sweet coconut flakes, and banana. In my group, no one even touched the *nasi kuniang* ("yellow rice," a dish used in many parts of Indonesia for special occasions). In fact, the men around me complained quietly that they were not very hungry, having already eaten dinner at home earlier. They were eating as a matter of ritual, not to satisfy hunger. (I had been told that at ceremonial occasions, people do not eat very much, as their eating is only a symbolic act. From what I observed on many ritual occasions, however, people often eat a good-sized meal.) The makings of nipa leaf cigarettes were passed around, as later was betel and its accompanying ingredients.

In between each serving of food, tobacco, and so on, there was some speech-making, using ritual language that I could not follow.⁸ But I was told that the pattern was generally the same each time. The host side would say something about the food being served properly, and it is all good, and it is here and let us eat, and so on. Then, the groom's side would repeat the general idea, saying, you say the food is all good and proper and it is here and let us eat. Then the hosts would go over it again, mixing in permutations on traditional phrases, often employing figurative language so that it

⁸ This language is difficult even for many Minangkabau people, as it employs a good number of terms that are never used in everyday speech.

took several minutes to express a single idea. There was one lead speaker for each side, but before he turned the floor over to the other side, he would always check with others on his own side to confirm that what he was saying was acceptable. Each time this speech making took place, three times in all, it lasted no longer than ten minutes. The final time, the issue was the groom's marriage title. When it was confirmed, it was passed into the kitchen for the women to hear: he would now be known as Sutan Rajo Bungsu. In fact, I was told that the title had been discussed informally by the groom's kin and bride's kin beforehand, so it was already known. This was a way to formalize it.

What I found interesting about the speech making, especially since I could not understand the details, was what the other men around the room were doing while the speeches were being made. I would have expected total attention paid to the words, but this was not exactly the case. While the speeches were made, other men quietly chatted a bit with each other, burped, yawned or, in the case of one man, studied the material of the curtains that hung over a doorway near the spot where he was seated.⁹ Their behavior was restrained, but generally peripheral to the ritual itself. It was not that the men were not taking this ritual seriously. However, this was not a ritual that required witnessing to be made into a performance, necessitating a rapt audience. It was a ritual to be attended and performed. For the men who were not speaking, their mere presence at the ritual, which made it possible, was indexical of their commitment

⁹ Burping in public is not considered to be particularly crude or embarrassing in West Sumatra.

to the ritual and its importance (cf. Rappaport 1979). This was not contradicted by the sense that many of them seemed to be waiting to finish and go home.

Most of the men left, after giving money. The women who still remained were eating again at the back of the house. Meanwhile, outside in front, young, unmarried men and boys were dancing with loose but repetitive motions as Minang pop blasted from a stereo brought outside specifically for this purpose. There was an obvious contrast between the informal atmosphere outside the front door – the pop music, the dancing, the old clothes worn by the young men and the smiles on their faces, their genuine enjoyment of the opportunity for celebration that this occasion presented – with the muted formalities that had been taking place inside. I was cajoled (or perhaps coerced) into joining the dancing, much to everyone's amusement.

The groom remained inside for a while with his companions. People told me that, according to form, the groom's companions would periodically, indirectly prod him into going into the bride's bedroom for the first time: "It's late and you must be tired. Why don't you go to bed?" But he would keep finding some excuse not to go: "It's really not that late yet," and so on. Eventually the groom found an excuse to come outside and watch us dance. This, I was told, gave the bride a chance to prepare for bed and return alone and unseen into the bedroom, with its satiny curtains and new bedding prepared for the new marriage, to wait for him there. A senior man apparently decided that the music needed to end so as not to disturb the rest of neighborhood. By 1a.m. everyone either headed home or went inside the house to go to bed. Half a dozen unmarried women and my wife gathered in the bride's sister's

bedroom, the groom's companions slept on the floor in the main room of the house, and I joined the groom's unmarried brother, Da Arli, in his bedroom. The groom had found an unobserved moment to slip into the bride's bedroom.

When the call to prayer sounded before dawn, the groom got up and, joined by his companions, went back to his mother's home, demonstrating that he had not forgotten his own clan, and still remains tied to them. Later that afternoon, he would be returning to sit (again, impassively) with the bride, each wearing gold-saturated wedding finery while a parade of guests came to eat, be photographed, and pay their respects. Meanwhile, Ni Lik, a younger sister of the bride came into Da Arli's room to retrieve some of the food from the previous evening, which had been kept there overnight to be used for our breakfast. Ni Lik later said that the food had lost its flavor. Da Arli explained to me that a spirit must have sucked out the essence of the food; perhaps a neighbor had sent it, feeling jealous of the festivities or the marriage.

Framing Life as Adat

Rituals like the marriage ritual described above are pointed to by people in West Sumatra as the clearest examples of adat in action: they follow patterned routines and employ language that is understood to be traditional and specific to Minangkabau society, and to act as symbols of that society and the values it celebrates. Not all of life in West Sumatra so easily fits this description. As my account implied, even *during* the course of such a ritual, people participate in it, and around its margins, with varying degrees of conscious commitment to its order. The proper order may be

violated (the groom comes in through the back door), and some members of the community slip outside of it (the boys dancing in front of the house) or may try to undermine it altogether (the – albeit only speculative – jealous neighbors). More starkly, such ritual realizations of adat are special occasions. Seeing life through the framework of adat can thus distort as much as illuminate the workings of social life in West Sumatra. In Bukittinggi of the early 21st century, this is compounded by fact that adat is seen as something that has deteriorated. Adat is only partially and irregularly applicable to people's lives, but its existence in patterns of social relations, and as an ideology, remain significant.

The following account will hopefully succeed in giving a broad overview of adat, and of traditional Minangkabau society more generally, as well as offering a sense of the relationship between adat and life in Bukittinggi in the early 21st century. This discussion is also aimed at giving some shape to a number of features of Minangkabau society – such as the kinship system, rights to property, and some key features of gender roles – and to better situate this dissertation within the ethnographic literature on Minangkabau society. Much of that literature addresses these very features.

On two other levels, this account is necessarily a failure. As an account of “Minangkabau” life—what many people in Bukittinggi might have expected me to produce—it is rather thin, incomplete, and less beautifully ordered than a good account of adat should be. It has neither the precision nor the sense of a self-contained world of embodied wisdom that can be found in careful explications of adat. I have

also interrupted what could have been a clean account of adat with anecdotes, caveats, and comments that disturb its sense of order.

At another level, as I have already made clear, accounts of adat, no matter how detailed, are themselves thin, incomplete, even misleading accounts of Minangkabau life, even rural Minangkabau “pre-modern” life (wherever and whenever we choose to locate it). By framing the lives of people in Bukittinggi in terms of what is at its heart a relatively standard account of Minangkabau adat, I also participate in recreating something of a deception. This is a concern I will circle back around to toward the end of this discussion of adat.

Types of Adat

It is true that adat will sometimes be discussed by people in Bukittinggi as if it were timeless, an object that somehow exists independently of its practice. Whether a person knows adat or not, whether it is practiced or not—and despite the fact that both knowledge and practice of it are virtually universally considered to have greatly deteriorated over the past few generations—it will often be talked about as if it exists somewhere as the true and immutable essence of Minangkabau society. At the same time, it is generally understood that practically and ideally, there is no one version of Minangkabau adat. Rather, adat varies over time and space. Each collection of villages, or *nagari*, in Minangkabau society follows a different version of adat, even if the broad outlines of traditional Minang culture look similar from one village to the next – particularly among villages in the upland valleys that make up the

Minangkabau heartland. Further, it is commonly known that what is at one time considered the adat way of doing something might later be reconsidered, and that some kinds of adat must in fact adapt to changing times. This combination of immutability and flexibility is explicit in Minang conceptions of adat, which generally posit four categories of adat, from the most to the least fundamental. The categories are worth noting, partly because they help to define the outlines of adat, and partly because they begin to give a feel for the way that adat is conceptualized as an ordered and ordering system.

On one end lie the fundamental underpinnings of adat, the alteration of which is unthinkable. This *adat nan sabana adat*, or “adat that is truly adat,” is framed by a concept of natural laws, so that its tenets are thought to be rooted in the very nature of the universe. This includes not only such things as the laws of physics, but because such laws are understood to be the creation of Allah, it also includes a social element. The Truth of Islam is considered a fundamental, unalterable fact of the universe, and therefore devotion to and practice of Islam is also included in “true adat.” This explains why a person must be a Muslim (or at least identify as one) in order to be considered Minangkabau.

Adat nan diadatkan, “adat that has been made adat,” in contrast, generally includes the fundamental principles of Minangkabau society (in any and all nagari), such as the broad outlines of the matrilineal kinship system or the way that nagari leadership is structured. These are understood to have been passed down from generation to generation. They are also understood to be a human creation, and

therefore alterable. However, it is this adat that makes Minangkabau society distinct from any other society, which would have its own adat. This adat is divided into two types, or traditions, a point to which I will return shortly.

Adat nan taradat, “adat that has become adat,” applies to the application of these basic principles of Minangkabau society. The application may differ from nagari to nagari, although only in terms of detail. For example, the ceremonies involved in recognizing and celebrating marriages are governed by this level of adat, which may be changed by the general consensus of nagari leadership. In the account of the wedding ritual above, I pointed out that people ate in groups from jama – large, round plates. In Sungai Puar, where this wedding ritual took place, the use of jama may be considered *adat nan taradat*. It is considered the proper way to do things. In other areas, this is not the case.

Finally, there are proper, but more or less arbitrary ways of behaving. These norms, often called *adat-istiadat*, are used as long as they are useful and convenient. They are considered habits, informal norms that can easily be changed if there is a need to do so. “Adat-istiadat,” being the loosest kind of adat, is also the most inclusive. The term can be used to encompass all kind of adat, from those Truths that are built into the nature of the universe, to those things that are mere conventions.

It is, perhaps, here where the concept of adat begins to leak into the broader, less overtly conceptualized areas of life that anthropologists often include in concepts of culture. To take my earlier example, the widespread use of cell phones could conceivably be described as *adat-istiadat* in Bukittinggi. However, it seems unlikely

that anyone would make this reference without intending at least a touch of humor.

While most adat-istiadat can be seen as ways of carrying out adat nan taradat (adat that has become adat), which in turn can be seen as ways of applying adat nan diadatkan (adat that has been made adat), which in turn must be based on adat nan sabana adat (adat that is truly adat), something like cell phone usage breaks the links between the categories. No one ever used the term this way in conversation with me, even though the category could be stretched to make it applicable. As for gambling, and other behaviors which are explicitly rejected by higher levels of adat (gambling being proscribed in Islam), it could not be referred to as adat-istiadat (at least not “Minangkabau” adat-istiadat) no matter how widespread it is in practice, unless irony or sarcasm were intended.

Minangkabau Origins

Adat, as practiced, thus varies from place to place and era to era, yet still unifies the nagari of West Sumatra into the *alam* Minangkabau, the Minang world. Minangkabau traditional histories (*tambo*) trace the origins of the alam Minangkabau to Iskandar Zulkarnain, Alexander the Great. The most widely recounted story is that his three sons split up during a great flood, going in three directions to rule over three kingdoms: Rum (usually identified with the Byzantine Empire), China, and Minangkabau. Maharajo Dirajo is the name used for this first Minangkabau king, who spotted the peak of the volcano Mt. Marapi (just south of Bukittinggi) jutting out from

the sea, and thus set his ship ashore in what would become West Sumatra. This legend is not generally taken to be a literal recounting of history.

Adityawarman is usually identified as the first historical figure in Minangkabau history, and as the king who first established a sort of symbolic unity over what came to be the alam Minangkabau. Adityawarman, who lived in the mid 14th century, appears to have been a Sumatran native who had lived in East Java, and had ties to the Majapahit kingdom, although the kingdom he established in the west Sumatran highlands was positioned as an independent one (Drakard 1999). The location of the kingdom was likely a result of the gold mines in the vicinity. This kingdom reflected Malay and Javanese influences, and the Hindu and Buddhist ethos that pervaded the region at the time. Dobbin (1983) suggests that Adityawarman's death may have led to the social disruptions that lie behind the next important piece of Minangkabau mythical history.

According to this history, the mythical Maharajo Dirajo's descendant, Datuak Katumanguangan, had a younger half-brother, Datuak Parpatiah Nan Sabatang, who was born to the same mother. Together, the two founded Minangkabau adat. That is, they are the ones who established Minangkabau adat nan diadatkan, or "adat that has been made adat."¹⁰ The elder brother, Datuak Katumanguangan, established a version of adat that stressed a relatively hierarchical system of nagari government and a relatively rigid and harsh code of punishment for criminals. The younger brother, Datuak Parpatiah Nan Sabatang, founded a version of adat based on an egalitarian

¹⁰ Recall that "true adat," or adat nan sabana adat, having being created by God and being integral to the nature of the universe, is considered eternal.

form of nagari government, and a more forgiving legal code. Dobbin's suggestion is that these two traditions represent two sectors of society, each of which asserted itself following the death of Adityawarman, the historical figure credited as Minangkabau's first king. Those elements of society tied closely to royalty and its control of the gold trade can be connected with the relatively hierarchical adat of Datuak Katumangguangan; those aspects of society reflected in the pre-Javanized traditions (including matriliney), and the influences of long-standing Indian communities in West Sumatra, can be linked to the more egalitarian adat of Datuak Parpatiah Nan Sabatang.

These two traditions divide Minangkabau society into two *lareh*, with different nagari falling into each one. The relatively autocratic adat of Datuak Katumangguangan is followed by the Koto-Piliang *lareh*, while the relatively egalitarian adat of Datuak Parpatiah Nan Sabatang is followed by the Bodi-Caniago *lareh*. A *lareh* can be a geographical district, but in this case has come to refer more precisely to a conceptual district: each nagari in theory can be located in one of the two *lareh*, depending on whether it follows Koto-Piliang or Bodi-Caniago adat. Which one a nagari adheres to depends on which clans dominated the nagari from the time of its founding, and to which *lareh* those clans traced themselves. There is said to be a geographical distribution of *lareh* such that most nagari in the Tanah Datar valley, around which Minangkabau royalty and the trade in gold were centered, are Koto-Piliang, which makes sense considering the association of Koto-Piliang with autocracy. Nagari in the Lima Puluh Kota valley are said to be mixed between the two *lareh*, while those in the Agam valley, where Bukittinggi is located, are dominated by

the egalitarian Bodi-Caniago lareh. The Bukittinggi area itself is said to into the Bodi-Caniago lareh, the more egalitarian of the two.

In fact, rather than simply being one of two types, nagari seem to have each developed a variation on a general pattern, some more “egalitarian” than others (F. von Benda-Beckmann 1979). Another way to understand the two lareh is that both are seen as necessary elements of Minangkabau adat, so that they are complimentary rather than competing models. Such a view is incorporated, for example, into the texts (Zulkarnaini 1995) used to teach West Sumatran teenagers about traditional culture.

Kinship

In order to understand the workings of the nagari more fully, it is necessary to examine them through the lens of Minangkabau kinship. Here, too, there is variation from nagari to nagari, at the very least in terminology, as can be seen by comparing various ethnographies of Minangkabau society. The classic anthropological account of the Minangkabau social system was written by P.E. de Josselin de Jong (1952). Josselin de Jong attempted to construct the ideal pattern of socio-political structure in Minangkabau that, he believed, underlay the actual and varied structures and terminologies observed over time and space. While not following all of his choices in terminology, the following account (a version of which appears in virtually every extended Minangkabau ethnography and exposition on Minangkabau society and culture) largely follows the pattern that Josselin de Jong laid out. I have emphasized details and terminology that seem most useful for understanding Bukittinggi at the

turn of the 21st century. This is nevertheless an idealized version, and also one that applies best to village, not city, life. Therefore, I will also give broad sense of how all of this relates to the lives of people in Bukittinggi today.

Every Minangkabau person has a clan affiliation that is inherited from his or her mother, and remains the same throughout life, regardless of marriage. Each clan, or *suku*,¹¹ is identified by a name, some of which can be found widely throughout Minangkabau society, and some of which are found mostly in limited areas. As the word “suku” (it can mean “one quarter”) implies, there are four clans that are considered to be the original ones in Minangkabau society: Bodi, Caniago, Koto, Piliang. These are, of course, also the names used in the identification of the two *lareh*, or versions of *adat*: Bodi-Caniago and Koto-Piliang. In theory, each *suku* (Josselin de Jong counted ninety-six) aside from these four, was the result of a split from one of the original four, and was originally a branch of that *suku* that established itself in a new location. In Bukittinggi, people sometimes know the relationships between certain *suku*, and will volunteer that this and that *suku* are “really” the same. But most of these relationships remain obscure and unimportant to people.

This is likely because *suku* membership, at this broadest level of relatedness, has little practical impact on a person. While it is understood that any two people of the *suku* Koto, for example, share a common ancestress, the two only share

¹¹ The word “suku” is used in Indonesian to mean “ethnic group.” It can sometimes be used this way in Minangkabau as well. For example, a person born to a Javanese mother and a Minang father cannot inherit a Minangkabau *suku* identity from his or her mother, who may be said to be “suku Jawa.” As will be noted below, the word can be applied to smaller groups *within* a clan as well. Thus, “suku” can denote a variety of degrees of relatedness, from an entire ethnic group down to a small group of closely related kin.

meaningful kinship ties if that ancestress can be located a few generations back at most. Two people from suku Koto who come from different nagari are not considered to be related in any practical sense. So, while in theory the suku is an exogamous unit, it actually requires more than a common clan *name* for two people to be considered of one suku (*sasuku*) in this sense. Generally, no one is bothered if two people marry who are both from, say, suku Sikumbang, as long they came from different nagari, or cannot trace their ancestry back to a known, common ancestress.¹²

More important than the name of the suku is the lineage to which a person belongs within that suku. Sometimes people use the word “suku” to apply to these smaller groupings as well. Other terms can be used to identify smaller matrilineal groupings within a clan, and thus identify people as sharing known kinship ties as well as a common suku name. “Kampung” originally referred to a settlement of people within a nagari who are from one suku and are recognized as sharing a common lineage, even if their common ancestress is not specifically identifiable (Josselin de Jong 1952). In Bukittinggi, however, “kampung” is generally used only to mean a “neighborhood” of the city or to mean “village,” in the same way that the Indonesian equivalent “kampong” is used.¹³ A “*payuang*” (literally, “umbrella”) may similarly

¹² Da Luko told me that his girlfriend had once broken off their relationship for half a year after discovering that they were both members of the same suku. He eventually convinced her that, because his lineage was native to Bukittinggi and her lineage was native to another town in West Sumatra, their common suku designation was not an impediment to their being married, and so they were. She apparently understood the general rule about exogamous suku, but was less clear about how her own society actually applied this rule.

¹³ De Josselin de Jong (1980) states that the geographic meaning is derived from the genealogical one, as members of a kampung tended to live together in one area made up of a group of houses. These houses would thus form a sort of “compound,” the latter being an English word etymologically derived from the Malay word in question. It may also be that the

refer to such a group of matrilineal kin, all of them perhaps represented in nagari affairs by the same man. A “*paruik*” (literally, “belly” – that is, womb) is a smaller group of kin that can all trace their lineage back to the same, known woman, prototypically three generations back. Branches this size and smaller may also be considered *kaum*, or *jurai*. In casual conversation in Bukittinggi, people seem more likely to use less distinctive terms such as *karabat*, and *famili* to identify someone as a relative. *Dunsanak* is another Minang term that can refer broadly to one’s relatives, particularly those in one’s own generation. However, these terms do not necessarily indicate that a relative is from the same suku. Relatives of a person’s father, for example, are from a different suku, but are still considered to be *karabat*.

That these latter terms apply to both matrilineal and non-matrilineal relatives accurately implies that Minang people maintain kinship ties with their fathers’ relatives as well as their mothers’ relatives. A father’s lineage is the *bako* of a Minang person, with that person’s lineage becoming the *anak pisang* of the father’s lineage. As the bako, one’s father’s relatives, while members of a different lineage than oneself, are still considered kin. A person may maintain close emotional ties with members of his or her bako. There are also ritual duties that fall to the bako at various times in a person’s life, reflecting the claims the bako have on their anak pisang. For example, there is the Kurai adat practice (that is, a adat practice of the natives of the Bukittinggi area) called *manjapuik anak*, “fetching the child.” In this ritual, an infant

term originally did refer to a cluster of structures – or, more abstractly, a collection of things in one place – and then later, in some areas, came to refer to a group of kin that lived together in such a cluster or collection. In any case, the two meanings are clearly related and refer to a collection of people.

of perhaps five or six months of age is brought for the first time to the house of his or her *bako* (i.e., the house of the paternal grandmother) amid a procession of *bako* members, an exchange of food between the *bako* and the *anak pisang*, and a feast. The child may then spend the night – or even an entire week – in the house of the *bako* before being carried back home by members of his or her *suku*.¹⁴

Nevertheless, a person's matrilineal relatives are still often considered the closest ones, and the ones with the deepest responsibilities toward a person. In this vein, the role of the *mamak* is of particular note. A *mamak* is one's mother's brother – or, more broadly, any male matrilineal relative of a generation superior to one's own. Mamak are the male authority figures par excellence of traditional culture. Mamak are supposed to look after their sisters' children, their *kamanakan*, making sure they do not get into trouble, are well behaved, and so on. According to accounts of traditional culture, the *mamak* held both authority and responsibility beyond that of the father, leaving the father to have emotional ties to his children unencumbered by financial responsibility and the need to discipline.

In Bukittinggi, people middle-aged and older often told me that when they were young, the *mamak* was a figure that inspired fear. They would particularly avoid

¹⁴ This ritual is still performed by some in Bukittinggi, but it is often ignored, especially in some areas. For example, Da Palo complained to me that *manjapuik anak* did not really accomplish anything – the child's *bako* were still the *bako* whether the ritual had been performed or not, and he saw no reason to wait until the ritual had been performed to bring a child to the house of the child's *bako*. In his estimation, the ritual was a waste of money, and possibly done merely as a way to show off the fact that the child's father had money to fund it. It is also worth noting that traditionally, after several days of ritual feasts at the bride's house, a feast is held at the groom's family's house, and the newlywed couple spends one or more nights there before returning to the bride's home. Today, with most people shortening the cycle of wedding rituals, a similar purpose is served by having a feast at the groom's family's house the day after such feasts are held at the bride's family's house.

public encounters with their mamak if at all possible; just a look from him was enough to inspire obedience, and a cough enough to snap one into heightened self-consciousness. While the role of mamak is still an important one today, both financial responsibility towards children as well as the job of disciplining children is borne mainly by a child's father. Many people complain that men no longer take their roles as mamak seriously, and that practically speaking, mamak are important mostly to fulfill ceremonial duties at adat events, such as weddings.

Households

In a traditional village setting, an entire lineage, descended from one woman, might live in one house, the rumah gadang discussed in Chapter 1. Since each female descendant would have the rights, upon marriage, to her own bedroom, the rumah gadang could actually grow as time went on and new additions were built onto the original house.¹⁵ No additions would ever be necessary for male children. From an early age (about seven to ten years of age, around the time of their circumcisions), boys in the traditional nagari would stop sleeping at home, and instead sleep in the surau, often translated as “prayer house” because—despite its pre-Islamic origins—it became associated with Islamic learning and ritual. At the surau, boys would study important subjects. Most notably, they would learn to read the Koran. They might also study *silek*, a system of self-defense. These boys would still eat at home, and would in fact never shed their association with their native house.

¹⁵ Otherwise, a new house might be built, with part of the lineage splitting off to live in it.

However, they would be likely to eventually spend a number of years away from their native village, or even away from the Minangkabau heartland altogether. As boys became adolescents and approached adulthood, they would often *marantau*, or go abroad to seek experience and wealth. This pattern is one of the reasons that Minangkabau people developed the reputation as traders, as they would need to seek non-agricultural work to earn a living while away from the village. The practice of *marantau* is said to serve several functions. It allowed young men who might be disruptive and immature to be disruptive and immature away from the village. Away from the village, they could gain life experience and wisdom, and return prepared to deal with their adult responsibilities. It also allowed them to at least temporarily escape a life of agricultural labor, and to pursue wealth that could be added to the overall wealth of the clan in the village. Having already been somewhat marginalized in their native houses, they could go out into the world, prove themselves, could return home as accomplished adults ready to be married.¹⁶

Marriage would not change the association between a man and his natal house, as married men would go from sleeping at the surau to sleeping with their wives, yet still spend their days working on the land held by their sisters, and looking after their *kamanakan* (sisters' children) at their native houses. (Divorced men could go back to sleeping at the surau if necessary.) In their wives' houses, men would not be members

¹⁶ Studies of Minangkabau *marantau* practices can be found in Naim (1974) and Kato (1982). Kato argues that, until the latter part of the 19th century, *marantau* was largely a matter of segments of a clan breaking off to clear land and new settlements. It was only in the late 19th century and first decades of the 20th century that the dominant pattern of *marantau* was that of unmarried males temporarily migrating away from their villages (mostly to cities) before returning to be married.

of the lineage, but be *sumando*, men married to members of the lineage. They would always have the status of guests there. Because their economic responsibilities were mainly to their sisters and their *kamanakan*, and not to their wives and children, it was not an extra burden for men to have more than one wife, and this was common, even beyond the four wives generally taken as the maximum allowable by Islamic law.¹⁷

Many of these characteristics of traditional nagari life are no longer the norm in Minangkabau life. State schools have largely replaced the *surau* as the primary site of education for boys as well as girls, although religious study may take place at the *surau*. Boys do not sleep in the *surau* however, but return home. In neighborhoods in Bukittinggi, the *surau* may even be locked at night, making it impossible for any men who need a place to sleep to find refuge there. In Bukittinggi, boys of any age may sleep at home, although there does remain a tendency for some unmarried boys in their teen years and older to often find someplace else to sleep (e.g., a friend's house), especially if they are no longer attending school.¹⁸ Several young married men who had done this recently, before they married, remarked that sleeping at home was best avoided because of the presence of their unmarried sisters, and because of the possibility that their parents might want to have sexual relations. Many young men still marantau at some point – perhaps to Padang or Medan, or to Jakarta. There are

¹⁷ People still remember older members of their families who were said to have had ten or twenty wives. It is not usually clear how many wives any given man could have had “at one time,” especially because divorces were often not formal. Men often simply stopped visiting a wife, and thus stopped being married to her.

¹⁸ I was given conflicting accounts of when the practice of boys sleeping in the *surau* became rare in Bukittinggi. For example, one man who was a boy in the 1950's told me that back then no one slept in the *surau*, and claimed that this was the case for his father's generation as well. Another man, nearly the same age, who grew up in nearly the same area, said that sleeping in the *surau* was still the norm until the 1970's.

more opportunities for work in those places. Young women may marantau as well, and both men and women may end up settling down permanently away from their villages. This is referred to as “*marantau cino*” (see Kato 1982).

As discussed in Chapter 1, the rumah gadang that housed dozens of people is no longer employed in West Sumatra, and households in Bukittinggi are generally small (averaging four or five people). After marriage, typically between twenty and thirty years of age, men commonly move into their wives’ homes – or, if possible, the couple finds a new home together – and a man’s work goes towards his wife and his own children. While a man is still considered a sumando, and may be conceptualized to some extent as a “guest” if he is live in a home belonging to his wife’s lineage, he is also considered the head of the family, *kepala keluarga*, responsible for its moral and financial well-being. This is at least one of the reasons that men are unlikely to have more than one wife today, as they are expected to provide for their wives and children.¹⁹ As in much of Islamic Indonesia today, polygyny, though it does still occur, is generally frowned upon as morally questionable except under particular circumstances (e.g., with the permission of the first wife, especially if she and her husband have been unable to produce a child), even if it is technically allowable according to Islamic law.

Another important change is that young people have much more freedom in choosing their marriage partners than they once had. Traditionally, marriages were

¹⁹ Minangkabau scholar Hamka makes this point in his well-known 1946 essay, “*Adat Minangkabau Menghadapi Revolusi*” (“Minangkabau Adat Faces a Revolution”), reprinted in Hamka 1984.

arranged by one's family, with mothers often doing the work of finding proper matches, and the *mamak* of the potential bride making a formal proposal to the *mamak* of the potential groom. Some people in Bukittinggi who were born in the first half of the 20th century recall not knowing anything about their marriage partner before becoming engaged, and not meeting them until the marriage rituals began. Today in Bukittinggi, many young people find partners on their own, although they usually do not introduce their boyfriends or girlfriends to their families unless they are ready to discuss marriage. Even so, perhaps as many as half of all marriages among young people today are the result of matches arranged by their families.²⁰ In these cases, the families suggest and introduce possible marriage partners, but it is standard practice for the potential brides and grooms to have the freedom to accept or reject the match, and usually they have the opportunity to meet each other and see if they mesh before making this decision.²¹

²⁰ It is difficult to know what percentage of marriages are arranged (*dijodohan*) and what percentage are the result of personal selection (*pacaran*). When I asked people to estimate the percentages, the responses I received ranged from the claim that almost all marriages were arranged to the claim that almost no marriages were arranged. In my observation, about half seemed to be of each kind.

²¹ There are cases, however, where families refuse to accept the choice made by their children – either to marry someone or *not* to marry someone – or at the very least put pressure on them to do one or the other. This is not only true for young women. Da Tor, for example, was bitterly disappointed in his marriage, having been pressured into it by his family without knowing much about the woman who was to be his wife. Like most other people I spoke with, he told me that he would allow his own children freedom in selecting their marriage partners.

Property and Matriliney

While the shape of Minangkabau family life has certainly changed, these changes have occurred within, not against the matrilineal kinship system (cf. Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1985; Blackwood 2000:92-107). One of the reasons matrilineal kinship ties are particularly important is that certain forms of property are controlled by matrilineages.²² This is usually true for tracts of land that are used for rice fields (*sawah*) and for houses, as well as for the houses themselves. When property is obtained as a result of an individual's effort, it falls into the category of *harato pancarian*, and that individual is free to use, sell, or otherwise manage the property as he or she sees fit. However, after that property is passed down to succeeding generations, it becomes *harato pusako*. This is property collectively controlled by a matrilineal group – basically, at a level corresponding to the payuang or the paruik, depending on the terminology used. What this means is not so much that a lineage group “owns” the property, each with an equal share, but that the group as a unit controls the rights to use this property. It is, in fact, only the female members of the lineage, descended from the original woman who obtained the property, who inherit a claim to the use of the property. Men cannot claim rights to *harato pusako*.

These use rights are thus divided up among the women with such a claim. Girls inherit the claim to use rights held by their mothers, although there is no guarantee that such rights will not be redistributed among the members of the lineage if the need arises. Male members of the lineage, in their roles as *mamak*, share

²² For an extended examination of issues of property and inheritance in Minangkabau society, see F. von Benda-Beckmann (1979).

responsibility for overseeing this division of use rights, particularly those men with who hold high clan titles (see below). Ideally, this would be done to maximize the benefit for, and address the needs of, all of the members of the lineage. Women in the lineage, for example, would always have a house to stay in, and land to live off of.

Use rights do not include the right to sell the property, as the person with use rights does not own the property. Ideally, harato pusako cannot be sold at all, and the tie between property and lineage has a semi-sacred feel to it that goes beyond mere financial value. It is, however, sometimes sold in cases where it is determined that it is in the best interest of the lineage to sell the property, especially if the proceeds of the sale go for funding an important adat event for the lineage, such as wedding or funeral expenses. Even in this case, it is preferred that the property be sold within the suku (clan). More acceptable in the view of adat is to *manggadai*, or “pawn” harato pusako, to another lineage (again, preferably to a lineage within the same clan), which only temporarily transfers use rights in return for money (again, usually to fund important lineage events).

Stepping back from this idealized system for a moment, it is important to note how complicated property matters can become. Pawned land that is not redeemed for a long time, for example, can become the subject of dispute, with more than one lineage claiming to have rights to the land. Sometimes, the party which has received the pawned land will in turn re-pawn the land to a third party, further adding to the confusion. Various kinds of gift giving may transfer the rights to property outside of the harato pusako system. A father, for example, may use the Islamic concept of

hibah to give gifts to his children before he dies, thus making sure that his privately held property, *harato pancarian*, goes to them, not to members of his own lineage (i.e., his sister's children).²³ Further, in an urban area like Bukittinggi, there is much more incentive—or at least much more opportunity—to sell *harato pusako* land, and thus a substantial portion of land in the city is now held as private property. People sell land not only to fund adat events, but also, for example, to raise capital to start a business. The proceeds for such a sale should, in theory, be *pusako* themselves, benefiting the entire lineage. However, if members of the lineage spend them for some purpose, succeeding generations may be left without any of the benefit.

Ethnographic Interlude: Inyiak Datuak

A story related to me by Inyiak Datuak, whom we saw earlier criticizing a man for his adat obsession, and arguing that money was more important for daily life than adat, hints at the fact that while basic adat concepts of property and kinship are a force in daily life in Bukittinggi, in actual practice, these concepts act more like an underlying theme which is reworked or rephrased, hushed or amplified by the people involved, depending on the circumstances.²⁴

Inyiak Datuak holds the high title in his lineage, and is thus considered responsible for the well being of the lineage, and for overseeing its corporately held

²³ In theory, however, this property would later be transformed into *harato pusako* after his own children die and pass it on to the next generation.

²⁴ See von Benda-Beckmann and von-Benda Beckmann (1985) for a short discussion of how *adat* kinship and property relations have long been varied from place to place and situation to situation, and have frequently shifted according to circumstance and even intentional manipulation.

property, its *harato pusako*. Recently, Inyia Datuak's *mamak* had come to Bukittinggi from Medan, in North Sumatra, for a visit. Inyia Datuak knew that his *mamak* was poor, and that neither of his *mamak's* children were respectful or attentive to their father. For this reason, Inyia Datuak felt *sayang* (pity/love) towards his *mamak*, and treated him very well during his visit. One day, when Inyia Datuak, his sister and their *mamak* were sitting across from each other in the living room, their *mamak* unexpectedly announced that he planned to sell a plot of land, complete with house, that was included in the lineage's *harato pusako* in Bukittinggi. Inyia Datuak was shocked.

According to Inyia Datuak, his *mamak* must have mistaken his *sayang* towards him for *takut* – fear, reluctance to confront – and figured that Inyia Datuak would not stand up to him. He was wrong. Inyia Datuak took his *adat* responsibilities seriously as the titleholder within his lineage. According to *adat*, even though his *mamak* was several decades older than Inyia Datuak, Inyia Datuak's title meant that he outranked his *mamak* in these matters. He was incredulous that his *mamak* had so little concern for others in the family, and knew that this *mamak* should (and, according to *adat*, must) have consulted him on this matter before making any decisions. He immediately protested: What about my sisters and their daughters? What about their needs? If the *mamak* sold the land for money, what would happen when they grew up and needed a place to live? His *mamak* replied: I am the *mamak*, and it is my concern.

In response, the normally mild-mannered Inyiak Datuak—in an act that, however closely linked to adat concerns, has little connection to adat standards of behavior—stood up, reached towards his mamak, and slapped him across the face. His mamak apparently went into some kind of state of shock (when Inyiak Datuak recounted the story, he demonstrated by stiffening his muscles, shaking, and rolling his eyes up towards the ceiling), and Inyiak Datuak's sister began crying and yelling Inyiak Datuak's name. (That is, his given name, not his title or honorific.) After the mamak had been fetched a glass of water and recovered a bit, this is what he said to Inyiak Datuak: Lots of other people get the same idea and sell land. Why am *I* the one who gets hit?

Inyiak Datuak's mamak tried to defend himself by pointing out that his plans to sell lineage land were not unusual, even if doing so is inappropriate according to adat. After all, as Inyiak Datuak himself had pointed out to me on a separate occasion, surviving modern life takes money, and this is a greater concern than adat. In this case, however, adat was of very great concern to Inyiak Datuak because the adat in question was not a matter of abstract theory or ritual. It is perhaps more accurate to say that what was of concern to him was not adat itself, but rather the well being of his sister and nieces. The structure of property relations and Inyiak Datuak's authority over lineage matters, both defined by adat, were in this case an instrument that Inyiak Datuak could use to protect their well-being. His mamak was the one who got hit because he threatened this well being, not because he wanted to violate an abstract principle like all the other Minangkabau people who had sold lineage property.

Of course, at the same time, Inyiak Datuak's mamak had tried to assert his authority to sell the land based on his traditional authority within the family as a mamak. This argument was unconvincing, as Inyiak Datuak's title vested him with broader traditional authority over lineage matters, and his concern for the future well-being of his sisters and their daughters was morally superior to his mamak's concern with making money for his immediate use. In the end, Inyiak Datuak's position was stronger. His mamak returned to Medan, and the land was not sold.

Adat and Islam

Because Minangkabau adat revolves around a matrilineal kinship system, while Islamic traditions include a number of patriarchal elements, the conflict between regional and Islamic culture has long been a topic of discussion for scholars and observers of West Sumatran social life (Abdullah 1966, Abdullah 1971, Hamka 1984, Hadler 1998). Of particular interest has been the Minang system of property relations and inheritance, in which the use rights for property remain in the hands of women, and are passed from mother to daughter. This often appears, at first glance, to conflict with Islamic laws, which guarantee daughters a share of any inheritance, but grant a larger portion of such inheritance to sons. While this conflict has thus sparked much discussion, it is not as fundamental as might be assumed.

Pusako property is not private property but property to which a lineage holds rights, and it is never *owned* by an individual. For this reason, it has become easy for Minang people to see the rules for its inheritance as lying outside of those prescribed

in Islamic law for private property, rather than conflicting with them. While this by no means puts to rest the debate over the relationship between Islam and adat, it does make it possible for matrilineal adat to be understood as compatible with Islam.

The tensions in the relationship between Islam and adat have certainly received attention from Minangkabau scholars, most famously in the works of Hamka (1984).²⁵ Members of the Kaum Muda movement in West Sumatra in the early 20th century argued that many adat practices – including the matrilineal system – needed to be altered or eliminated in favor of a modern, rational social system based on Islam (Abdullah 1971). However, as other ethnographers have noted (e.g., Whalley 1993, Blackwood 2000), this is something that most Minangkabau people deny is of much concern. Occasionally, I did hear comments from people about how adat practices were in fact contrary to Islam, or to values commonly associated with Islam – most often practices that concern gender roles. One man remarked to me that the practice of men moving into their wives’ homes was really backwards, as the man was the “king” (*rajo*) of the household. Another man noted that it was not really right for a couple, already married in an Islamic ceremony, to wait until after their adat ceremonies are complete to live as a married couple.²⁶ According to Islam, he said,

²⁵ In particular, Hamka’s 1946 essay, “*Adat Minangkabau Menghadapi Revolusi*” (“Minangkabau Adat Faces a Revolution”), reprinted in the 1984 collection, *Islam dan Adat Minangkabau*, is an attack on Minang adat, and a call for Minang society to adhere more closely to Islamic principles. Hamka’s complex and shifting relationship to Minangkabau adat and its relationship to Islam is discussed by Hadler (1998).

²⁶ Usually the adat portion of a wedding follows the Islamic rituals by only a matter of days at most. Sometimes, however, a couple will get married according to Islam and according to the state, but then wait weeks or even months before carrying out the adat ritual celebrations that mark the marriage as complete according to Minangkabau tradition. In the meantime, such couples are not allowed, according to adat, to live as a married couple. The usual reasons for

once the woman became the man's wife, she should immediately be his responsibility, and should immediately be available to serve all her duties as his wife. In both of these cases, the men seemed to imply that it was the force of tradition that kept them from doing things the *right* way – but that the traditions were important, too. I also occasionally heard mention of how the timing of adat ceremonies needed to be reworked so that they did not interfere with prayer times. One religious lecture I had recorded from a mosque noted that women helping out with the cooking at adat celebrations often neglect to pray because they are involved in carrying out this ritual.

If such examples point to the fact that Islam and adat are still seen as independent frames of reference that may sometimes conflict with each other, the way the relationship between adat and Islam is currently conceptualized publicly in West Sumatra denies this possibility altogether. This relationship is expressed in the following formulaic expression: “*Adat Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah,*” which means, “Adat is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Koran.” This conveys a notion already discussed above: that Islam, as Truth, represents the eternal and immutable core of adat. The expression appears widely in more general discussions about life in West Sumatra, and is regularly included in almost any West Sumatran newspaper article which touches on moral issues. So well known that it is commonly shortened to “ABS SBK,” it has become a mantra capable of crystallizing a

the delay are financial in nature, or have to do with picking the best timing for the adat ceremonies. In one case, I was told that the reason for the couple to go ahead with the Islamic marriage ritual weeks before the adat ritual (rather than waiting to do both) was that a long engagement would present a dangerous opportunity for outsiders to make trouble and attempt to undermine the marriage plans.

sense of an integrated moral essence, beyond debate, that exists at the heart of Minangkabau life. It is indeed almost always used to imply a general sense of moral soundness, than it is to, say, explain or assert a *particular* stand on an issue. In declaring “ABS SBK,” one implies that no debate on any particular issue is even necessary, for one cannot ask the question of “adat vs. Islam” when adat arises from Islam.

Modernizing forces like the Kaum Muda movement have never been successful in completely eliminating from Minangkabau adat all traces of practices – like matriliney – that do not seem essentially Islamic. At the same time, it seems clear at the very least that Islam has been positioned rhetorically so that its ultimate authority in determining how things *should* be cannot be openly questioned (cf. Abdullah 1985). Ethnographers have even reported a shift in the “ABS SBK” saying, tracing the historical development of this rhetorical positioning. Earlier versions of the saying posited that adat was based on what was true or right, with no mention of Islam; or, that adat and Islamic law were *mutually* constituting; or that adat was based on Islamic law, which was based on the Koran, which in turn was based on what was true or right (Kato 1982, Abdullah 1985). By the time I carried out fieldwork in Bukittinggi, these other versions were nowhere to be found.²⁷ Nevertheless, the urge to continually assert that adat is, in essence, a manifestation of Islam, and to do so

²⁷ At least once, I recall asking a man in his thirties about the version of the phrase that appended “the Koran is based on Truth” to the end of ABS SBK. He looked surprised and told me he had never heard that before. There was one instance in which someone used an alternate version of the saying with me. I will discuss this in Chapter 4.

rather than engage in debates over what this means, suggests again that the tensions between adat and Islam are not entirely inconsequential.²⁸

It should also be mentioned that certain kinds of beliefs and practices that are understood to be “traditional” appear to have become much rarer in recent decades, and that this may be in part due to the influence of ideas about what is properly “Islamic.” Examples range from belief in and engagement with spirits to the use of traditional dance and music to celebrate sacred occasions, both of which may be seen as improper or misdirected forms of worship. In both cases, the traditions in question are rarely spoken of when adapt is discussed.

Gender Roles and Hierarchy

One of the enduring practices of the matrilineal system is the way it assigns men certain kinds of authority – always symbolic, sometimes practical – through the bestowing of titles. All Minang men are given adat titles, *gala*, upon marriage. Until this point, men are generally referred to and addressed by the personal name they were given as a baby – or, most often, by some short nickname derived from this personal name. After marriage, according to adat, it is their *gala* that should be used. In practice, in Bukittinggi, there is great variety in what names men actually use, not only from person to person, but also each individual in different social contexts. In casual contexts, such as among friends of similar age, personal names or nicknames (derived from the personal name, the *gala*, or sometimes from some other dimension of the

²⁸ Some Islamic and adat experts no doubt engage in such debates, but they do not seem to be of much interest to most people.

individual's identity) are often used. In other context, particularly in the course of adat rituals, the gala is certain to be used.

Most gala in Bukittinggi are one of a few types – meaning that they are built around one of a small set of common gala terms, all of them with connotations of royalty, knowledge, wealth, or other great qualities. The most common is *Sutan* (“Sultan”), and some other common gala terms are *Kari* (“Koranic Reciter”), *Rangkayo* (“Wealthy One”), *Bagindo* (“Noble”), *Malin* (“Learned”), *Rajo* (“King”), and *Sati* (“Sacred Power”). These are usually used in combination with each other and with other descriptive words to create the whole gala: *Rajo Ameh* (“Golden King”), *Sutan Mudo* (“Young Sultan”), or *Sutan Rangkayo Sati* (“Wealthy Sultan of Sacred Powers”), for example.

There is a hierarchy of gala, and the first term in the gala indicates the rank of the title. Members of the man's lineage determine the rank, though the remainder of the gala may be conferred by his wife's lineage. Some men may have their gala elevated if they gain in prestige. Datuak is generally the highest adat title, and men with datuak titles are the ones who are responsible for overseeing lineage affairs, such as the harato pusako property, and the marriages of younger members of the lineage, who are all in essence his kamanakan, the children of his “sisters.” These men may also be called the *kapalo suku* (literally the “head” of the suku), or the *tungganai*.

Several related lineages will be led by a *pangulu*, basically the *kapalo suku* who holds the highest position among them and thus represents them to the nagari as a whole as part of a council of pangulu. Exactly who participates, and in what fashion,

in a traditional adat council depends upon the adat in effect in the nagari in question. This is one of the major differences between the two lareh, or domains (types) of adat, Bodi-Caniago and Koto-Piliang. Bodi-Caniago, which better characterizes the Bukittinggi area, is the “egalitarian” lareh because all of the pangulu of the nagari participate at an equal level in the council. The formulaic description of this system is “*Duduak samo randah, tagak samo tinggi*,” “Sitting equally low, standing equally high,” and reflects the fact that the council hall would have a level surface.

Typically, the pangulu will be chosen from among the eligible men in the lineage. Sometimes the position will rotate between the heads of various subsections of the lineage. In the Koto-Piliang lareh, applying the more “hierarchical” adat, the pangulu might be chosen on virtue of his being the eldest kamanakan of the previous pangulu. Further, in this lareh, some pangulu would have higher prestige than others.²⁹ The council floor would not be even, but would have raised platforms where the superior pangulu would sit to emphasize their status. The formulaic description of this system is, “*Bajanjang naiak, batanggo turun*,” “Up the stairs, down the ladder,” reflecting the fact that each level of authority comes in a certain order. In some nagari, especially those in the Koto-Piliang lareh, and most often in those located outside the three central valleys that make up the Minangkabau heartland, there might even be a single figure sitting at the top of the hierarchy as a sort of village head.

²⁹ In de Josselin de Jong’s (1980) explanation, since all clans can trace themselves back to the four original suku, ultimately there would be four top pangulu in a village, each representing all of the clans that descended from a particular suku.

In either lareh, the council is supposed to reach its decisions through a process of *musyawarah*, deliberation and discussion, leading to *mufakat*, consensus. This does not necessarily mean that everyone, through their own paths of reasoning, will ultimately come to the same conclusion. Rather, it means that everyone will agree that the council, as a whole, has come to a particular conclusion, which then becomes the conclusion that everyone support as valid. Thus, every individual involved has a say and an opportunity to argue and reason, but what ultimately matters — what is ultimately seen as the indisputably “correct” conclusion — is not what the individual believes is correct, but rather what the group determines is correct.

The pangulu embody the process of leading the nagari through carrying out these deliberations in the adat council hall, and putting the resulting consensus, the *mufakat*, into words. But adat also recognizes other nagari leaders who help to guide the community, and whose voices should be heard on important matters. There are three groups of male leaders identified as necessary to guide the community. There are the lineage heads (the pangulu, usually framed in this case as elders, *niniak-mamak*), the scholars (*cadiak-pandai*), and the religious leaders (*alim-ulama*).³⁰

While the wisdom of a recognized leader in any of these categories may carry weight, even the pangulu are ultimately supposed to defer to the general consensus of the members of the lineage. Decisions must be agreed upon by all the parties involved

³⁰ These categories apparently apply mostly in Bodi-Caniago adat, which applies to the Bukittinggi area. In Koto-Piliang adat, the major categories may be different, and refer to the ministers or secretaries of the pangulu (the *manti*), their religious advisors (*malin*), and a sort of sergeant at arms/enforcer of decisions (*dubalang*). No one in Bukittinggi ever brought up these categories to me. Amir (2003: 55) simply states that these categories (as opposed to the ones I’ve discussed above) are simply no longer relevant, which makes sense considering that the nagari is no longer a functioning political unit.

for them to be considered valid, and the job of leaders in settling disputes is not to render a final and binding decision, but rather to help the parties reach a resolution that all can agree to abide by (cf. Rosen 1989). It is understood that if all parties do not agree to a decision, it will likely never be carried out anyway.

As K. von Benda-Beckmann writes, referring to Minangkabau people in general, “They are extremely sensitive to decisions imposed upon them and consider such decisions an affront to their person, as well as to adat” (1983: 2). Benda-Beckmann continues by noting that this aversion to being dictated to is not tantamount to what we might call “individualism”: “Yet this does not mean that they exhibit an outspoken individualism. On the contrary, the Minangkabau are very much aware that they are part of a social network in which they have responsibilities as well as rights. Being part of a group, however, does not mean that others can make decisions for them. Everyone must have a say and everyone must ultimately concur” (2).³¹

This is not to say that all members of a nagari are equal. Although accounts of adat often skip lightly at best over the fact, adat primarily describes the social arrangements and political structures of village elites. Most nagari in West Sumatra, seem to include a hierarchy consisting of those who are members of lineages considered native to that nagari and control its land, at the top; those who are members of lineages that migrated to the nagari later, but were then adopted to be an adjunct of one of the native lineages and allowed some use rights to land, in the middle; and those who are not considered members of a native lineage, but were landless and

³¹ These are principles that differ sharply from those of state courts, something that she examines in detail (K. von Benda-Beckmann 1983).

forced to act as “servants” or “slaves” to them, at the bottom (Pak 1986, Blackwood 2000). It is only the elite, native lineages that have a full say in nagari affairs according to adat.

In accounts of adat in the traditional nagari, women’s roles are less well defined than men’s roles, though theirs are understood to be extremely important voices in the nagari, at least on par with those of the male elders, scholars, and religious leaders. Decisions that are formalized by pangulu and other male clan representatives are supposed to represent the consensus of women as well, even if their opinions are solicited less formally, outside the bounds of official deliberations. Although this arrangement is often justified by the idea that men are better at making the final, rational decisions (see Chapter 4 below), it is important to keep in mind that a “behind the scenes” influence can be understood as having a kind of power that can match or exceed that of those who are in the public eye. (I will explore this idea more thoroughly later in this chapter). When, for example, Da Dan tells me that only men should hold positions of authority, but that women, as “advisors” to men, may actually be more powerful than the men themselves, there is some reason not to hastily dismiss what he is saying as a rationalization.

This pattern can carry over into less formal or “official” occasions as well. The very first time my wife and I visited the house where we would eventually live through the entire length of my fieldwork, a discussion was held regarding the potential living arrangements. The discussion took place between the two sisters who lived in the house, Inyiaak Datuak, a mutual friend through whom the connection had

been made, and us. This “discussion,” however, consisted mostly of this friend lecturing at great length about a very few simple points concerning the arrangements (e.g., we’d be “like family,” and so on), while the rest of us listened. I was eventually asked to respond, and did my best, though I was not skilled enough at this kind of talk to make my words last very long at all. Meanwhile, the two sisters would occasionally acknowledge what was being said by confirming it with a quick “*iyò*,” meaning, “yes.” They said hardly anything else.

It appeared as if they were being dictated to, but in fact this was not the case. The idea of our moving in to their home had been discussed with them beforehand, and it was only based on their decision that we were invited there to have this discussion in the first place. Of all the adults who lived in this house, it was perhaps the husband of the older sister (the only man living in the house) who was actually most marginalized from the decision-making. He may very well have been consulted about the decision, but I cannot be sure; he returned home from work during the course of our discussions, but did not participate. In any case, it is certainly true that women's roles as decision-makers can be obscured by focusing on only the most ritualized and public aspects of the decision-making process – the things that are often the focus of discussions of adat.

From the point of view of adat, women are *bundo kanduang*, a term combining words for “mother” and “womb,” and implying all of the creative and nurturing powers and responsibilities of women in Minangkabau society. The term is particularly used for senior women, and sometimes for *the* senior woman in a lineage,

as if it were a formal position (Blackwood 2000). Yet most accounts of adat are rather vague about this role, even while rather grandiose in their suggestions of its importance. For example, a text used to teach West Sumatran junior high school students about adat devotes less than two of its approximately four hundred and fifty pages to the concept of *bundo kanduang* (and less than six pages to the role of adult women overall), including the following description of the role:

Women, in their roles as *bundo kanduang*, are adornments in the village. It is not a woman's physical self that becomes an adornment, but her character as a woman. She comprehends adat and etiquette, gives primacy to morals, and protects her self-respect like the honor of her family. She understands religion, comprehends the tenets of religion, and protects herself and her society from sin. (Zulkarnaini 1995: 128)³²

The Marginalization of the Nagari and Adat

I will return to the role of women, and its relationship to adat, below. Before this, it is important to note that the *nagari*, as a functioning political unit, does not exist in Bukittinggi. This is not merely because Bukittinggi is a city, run by a municipal government, although such is the case. Throughout West Sumatra, the *nagari* ceased to function in any significant sense after the national Law on Local Government in 1979 was implemented in West Sumatra in the early 1980's. Its goal was to provide a uniform structure to all local administration throughout Indonesia, with each officially

³² The original reads as follows: "*Kaum perempuan dalam perannya sebagai bundo kanduang menjadi hiasan di dalam kampung. Yang menjadi hiasan bukanlah dirinya dalam bentuk fisik, tetapi kepribadiannya sebagai perempuan. Ia memahami adat dan sopan santun, mengutamakan budi perkerti, dan memelihara harga diri seperti kehormatan kaumnya. Ia mengerti agama, memahami aturan agama, dan memelihara dirinya dan masyarakatnya dari dosa.*"

recognized *desa* (“village”) receiving the same amount of funding from the central government. The model used was essentially a Javanese model, and it did not match up well with the Minangkabau nagari, which was generally much larger than a Javanese *desa*. This meant that, in order to receive a reasonable amount of funding, the 543 nagari in West Sumatra were chopped into 3516 *desa*, later consolidated into about 1700 *desa* (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, nd.). Although adat councils continued to function (*Karapatan Adat Nagari*, usually known by the acronym KAN), their charge of handling matters related to adat was never particularly clear, especially as this implied a concept of adat that reduced it to a small subset of concerns that did not conflict with the responsibilities of government. By most measures, local government became integrated into the centralized, national system, and the traditional nagari leadership lost its power. This emphasis on centralized power meant that discussions of adat as having anything more than symbolic meaning – that is, as being a basis for claims as to how society actually works – were marginalized as well. Recall that the man who was preoccupied with talking about adat, described at the beginning of this chapter, claimed that for years no one talked about it at all (c.f. Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, nd.).

Beginning in 1999, after Suharto’s New Order regime had fallen, there was a move to decentralize power in Indonesia, and give regions more flexibility in running their affairs. In West Sumatra, a movement has formed to *baliak ka nagari* – that is, “return to the nagari” as a central entity in Minangkabau life. This process is still ongoing, and filled with complications over everything from determining what areas

belong to what nagari, to designing a system of nagari governance that works for contemporary concerns, to deciding who gets to participate in nagari leadership (see Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann, n.d.). In all five traditional districts (*orong*) of Bukittinggi, the KAN carry on, but continue to play little role in the lives of most people. The *baliak ka nagari* movement has had little or no impact on life in the city. A related component of this movement, *baliak ka surau*, or “return to the surau,” has emphasized the reestablishment of the prayer house as a center of education, particularly adat education. While there does appear to be some heightened interest in studying traditional Minang culture in Bukittinggi (e.g., more interest in learning indigenous *silek* styles of self-defense rather than karate), at this point, the movement remains mostly a slogan used to anchor discussions.

Thus, men with high adat titles in Bukittinggi do not necessarily have any well-defined duties vis-à-vis the public in general, although they may continue to be highly involved in the affairs of their lineages. Social status has less to do with having an adat title, and more to do with having wealth and education. Although natives of Bukittinggi are proud to be Kurai, and sometimes complain about all of the “outsiders” who now live in the city, the nagari hierarchy of native lineages, adopted lineages, and servants is mostly irrelevant. In Bukittinggi, no one ever discussed such a hierarchy with me.³³ Men and women are considered elites (and good marriage

³³ This is not the same as saying that they had no thoughts about such a hierarchy. Both Pak (1986) and Blackwood (2000) report that Minangkabau villagers were very reluctant to talk about hierarchy. I tried only a few times to ask about “*kamanakan dibawah lutuik*” (“nieces and nephews beneath the knees”), the label that both of these ethnographers report is used to reference the “servant” or “slave” class. As far as I could tell, the people I asked about this –

partners) less because of the native status of their lineage, and more because they have achieved a high education, are wealthy, are pious, and come from families free from a history of immoral or criminal behavior.³⁴ This appears to be increasingly the case in West Sumatran villages as well (Pak 1986, Blackwood 2002).

Today, wealth is one of the most important factors in determining which man becomes the title-holder for a lineage. Men who are able to obtain a higher education, and then obtain a prestigious, well-paying job, are often given high titles, and people grumble about their ability to use the influence of their money to sway others in the lineage to bestow the title on them. Often, people complain, the person chosen knows little about adat, and has no interest carrying out the duties involved, but is only interested in the prestige that comes with the title. They may even live outside of West Sumatra, in which case a deputy might bear the bulk of the actual burden. If being granted a high title once conferred high status on a man, today status is largely a matter of having achieved financial success and a high level of education, and such status often attracts a high title. In Bukittinggi, there is a good deal of cynicism that adat, seemingly like every other aspects of public life, has become corrupted, and is now only a servant to money.

including people who had grown up in smaller villages rather than in Bukittinggi itself – usually genuinely had not heard of this category, or at most did not have any clear idea about its significance. I assume many people in Bukittinggi are aware of this category, but since no one ever brought it up with me or appeared to attach much importance to it, I soon stopped asking about it.

³⁴ However, as I will discuss later in this dissertation, being an elite can be seen as a bad thing as well.

Imagining Minangkabau Adat

Seeing adat as something that has deteriorated, or is in need of revival, requires the assumption that it was once whole and pure: there once was a “traditional Minangkabau society,” and it worked in this manner, based on these ideals. It is generally assumed that this period existed before outside influences began to erode native (*asli*) culture, although in this case “native” would generally be understood to include Indic, possibly Chinese, and certainly Middle-Eastern influences that became integral to creating “Minangkabau” society, and thus became native. Truly “outside” influences would usually be understood to be western in origin, a process that began with “350 years of colonialism.”³⁵

In fact, a number of scholars have examined the ways in which Dutch influence, and Dutch colonial policy in particular, helped to create parts of what were later understood to be “traditional” culture (e.g., Benda-Beckmann 1979, Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1985, Kato 1983, Kahn 1993). For example, the Dutch – favoring integration of “native” leaders into their colonial system as a strategy through which to govern – exploited, rationalized, and distorted the various patterns of pangulu leadership found in nagari across the region. Most notably, they determined which pangulu were official, and prevented any new ones from being installed. That

³⁵ A number of times, when discussing “Minang” society with me, people used this figure. It is certainly taken from the period of time beginning when European powers, and especially the Dutch, played a major role in the region that now makes up Indonesia, including the time when most of the region was an actual Dutch colony, up to the time when Indonesia became a sovereign nation-state. People applied the figure to West Sumatra, although it was not actually colonized by the Dutch until the early 19th century.

is, while it had been the case that a lineage under one pangulu could split apart if it became too populous and cumbersome, and thus a new pangulu position would be created, the Dutch forbade this from taking place in order to better control nagari leadership.³⁶ What resulted was not simply a different social system than whatever had existed prior to Dutch influence, but a more standardized one as well. European conceptions of Minangkabau society in some sense replaced what had been diverse social arrangements in nagari around the region (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1985).

Kahn (1993), in an extended examination of the process by which “traditional Minangkabau society” was “constituted” as a concept, has shown how debates among Dutch social scientists and colonial administrators over the nature of “native” society and what policies would best help it to develop – should it be Europeanized? should it be allowed to develop according to its own native logic? – created a discourse that helped to construct the concept. Dutch scholars had to determine how exactly this native society was structured in order to figure out what to do with it. They began a process of recording and objectifying West Sumatran social systems into a vision of “Minangkabau society.” West Sumatran scholars later took up the discourse as their own in the early 20th century, and the emphasis shifted. For one thing, notes Kahn, discussions of traditional life were a reaction to dissatisfaction with the current state of society, particularly from an economic perspective:

If many Minangkabau in the 1920’s were coming to form an image of a traditional village economy governed by principles of mutual respect

³⁶ In Bukittinggi today, new pangulu positions are not created, as lineages do not split.

and cooperation in opposition to the contemporary development of a money economy dominated by base desire (*hawa nafsu*) and the dominance of money (people even being forced to “eat money”), then it is not surprising that, for many, a cure to the problems wrought by economic modernization rested in indigenous customs (*adat*) and the modes of social organization to which they gave rise. (126)

Kahn also notes that *adat* became an alternative to social reform as fueled by Islamic reform movements. All of this helped to transform *adat* from practice into discourse. As a quotation from Abdullah (1971), also highlighted by Kahn, puts it, “[A]*dat* changed from a collection of commonly accepted forms and traditions into a statement of regulations and philosophy. In response to the activities of the Islamic modernists, however, *adat* began to assume the status of an ideology. Its ideas and institutions were being crystallized into a universal system” (Abdullah 1971: 15). It is this crystallized conceptual system that is sometimes imagined to describe everything about the lives of people in West Sumatra (their “culture” in its broadest sense) as they existed at some undetermined point in the past.

Marginalizing and Highlighting Women in Accounts of *Adat*

This transformation did something else, to which Kahn gives only the briefest of treatments (Kahn 1993: 184-186). Perhaps because the Dutch had established the *pangulu* as their vehicles of leadership, and made them—and male leadership and economic production in general—the focus of their discourse, women were marginalized in accounts of *adat*, and thus in the standard picture of Minangkabau culture. This was already suggested above, where I examined a modern teaching

text's treatment of *bundo kanduang* (senior women) and the role of women more generally. This is true despite the fact that *adat* is based around a matrilineal system in which property rights are inherited primarily by women. This same text explains that although "*harta*" (that is, *harato pusako*, property own corporately by a lineage) is "owned by" (*dimiliki*) women, it is "controlled by" (*dikuasai*, denoting power and dominance) men. This presumably refers to the fact that male lineage heads are supposed to look after matters such as the distribution of the property (Zulkarnaini 1995: 130).

The last few decades have seen gender—explicitly or sometimes implicitly, in the self-conscious examination of women's lives— become the focus of much scholarship on Minangkabau (e.g., Prindiville 1984, Tanner and Thomas 1985, Pak 1986, Whalley 1993, Krier 1995, Reenen 1996; Blackwood 2000; Sanday 2002; cf. Peletz 1996). Of particular note is Blackwood's (2000) examination of the role of women in contemporary Minangkabau village life. Blackwood makes a convincing argument for the power of women in daily life in Minangkabau—and for their central role in carrying out *adat*.

Indeed, even though women seem to slip through the cracks of accounts of *adat*, they are the ones that actually carry out much of what is identified as the practice of *adat* today. A good example would be my own account above of a wedding ritual, told from the male perspective. Women appear merely in the background, as the ones behind the scenes cooking food for men. Yet, the process of exchanging food and labor (in the kitchen) in which the women participate is just as much a part of the

ritual as the speechmaking and eating undertaken by the men. Women's management and enactment of such ceremonies are not merely mechanical performances of ritual, either. They are, as Blackwood shows, ways of defining, maintaining, and manipulating social relationships. Further, while women may not be the ones formalizing, through ritual speech, marriages or divisions of clan property, they are very often the ones arranging for the marriage or negotiating for property rights before such ritual can be enacted. The central role of Minang women in the practice of adat and in shaping the daily lives of Minangkabau communities is seconded in Sanday's recent (2002) ethnography as well.

This remains true in Bukittinggi today, even though the rumah gadang has given way to smaller households, and the bundo kanduang cannot be considered a defined social role. Households often revolve around, or even consist of, a nuclear family, with the father and husband designated officially by the government, and recognized by Islamic discourses, as the "head" of the household. Newly married couples often live in the wife's family's home, on harato pusako land (or even in their rented house), but this may be more a result of economic necessity than anything else. The ideal in Bukittinggi, even though it is usually unaffordable, is for a married couple to have their own home – either building one on the wife's clan's property, buying one as private property, or at the very least renting one. This does not, however, prevent women from organizing household finances, managing lineage and neighborhood social relationships, and enacting adat rituals.

At the same time, there can be no doubt that the rhetoric of male authority, the state's recognition of men as public leaders who are responsible for their family's affairs, and the slow disappearance of multi-family households that revolve around the descendants of a senior woman have all eroded the cultural resources with which women can assert themselves in family and public affairs. It is certainly possible to paint, as Sanday (2002) does, an overly idealized picture of the position of Minangkabau woman.³⁷ Among the ethnographers who have focused in recent years on the lives on Minangkabau women, Krier (1995) is particularly insistent that women may find themselves subjugated by male political power, even while the importance of their voices is recognized in theory by conceptions of adat. Krier argues that in practice, when it comes to matters such as a dispute over the control of land, these voices may in fact be relegated to voices of protest, making appeals to the men. It is men, she says, whose adat roles are given practical power in concert with state and religious institutions.

³⁷ Sanday's argument, that Minangkabau society (especially "traditional" Minangkabau society) should be considered "matriarchal," overreaches and indeed seems to be based on an idealized version of women's lives. Her conclusion is largely dependent upon her redefinition of "matriarchal" to mean not that women hold power in a way parallel to men in patriarchal societies, but that the society is somehow centered on women. Her suggestion that the word be redefined this way is predicated on the fact that some Minangkabau have adopted the Dutch-derived term "*matriarchaat*," generally translated to English as "matriarchy," to describe Minangkabau society. Sanday writes, "Are we going to replace their self-designation as a *matriarchaat* with a new label on the grounds that their meanings don't fit the Western definition of matriarchy? I think not. My goal in going to West Sumatra was to explore local meanings, not to apply labels devised at home" (2002: 231). Despite this, however, Sanday *does* apply a label devised at home: "matriarchy." It is her argument that *we* should change the meaning of our own local (and professional) terminology because it does not fit the Minangkabau definition of *matriarchaat* (and, presumably, because "*matriarchaat*" and "matriarchy" are etymologically related). This is difficult to accept, and in any case ultimately undermines the significance of her claim that Minangkabau is a "matriarchy."

Although I did not study such land disputes in Bukittinggi, I did occasionally hear women complain about this very problem. Ni Gan, for instance, is a woman in her late 20's who complained to me about the pangulu (highest title holding man) in her lineage. She told me that he had been capricious in the way he handled arrangements for Ni Gan's younger sister's engagement, and had also used his position to sell large pieces of land for which he – that is, not the lineage as a whole – enjoyed the profits. She complained to me about her own lack of power, and told me that she thought that things would be better off if in the future the pangulu were just abolished. (She later made her statements a bit more ambiguous, saying that things would be better off without this particular pangulu, while other lineages enjoyed the services of good (*elok*) pangulu.) When I asked her if there were women who held comparable positions of power within the lineage, she said that there weren't any. When I asked about the idea of *bundo kanduang*, she told me that this was something from the past (*zaman dulu*), merely a matter of history.

The day Ni Gan told me all of this, she was particularly exasperated over the problems she was having with this pangulu. In a later interview, in a different frame of mind, she also told me that one of the things she was most proud of about being Minangkabau was that Minang society valued women more than did most other societies. She pointed out that many Minang women have salaried jobs or run farms or businesses, and that women do inherit the rights to most property. Accounts of adat that minimize the roles of women certainly may reflect a reality that women may have

more difficulty than men in making overt claims to authority. They nevertheless miss much of roles women actually play in adat-related affairs.

Women's position vis-à-vis adat, and vis-à-vis family and lineage affairs, remain multi-dimensional. As Blackwood describes it for village life, so it is in Bukittinggi: "Despite the dominance of the ideology of femininity and motherhood at the national level, state ideology is not hegemonic in creating a particular type of Minangkabau woman. Their lack of subjugation to national discourses is evidenced in their control of households, the very site that the state imagines women to be most submissive" (2000:107). Just as the matrilineal property system still functions along with private property and capitalist enterprise, women participate actively in aspects of social life organized by adat, as well as those organized by national, religious and capitalist institutions (cf. Whalley 1993).

The Limits of Adat

We return here to the idea that Minangkabau people live their lives in both *kampung* and *pasa*, both within and outside of the framework of adat, and that the borders between them are uncertain. It is in fact sometimes unclear which dimensions of life are lived according to adat – and can be labeled "Minangkabau" – and which ones are not. For example, I was speaking with Ni Tasi, an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties, about her desire to have children. Rather unenthusiastically, she said that she did want to have one – but only one – child, because it would give meaning to

her working for a living, and would help insure that there was someone to look after her when she got old. She then continued:

Ni Tasi: That's enough already. [laughs] In my case, as far as children go, one is enough, but it must be a boy. If I have one boy, then it's OK.

GS: Why?

Ni Tasi: In Minang society, that child will later get married, and women have to go with their husbands, which means they'll have to leave home. That's the thing if she's a girl.

GS: Uh-huh.

Ni Tasi: Uh...not women! It's *men* that have to leave home.

GS: Oh, yes.

Ni Tasi: Right? But, uh... a husband is in charge of the household, you know, so it could be – for example, he can build a house close to his mother, you know? And the wife has to follow along. That's the thing. But if the child is a girl, and her husband goes to America, for example—

GS: She follows.

Ni Tasi: —she has to follow him, right? [laughs] It's better to have a boy.

Ni Tasi tries to explain her preference for a boy in terms of how “Minang” society functions. Her explanation makes sense – women are more likely than men to move away because their spouse finds work away from West Sumatra³⁸ – but the “Minang” label does not quite work. How can women have to leave home in Minang society when, according to adat and the world of the *kampung*, it is men who must leave home?

Adat may encompass all of “Minangkabau” life, but it only provides a partial framework for the lives that Minangkabau people live. National bureaucracies, the

³⁸ Some women also stay in their native houses in Bukittinggi while their husbands work in some other city. This is especially true when they have very young children, and feel the need for their sisters and other family members to assist them.

marketplace, and religious institutions, to take three examples, also provide arenas for social life. If the perfectly ordered world of adat has never existed on the ground, it nevertheless exists today as much as ever as a set of concepts and practices that help to provide some structure to life in West Sumatra, and help to define it as uniquely Minangkabau in nature. To get the larger picture of Minangkabau identity, however, we have to look beyond the dimensions of society that are tied to the *kampung* and conceptualized in terms of adat. We have to look at the way that people are imagined as persons moving through a world of both *kampung* and *pasa* in a distinctively Minangkabau way. It is to this discussion of Minangkabau character that I now turn.

Autonomy and Humility: Conceptions of Minangkabau Character

Hatta

Mohammed Hatta, whose family home still stands in Bukittinggi, was a leading figure in Indonesia's nationalist movement, one of the two men who officially proclaimed its independence at the close of World War II, its first vice-president, and one of its prime ministers. Two thousand-two was the one-hundredth anniversary of Hatta's birth (he died in 1980), and the occasion was marked in his hometown by banners, student speech contests, newspaper columns, and so on. None of these, as far as I could detect, contained a single critical word about him.³⁹ Hatta is, if not the patron saint of Minangkabau, the icon of its ideal self-image. What Hatta is thought to have been is the ideal version of what a Minangkabau person is supposed to be. The

³⁹ I mean "critical" in the sense of "finding fault," although it was striking how little was said about Hatta that could be considered critical in any sense of the term.

centennial of his birth provided a good opportunity for people to use him in their discussions with me as an exemplar of Minangkabau character.

Despite Hatta's credentials, he has always been overshadowed nationally by Sukarno, the nation's other proclinator of independence, first president, and the linchpin of its politics from the revolution until his marginalization by Suharto in the latter half of the 1960's. Sukarno, of Javanese and Balinese heritage (though perhaps most closely associated with his Javanese roots), reveled in the public spotlight, making fiery speeches that showed off his rhetorical skills and mastery over numerous languages. He was famous for his flamboyant style as well as for his womanizing.⁴⁰ Hatta is notable for his contrasts with Sukarno, as well as his role as Sukarno's public second.

Hatta's reputation serves to reveal the qualities that a Minangkabau person should have, chief among them honesty, piety, strength of will, intellectual acuity, and humility.⁴¹ Hatta is said to have been a leader who worried about the welfare of his

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that in this way Sukarno embodied the very antithesis of Javanese male power as outlined by Anderson (1972). Anderson identifies a model in which power (understood as an metaphysical entity held by a person) is evidenced by a man's control over his desires and appetites, and his ability to command a situation without needing to expend words or emotional expression. Suharto was seen to perform such a vision of power during his thirty-year presidency, speaking only occasionally in public (and even then in an aloof, even-toned cadence), and distancing himself from overt indications of personal desire for wealth or power. Sukarno's image as a figure of male power seemed to rely on an alternate model, or perhaps his transcendence of it: his superfluity of power negating the need for the power to be maintained through self-control.

⁴¹ It was quite striking to me that amid all the discussions in 2001 of the marvelous qualities demonstrated by Hatta and his life, there seemed to be no mention whatsoever of the fact that he was a revolutionary. His role as a leader of the Indonesian independence movement, and the fact that he fought *for* moral principles like justice were of course acknowledged. However, there seemed to be a studied avoidance of any direct reference to Hatta as a fighter *against* entrenched powers. This is despite the fact that this characteristic fits quite nicely into

people. He was an important and accomplished man who never acted important and accomplished. He was deeply pious and was not interested in pursuing wealth and power for the sake of wealth and power, or in accumulating material goods.⁴² While he was, according to many people in Bukittinggi, the real brains behind the Indonesian revolution, he preferred to work in the shadow of Sukarno, who acted more as a symbol of even a figurehead. Notice, people pointed out, how after Hatta was marginalized in Sukarno's government and Sukarno took more and more power for himself, the country went into a downward spiral of economic hardship and political chaos, resulting eventually in Sukarno's downfall. While no one claims that all Minangkabau people live up to Hatta's example, many of his qualities are seen as tied to his Minangkabau origins. The unassuming way he went about expressing himself, his reliance on a combination of intellect and religious learning, and even the way that he worked in the shadow of another rather than out in front of the world are all understood as being particularly (ideal) Minangkabau traits. They are also understood to be superior to the characteristics exemplified by Sukarno.

A Charter Myth for Minangkabau Character

When defining explicitly what Minangkabau character is like, I found that Minangkabau people continually contrasted themselves with Javanese people, who

the ideal image of Minangkabau character that I am discussing in this section. Hatta, as a figure associated with national politics and culture, has been re-imagined to serve a political culture that – despite some recent ripples of change – is primarily dedicated to celebrating loyalty to entrenched authorities, not to challenging them.

⁴² During one speech contest, a high-school student commended Hatta, in a bit of anachronistic praise, for having wished as a teenager for a mere bicycle, rather than an automobile.

make up by far the largest percentage of the Indonesian population.⁴³ In a widely repeated story, the designation “Minangkabau” itself came about as the result of a revealing clash between natives of west Sumatra and of Java. Although the story is understood to be apocryphal even by many Minangkabau people, it is still repeated as if it contains an important truth. The story is that the invading army of a Javanese king had swept up through Sumatra and was about to conquer the people we now know as Minangkabau. In order to prevent this, the local people proposed a deal: each side would find a water buffalo to represent it. The two buffalo would then fight each other. If the Javanese buffalo emerged victorious, the Javanese king would be granted control over west Sumatra without a fight. If the local buffalo won, the Javanese army would have to retreat. The Javanese agreed, and found a massive, fierce buffalo to represent them. The locals had a different strategy. They took a buffalo calf that was still nursing, and kept it from its mother. When the time for the fight arrived, they attached a knife to its nose and let it go. Desperate to nurse, and seeing an adult water buffalo in front of it, the calf ran up and shoved its nose into the belly of the brawny Javanese beast, killing it with the blade. The Javanese left in defeat, and the local people were thereafter identified by the victory, (loosely) *minang*, of their water buffalo, *kabau*.⁴⁴

⁴³ Minangkabau people often include Sundanese people, the natives of western Java, in the category of “Javanese,” though the term is more properly applied to natives of the eastern two-thirds of the island.

⁴⁴ This is why, according to one version of the story I heard, Javanese ceremonial dress is now characterized by the wearing of a *keris*, or dagger, in the back rather than in front, as is the case for Minangkabau ceremonial dress. I doubt that many Javanese people share the interpretation that this is symbolic of a defeat, let alone this particular defeat!

The story nicely condenses common conceptions of Minang character, contrasting them with the imagined other of the Javanese. The Javanese, like their army and their kabau, are big and strong and threatening. This corresponds in part to the position of the Javanese as the dominant group in Indonesia, vastly outnumbering Minangkabau people. However, it can also be understood as a reflection of the perceived character of Javanese people. They are said to be somewhat obvious, like the choice of their kabau, and to be more brawn than brain.⁴⁵ People in Bukittinggi often noted to me that Javanese people were willing to do hard, boring physical labor without complaint – much like a kabau, in fact. They pointed me to the fact that many Javanese people were employed in Bukittinggi’s small brick-making enterprises, doing hard, tedious, physical work that many Minang people were said to be unwilling or unable to do. Also, just as the invading Javanese army was doing the bidding of a king in the story, Javanese people are seen as being extremely hierarchical, and of being highly concerned with doing as they are told. Finally, although it does not appear directly as a dimension of the kabau story, it is important to know that this Javanese tendency towards hierarchy is widely understood to be related to their being somewhat less devoted to Islam than are Minang people – or at least that their society’s maintenance of many “feudal” (and Hindu-Buddhist) traditions that are anti-Islamic. These traditions are seen as running counter to Islam’s essentially egalitarian ethos, in which all people are equal creations of God. In the kabau story, the Minang are the little guys, but they are victors, not victims. They refuse to be subjugated by a

⁴⁵ Although at least once I was told that the dumbest *and* the smartest people in Indonesia were Javanese.

great power that arrives with a false aura of superiority, and they are clever enough to trick their enemy into a defeat.

The Ambiguity of Cleverness

Cleverness and trickery are not without their dangers, of course, and not every Minang person can be a Hatta. The central tension in discussions of Minang character runs along a moral wire strung between different poles of cleverness: intelligent and ingenious on one side, cunning and conniving on the other. For example, in Amir M.S.'s (2003) recent book discussing Minangkabau traditions and character, the final pages are devoted to this very concern. The author is a Minangkabau man, now based in Jakarta, who has written about Minangkabau culture for Minangkabau and general Indonesian audiences. In these final pages of his book, he writes about several kinds of cleverness – *galie*, *licik*, *cadiak*, and *pandai* – that have been ascribed to Minang people, and asks his readers to consider which kinds are worthy of being preserved, and which kinds are shameful and in need of being avoided.⁴⁶ Hatta, as the exemplar of all the *good* aspects of typical Minang character, is generally not described by terms like “galie” or “licik,” which have negative connotations, or even “cadiak” which can be ambiguous, but by terms like “pandai” (smart, skillful) and “bijaksana” (wise). However, the full range of Minangkabau cleverness is far more varied.

⁴⁶ Amir M.S. uses the *kabau* story as the primary example of a kind of cleverness, *cadiak*, that is worthy of being preserved. His other example of *cadiak* is the main character from his favorite television program, the American show *MacGyver*, though he admits to being indifferent to most everything else on television.

For Da Jik, a successful businessman about forty years of age, cleverness explains why so many Minang people go into business and are successful at it. Minangkabau people are indeed known, even stereotyped, throughout Indonesia as traders.⁴⁷ Da Jik talked to me about this in the context of describing his own business history. He told me, with a sort of guilty pleasure, about how he had first been hired to assist someone in his business, gradually taking on more and more responsibility as would an ideal employee, and then used his position and knowledge to establish his own business and take away most of the customers of his former boss. (In Da Jik's story, his boss was also trying simultaneously to cheat him out of his fair share of the business's profits, so the maneuvering and scheming went both ways.) Da Jik used himself as an example of what he thought was the typical way in which Minang people operated. They – in contrast to the Javanese, he pointed out – are always cleverly playing with words and relationships, scheming for their own advantage whatever the outward appearance of their actions may be.

I indeed found such stories to be common, though most of the people with whom I spoke were not as successful in business as Da Jik. Da Dan, a man of about thirty-five whose previous business had failed and whose current business consists of somewhat ad hoc buying and selling of common household needs, also emphasized to me the connection between Minangkabau cleverness and their tendency to be good independent traders and not particularly good employees. That is, he saw

⁴⁷ Indonesians of Chinese descent are known as the dominant group in large-scale trade and business, while Minangkabau people are known as the “indigenous” group most successful in trade, particularly small-scale trade.

Minangkabau people as independent thinkers constantly searching for ways to advance their own interests: necessarily qualities when one is trying to make a profit amid difficult economic conditions, but contrary to the loyalty and obedience one might look for in a subordinate. He described Minang people as “difficult to control” (*susah diatur*), and conceded that he personally fit this description.

Da Dan’s example was that he had once been employed to help tend a small shop owned by another man. Da Dan felt that he was not paid enough, and resented his boss’s tendency to constantly look over his shoulder and control everything that he did. To prevent Da Dan from stealing, the boss would not allow him to sell anything without the boss overseeing the transaction. Taking this as a challenge, Da Dan developed a method of slipping extra items into customers’ bags after the boss had already checked the transaction. He relied on an unspoken agreement with certain customers, who would then return to pay Da Dan personally (rather than the store) for the extra items. He explained to me in detail how he overcame the various obstacles that could have hindered the plan’s success. “That’s one example,” concluded Da Dan. “There really are a lot of Minang people who are sly [*licik*]. Difficult to control.” When I asked him if being sly were good or bad, he defended it if one’s “financial circumstances are really pressing.”

The tendency to use cleverness explains for Da Dan why Minang people tend to work behind the scenes rather than out in front as leaders. As an example, he says Hatta did not want to be president, though he should have been. I was told many times that Minang people held few visible positions of power in Indonesia both because they

preferred to work behind the scenes, and because other Indonesians did not trust them in positions of power, fearing that they would manipulate their positions for their own benefit, or the benefit of their home villages.⁴⁸ “Because, supposing you’re number one,” said Da Dan, “there are too many problems. But if you’re a person behind the scenes, there’s a lot of money. Not a lot of problems. There’s no responsibility. It’s hard to get Minang people to be responsible.” (Recall also that Da Dan was the one who told me that women, as advisors, might be at least as powerful as men who make official decisions.)

People in Bukittinggi warned me (and later sometimes consoled me after I found there to be some truth to it) that it might be difficult to get people to agree to do a series of interviews with me. The idea was that to agree to such a thing would be too restricting, establishing obligations that they did not desire and setting up the possibility that they might disappoint me. It was better for many people to simply avoid commitment, even if they were willing to help me whenever circumstances were favorable. While this attitude was indeed true for many people, it certainly was not true for everyone. It was, however, widely recognized as a common quality that Minangkabau people associated with members of their own society: a reluctance to place themselves in a position of obligation toward others.

This is quite reminiscent of what Benedict (1967) wrote, just after World War II, about Japanese people. A major difference is that Benedict saw Japanese society as

⁴⁸ People rarely, if ever, mentioned the political history (described in Chapter 1), particularly the rebellion in the 1950’s, that provided the context for the decline of Minangkabau people in positions of national power.

heavily saturated with such obligations at least in part because of its hierarchical character. She saw Japanese people as being largely accepting of, even valuing, the obligations that came along with established hierarchies, but often interested in avoiding taking on other obligations that might add to their burden. In contrast, the avoidance of obligation that Da Dan and others described to me as part of Minang character was said to be fueled by a sense of egalitarianism – even, perhaps, a certain kind of individualism. It was described as a central dimension of the “Minang” outlook on life, not simply a reaction or resistance to a dominant feature of Minangkabau society.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Benedict (1967) writes: “The passivity of a street crowd in Japan when an accident occurs is not just lack of initiative. It is a recognition that any non-official interference would make the recipient wear an *on*” (104). This last word refers to the “obligation” which would necessarily accompany action. That is, were one to help a victim of an accident, the victim would be burdened with a sort of debt of obligation or loyalty. According to Benedict, Japanese people, being aware of how heavy such burdens can be, may actually avoid helping someone because they recognize that to do so is a sort of imposition on the person being helped.

We can compare this to my memory of being in a car with several other men on a road outside of the city, out to have a good time the night before the fasting month was to begin (doing what is referred to as “*balimau*”), when we passed by the scene of an accident that had obviously taken place not long before our arrival. At least one motorcycle sprawled shattered in the street, and a man lay face down and motionless on the side of the road. A few people stood nearby, or down the road, but there was little action. We all saw the scene, but the driver of our car only slowed for a moment, and did not stop. No one in the car said a word about what might have happened, or wondered aloud whether the man was hurt or dead, or said anything else for that matter, and no one had any visible emotional reaction (aside from the silence). Several minutes later, however, I listened as a discussion emerged among the other men in the car in which they defended to themselves and to each other (and to me, perhaps) their failure to help. The main point of this discussion was that it would have been good to help, but then we would have become involved in whatever was going on. This might have meant taking someone to a hospital, which would have been fine, but after that we might become responsible for him if there was no one else to do it, and who knows what problems this might create? While not helping seemed wrong because we should have been compassionate (*ibo*, see Chapter 4), the counterargument was that the actions necessary to be compassionate could lead to unjust burdens laid on our backs – not on the backs of those we helped, as in Benedict’s example.

More than most of my respondents, Da Dan emphasized the cynical interpretation of Minang cleverness – though it should be noted that he was clearly taking pride in describing Minang thinking as superior to that of others, if morally ambiguous. The stereotype of the scheming, irresponsible and dangerous Minang person is one that many natives of West Sumatra worry about. While I did not conduct any research on images of Minangkabau people in other parts of Indonesia, I did notice that non-Minangkabau Indonesians I came across in Bukittinggi did often express these views. I recall, for example, a conversation I had with a Javanese woman who had lived much of her life in Bukittinggi after her father, a policeman, had been assigned to work there. Like so many Minang people, she contrasted Minang people to Javanese people. Not surprisingly, she reversed the usual arrow of judgment, complaining that Minang people were very difficult to get along with, that they were not very good at caring for each other properly and, most of all, that one had to be very careful around them. Minang people, she indicated, are difficult, dangerous, and troublesome, and you never could know what they might be up to.

Caged in on the Outside

In explaining her thoughts, this Javanese resident of Bukittinggi cited a common Minangkabau saying: “*Taimpik nak di ateh, takuruang nak di lua.*” At the most basic level, this means, “Wanting to be on top when pressed down, wanting to be outside when caged in.” She used the saying as a description of Minang character. In this respect, she was similar to many Minang people, who in conversations with me

cited this saying more than any other as a description of Minang character. However, the saying – like Minang cleverness in general – can be interpreted in different ways.

Its meaning is more subtle than the translation suggests. It does not simply refer to a desire to break free of burdens and restrictions, although this is an important part of its meaning, and perhaps the meaning closest to the surface. The word “nak,” which I have translated as “wanting,” implies both the desire for something to happen and an expectation that something is going to happen. Ni Saia, a woman in her late 50’s who is native to Bukittinggi but has also spent a good portion of her life in other parts of Indonesia (and thus often used Indonesian with me instead of Minang), explains the saying using a similar word in Indonesian, “mau.” This word also carries a sense of prediction or expectation, although it may be used to express desire. Both of these words can therefore be translated as “will,” carrying the sense both of a desire and a prediction. This helps to make clear that the saying in question does not just mean that Minang people want to be freed from restrictions, but that they try to be free *while still*, apparently, restricted:

Ni Saia: It means that Minang people are clever [*cerdik*] like this. People say that if they are pressed down – this right? [she indicates her foot] – pressed down with this – Minang people won’t be below when they’re pressed down. If they’re pressed down they will be on top. They will be pressed down, but they’re going to be on top, they say. Ahh, that’s the cleverness of Minang people. So for deliberations [*berunding*], Minang people are really good.

GS: Why?

Ni Saia: For taking care of a problem that’s somewhat complicated, you know.

GS: Yes.

Ni Saia: [un] They say – well, just like that: if pressed down they will be on top. They’re not going to be below.

GS: Yes – so if they’re below—

Ni Saia: If they're below, it will be painful. And they do not want [mau] to be in pain. That's Minang people – their character. If they're caged in, they won't be inside. They will be caged in, but on the outside.

In one case, where it seems clearly appropriate, I have translated the word “mau” as “want”: “And they do not want to be in pain.” Similarly, the final sentences quoted above could have also been translated as, “If they're caged in, they don't want to be inside. They want to be caged in, but on the outside [*Kalau terkurung dia ndak mau di dalam. Dia mau dikurung, tapi di luar*].”

The saying refers to a desire to be free and unfettered, to maneuver agilely and to turn disadvantage into advantage, and to an unwillingness to concede defeat. It also refers to a desire for the impossible: to actually be on top while apparently being pinned down, or to be outside while apparently being imprisoned. Da Dan makes this sense of the impossible clear by adding a third piece to the saying: “This is what Minang people are. Wanting to be on top when pressed down, wanting to be outside when caged in, wanting to be in the middle when walking as a pair. Things that are impossible. This is the basic character of Minang people.”

According to Ni Saia, this means anything but being dangerous and sly. Notice how she asserts that this quality of Minang people makes them good for deliberations – that is, for discussing problems as a group and coming up with solutions together. This, of course, refers to the adat practice of resolving problems through musyawarah, deliberations and discussion, as discussed above. This seemed counter-intuitive to me. How would it be a good thing for reaching an agreement if everyone wanted to gain the upper hand, I asked? She explained to me that this ability

to very carefully maneuver through a difficult situation was what allowed Minang people to solve seemingly intractable problems without fatally offending any of the parties involved. Everyone could therefore maintain a sense of autonomy while at the same time managing to also act together as a group.

It was the very day after the Javanese woman had cited this saying to support her contention that Minang people were difficult and dangerous that Da Eri, a highly educated part-time lecturer in his mid-thirties, used it in his description of what he thought was the thing to be most proud of about Minangkabau identity. In contrast to Da Jik and Da Dan, quoted above, Da Eri is not a businessperson. In fact, he says he could never be a business person, and would not want to be one – something that differentiates him from the majority of Minang men I spoke with, who made clear that their ideal form of work was to run their own business.⁵⁰ His siblings even tell him not to ever go into business because he would likely just feel sorry for people and give his goods away to them. Da Eri is considered thoughtful, humble, and pious by his peers, and it is difficult to imagine him telling a story about scheming for advantage, like Da Jik, let alone stealing from his boss, like Da Dan.

⁵⁰ This is despite the fact that civil servant positions are often considered prestigious in Indonesia, and desirable for the steady stream of income they assure. Most Minang men I spoke with said that they would prefer to run a business because they would be free to do as they pleased without supervision. In addition, they felt that while it was always possible to become rich from one's business, a civil service position placed a ceiling on one's income. Although usually in a separate context, many people talked to me about how civil servants were often corrupt, and how it would be difficult to become a civil servant without becoming corrupt oneself. I am not sure to what degree this idea also figures into the preference for running an independent business. Women's opinions about their ideal work seemed more mixed.

Still, Da Eri tells a story parallel to theirs. The incident occurred on the very first morning after being hired in Jakarta as a lowly, if skilled laborer, when his wealthy and powerful boss discovered a broken piece of equipment. Despite the fact that Da Eri had not even begun working yet, she berated him for the problem, gesturing rudely with her left hand. Da Eri listened to her and when she was done, he cursed at her in Minang, feeling his self-respect (*harago diri*) had been trampled upon. He explained to me that, although she understood the gist of his words, she fell silent. “Maybe she was taken aback: how could I be so brave? I wasn’t even in control then, you know. Because it was out of my control: this isn’t acceptable, it’s not right for a person to be like this. Or maybe this is my character that’s...in general Minang people are more sensitive, you know. Perhaps Javanese people would just say, ‘Yes, ma’am.’⁵¹ Not me.”

Just like Da Jik and Da Dan (and Ni Saia and others), Da Eri sees his own character, as demonstrated in his story, as typically Minangkabau, and uses some of the same themes in discussing what that means. He even specifically remarks to me that Minang people share the same core identity, whether they otherwise share his moral outlook or not. Below, Da Eri uses refers to those who do not share this moral outlook as “*preman*,” a term that can refer to a thug or criminal, but also to any of the vaguely shiftless un- and underemployed men who might be hanging out with each

⁵¹ What I have translated here as, “Yes, ma’am,” is actually “*inggih, inggih*.” The word “*inggih*” is high (meaning used with superiors) Javanese for “yes,” and is iconic of an attitude of obsequiousness.

other in the middle of the day. I had asked him what aspect of Minangkabau identity made him most proud:

Da Eri: One thing that I see is the issue of democracy. This is very different from Javanese people. Because we are not bound by a pattern of, what's it called – a pattern of royalty. We're not bound by the mindset of the Javanese that aggrandizes the high status of other people. In Minang this does not exist. We have the right to say what we feel. People are equally – “standing equally high, sitting equally low”⁵² here. Because I see that Minang people – the reason I say this is that, right now, this is the most prominent thing with Minang people. This is aside from whether it's a positive or a negative, all right? Because as I see it [...] it used to be that Minang people here were famous for being very, very religiously observant. But now, I think in general it's really the same with Minang people and Javanese people, with people in Jakarta, people in Kalimantan, people in Riau – it's the same. There still are preman. You ask them, “Where do you come from?” “I'm a Minang person.” “Do you drink alcohol?” “Yes.” “Do you gamble?” “Yes.” It's embarrassing, right? But this is the identity that is most – being a Minang person is that they speak as themselves, not as a “humble servant.”⁵³ No. They are not slaves. They will never think as slaves, even if they work as household servants. If you had a Minang person as a household servant, Greg, go try and treat them in a rude way. They'll resist. This is Minang people – their character. Because, there is a saying: “Wanting to be on top when pressed down, wanting to be outside when caged in.” So when they're – well, pressed down, they want to be on top. “How come?” [in English]. When they're caged in, they want to be outside. Weird [*lain*]! Very strange [*asiang*]! [laughs] That's Minang people. So, sometimes there's a clash between – a lot of clashes between Javanese and Minang. There are a lot of clashes. A whole lot. [laughs]

⁵² “*Tagak samo tinggi, duduak samo randah.*” This is a set Minang phrase. I discussed it earlier in this chapter.

⁵³ Note the words he uses here, “*hamba sahaya.*” Both of these mean “servant” or “slave.” In Indonesian, “*sahaya,*” usually simplified to “*saya,*” is the standard respectful form of “I/me.” Similarly, in Minangkabau, the standard respectful form of “I/me” is “*ambo,*” the Minangkabau pronunciation of “*hamba.*” Da Eri knows this very well, of course, yet he clearly understands the difference between using a linguistic frame such as “*ambo,*” and actually having the subjectivity of an *ambo*. He regularly uses “*ambo*” to refer to himself during this interview, and uses it throughout this passage.

The Need for Order

Da Eri continued to tell me that even children's views were respected in Minang families so that, for example, they had a say in what the mother would cook. The only problem with this freedom to assert one's views, he conceded, was that sometimes children were wrong and adults were right.⁵⁴ In any case, he said, these "democratic" features of Minang life were not ones that he saw disappearing any time soon. On the contrary, he worried that they were becoming so prominent that they were going to wipe out the polite and respectful sides of the Minangkabau "of old" (*nan dulu*) just as he is embarrassed by the lack of piety and immoral behaviors of the Minang preman who, nevertheless, share his pride in their refusal to be subjugated.

The tension between different kinds of cleverness reemerges in Da Eri's words as a tension between individualism and egalitarianism on one side, and disrespect and disorder on the other. Just as cleverness can be used for moral or immoral (selfish) gain, the unfettered assertion of individual will is both the key quality of Minangkabau (and his own) moral identity, and the cause of its deterioration. Is it for good or ill that individuals refuse to be restricted, resist hierarchy and control, and assert their individual wills?

The image of ideal Minangkabau character may be built around ideas of cleverness and individual will, but it in no way is it built around a celebration of

⁵⁴ In fact, Ni Saia, more than two decades Da Eri's senior, once offered the idea of a mother asking her children what they wanted her to cook as an example of how many parents these days are overly indulgent of their children's individual whims. She claimed that children would learn how to get along well with others by not being catered to. It is interesting to note that the common American image of the child as picky eater seemed to be absent in West Sumatra. People almost always describes themselves as children, or described their own children, as eating whatever was served to them.

anarchy. An interesting example concerns the way people in Bukittinggi talked to me about political demonstrations. Beginning in 1997, Indonesia had witnessed a dramatic increase in political street protests and demonstrations. They had helped to topple Suharto in 1998 and bring in the era of *reformasi* that was characterized by an increased freedom of public expression. Political demonstrations have been frequent ever since then, but most everyone I spoke with in Bukittinggi disapproved of them. They also noted that there were relatively few such demonstrations in West Sumatra. (More than one person even claimed that political demonstrations were completely absent in West Sumatra, although this was obviously not true.) Although the provincial capital of Padang is sometimes the site of small student demonstrations, there are rarely any at all in Bukittinggi. Da Dan told me that the only reason students in Padang had demonstrated at all during the period that led to Suharto's resignation was that students in Jakarta had sent them a pair of women's underwear, supposedly a symbolic accusation that they were too weak or cowardly to stand up and fight.

Da Tor agreed that Minang students in Padang only demonstrated after they were goaded into it by students in other areas of Indonesia, though he thought that there may be Minang people behind the scenes – never as public leaders – doing the thinking and involved in protests (in Jakarta). In his view, Minang people simply saw no benefit from demonstrations.⁵⁵ “It's the politics of trade,” he pointed out, adding that Minang people cared about how business was going, and that worrying about

⁵⁵ It should be kept in mind that, as far as I can recall, not a single person I spoke with in Bukittinggi ever expressed approval for then-President Megawati Sukarnoputri, who had come to prominence as a result of the political demonstrations of the late 1990s. Most everyone I spoke with told me that they thought things had been better under Suharto's leadership.

politics and the government never got people anywhere. “Because all this time, the government hasn’t really paid attention to people. So rather than people hoping for attention from others, eh, just let us pay attention to our own selves.” He laughed, “Enrich ourselves. Work. Ah, perhaps that is it in Minang society.”

He added that Minang people were more interested in thinking about “work, trading, selling, using time efficiently,” and he laughed again. “It’s not that we don’t have the enthusiasm to make progress. No, we have it.” “You have opinions,” I responded. “Personally, we do,” he insisted. However, throwing themselves into someone else’s social “movement,” he said, was not something Minang people did. “Minang people don’t much like chaos,” he explained. “You could even – rarely is there any chaos, because society has elements – there is a government in society, for example,” he said, and explained how mothers’ brothers, *mamak*, were there to watch over their nieces and nephews.

Most intriguing is the way that so many Minang people actually saw the reluctance to protest as a sign of independent thinking and expression. They saw most demonstrators (who, of course, were also largely Javanese) as sheep, doing only what everyone else around them was doing, or often doing only what they were being paid to do in someone’s political interests. The former was seen as dim-witted, and the latter seen as immoral. Rather than think for themselves, these protestors simply did as they were told, creating chaos and accomplishing little of value. The proper way to initiate change, people told me, was to work on it in a safe, orderly manner, avoiding any appearance of chaos. In their minds, not taking their complaints to the streets was

not at all a sign of submission to existing authority. To the contrary, it was a result of being unwilling to thoughtlessly follow along with the crowd. Minang people, I was often told, did not protest in the streets because they had minds of their own, and you simply could not get them to do such a counterproductive thing as incite chaos.⁵⁶

Even stories of individual cleverness and manipulation that I recounted above are sometimes framed so that they actually celebrate adherence to an imposed social order. We can take an example from Da Jik, the man who told the story about becoming his boss's key assistant in order to eventually found his own business and take away his boss's customers. He told me an involved story of how he escaped from legal troubles by exploiting an overheard conversation that allowed him to get to know, and get in the good graces of an important police official. He then used his contact to have his legal situation taken care of, making sure the whole time to keep up the appearance that his favors for the police official were coincidental to his own needs. The story itself (which I will not recount in detail here) was focused on Da Jik's initiative and skill in taking advantage of the opportunity that presented itself to him. What was most compelling about the story, however, was that Da Jik offered it to me as an example of the effectiveness of piety and prayer: he had prayed, pleading with God for help, just before stumbling upon the conversation that eventually led to

⁵⁶ Of course, all of this could be addressed in terms of a national political culture with which it is engaged and which it reflects. For decades, Suharto's New Order government worked to promote order and deference to authority as values oppositional and superior to any kind of political activism. (See Pemberton 1994 for an extended study of how the New Order government exploited and shaped conceptions of traditional Javanese culture for its political ends.) What is interesting to me here is the way that people in Bukittinggi saw a particularly Minangkabau approach to political (in)activism that they contrasted with larger national trends.

his escape from trouble. The story celebrated cleverness and individual initiative, yet Da Jik framed it as a story about submission to a larger moral order. (In Chapter 6 will return to the ways that prayer crystallizes the tensions between autonomy and integration as dimension of a moral self.)

A Minang person is – should be – jealous of their individual independence and clever enough to guard it. At the same time, to be truly “Minang,” a person must, of course, be a participant in the established order and relationships of “Minang” social life. These are the elements that Ni Saia referred to in her discussion of careful problem solving through deliberations, that Da Eri referred to when he talked about the “old” Minangkabau ways of religious piety and polite and respectful behavior, and that Da Tor spoke of when he mentioned that mothers’ brothers were there to keep an eye on their nieces and nephews. A Minang person should never be controlled by others, but a Minang person should also always be in control of themselves. Hatta is, after all, revered for being humble, pious, and learned as well as clever and willful. It is only by engaging the individual will with the ordered boundaries of society that a Minangkabau person can take part in Minangkabau life. This, of course, brings us back to the importance of adat.

Identity and Multiplex Morality

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, I believe that all of these ideas about what it means to be Minangkabau are, for the people who identify themselves with this label, also claims to significance. That is, they are moral claims. They posit

ways to live in the world that are oriented towards realizing some good, and they link the self to that good.

We can now look back on the material presented in this chapter and conclude that there are multiple moral orientations celebrated in Minangkabau identity. Included are claims for the significance of the patterns of social order, relations of obligation (to other people, and to God), and ritual practices described by adat, and the humility and respect with which they are pursued. Also included are claims for the significance of autonomous individuals maneuvering their own ways through the world, asserting their inherent significance and their equality with and freedom from control by others.

There are of course echoes here of the conceptual split in Bukittinggi between *kampung* and *pasa*, with *kampung* being the site of adat and the *pasa* being the site where the autonomous individual is most fully realized. Minangkabau identity celebrates both of these dimensions of life, and we have seen how they can sometimes come into tension with each other: most notably, the cleverness and assertion that are celebrated in Minangkabau identity, if taken too far, can undermine the order and humility that are also celebrated. We have also seen once again, however, that the line between *kampung* and *pasa* – or between life according to adat and life outside of adat – is indistinct. Being Minangkabau means living within a distinctively Minangkabau society, and living within a society marked by national, international and (conceptually, at least) modern influences that have altered that ostensibly once-

pure kampung life. It means approaching that world in specific and sometimes contradictory ways.

The discussion of Minangkabau identity above is not meant as a complete exploration of morality and identity among people in Bukittinggi, which I will continue to pursue. It has however served to introduce themes that will continually re-emerge in the following chapters. In Chapter 3, I will begin to explore how public interactions in Bukittinggi express and celebrate different kinds of moral orientations in different ways. In this chapter, I will focus specifically on the ways many of these interactions express and celebrate social cohesion and submission of the individual to the larger community. However, I will also suggest that even in the patterns of interaction that celebrate this vision of the good, there remains a space for preserving individual autonomy. In the course of this discussion, I will also make more explicit the ways that I see identity and morality as linked, and the consequences this has for our understanding of person and self.

Chapter 3

SOCIAL SELVES in EVERYDAY INTERACTION

Da Andi, an underemployed man in his fifties who lives in the Bukittinggi neighborhood where I lived, was one of dozens of people who stressed to me how safe (*aman*) it was in Bukittinggi, and in West Sumatra more generally. This chorus grew louder as Indonesia suffered from well-publicized incidents of violence, especially the 2002 bombings that killed over two hundred people, many of them tourists, in Bali.¹ Da Andi, a subdued and unpretentious man, pointed out to me that it was clear that Bukittinggi was a safe place from the way that people could be seen socializing (*bergaul*) with each other. In Bukittinggi, this idea of “socializing” brings to mind images of people politely greeting their neighbors as they pass by, women cooperating to carry out adat rituals, and men sitting in the coffee houses urging each other to eat and drink together. Seeing this, we know that there cannot be any problems, Da Andi said. “How can someone be a terrorist if they are able to socialize well with others?”² This was, he said, impossible.

¹ The media had widely circulated the idea that Bali was the safest province in Indonesia (specifically, safe from civil unrest or terrorism) with West Sumatra being the second safest. After the bombings in Bali, many people in West Sumatra remarked to me that their province must now be Indonesia’s safest.

² Near the beginning of my fieldwork (and well before the bombings in Bali), while conducting a household survey in the neighborhood where I was living, a man had warned my research assistant to be careful because there could be terrorists around. My Minang was still unreliable at that point, and I thought that perhaps he was talking to her about the Al Qaeda cells that were rumored to be spread through the country. My assistant later assured me that he was talking about me.

I was difficult for me to take the leap that Da Andi's claim asked me to take. Although I had no reason to believe that there was any problem with terrorism in West Sumatra, and I did feel safe there, I was not quite sure I could jump so easily from the observation of these daily habits of polite interaction to the conviction that anyone who was taking part in these rituals was obviously morally upright in other ways. In part, Da Andi's comments were simply part of the wider rhetoric defending the image of Indonesia and of Muslims from what were seen as common and incorrect assumptions about them that linked them to chaos and violence (or at least distancing Minangkabau society from those images). I was a little piece of the wider world to which people in Bukittinggi had immediate access, and toward which they could direct their attempts to correct these assumptions. I call this "rhetoric" because it often went beyond the point where people were simply giving me what they felt was a more accurate view of their own society, and instead seemed designed to sell an obviously exaggerated image of that society as untroubled by social conflict or immorality of any kind.

To what extent Da Andi's claim was an instance of such self-consciously exaggerated rhetoric I cannot be sure, but he certainly presented his argument as having the force of logic: proper socializing is an index of general morality. This leads us to wonder: What is involved in these everyday social interactions that make them of such powerful moral significance, and what is the conception of persons that gives such an argument its weight? This chapter examines how everyday interactions in West Sumatra express the moral good of social cohesion, emphasizing the ways that

persons are part of a unified social collective, and deemphasizing the ways that they exist as autonomous individuals. Such interactions are realizations of the moral social order described more formally as that of Minangkabau adat (as described in the previous chapter). Their performance is also a way that individuals realize their moral personhood based on this social order: they become part of it.

It is my hope that the material in this chapter will help us make sense of Da Andi's statement, and to situate it as part of a particular way that Minangkabau people read and participate in their own social worlds. That means, however, that this chapter is organized around only certain kinds of social interactions and one way of understanding them – albeit important kinds of interactions and an important part of the way we can understand them. I want to show how it is possible to tell a compelling story using this particular point of view, a kind of story that some other anthropologists have told, particularly in regard to non-Western and especially to Asian societies. It is a story about both a moral outlook, and a conception of persons, that emphasizes the collective while making autonomous individuals bad to think – that is, both immoral and less than fully real. I will then argue that a more careful attention to theories of “persons” and “selves” can help us to see what this story does and also what it does tell us about moral life in West Sumatra. Before I can get to that point, I must turn to further ethnographic description of life in Bukittinggi. I begin with a small but revealing piece of the Minangkabau language.

Awak and Usness

The word “*awak*” appears in the Indonesian national language as well as in Minangkabau. In standard Indonesian, it is most commonly used to refer to a crewmember of a ship or plane. However, according to Echols and Shadily’s (1989) *An Indonesian-English Dictionary*, its core definition is actually a “body” or “self” of a person or object, though it can also be used to mean “I, my,” or “you, your.” Significantly, the dictionary also notes that in Indonesian, “*awak*” can mean “Minangkabau.”

In Sumatra, as well as among Minang people spread throughout Indonesia, an *urang awak* (that is, an “*awak* person”) is a Minang person. When spoken by a Minang person, it means “one of us,” with “us” referring to Minangkabau identity. This reflects the fact that in the Minangkabau language, “*awak*” connotes inclusiveness. Since Minang people refer to themselves in this way as “*urang awak*,” non-Minangkabau people have adopted it to refer to them as well. For a non-Minangkabau person in Sumatra, an *urang awak* is not “one of us,” but is still a Minangkabau person. The word is so frequently used in the Minangkabau language (in contrast to standard Indonesian, in which it is rarely used), and used in so many ways, that it is easy to see how it has become synonymous with Minangkabau.

When I was originally taught to speak Minangkabau, I was told that “*awak*” was the Minang equivalent of Indonesian’s “*kita*,” which means “we” or “us,” and includes both the listener and the speaker within its scope. (There is another word, “*kami*,” which means “we” or “us” *exclusive* of the listener, and is employed in both

Indonesian and Minangkabau.) This was despite the fact that a more obvious equivalent of “kita” is also used in Minang: “kito.” The most complete Minang-Indonesian dictionary available in West Sumatra lists the first definition of “awak” in the Minang language as “*kita, bersama,*” meaning “we/us, together.” It also lists the following additional meanings of the word: “*saya*” (I/me) or “*badan diri*” (one’s own body), “*dia*” (him/her) and “*kamu*” (you) (Usman 2002).³ This same word is thus used to mean “we” (inclusive), “me,” “you,” or “him/her” – in other words, as a substitute for almost any pronoun.

In all cases, using “awak” represents a polite way to speak. This sense of politeness is created by the feeling of inclusiveness that it connotes.⁴ Essentially, it refers to you or me or him or her or us in terms of all of us, and does so by implying that we are all one body, one self. In contrast, to separate oneself from others is quintessentially bad manners, and this is reflected in the fact that some pronouns are considered rather vulgar. The basic words for “you,” “*waang*” when addressed to men and “*gau*” when addressed to women, are insulting when addressed towards one’s

³ Another Minangkabau-Indonesian dictionary lists the Minangkabau definition of *awak* as the following: “*awak* [*awak* as it is used in Indonesian], *diri* [self], *saya* [the polite version of I/me], *kamu* [you], *kita* [inclusive we/us], *aku* [the informal version of I/me]; *urang awak* = *orang kita sendiri* (*orang* Minangkabau) [*urang awak* = our own people (Minangkabau people)]” (Yunus St. Majolelo 1983). In the Malay dialects spoken in Malaysia, “*awak*” generally means “you.”

⁴ Although the dictionaries fail to point it out, *awak* is also commonly used as a substitute for *kami* (we, exclusive of the listener) as well. This follows a pattern also found in Indonesian, where the inclusive version of we (*kita*) can be used as a polite, humble substitute for the exclusive version of we (*kami*) or for I (*aku, saya*), which is also of course an exclusive concept. This is reasonably common, although not nearly as prevalent as the use of *awak* as a substitute for various other pronouns in Minangkabau. The way *awak* is used in Minangkabau reflects linguistic and cultural patterns that go beyond Minangkabau society and extend to other Indonesian societies.

elders, and are generally crude enough to carry the risk making someone very angry if used anywhere outside of informal settings among close friends and family.⁵

Similarly, to refer to oneself as “*aden*,” while common among equals or intimates, shows a lack of respect toward the person being spoken to. While using “*ambo*” is an acceptably polite alternative – it literally means “slave,” though it is most often used in its function as a pronoun, “I” – using “*awak*” is better. It stresses the unity of the speaker and the listener.

Everybody knows, of course, that distinctions between individuals still exist, and “*awak*” is usually interpreted in context to refer to a specific person or a narrower group of people. For example, someone might say, “*Namo awak, sia?*” (“What is awak’s name?”), and clearly mean, “What is your name?” In response, the person might confirm the question is being addressed to them by asking in return, “Awak?” meaning, in this case, “Me?” During conversations with me, people would use “*awak*” when talking about universal human issues in which I was included, but they would also use “*awak*” when talking specifically about Minangkabau ways of doing things from which I was excluded.

Using “*awak*” in this way does two things. First, it organizes a concept of persons in which groups or combinations of people form a collective entity marked by a state of “usness.”⁶ It does not erase the reality of persons as individuals, which can

⁵ Sometimes the same is true even in such contexts. Da Palo, for example, told me that his adult daughter became angry with him when he would address her using “*gau*.”

⁶ After all, while “*awak*” can be interpreted in context to mean something more specific, it also allows people to be ambiguous about the subject of a given statement. It can be a way of stressing the idea expressed in a statement rather than the actor. Since the word is used so

also be easily conceptualized through other ways of speaking. For example, the use of other pronouns, such as “*waang*” for “you,” points towards a conception of persons as individuals, but anonymous and largely undifferentiated except by gender (e.g., every boy or man is a *waang*); the use of terms of address which refer to social role and status, such as “*uni*,” for “older sister” or “*datuak*,” a high lineage title for a man, points to a conception of persons that is relational and hierarchical, as well as gendered. Moreover, there are personal names and nicknames that are commonly used as well. The state of usness is simply one layer of reality, and the use of “*awak*” helps to emphasize it.

Most important here is the second thing that using “*awak*” achieves, which is that it communicates a message about the speaker’s disposition in relationship to the person being spoken to. Whatever the various levels of relationship between the speaker and the listener, the use of “*awak*” signals that the speaker is actively engaging and encouraging the state of usness rather than keeping herself or himself separate. It does not erase the other layers of reality, but it does propose which one is currently relevant.

Take, for instance, the following incident, which took place in the family of Da Jik, the successful, middle-aged businessman we met in Chapter 2. One day, Da Jik’s mother was feeling sick. His sister, concerned for her health, suggested going to the hospital by asking, “*Amak pai ka rumah sakik?*” which means, “Is mother going to the

often, this makes translation into English from Minang quite difficult: whatever pronoun the translator chooses as the translation of “*awak*,” it is sure to be a least a little misleading as to the implications of the statement being translated.

hospital?” or “Will mother go to the hospital?” His mother then refused to go to the hospital, but not because she did not wish to seek medical treatment. Rather, as she later complained to Da Jik, she was upset at the way her daughter had spoken to her. Da Jik explained to me that his sister should have said to their mother, “*Mari awak pai ka rumah sakit,*” or “Let’s go to the hospital.” In other words, she should have constructed the idea of going to the hospital as something they would do together, as *awak*, rather than singling out their mother individually as the person who would both decide whether or not to go, and who would go to the hospital.

Da Jik’s mother was apparently particularly sensitive (at least at that moment) to the way her daughter spoke to her, as the daughter’s mistake in this case was an extremely subtle one that might easily have gone unnoticed by many people. Da Jik explained to me that his sister was unaware of the problem, having grown up in a more urban environment and in a different generation than him or their mother. She did not realize that the way she spoke was problematic. Da Jik confessed to me that he himself would not have thought much about the difference between these two ways of speaking, although he could identify that difference and its significance for his mother. However, this example does help to demonstrate the way “*awak*” in particular, and a conception of persons as integrated into a state of usness more generally, is important to people’s sensibilities. The way the daughter spoke was not explicitly rude. There is nothing inappropriate about calling one’s mother “*amak,*” (“mother”) or asking her if she wishes to go to the hospital. Still, the way the daughter’s question framed the situation seemed to express the attitude that the illness and a trip to the hospital were

the concerns of the mother, while the daughter was an observer or a supporter – or even a person who might feel burdened by the mother’s answer.

The main argument here is that the widespread use of *awak* signals a moral vision of social interaction in which it is the collective that receives emphasis, while individual autonomy and difference are muted. For most of the remainder of this chapter, I will demonstrate other ways that this moral vision is expressed in the course of everyday social interaction in West Sumatra, to the point that we may begin to (mistakenly) imagine Minangkabau society and Minangkabau persons as living lives entirely oriented towards it.

At the risk of getting ahead of my larger argument in this dissertation, however, I will also note here before moving on that the example from Da Jik’s family serves to emphasize another important point about the collective emphasis of “*awak*.” The autonomy of the individual self is not erased by the use of *awak*, but rather set aside and preserved. “Will mother go to the hospital?” constructs two separate actors, one of whom is implicitly suggesting a course of action that the other one might want to take. It is not quite a command (though to what extent it is or is not must depend on the tone used and other information conveyed outside of the semantics of the sentence itself), but it certainly opens up the possibility for conflict, which different actors presenting opposing opinions and behaviors. This is especially true considering that the action of Da Jik’s rather elderly mother going to the hospital would almost certainly be assumed to involve the help of others – most notably, her children. In contrast, “Let’s go to the hospital,” (that is, the version of the sentence that uses the

term “*awak*”) constructs a single actor (*awak*) that has decided what to do, and is doing it. In this version, the daughter is merely expressing and reinforcing the actions of that single actor. There can be no question of one person telling another what to do or being in conflict with the other because individual autonomy simply becomes irrelevant when there is only one actor in question. Agency instead lies at the level of the whole, the *awak*.

If individual agency is set aside here, however, it does not cease to exist. The other version of the sentence is still a possible construction, even if it is unvoiced. The mother does not lose all sense of individual autonomy simply by being addressed through the use of “*awak*.” This analysis refers to the way the situation is framed linguistically. There is a certain ideal attitude projected onto it through this linguistic construction. The psychological reality of the situation is not confined to this linguistic construction. If, in fact, the mother has strong feelings about not going to the hospital, she could simply reject the statement about going to the hospital, and assert her own preferences. As the mother, she is owed deference, and there would be no problem with this kind of assertion. The point is what the use of “*awak*” implies about the relationship between the mother and daughter. It can help to preserve the sense, for the mother, that she is *not* being controlled by others or in conflict with them. Her daughter, by using “*awak*,” would in fact make no claims at all on the mother’s autonomy, allowing her linguistic and social space to preserve the possibility of its use. There are therefore two things going on here simultaneously: the preservation of integration between individuals in a social interaction, and the

preservation of an individual's sense of autonomy. Perhaps, given the important role that autonomy plays in conceptions of Minangkabau character (see Chapter 2 above), it should not be a surprise that *awak* is about more than merely erasing the individual as an autonomous agent. This is a point to which I will eventually return.

Mixing In and Bulging Out: Bagaua and Sombong

Mixing In

In the course of daily interactions with between people in the city, and particularly within the *kampung* neighborhoods, the judgments people make as to the moral status of others are most often centered around one issue: Does the person take part in regular social interactions with other people, and do so as an equal, or not? Those who mix in with others by doing what others do are understood to be committed to the moral values of the community in general. Those who stand apart from, and especially above the community are judged morally deficient, acting to undermine those same values.

To *bagaua* (or *bergaul*, I) is to socialize, to mix with and interact with other people. Knowing how to *bagaua* and making an effort to do so is what creates the state of unity expressed in the use of “*awak*.” Through socializing in a proper manner with other people – chatting with neighbors, participating in collective rituals, and generally making an effort to interact with other people in the community – people demonstrate that they consider themselves part of the community, not separate from or superior to it. Failing to *bagaua*, either by physically separating oneself from other

people or by symbolically separating oneself from other people through the violation of behavioral norms, is considered *sombong*, or arrogant. Being able to bagaua is a sign of general goodness that came up repeatedly in my conversations with people in Bukittinggi.⁷ People not only evaluated others by how well or how poorly they were able to bagaua, but in self-evaluations during interviews, people named their ability to bagaua, perhaps more than any other quality, as one of the things that was most valuable about their own personalities. In contrast, *sombong* appeared constantly as a critical description of improper or immoral behavior and attitudes, and no one ever described themselves (and least, not their current self) to me using this term.

For men, a prototypical way to bagaua is to sit in the evening (or early in the morning) at a neighborhood lapau kopi, the small coffeehouses where men sit to chat, play games, eat, drink, smoke, and watch TV. There is at least one, and there are often more than one, of these spots in every neighborhood. In the lapau, men of all ages can enjoy being a part of the community and can present themselves as incorporated into it. Paying visits to the lapau acts as a way for a man to indicate that he does not wish to separate himself from others, but is instead interested in being with other members of the community, doing what they are doing.

From a practical perspective, sitting in the lapau allows a man access to information about what is going on in the community. The lapau is considered one of

⁷ It is notable that the Indonesian root for the word, “gaul,” is used in Indonesian youth culture as a slang adjective expressing approval of something. Something described as “gaul” might be called “cool” in English. A dialect of Indonesian used by youth in Jakarta, and consequently having spread to other areas of Indonesia, is known as *bahasa gaul*, or “the language of gaul.”

two places – the other being the mosque or prayer house – where a person can keep in touch with neighborhood events. However, while the prayer houses are often empty unless a particular event is going on, the lapau is a reliable place to find other men and socialize. Several people mentioned to me that such socializing was important for men's economic lives. They needed to be out and about to know about opportunities for work, and to become friendly with people who might connect them to a job. Similarly, if they were business owners, they needed to be able to cultivate friendly relationships with people who might be their customers. Citing another practical reason for men to socialize, Ni Saia (a formerly successful business owner in her late-fifties, now living in poverty) told me that, as a mother, she thought that boys had to be encouraged to “go out” and bagaua. According to her explanation, men need to be able to go out and socialize so that they would always be able to get help from other men when necessary. For example, she said if it became necessary to dig a grave, a man would need help, and he would need help from other men. Men therefore needed to be good at making friends, or else they would find themselves without any resources when they needed help from others – whether, she said, that help was for an occasion of happiness (*suka*) or of grief (*duka*).

During the first weeks of my fieldwork, after my wife and I moved into a house with a local family in the outer parts of the city, I was told that it was important for me to appear at the local lapau. This would help people to feel more comfortable about my presence in their neighborhood. Otherwise, they would become increasingly suspicious of me, I was told, wondering what I was doing there, whether I had any bad

intentions, and if I was a threat to cause trouble for the neighborhood. What was stressed to me was that I needed simply to go there to sit, perhaps to drink some coffee or tea. Although this would allow people at the lapau to ask me what I was doing in their neighborhood, and give me an opportunity to explain my purpose to them directly, this seemed to be seen as a secondary benefit of making an appearance there.

Inyiak Datuak, having invited my wife and I to live with his family in their home, felt responsible for my position in the neighborhood, and insisted that he accompany me at least the first time I went the lapau for a quick visit, helping to more smoothly integrate me into its social circle. He kept our visit brief, and did not particularly encourage me to converse with the other men there in any depth. The main goal was simply that I be present, that I position myself as part of the community. This in itself would reassure people that I was not a threat. I subsequently spent many evenings in that same lapau, many times greatly enjoying myself and the opportunity to converse with others and find out what was going on in the neighborhood. Other times, it felt like a forced exercise, as I fought my evening lethargy to wind up resentfully enduring the thick smoke and the noise from the television that frustrated my ability to hear what the men around me were saying. At those times, I sat sipping my drink and watching the TV, and said very little to the other men. I worried that I was doing a poor job of participating in the community – especially since during the day I spent much of my time in other parts of the city. Despite my shortcomings, by the end of my fieldwork, I had been told a number of

times that people in the neighborhood were impressed by how skillfully I was able to *bagaua*. What did I do, I wondered? The answer was simply that I had shown up.

In the 1970's, Frederick Errington carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the village of Bayur, ten miles or so west of Bukittinggi. He found that virtually every man in that community made an effort to socialize, and to be seen socializing (and *not* be seen alone), in the late afternoon and early evening, in the streets of the village and in its coffeehouses (1984: 54-56). The ideology behind this ritual resonates with the way people talk about the lapau in Bukittinggi today, with the way men gather there and the way young men may find spots to hang out in neighborhood groups in the evening, playing guitar or watching TV. The actual social rhythms for men in Bukittinggi neighborhoods in the early 21st century, however, are looser and more varied than those of West Sumatran villages in the past. People say, for example, that there are lapau people and others who are not lapau people,⁸ although even men who do not care much for sitting in the lapau might make a point of dropping by occasionally. Da Jik, for instance, told me that he did not care to sit in the lapau (he tended to socialize with other men at the site of his business instead), but also pointed out that when he moved into a new neighborhood in the city, he made sure to visit the local lapau to make himself known to the community and encourage a good relationship with his new neighbors.

⁸ Some people associate the lapau with questionable moral behavior, including gambling, drinking alcohol, or even wasting money on extra coffee and cigarettes. This is tied, as will become clear in Chapter 4, with the dark side of *bagaua*, when socializing exposes people to corrupting influences.

Compared to a West Sumatran village thirty years earlier, in Bukittinggi today, men's more diverse work lives, greater access to personal transportation (usually motorbikes), and greater range of places to be and people to know in the city mean that socializing itself is more varied. Men's social lives are not limited to their immediate neighborhood. People in more isolated village environments (closer to the context of Errington's study) are likely to find themselves completely socially isolated if they do not interact with their neighbors. This is not necessarily the case in Bukittinggi. In addition, there are simply more things to do today in Bukittinggi than there would have been in Bayur thirty years ago, including activities available in the home. Most notably, most homes in Bukittinggi today include a television set, and in many of them the TV is on every evening (and often during the day as well). People can entertain themselves at home by watching TV, and a much smaller but growing number of people also have access to videodisc players and rented or purchased discs.⁹ A few people have access to computers and video game players, and groups of young people may gather around these for entertainment as well. The fact that the forms of bagaua are varied in the city, however, has not weakened the rhetorical strength of bagaua as a moral concept. These behavioral threats to the regularity of bagaua behavior have perhaps even strengthened the need for people to reaffirm its value

⁹ This is still a fairly recent phenomenon in Bukittinggi, and the range of films available is limited. Asian kung fu and action movies, as well as Bollywood productions can be found, as well as some American films, almost all of which are pirated copies. Minang pop music videos are also popular. Less publicly, and to a narrower audience, pornographic movies are circulated.

through talk. Whether that is the case or not, I found the idea central to the way people conceptualized moral life.

That the prototypical spot to bagaua, the lapau kopi, is a male arena is predictable. The idea of bagaua is a gendered one, and is much more closely associated with men than with women. Opportunities for women to bagaua in the ways that men do are somewhat limited. It is generally considered improper for women to spend time sitting at a coffeehouse, and though they may come in to buy something, they rarely sit down to relax. Sometimes a few women will gather together around small neighborhood stores (which may also be called lapau, but in this case usually not those that sell coffee), especially those run by women, but most often women socialize with other women in their homes. Being seen out and about too often can become uncomfortable for women, especially married women with children. People say that women who are seen socializing away from home too much will be gossiped about, and will be suspected of neglecting their domestic duties. While there are both men and women who hold down jobs outside the home, it is usually mostly the men who are prone to hanging around together with their colleagues to socialize.¹⁰ Even too much socializing in other women's homes can be uncomfortable. One woman told me that when it came to casual socializing, she hardly ever went further than across the street, to her cousin's house. Although there were a number of other

¹⁰ Many women also work from their homes, taking orders for clothing, making snacks to sell, and so on.

houses up and down this street that belonged to members of her family, she said that people gossiped too much if she went even a few doors down.¹¹

When Ni Saia made her comment that boys should be encouraged to go out and bagaua, she stressed that this was more important for boys than for girls. Her comment alluded to occasions for formal ritual, or adat events, such as funerals or weddings, where men might need the help of other men. In fact, women often play an even larger role than do men in such events, exchanging, preparing and serving large amounts of food, for example (cf. Blackwood 2000, Sanday 2002). Women certainly depend on each other's help during these occasions. That Ni Saia mentioned only men's needs to bagaua reflects a general assumption that women's networks are not created by "going out" to socialize, but rather are created through the domestic sphere. The family home is, after all, considered the domain of women, as the rights to land and houses are traditionally given to the women in a lineage, while married men are conceptualized as guests in their wives' houses (see Chapter 2 above). Men even refer to their wives as their "*urang rumah*," the polite term for a wife that literally means

¹¹ It is possible that the social patterns of women in Bukittinggi vary somewhat according to the types of neighborhoods in which they live. Families living on pusako land dominated the neighborhood where I lived – that is, the women were living in their native village and often were related to many of their neighbors. In contrast, in another neighborhood where I spent a good deal of time, most of the homes were rented or purchased, and women were less likely to have relatives living close by. Many of the women in this neighborhood traced their origins to villages outside of Bukittinggi. My sense is that I saw more "informal" socializing between women in the latter neighborhood – that is, women spending time chatting in the living rooms of their neighbors, or gathering around small stores in the neighborhood. Perhaps the women in this neighborhood did not have ready-made kin networks in the neighborhood to rely on to the same extent that women in my own neighborhood did, and were therefore more motivated to actively socialize in this manner, cultivating extra-domestic relationships the way men tend to. However, although there is a certain logic to this proposition, my observations were not systematic enough to provide more than the suggestion of this possibility.

“person of the house.” Men are the ones who need to go out and find a community, creating a place to belong outside of their homes.

While a good portion of my interviews were conducted with women (about a third), I did not spend time socializing with groups of women as I did with groups of men. The fact that I am a man surely influenced the kinds of things that women talked to me about as well, and the way in which they talked about them. My sense is that this casts a particular light on my understanding of how bagaua manifests itself in people’s behavior. Because women talked to me about the importance of bagaua just as men did, however, I do not believe that the ideology discussed here is particularly male, even if I emphasize the particular ways that men carry it out. Women do not hang out in the lapau, but they intermingle as they carry out domestic chores around the neighborhood (shopping, doing laundry, etc.), participate in ritual events together, and meet in groups to form *julo-julo*, in which everyone contributes a small amount of money and takes turns being the recipient of the whole pot.¹² In addition, even though women are “supposed” to be in the home, many women do work (and younger ones study) outside of the home. In my experience, women, just as much as men, are keenly attuned to the importance of being an integrated part of the community, even though the arenas in which they integrate themselves are different than those of men.

A Social Identity

¹² These are also called “*arisan*,” in Indonesian. See Fessler (2002) for an analysis of arisan in Bengkulu, a province several hundred miles south of Bukittinggi.

This brings up the other way in which socializing pulls people in Bukittinggi together into a moral community: people self-consciously identify their society as one devoted to the moral value of social interaction and integration. They contrast themselves – as Minangkabau, as Indonesians, and sometimes as Asians or *urang timur*, “Easterners” – with others in the world who do not, in their imagination, value these principles. Westerners are the prime example of the other in this imagined divide. Just as an important part of the identities of Minangkabau people comes from a self-conscious representation of themselves as the inheritors of a particular tradition (see Chapter 2 above on adat), the identities of many Minangkabau people draw from a self-conscious comparison of themselves to other kinds of people in the world – in this case, people less interested in the moral value of social cohesion than themselves.

One day, for example, I found myself waiting for my wife for a few moments inside a small office. As I waited, I chatted for a few minutes with a man whom I had never met, but who already knew my wife. Nothing about the conversation stood out to me until my wife arrived and we were preparing to leave. The man I had been chatting with made a remark that confused me. No one in America, he said, would ever do what he and I had been doing, right? I had to ask him what he was referring to, so he explained that he meant that no one would ever chat as we had just been doing. People where I come from don’t bergaul, he said, using the Indonesian equivalent of the Minang “bagaua.” In his mind – and this was a man with a fairly high degree of education – Westerners were not simply less social than Indonesians,

but actually did not participate in even the smallest degree of casual social interaction in public places.

This was not an isolated example. One friend wanted me to confirm that if I happened to run into my sister-in-law somewhere, we wouldn't bother to even acknowledge each other. In another instance, after attending a marriage ritual at a friend's house, my wife and I were relaxing with some members of the family. One man praised me very generously, saying I was a good person. I asked him why he said that, and he said it was because I came to the event and socialized with everyone. Other Westerners, he complained, never came to these events and socialized. The remark was surprising considering that practically all of the Westerners around Bukittinggi are tourists and would not know about these events, be invited to them, or even be able to communicate with anyone there. He seemed to take their lack of socializing with local people to be an indication of something lacking in their moral status. As a final example, a man once expressed surprise to me at the idea that Americans held birthday parties for their children like the one he had just held for his four-year old daughter.¹³ He explained to me that he didn't think Americans would have anyone to invite. Specifically, he assumed that Americans' lack of contact with the people living around them (in their *lingkuangan*, or surroundings) would mean that there would be no one to come to a party.

¹³ Such parties actually appear to be the result of foreign influences, and a fairly recent phenomenon in Bukittinggi. Older people in Bukittinggi often do not know exactly when their birthday is, or how old they are. Some adults will treat friends to a meal on their birthday. Birthday parties for children sometimes take place, but are rare.

There may be some truth to this imagined social disconnectedness of Westerners. After all, the birthday party comment referred particularly to the idea that Americans would not have close enough social relationships with their *neighbors* to invite them to a child's birthday party.¹⁴ Americans (at least urban and suburban middle class Americans) certainly do seem less likely than people in Bukittinggi to spend so much of their time socializing with their neighbors. Whatever the extent of truth in this image of Westerners, it serves to highlight the self-conception of people in Bukittinggi as a community devoted to its own social cohesiveness, particularly the cohesiveness of kinship and neighborhood (two frames which overlap in Minangkabau villages as well as in many of Bukittinggi's neighborhoods). This is a widely shared conception of their own moral strength.¹⁵ The fact that Minangkabau people, unlike Westerners, make a habit of socializing with each other is taken as a sign that their community as a whole is in a safely ordered state. Da Andi's comment recounted at the beginning of this chapter, that no one who socialized well with others could possibly be a terrorist, is a clear example.

Even the moral value of being a Muslim has as much to do with social unity as it does with religious propriety. I will examine Islam in Minangkabau more thoroughly in Chapter 6. However, it is relevant here to point out the shape of the connection between being Minangkabau and being Muslim. It is generally considered impossible to be ethnically Minangkabau unless one is also a Muslim. This is because

¹⁴ I responded by telling him that even so, people still have friends to invite. "Do they?" he replied, with what seemed like a mixture of mild surprise and pleasurable interest.

¹⁵ Westerners are often thought to have a different set of moral strengths, such as honesty and diligence, which are sometimes contrasted to perceived weaknesses in "Indonesian character."

the conception of Minangkabau identity is structured around the concept of adat, which is in turn ideologically linked to Islam (Chapter 2 above). Since typically “Minangkabau” practices are ideologically assumed to be based on Islam, only a person who is either a Muslim (or, secretly a hypocrite) could truly integrate him- or herself into Minangkabau social life. I was often told people who converted from Islam would no longer be considered Minangkabau, and would in fact no longer be recognized by their own families, who would cut ties with them. This was not, I was told, because such people must be marginalized and punished for rejecting God. Although it was indeed understood to be the case that such a rejection of Islam was a moral violation against God, it was also considered a matter of a one’s *personal* responsibility and concern. Rather, it was because such people had chosen to remove themselves from the normal rhythms of the family and the community that they could no longer be considered members of either. If everyone else is praying, but one person is not praying, or if everyone else is celebrating and holiday and one person is not participating, how can that person remain part of the community? It is not, I was told, the community or the family that reject the individual who converts, but rather that individual who has made the choice to separate him- or herself from the community and the family.

Bulging Out

The ideological importance of social unity, and of valuing equality over individual difference, is highlighted by the attention given in Bukittinggi to the idea of

sombong, usually translated as “arrogance.” Any time a person separates themselves from others, places themselves outside and above the social group – in other words, any time a person fails to *bagaua* as they should – they can be labeled “*sombong*.”

Words referring to concepts like conceit or arrogance constitute one of the richest sets of synonyms used by Minang speakers. Aside from *sombong*, and discounting obvious alternate pronunciations for single terms, the list includes the following:

angkuah, arogan, bangak, bojik, bolok, bondek, bonseng, burakah, congkak, gaduak, gudangga, kagadang-gadangan, kapoak, ongeh, pongah, sok, takabua, tinggi ati and *uju*.¹⁶ Many of these terms, including *sombong*, seem to derive from the basic concept of swelling, as in the Minang words *bangkak* and *sambok*, both meaning “swollen,” *gambuang*, meaning “puffed up with air,” or even the terms for flowers, *bungo* and *kambang*, which can also refer to growth and development.¹⁷ Where *bagaua* implies

¹⁶ This list is taken from the words I heard used in Bukittinggi, and others recorded by Usman (2002). Heider (1991) created cognitive maps of emotion terms in Minangkabau, Indonesian as spoken by Minangkabau people, and Indonesian as spoken by Javanese people. He found that the “arrogance” cluster, with the key word of “*sombong*,” existed in all three maps. He comments, “Note that this is the only set of clusters in the entire study in which the Minangkabau cluster has more words than the Indonesian clusters” (313). He identified nine words in the Minangkabau “arrogance” cluster, all of which appear in my list above, with the exception of “*talanjua*,” which usually means something like “already done and irreversible,” but can also refer to having gone “too far” in something, or being “out of bounds.” This word seems to me to be associated with the cluster based on scenarios that might link the terms, rather than based on the fact that it refers to an emotion or attitude similar in meaning to the other terms in the cluster. In Heider’s map, it appears as somewhat marginal to the cluster. Fessler (1994) offers a relevant critique of Heider’s approach to the cognitive mapping.

¹⁷ These words also seem to be cognate to “*bangga*,” meaning “proud” in both Minang and Indonesian, and generally having more positive connotations than “*sombong*.” Echols and Shaddily’s *An Indonesian-English Dictionary* lists *anggak* as an additional Indonesian term for “conceited.” It also lists *bongkak* as an Indonesian term for “arrogant”; in Minang, this would be an alternate pronunciation for *bangkak*, “swollen.” Note that the Minang term *kagadang-gadangan*, listed above as another term for “arrogant,” is from the root *gadang*, the common Minang word for “large,” while *tinggi ati* means, “high hearted.” *Arogan* is taken from the English, and *takabua* is derived from Arabic. The suggestion regarding the common

mixing in as part of the group, *sombong* implies bulging out from it, puffing up beyond one's proper limits.

The concept covers a striking broad range of behaviors, and is used constantly in West Sumatra.¹⁸ For example, while it is *sombong* to doubt Allah, it may also be *sombong* to wear expensive clothing. In both cases, one's own self is being presented as greater than it actually is – either greater than God, or greater than the people in one's surroundings who are not wearing flashy clothing. Science, and a scientific outlook, were sometimes described to me as being *sombong*, based on the assumption that scientists believed in the absolute truth of their knowledge and axioms, ignoring human limitations and the much more profound Truth of Allah that defies human reason.¹⁹ The idea of debating (*debat*) was once described to me as *sombong* because it involved the insistence that one's own view was correct and someone else's was wrong, as if anyone could have direct access to the real truth; discussion (*diskusi*), I was told, was fine. *Sombong* applies to people who talk about their own strengths or good fortunes, who fail to properly acknowledge others with a greeting, and who do not participate in the same activities as others around them. Several men described to

metaphor of swelling underlying many terms for arrogance (and pride, and flowers) is my own. As far as I have been able to determine, there are no reliable published academic etymologies for Indonesian or Malay lexicons.

¹⁸ *Sombong* is important in other parts of Indonesia as well. Living in a Javanese city in the early 1990's, I found *sombong* to be an important concept there. Uni Wikan writes, "The most damning criticism of a Balinese you can make is to say that she or he is *sombong* or *angak* – arrogant" (1990:64). She goes on to note that a person may be *sombong* because of bragging, failure to greet others, failure to be social or sociable, or improper posture while sitting or standing.

¹⁹ This attitude towards science relies in part on a common (mis)understanding of science that assumes that its conclusions are not open for rethinking, let alone overturning – or even that scientists claim to understand everything.

me how, when they worked around bus terminals (notorious as centers of crude male behavior) they had to drink alcohol and gamble – even if only a little bit – despite their own distaste for those sinful activities. If they did not participate, they explained, they would be considered *sombong*. This was worse than a little bit of sin.

This focus on *sombong* appears to be active by the time children begin socializing with other children in school. Talking with adults about their memories of school, I found people had no memories of competing cliques of students and their schools. It isn't that people did not recall children forming groups of friends with others similar to them (the quiet kids, the bad kids, and so on), but rather that they could not seem to identify cliques that were more "popular" or placed higher in a hierarchy than others. Most people also denied that there were any social outcasts among the students. There was certainly no mention of anything like the concept of a nerd: the children who were considered smart were generally admired (and perhaps envied) and considered well liked. The only description I was ever given of a type of child who was unpopular was "*sombong*."

For example, Da Eri (the relatively pious man in his mid-30's who we met in Chapter 2, describing his reaction to be rudely treated by his boss) explained that his classmates had all been *kompak* (cohesive, solid), "except there were some who were a little bit *sombong*." He said those kids, "felt that they were rich. So those were the kind of kids that we ostracized, the ones who considered themselves rich." He said that they communicated this with the way they talked, the way they dressed, and the way they acted. He remembered one girl who "wasn't all that pretty, but she thought

she was pretty because she was rich – her father worked for the police department.

We weren't that close to her. We didn't get too close because she only sought out rich friends." Da Eri was also quick to point out that actually being rich did not necessarily mean that a child was ostracized, saying, "...sometimes rich kids adapted themselves to us. Their style – it was everyday style. Even though they were rich, their style was just simple. Jeans, thong sandals, things like that."²⁰

In the following chapter, I will return to the theme of *sombong*, examining in more detail how the concept fits more complexly into Islam and into conceptions of moral personhood. For now, the important point is that the attention paid to *sombong* as a typical moral failure is clearly tied to the ideological importance placed on the ability of an individual to become part of the group, to mix in rather than to stand apart from it. While there is, of course, a certain admiration for those who have achieved things like prestige, wealth and power that are beyond the reach of most people, in the end all of those things can be seen as moral failures if they draw an individual away from other people.

For example, Da Tul, a man of about thirty who sells illegal lottery tickets for a living, remarked to me that it was fortunate he never completed any higher education.

²⁰ It is, of course, difficult to know exactly why some children might have been ostracized or considered *sombong*. The difficulty is not merely in relying on brief descriptions taken from the memories of adults. By its very nature, the charge of *sombong* invites us to challenge cause and effect: those who exclude themselves are *sombong*, and therefore they are excluded; but could it be the case that those who were excluded (for any number of reasons) were then understood to be *sombong*? This is similar to the evaluation of Westerners as being *sombong* because they are not socializing with the rest of the population of the city. As we shall see in the following chapter, *sombong* is more of a judgment about a person's social interactions, not their character or intentions, making the question of the cause of a person's social exclusion less relevant to the charge of *sombong* than it might at first appear.

If he had, he explained, he would be studying all kinds of political issues and such, and he would not be able to be close to the regular people (conceived here as simply “the community,” or “society”: *masyarakat*). He said it was automatic that those with academic titles – who are assumed to be relatively well off materially – would only bagaua with others who also had such titles, and they would forget about the people below them.²¹ In his neighborhood, he said, those with such higher status did not associate with everyone else. As an example, he discussed a man who had moved into the neighborhood from Jakarta (therefore starting off as an outsider), and was not able integrate himself into the community.

Da Tul: No, we didn’t accept him. We did not accept him. There was a time when there was a death in his family, and he’d already been living in this neighborhood. There was a death – his father or a family member died. We didn’t get involved. If he had to dig a grave, well, he just had to dig it himself. We didn’t get involved.

GS: What did he do wrong?

Da Tul: What he did wrong was that he didn’t adequately adapt himself to us.

GS: For example, what?

Da Tul: He didn’t adequately adapt himself is the thing, didn’t adequately socialize. He didn’t adequately socialize with us.

GS: He didn’t socialize enough or the way he socialized was inappropriate?

Da Tul: No, he didn’t socialize enough. Even if someone’s a native to this neighborhood, if they’re a local child so to speak, if that person doesn’t adequately socialize, we couldn’t care less about

²¹ Through much of this conversation – part of which consisted of our second recorded interview – Da Tul appeared very concerned with defending his own moral status, particularly in relation to his drinking. He was, in fact, noticeably inebriated during the interview, and his answers sometimes strayed a bit from the questions I was asking. In any case, many of his comments can be read as ways of defining himself as having value – particularly, value which makes him in some ways superior to those who have achieved other kinds of valued social status. Thus, he contrasts himself with those who are highly educated, something that is quite prestigious. This also may have served as a particularly effective way for him to assert his moral value to me, as I am implicitly included in the category of elites to whom he is referring.

him – we just couldn't care less. They have to socialize, right? Even though we're – we're poor people, but if we socialize widely, we're going to get help from people.

GS: That person didn't try to mix with others, is that right?

Da Tul: *Kuper* is what we call it – [a contraction of] *kurang pergaulan* [inadequate socializing].

The example of the need to socialize in order to get help digging a grave was also the one used by Ni Saia above, and was frequently used to identify the kind of assistance that would not be forthcoming to those who did not regularly make themselves a part of daily social interactions with others. The emphasis in this example was generally on the idea that grave digging is hard work more easily done by a larger group. The broader subtext seems to be that it is only the community that can provide the kinds of emotional and ritual – as well as physical – help that dealing with a death (among other things) requires, and that to not make oneself part of the community is to deprive oneself of these necessities (cf. Parish 1994: 82-83). In regard to those who seem to reject the moral value of socializing, these kinds of examples emphasize that there are practical costs for them as well: they may think that they do not need or are too good for others, but they will inevitably suffer for this mistake.

So, why would they make such a mistake? Society also grants prestige to those with wealth and with education, encouraging them to consider themselves superior to others.

GS: What's the reason people don't socialize adequately?

Da Tul: Well, you know how it is. People sometimes – well, it's like I said earlier, Greg. People sometimes have had advanced educations. So all of us people are just insignificant. So they just

don't socialize adequately. They consider all the people in the neighborhood to be lowly. That's how it happens.

GS: But what if that person came to the lapau to hang out a lot?

Da Tul: Mmmm.

GS: There wouldn't be a problem?

Da Tul: There wouldn't be a problem. Even if they ordered – they sat in the lapau and asked for water. *Water*. But if they came to the lapau, right, it would mean that they were socializing. Even if they weren't going to drink anything, weren't going to play games, weren't going to do anything, right? If they came to the lapau often.

During this conversation, Da Tul made sure to add that his intention was not to air his community's dirty laundry, to "expose our disgrace" (*mambukak aib*) as he put it, using a common phrase referring to matters that are not supposed to be shared with outsiders. While the idea that elites are sombong and socially isolated from everyone else may be a common assumption, it is still considered a moral failure if one's own community is not unified.

Biaso: The Good of the Normal

While people in Bukittinggi were always willing, even eager, to speak with me, it was more difficult to find people who would directly consent to become a participant in my research, to sit down one-on-one someplace relatively quiet and have conversations that would be recorded on audiotape. Generally, people had no objections to any of the individual elements of being interviewed: talking with me, answering a broad range of questions, sitting in a quiet place, and even being recorded were all things that were not a problem for most people. However, when such an occasion was specifically marked as being part of a research project, people sometimes became hesitant. This marking could be done by making an appointment,

by arranging to converse in a particular place or under particular conditions, or by taking the recorder out and turning it on. In Chapter 2, I noted that some of this hesitation was due to an aversion to being bound by any obligations. Conversing does not create any such obligations, but participating in research does. Aside from this, however, people's reluctance was often expressed in terms of whether or not the experience was going to be *biaso*, or "normal." It was common for people to agree to participate only after being reassured that it would be a *biaso* experience in which I would only ask *biaso* questions.

In part, this seemed to mean that they did not want to talk about disgraceful or shameful (*aib*) things, and wanted to stick to topics that did not include their own private lives, particularly family relations, money, or moral failings. Like Da Tul, quoted above, people were worried about exposing anything damaging to the image others had of them, or their society, and some people told me this directly. Many people in Bukittinggi are intensely sensitive to the way they are seen in the rest of the world, believing that the world has a mistaken image of them (Muslims, Indonesians) as violent and backward. They worried that whatever it was I was doing was going to contribute to this image, and they did not want to make things worse. In more than one instance, people told me that they were afraid I was looking for terrorists, and that they would somehow end up implicated no matter what they said. Some people were never willing to speak with me about social tensions or problems in Minangkabau society, or particularly about those in their own neighborhoods, claiming either that there simply weren't any or that they occurred only in other (unspecified)

neighborhoods. These people often talked more openly about problems in Indonesia more generally, but might stress that West Sumatra was relatively free of these same troubles.²²

The fear of exposing, even inadvertently, something aib was also tied to a larger reluctance that many people had to talking about themselves. Even if what was being discussed reflected positively on the person discussing it – *especially* if it reflected positively – the very fact that they were discussing themselves could be considered sombong. I was warned many times, as I tried to gather a small set of respondents, that many people would likely be uncomfortable talking about themselves, and would be reluctant to agree to take part in a special activity that focused on doing just that.

However, even people who eventually talked to me about very personal (and even aib) matters expressed a desire for the experience of doing so to be biaso. Ni Yas made it a point to tell me towards the end of our interview series (that had covered personal stories about family tensions, money troubles, and personal moral struggles) that she was satisfied that the whole process had been generally biaso: we had sat together and talked. This was despite the fact that it clearly was nothing of the sort: I was a foreign man who sat alone with her in her house, asking her endless and sometimes vexing questions about her life, and recording what we said on audiotape.

²² Issues that were conceptually connected to Indonesia as a nation, such as government corruption, were the exception here. I cannot recall anyone claiming that while corruption was a problem in Indonesia, it was less of a problem in West Sumatra.

The important thing seemed to be that she was able to frame the experience as biaso: sitting and talking.

She wasn't alone in this. I witnessed several other respondents tell other people that we were going to eat or do some other mundane thing, rather than acknowledge that they were participating in my research.²³ Da Tul, for example, confused me early in our interview series. I had offered to treat him to lunch in the pasa before our interviews as a way to encourage his participation, have more time to chat with him, and provide incentive for him to come with me to my interview space in the pasa rather than talk with him somewhere less private. He appeared particularly enthusiastic about this, and explained to others in his neighborhood as we left on my scooter that we were going to eat. He seemed so focused on the idea of eating that I even worried that perhaps we might end up having lunch but never getting around to the interview. However, when we arrived at the pasa, he suggested that we should eat after the interview. After the interview, despite my attempts at persuasion, he insisted that he would prefer to return home rather than to go eat. This happened several times before I realized that he was not actually concerned with eating, but with having a mundane excuse to be going somewhere with me.

Similarly, I found that trying to encourage people to participate in my research by emphasizing the unusual opportunity it might provide for their stories to be told and their voices to be heard by people in other parts of the world, never met with

²³ They were not trying to hide the fact that they were helping me with my research in general, but only to avoid being seen as doing something unusual at a particular moment.

much of a response. While I do think that this was intriguing to some people, it certainly was not the proper way to frame it.²⁴

The morally ideology of mixing in, and the aversion to bulging out are not simply rhetorical ideals. They are put in practice through, and reinforced by, social interactions. Sometimes this is done through a kind of formality, the often very conscious application of rules of proper interaction. Before turning to such formalized interactions, however, I want in this section to briefly examine the ethos of “the normal” and how people become comfortable with and appreciative of conformity, and uncomfortable with anything that makes themselves or others stand out as individuals. Ultimately, I argue, *biaso* becomes a value in itself, even disconnected in consciousness from the moral evaluations that determine what is *biaso* to begin with. To say that something is – and *should* be – done a certain way because it is *biaso* is not to fail to offer a rationale. It is rather to identify the most immediately salient rationale.

The Wrong Way to Carry Shoes

One morning about six months into my fieldwork, my wife and I were headed to a local gym (a converted house with a collection of old equipment) to get some exercise when we made a stop in the *pasa* at a small clothing store owned by a friend. We had begun coming there regularly, not only because of our friendship but also because in back of the store a steep set of stairs led up to a small room that I had

²⁴ In Chapter 5 I will discuss the balance between expressing and not expressing personal experiences, opinions, and so on.

recently arranged to rent as a work and interview space. By this time, we were familiar with many of the people in this little section of the marketplace, a row of stores and stalls adjacent to the central structure of the Upper Market. On this particular morning, we found the store rather typically empty of customers, but occupied by some young women we were friendly with, friends and relatives of the owner.

We had talked for a moment or two with them, when suddenly one of them noticed my wife's shoes – not the ones on her feet, but the athletic shoes she was carrying to change into at the gym. She had picked them up at another spot in the marketplace, where a friend let her keep them for convenience, and carried them the short distance to where we now stood by tying the laces together so that she could easily carry the pair of them dangling down together from one hand. As soon as everyone's attention was drawn to the shoes, quite a commotion erupted. "Jenny! What are you doing?!" they shrieked, bursting into laughter. "Your shoes – oh, Jenny, you're so funny! Jenny, Jenny!" They quickly found a bag for her to carry her shoes in. Jenny and I were a little startled and abashed by the uproar, and confused about its cause. When this became clear to them, the women began to explain, with a gentleness and seriousness seemingly aimed at easing our anxiety, that it just was not the practice – *kabiasaan*, based on the root "biaso" – of people around there to carry shoes like that. If a person were going to carry shoes, she would put them in a bag. In Bukittinggi, they said, people would laugh at you if you carried them loose, although

that might not be the case in the big city.²⁵ One of the women explained that people around there did not have the self-confidence (*percaya diri*) to do something strange like that. No one had any particular explanation for why it was a strange thing to do other than the fact that it simply was not done.

What impressed me about the incident was the intensity of the reaction to something that was, at most, just a little out of the ordinary and seemingly of no particular consequence. No one was laughing in idle amusement. Instead, there was a frantic (if still comic) sense of discomfort, a tension that needed to be relieved. There was a breach that, while not critical, needed to be repaired before normal interaction could be resumed. (The women did, after all, quickly move to fix the problem by giving Jenny a bag.) Who would be able to withstand such a reaction, self-confident or not? It seemed clear to me that it was not just a Minang person's particular lack of self-confidence, a quality of an individual's personality, that would lead them to avoid mildly unusual behavior. Rather, the emotional intensity of the reaction to such behavior would stop all but the most self-assertive in their tracks. Such a reaction would surely make any person self-conscious of the fact that they were sending some kind of significant message with their behavior. If no such message were consciously intended (and therefore there was a danger of a significant mistake being made), stopping and retreating to reconsider would be a likely response.

²⁵ Jenny later told me that she had thought people were laughing at her as we walked through the *pasa*. However, since being looked at and laughed at was common for us in West Sumatra, she did not concern herself with trying to identify a specific cause, and had no reason for suspecting that it had anything to do with the shoes.

Trying to be Biaso

We can recognize that shame and shaming play roles in the shoe story.

Through their reactions – laughing, mocking, talking disapprovingly – to behavior that does not conform to social norms, people actively discourage such behavior in others by causing a feeling of shame (broadly, “*malu*” in Minang and Indonesian). We might also note that this reaction, the discomfort I sensed during the incident described above and the push to identify and rectify the shameful behavior, would seem to indicate an emotional response to that is not easily labeled in either English or Minang.²⁶ In any case, the two – shame and shaming – work as a pair, and the cycle appears to be an important one in that it constantly reinforces conformity and the value of social unity.²⁷

We saw above how gossip could act to keep a woman from even venturing down the street too far to make a casual visit to a cousin’s house. The fear of gossip was often mentioned to me as the reason a person’s behavior would conform to certain norms, even if that person did not really believe the norm was very important. Men, for example, avoid doing housework because other people might gossip about it, saying that he is not treated well by his wife, or remarking that his status in the

²⁶ Vaguely, we can think of it as a kind of anxiety. It might be useful to ask to what extent it can be understood as a kind of shame in itself, particularly if the source of the non-conforming behavior is entwined with the self in some form – a friend or a family member, for example. I am not sure that this is an adequate explanation for cases (for example) of feeling the need to mock a stranger or hint sharply that a neighbor’s daughter really ought to be married by now.

²⁷ Daniel Fessler (1994) writes that villagers in Bengkulu – the province just south of West Sumatra, where the population is closely linked culturally and linguistically to Minangkabau society – appear to be particularly sensitive to shame. The same might be said for people in West Sumatra. We should also not lose sight of the fact that it is an interactive process that involves a tendency to shame others as well.

household is low. Ni Tasi, the single woman in her mid-20s who wants to have a boy one day, expressed the idea that eventually she would need to get married (whether she wanted to or not, and she was not sure that she really wanted to) because otherwise people would not stop gossiping about her. (She also told me that people in her neighborhood would gossip every time someone makes improvements on their house, speculating that it is in preparation for a wedding. She joked that avoiding gossip must be the reason that no one in her neighborhood ever fixed up their houses.) A couple my wife and I were friends with thought better of their idea to refer to their new baby by the name “Willy,” based on his middle name, William, choosing instead to use another, more commonly Minang, part of his name.²⁸ The baby’s aunt explained to me that, in the end, they just could not use that name because people in their *kampung* (village, or neighborhood) would think they were trying to act like “city people.” They would talk about them being *sok* – that is, of showing off, or putting on airs. In all of these cases, it seemed to people just easier to do as expected and avoid giving anyone anything to gossip about – that is, giving them any reason to become involved in one’s affairs.

A person does not necessarily need to make a conscious decision in order for them to stand out, of course. There was, for example, a four-year-old boy named Rafi who lived next door to my wife and I for the first year or so of my fieldwork. For

²⁸ People in West Sumatra are often given two or three names, one of which (most often, but not always, the first) is generally used to refer to and address them, usually in a shortened form. All of these names are chosen by the family, and none of them act as a surname. (Some Minangkabau people, particularly in Jakarta, have begun to use the name of their *suku*, or clan, as a surname, more closely matching Western styles of naming.) In this case, “William” was the baby’s middle name. The name was actually taken from my father-in-law, who had visited Bukittinggi the previous year, and it is not a common name there in any sense.

most of that year, Rafi (unlike any of the other children who lived in our neighborhood, as far as I could tell) was terrified of us. When we visited Rafi's home not long after moving in to the neighborhood, he cried and his older sister had to hold him to keep him from running away. All of the adults present, including his mother, laughed mildly at Rafi. They explained to us that Rafi was afraid of becoming a *bule*, a white person, and being taken away with us. Rafi did in fact have unusually light skin for a Minangkabau person, and his hair had a distinctly brownish tinge. I do not know who first suggested to him that this meant he might become a *bule* and be taken away (I doubt he invented the idea on his own), but it soon became clear that he would not be allowed to forget the idea easily. Whenever other children spotted us when Rafi was nearby, they would make sure he saw us, and then laugh as he ran away in terror. They would sometimes remind him specifically, as he fled, of his fear of becoming a *bule* and being taken away, but it became a regular enough occurrence that they usually had merely to alert Rafi to our presence and then wait for his reaction.²⁹ Any adults who observed this would usually smile, and no one (aside from us) ever tried to put a stop to the teasing.

This is in fact a more severe version of a kind of teasing that is commonly directed toward all children (ranging from babies who cannot yet speak to

²⁹ There was one boy, Ilham, who was particularly relentless and never seemed to tire of this "game." Ilham, a generally good-natured and outgoing boy of about five, could usually be counted on to be at the center of any mischief being made by the children in the neighborhood. Relevant to this particular teasing, it might be notable that Ilham and his older sister were at this time living in Rafi's house as foster children (*anak asuh*). This was an arrangement made between Ilham's parents and Rafi's parents in order to relieve some economic burden from Ilham's parents and provide some extra help (mostly provided by the older sister) to Rafi's household. Ilham knew something about the dangers of being taken away from one's family and being an outsider.

preadolescents), but usually by adults. For example, parents or other caretakers would ask their child, usually when we were about to part company, if the child wanted to go away with us, sometimes specifying that we would take them to America. The question was usually not simply asked, but asked repeatedly while the adults watched the reaction of the child. Often it was presented not as a question but as form of encouragement: “Go with uncle, OK? Go with uncle.” The child would almost always react with some degree of fear.³⁰ The younger ones, being held, might bury their heads into their caregivers’ bodies and cling more tightly, and the older ones tended to offer a minimalist verbal rejection (a simple “no”) and display nervous smiles or simply blank expressions while looking off into the distance in a kind of tense disengagement from the danger. This was not only done with us because we were foreigners. Minangkabau people do this with each other as well, either asking others’ children if they want to come with them (or pretending they are simply going to take them), or offering feigned encouragement to their own children to go home with someone else. All of the adults involved in such teasing generally smile as they watch the child’s nervous or fearful reaction.

³⁰ The only exception I saw came when the three-year-old girl living in the house where we stayed through the length of my fieldwork was asked if she wanted to go to “Mika” (her word for “America”) with us. Being sufficiently comfortable with us, and having no sense of where or what Mika was, she said that she did. This of course did not lead to her going anywhere with us, and elicited laughter from all of the adults present – laughter that perhaps caused her to try to figure out what was really being asked of her.

Briggs (1970:148-149) has recorded very similar kinds of teasing of Inuit children,³¹ and she has analyzed (Briggs 1998:87-115) the ways it challenges children to recognize the importance of their attachments to others, and perhaps even the dangers of overly exclusive attachments. For Rafi, being challenged as to the nature of his attachments to his family must have been unusually terrifying because his own body seemed to be betraying his desire not to be separated from his family and his community, not to be marked as an outsider. Other children, and even adults, seemed to find some kind of satisfaction in this terror, even if they also (in the case of adults) sometimes tried to comfort him after the fact, when he had already displayed the proper fear at the suggestion that his difference destined him for exclusion.

On a social level, at least – that is, when people think about the proper way for other people to act, or the positive moral qualities involved in being a social being – people in Bukittinggi do emphasize the value of “the normal” over anything that stands out from it. Take as an example, what Da Eri tells me about drawing people’s attention. He had just been telling me that when he was a child, he had difficulty with situations in which he became the center of attention, to the point that his body would shake. He suggests that maybe he was just mentally weak, and then I ask him the following:

GS: Did you have friends when you were young who enjoyed being the center of attention?

³¹ In Briggs’ descriptions, however, it is never the parents or caretakers that do the teasing. Rather, they watch without comment while others ask the children to come away and live with them.

Da Eri: I did. We called them out as being MPO. Attracting People's Attention [*Menarik Perhatian Orang*, widely referred to in Indonesian slang as “MPO”].

GS: And that's a negative thing?

Da Eri: From our perspective when we were kids, it's negative. Show-offs [*palagak*], that's what those people are. Yeah, we didn't like show-offs when we were kids, and even up to today. For example, someone who drives his motorcycle all fast [un], I really hate that. Does that person think about all the other people around when acting like that? MPO.

He immediately contrasts the negative quality of intentionally trying to attract attention to the positive quality of being *biaso*:

Da Eri: That's exactly why I like things that are just normal [*biaso-biaso sajo*]. So for example, you, Greg are just normal – that's what I like. Think about if you weren't normal... you were like a tourist and wore shorts up to here, right? Maybe you'd MPO if you wore shorts, or Jenny wore a “U can see” shirt.³² Do you know what a “U can see” shirt is?

GS: Yes, there aren't any—

Da Eri: Sleeves.

GS: —sleeves.

Da Eri: That's a case where people are sometimes MPO. “Exhibitionist,”³³ something like that? So, since the time I was little, I haven't liked that. So, having friends like that – up until now, I've tried to stay away from stuff like that. If there's a person like that, I take no notice of them, though I don't give them any ultimatums. There really are a lot of people like that. They really have self-confidence. Sometimes, those people don't think, sometimes, whether other people are insulted.

I was initially bemused at the way he criticized the revealing clothing that tourists are known to wear for being not *biaso* and therefore attracting attention.

Where I would assume that the moral problem with such clothing was that it was an

³² “U can see” is a term derived from English, pronounced like “you can see,” but (according to my transcriber), spelled as it appears here.

³³ He says this word in English.

insufficiently modest display of the body, for Da Eri there is a more salient issue than that of exposed bodies. Revealing clothing is an insufficiently modest display of oneself in general – not because it passively reveals skin, but because it actively seeks to draw the attention of other people through its difference from the normal. I had always assumed that the clothing worn by some tourists, like the tank tops Da Eri refers to – particularly in the case of women – was considered morally inappropriate because it was sexually provocative.

Da Eri's comments helped me to reframe my understanding of the problem as one that is not simply about sexuality, but as one that is more broadly about attitudes towards individuals and their moral relationship to the community. Wearing skimpy clothing is like driving your motorcycle too fast. Both seem designed to attract attention, to make an individual stand out from the crowd. Da Eri imbues self-confidence – the term he uses is “*PD*,” short for “*percaya diri*” – with a sense of moral ambiguity by tying it to being a show-off. We might also translate it as “belief in oneself” or “reliance on oneself.” The term often has positive connotations in Indonesia, but this is not as clear-cut as it is for “self-confidence” among Americans. As indicated here and in the story of my wife's shoes, above, *percaya diri* can also be seen as strength that can be misused when belief in the self means ignoring the relationships that self has to others.

Seen this way, *biaso* becomes a positive moral quality itself. This is certainly not because it can imply mediocrity.³⁴ We could say instead that it captures the modest quality of being like others, and thus being at one with them. Expressed this way, it is not merely that violations of *biaso* are violations of particular values, but rather that *biaso* is a value in and of itself. (It is understandable that “*Biaso*” appears as the name of businesses in West Sumatra even though this might appear to be a rather counterproductive advertising strategy if one was targeting consumers in America.) It then makes a certain amount of sense that people are motivated to tease and talk about others when they publicly display deviation from the normal in behavior or appearance. Improper clothing may be commented on, or even the bright color of a blouse is likely to be pointed out by others in a mild form of teasing; people who wear red are often, for example, singled out and referred to as “red.” If someone develops a pimple, others will be sure to point this out. The desire to point out, label, and draw attention to any difference appears to be quite common, even at times unrelenting.³⁵

³⁴ The word can be used in this way as well. For example, to say that a particular dish of *dendeng balado* – jerked beef covered in ground chili pepper – is “*biaso*” is to say that it is perfectly acceptable, but not remarkably good.

³⁵ Simons (1980) argues that the Malay-Indonesian “culture-bound syndrome” of *latah* is a cultural elaboration of the startle reflex in which hyperstartlers (people who have an unusually sensitive or strong startle reflex, who can presumably be found mixed into the population of any society) are identified and teased (often by children) until they develop the coprolalia, echolalia, echopraxia, and automatic command obedience typical of *latah* behavior. When I was preparing a lecture on *latah* for anthropology students at Andalas University in Padang, Jenny Simon, my wife, pointed out that the fact that *latah* has developed in a Malay-Indonesian cultural context may be related to this more general tendency to identify and pick at difference.

Other ethnographers have also noted the importance placed in Minangkabau society on not standing out. For instance, take the story that recently appeared in Sanday's (2002) ethnography of a Minangkabau village: A young girl insists, despite adult disapproval, on wearing inappropriate clothing to a celebration. She is miserable at the celebration until finally she accepts Sanday's suggestion that she go home and change. She returns to the party radiant and happy. The girl's mother tells Sanday that the girl became happy when she changed because she could see that she was now dressed just like everyone else. She had been unhappy, according to the mother's (and, implicitly, Sanday's) analysis, because she had been different. The assumption is that the girl made herself unhappy by somehow being unable to understand that choosing to be normal was also choosing to be happy. (In Sanday's account, it is never considered whether it was the way the girl was treated by others as a result of wearing that clothing – rather the choice of being different itself – that made the girl unhappy. It is thus not clear to what extent the girl was reacting to the experience of being normal – based on a universal human or a culturally learned motivation – and to what extent she was reacting to a pattern of shaming and praise more generally.) Being normal can thus carry with it a certain moral fulfillment.

“Valueless” Norms

It should follow that it is possible to feel some kind of shame for violating norms that are not consciously attached to any particular value. Such cases were occasionally mentioned to me. For example, Da Lis, a newlywed in his 20's, told me

that he and his wife would only whisper when they were together in their bedroom, located inside the house they shared with his wife's parents. This was something he though was a common practice. He said that if they were heard talking or laughing, it would make him feel very uncomfortable, although there was nothing wrong with it, nor would he expect it to upset his in-laws. He simply would not feel right doing it, and kept to a whisper as a matter of following this kabiasaan (habitual or routine practice). Da Palo, a grandfather in his 50's, told me that a couple who had a baby after one of their elder children had already become a parent (that is, having another child after already having become a grandparent) would feel malu (ashamed) and would be made fun of by other people. He also said that there was nothing wrong or bad about having a baby in this circumstance, and there was no identifiable rule against it, yet it would provoke this response.

That something was simply "biaso," or a "kabiasaan," was often the explanation I was given for why people did things a certain way in Minangkabau society. This was not limited to things like the proper way to carry shoes, but included things like gender roles that I, at least, had expected to be too tightly tied to moral and religious conceptions to be dismissed as simply the way things are. Yet rather than justify, for example, the fact that it is almost always women who cook for the family and perform most other daily domestic chores – even if both husband and wife work outside of the home – by referring to the innate skills of women (as some people did) or to the gender roles required by Islam (as some people did), many people simply told me that such roles were a matter of kabiasaan. This was not to say that they were

therefore insignificant. While you could not fault a man for cooking (to keep with the current example) for some specific moral failing, you could understand why he would not do it, for he would be thought of as strange and would become the subject of gossip. One explanation I was given several times as to why women did not play the games (dominoes, cards, chess) that men spent so much time on, was simply that it was not *biaso*, and so they would not do it. In other words, I was often told that such “rules” about social roles were essentially arbitrary, yet nevertheless maintained because no one would want to violate them.

To take a related, yet perhaps more significant example, people I spoke with rarely if ever tried to justify the Minang matrilineal system by explaining its advantages or moral underpinnings. A few men even remarked to me that by logic and moral principles (that is, based on Islamic teachings) men in fact should be the ones to inherit property, and wives should come to live in their husbands’ homes. However, not even these men argued that the matrilineal system should actually be changed. They still viewed it as an integral part of Minangkabau society, to be maintained and defended. Its value was the fact that it was *adat*, it was tradition, a moral value in and of itself.

During the early months of my interviewing, when I was mostly asking general questions about local social patterns (and often about gender roles, as the examples above indicate), I often found myself frustrated because when I would ask people why things were done in a certain way, they would simply tell me that it was because it was *biaso* to do it this way. I was hoping to uncover the moral underpinnings of social

relations, looking for the things that really mattered to people, and I felt like they were not giving me any useful information. I wanted them to be really committed to some moral principle, or to some clear conception of the nature of persons, men, or women that would explain why, of course, it was best to do things in just this way. Yet so often people indicated to me that the important thing was not the reason that motivated the norm, but rather the existence of the norm itself. People were, in fact, giving me a clue as to something that really mattered to them. The most salient value for people was often the value of *biaso*.

Of course, there are in fact reasons that certain things become *biaso* in the first place. So, for example, the wearing of skimpy clothing, talking and laughing with one's wife behind closed doors in one's in-laws' house, and having a new baby after having already become a grandparent may appear to be problems because they violate what is *biaso*, but it is undoubtedly not a coincidence that they all seem to involve the introduction of sexuality into an arena where it does not belong. There are other things going on in all these examples, and each could be investigated for its other layers.

To return to the example I opened this section with, the same is true something as simple as carrying an extra pair of shoes. No one could identify anything morally wrong with carrying shoes by the laces and not in a bag. It at first appears to be a violation of a norm that is not connected to any value. It is merely a *kabiasaan*, an arbitrary, habitual practice. The only value that is violated by violating the norm would thus be the value of conformity itself. While this is how the incident appeared

to me initially, with further thought I find it impossible to accept this interpretation. The range of possible human behaviors – especially on a level as simple as carrying shoes – is simply too vast for practices to develop in such an arbitrary manner. Out of all of the infinite possible practices that could become habitual, why should the proper (and improper) way to carry shoes be so readily identifiable to those women? Why should they react so strongly to it? Shoes, perhaps, can be dirty, and this might explain why they should be carried in a bag. Yet no one mentioned this rather straightforward reason.

Less than two weeks before this occurred, I joked in my field notes that “American shoes were in the collective consciousness of Bukittinggi residents yesterday.” In two separate incidents on the same day, people who knew I would be briefly returning to the United States later in the year asked me to bring back shoes for them. A year and a half later, as I completed my fieldwork, I found it socially difficult to leave with any shoes, and would have probably ended up giving my own away and buying a new pair had Bukittinggi’s shoe stores stocked anything big enough to fit my feet. Recall as well how Da Eri seemed particularly impressed that one wealthy person he knew wore shoes just like everyone else (and was thus not *sombong*). In West Sumatra, shoes are a highly visible, if subtle, sign of wealth and prestige. This should not be surprising in a society in which civil servants and other office workers wear shoes, but laborers, farmers, petty traders and the unemployed more often wear some kind of plastic sandal.

In Indonesian cities it is certainly not uncommon for people to own shoes and to wear shoes at certain times. Considering that Bukittinggi's climate is a rather cool one compared to that of most places in tropical Southeast Asia, this may be more true there than some other cities. At the same time, the significance of shoes is hard to miss. They are not taken for granted. Carrying around a pair of shoes that one is not actually wearing and that are serving no practical purpose thus appears to people a bit like a person exhibiting their paycheck in their office for guests to see. It would be *sombong* if it weren't such a ridiculous display. It did not provoke such a reaction *merely* because it was a violation of a local habit and thus a violation of the principle of social unity; the act's specific message, even if it was not immediately accessible to the people reading it, seemed to be a comic flaunting of the principle of social unity. It was a violation of that principle in both form and content.³⁶

It is also worth noting the comment, mentioned above, that it might be acceptable in the "big city" to carry shoes in this manner, but not in Bukittinggi. We can recall again the conceptual contrast between *kampung* (village, neighborhood) and *pasa* (marketplace, city), first discussed in Chapter 1. This comment about the different standards of the big city was made despite the fact that the incident took place in the middle of the *pasa*, the geographical location in Bukittinggi most associated with urban life, individualism, modernity, the shunning of traditions, and so

³⁶ Not all displays of wealth are proscribed by standard practice in Bukittinggi, of course. Wearing gold jewelry, for example, is quite common, especially for women. In this case, the display of wealth is carried out in a conventional language. As in many other parts of Indonesia, owning gold jewelry is also considered a way of saving wealth in a fungible form – although, arguably, owning and wearing gold are two different matters. In any case, wearing an excessive amount of jewelry is considered *sombong*, and I did hear women criticized for wearing much more than a small pair of earrings and one or two rings or a bracelet.

on. The concern with how to carry shoes can be considered a *kampung* concern, one that might be irrelevant in the city, the *pasa*. There is no place in Bukittinggi, however, that is *pasa enough*, however, for *kampung* concerns not to be important. The implicit idea in the comment about the big city is that social life in Bukittinggi never reaches the extremes of city life – even in the middle of the *pasa*.

While people in Bukittinggi do seem to display strong reactions to nonconformist behavior, there are reasons that some behaviors may strike people as more offensive than others to the value of social unity. I cannot offer unassailable evidence that my interpretation of the shoe incident is an accurate one. At the time the incident occurred, I was intrigued by it, but gave up trying to figure out exactly what had caused it after no one could tell me anything beyond the fact that it had to do with local norms. There can be little doubt, however, that such norms have the power to carry messages beyond that of the importance of conformity to arbitrary practices. For people in Bukittinggi, however, it is often the conformity itself, rather than the practice, that becomes the conscious focus of attention. We must wonder if such a conscious focus on the value of something *as* a norm, rather than on the nature of the norm itself, discourages the norm from being consciously examined, let alone challenged.

Baso-Basi: Manners and Formalized Daily Interactions

Where aspects of behavior are not simply habits, but rather consciously categorized as proper behavior, they are often referred to as *baso-basi*, or manners.

Based on the same root, to behave in a self-consciously polite manner is to *babaso*. A person who is *babaso* is understood to be acting self-consciously, intentionally behaving according to standard conceptions of polite behavior. Baso-basi can thus be seen as covering everyday ritual interactions structured by norms of behavior.

Baso-basi is closely linked with *adat* (traditional culture – see Chapter 2 above), as it is understood to be the *adat* way of interacting with people, one that is based on important Minangkabau values. One person I spoke with even explicitly connected baso-basi with Islam, by pointing out that Minang baso-basi is a form of Minang *adat*, and since Minang *adat* is based on Islam, Minang baso-basi is therefore based on the teachings of Islam. The idea seemed to be a general one, and she did not attempt to give me any specific examples of particularly Islamic manners. The point was that baso-basi was the proper way to relate to and value other human beings, and as a moral mode of behavior, it had to be grounded in the ultimate basis of all morality, Islam.

While an emphasis on baso-basi is thought to be an important trait of Minangkabau culture, the general category of baso-basi is understood to apply to many or possibly all other societies, although Minangkabau people often doubt its significance for Westerners. At the very least, people know that other Indonesian groups practice forms of baso-basi (and the term is common in Indonesian, as “*baso-basi*”), although many people in Bukittinggi pointed out that Minang baso-basi was the most supreme version (*paliang tinggi*), and sometimes even that Kurai (the ethnic group, a sub-group of Minangkabau, that is native to the Bukittinggi area) baso-basi

was the most supreme version among all Minangkabau groups.³⁷ Like the subject of adat in general, the subject of baso-basi was often one that people turned to when I first met them and told them my purpose in Bukittinggi. The importance of baso-basi and the self-conscious nature of the behavior it required seemed to stand out to many people in Bukittinggi as something that made them special, and something of which they could be proud.

In the Coffeehouse

Let me turn now to a brief description of baso-basi behaviors. A good place to start would be in the lapau, the coffeehouses where many men bagaua, displaying baso-basi as they do. There we can see what is meant by baso-basi, and also some of the moral themes that connect it with bagaua.

If you are a man in West Sumatra, and you walk into your local lapau, the men who are already inside will greet you by inviting you to drink. After sitting down and ordering, your drink will arrive – probably some variation of coffee or tea, but maybe even a brightly colored energy drink – but before you take a sip, you will be sure to invite everyone else to drink. As you look around the room, extending the invitation to each individual man, each will respond, perhaps with just a nod but more likely

³⁷ Sometimes people remarked to me that Javanese people, in contrast to Minang people, tended to be direct and unselfconscious about their interactions. On at least two such occasions, the person making the remark then remembered that I had previously lived in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta, and so they added that I must already know this. I could not readily confirm their assessment, as I had often found Javanese people to be at least as indirect and self-conscious in their behavior than many Minang people, or even more so. This use of the Javanese as a foil for the Minangkabau is another instance of a convention that I discussed in the previous chapter.

with “*alah*,” (“already”) or “*samo*” (“together”). In other words, each man will signal to you that they too are drinking and that now you are all engaged in the activity together.

The way you address each man should conform to the standards of baso-basi as well. When you invited each man to drink with you, you addressed each individual by name. However, what name you use will depend on that man’s status, and their age in relation to your own. For your peers or those younger than you, you may use their given names, usually shortened to a one- or two-syllable nickname. If they are married, you should use their lineage titles, also usually shortened to a nickname. Alternately, and especially if you do not know a man’s name, you must be sure to address them as “*da*” (older brother) if they are a bit older than you, or “*pak*” (father) if they are significantly older than you.³⁸

The baso-basi that applies to the lapau is a concentrated version of the everyday baso-basi that is used in public social interactions in Minangkabau society. It is concentrated in the sense that the lapau is a place where a number of people (specifically, men) come together in public, and therefore such interactions can be regularly observed in this one, small locale. It is everyday in the sense that these ritual interactions are mundane and relatively informal when compared to norms that apply to more elaborate rituals, such as wedding negotiations or the installation of a new lineage title holder. This is not baso-basi taken to its extreme limits, but rather an example of how is important in the most unremarkable of circumstances.

³⁸ There are a number of other possible terms of address, all based on kinship terms. Their usage varies throughout West Sumatra.

In both form and content, the baso-basi on display in the lapau stresses social unity. Through participating in the ritual choreography of these little moments, people become part of an ordered, coordinated entity beyond the level of the individual.

While it is individuals who consume at the lapau – and individuals who compete with each other in games of cards, dominoes, and chess – they do so while engaged in a performance that ties them together as a cohesive social body, or even (as in the use of kinship terms) a family. Beyond this, a good deal of the content of the rituals involved goes towards belying the individual nature of the consumption that goes on in the lapau. If the lapau sells food, people who eat will go through the same ritual as those who drink, as it is considered imperative to invite others to eat before beginning to eat one's own food – a norm that applies inside the home as well.³⁹ The individual consumption of food and drink is, in this way, nested inside an inclusive ritual.

Smoking is a nearly universal habit for men in West Sumatra,⁴⁰ and cigarettes are also consumed individually in the lapau by most men who spend time there.

While men frequently offer cigarettes to others, or request them from their friends, no one goes through the kind of ritualized invitations to smoke before lighting up, the

³⁹ This norm applies inside homes and in smaller, neighborhood lapau. It does not apply, however, to restaurants in the city where people often do not know the other customers. Also, while the norm applies to eating meals, and it applies to eating snacks when outside the lapau, it often seems not to apply to eating snacks inside the lapau. In the lapau, men will often nibble on various snacks without bothering to offer an invitation to others.

⁴⁰ Almost all Minangkabau men in West Sumatra smoke cigarettes, either clove cigarettes (*kretek*) or straight tobacco cigarettes (*rokok putih*), and many boys begin to smoke before they are teenagers. Smoking is considered a male activity. It is difficult to estimate the percentage of women who also smoke. Women are rarely seen smoking in public, as this (meaning both smoking and, even more so, doing it in public) is considered improper and a sign of loose morals. Judging by how many women I saw smoking in their homes, it seems clear that while most women certainly do not smoke, the number who do smoke is significant.

way they do for eating and drinking. Still, cigarettes are used as a form of social currency in the everyday interactions among men that go on in places such as the lapau, and are closely associated with the idea of bagaua.⁴¹ Men who bagaua often are said to smoke more often, and even men who do not smoke very often are most likely to smoke when socializing with a group of men.

In one of the very first discussions I had with a Minangkabau man during the course of my fieldwork, the social importance of cigarettes was driven home for me. Before even making it to my field site in Bukittinggi, I found myself sitting in a small building outside a local traffic police station in the provincial capital of Padang.⁴² An officer there quizzed me about what I was doing in West Sumatra. At one point in the conversation, he took out a cigarette to light, and offered one to me. When I refused it, explaining that I was not a smoker, he told me that all Minangkabau men smoked, and that I was going to have to smoke in order to socialize with men in West Sumatra. This was, he said, part of adat, and if I did not do it, I would not be able to participate

⁴¹ This echoes the use of cigarettes – in this case, usually “traditional” cigarettes made from tobacco wrapped in nipa (*nipah*) palm leaves – that are passed around to male guest at some formal events. This use of cigarettes seems to broadly parallel the use of betel (*siriah*) for similar purposes. Betel, the use of which predated the arrival of tobacco, is still used in a similar way in many Minangkabau ritual occasions, and is sometimes considered absolutely essential. For example, while printed paper invitations are now widely used, many people still have betel leaves sent to the homes of those they wish to invite to an adat ritual, or at least to those who have important kinship ties to the event. This is considered the proper adat way to issue the invitation. While the distribution of betel is made to both men and women, the distribution of cigarettes is exclusively for men.

⁴² My wife and I had arrived there with a letter from a government agency in Jakarta, requesting permission from the West Sumatran police for me to conduct my research. Since the address on the letter turned out to be for this local traffic police station rather than for the headquarters of the provincial police, the officers there had no idea what to do with us. So, they sat us down, ordered some drinks for us, and chatted with us before sending us on our way.

in Minangkabau adat. After discussing this for a while he eventually conceded that I might be all right if I did not smoke, but that I absolutely could not turn down the *offer* of a cigarette. He insisted that I take a cigarette from him and put it in my mouth, and later in my shirt pocket. His claims were a bit extreme. I seemed to do just fine without ever taking up smoking (or even accepting offers of cigarettes), though I did occasionally have to resist attempts to talk me into taking up the habit, and I did sometimes offer cigarettes to men when I interviewed them. Nevertheless, the associations he made between male social interaction and smoking were certainly right on target.⁴³

Da Jik, the man who told me that he made a point of making a (rare, for him) visit to the lapau when he moved into a new neighborhood, demonstrated for me how, upon sitting down in the lapau with his new neighbors (who were still strangers to him at that point), he had taken out his pack of cigarettes and his lighter and laid them down in front of him on the table. This, he explained, was an implicit offer to the other men who were in the lapau – not merely a literal, if indirect, offer of cigarettes, but through them an offer of social interaction. He said that it signaled to them that he wished to engage in social interaction with them. A different signal would have been sent had he simply come into the lapau, sat down, ordered a drink, lit up a cigarette to smoke, and then left after consuming it. The men there, he told me, would have understood (although perhaps been critical of the fact) that he had no interest in social interaction with them. Instead, he presented his cigarettes – and through them, himself

⁴³ Errington (1984) discovered that the men in Bayur expected him to always carry around cigarettes and offer them to others, even though he did not smoke them himself.

– as something available to be shared among the group. This act was self-conscious enough that he could later reenact it for me, explaining the purpose of his actions, and use it to demonstrate proper Minangkabau behavior.

Social Exchanges

The term *pitih rokok*, or “cigarette money” is often used to describe the money paid to a man in return for a favor. For example, a neighbor and relative of the family I lived with – a *mamak* to Inyiak Datuak – built a wooden gate between two family houses to keep my motor scooter safe from thieves at night. This was clearly a way for him to make a little money, as he was quite poor and lacked any regular source of income. When he finished with the gate, I tried to pay him a sum of money, but he at first refused to accept it, acting as if the labor and expense he had endured were gifts, or perhaps something done for the entire compound of homes belonging to his family. My argument that he had done the work and deserved to get paid had no effect. It improperly framed our exchange as a utilitarian one. Such an argument might have worked had we been strangers involved in a transaction in the *pasa* – though even in that case, it would have been a graceless point to make, I think. In any case, considering that he and I were living in a single family compound, we clearly could not be considered strangers related only by utility. Ignoring my failed arguments, Inyiak Datuak quickly stepped in and encouraged his *mamak* to accept the money, which he described as “*pitih rokok*.” After only a brief moment’s protest, he did accept the money, as he had clearly intended to do from the beginning. The term

“pitih rokok” downplays the importance of the money by implying that it is not a large amount of money – just enough to buy some cigarettes – even if it is in fact substantial.

I think the rhetorical transformation of the money (*pitih*) into cigarettes (*rokok*) reframes such exchanges as primarily social rather than financial ones. Similarly, as shoppers stroll by in the *pasa*, shopkeepers invite them to stop in, as if for a visit (“*Singgahlah!*”), and once they are in negotiations over a sale, they may claim to offer the customer *arago awak*, meaning the price that pertains “just between us.” This episode also helps illustrate how *baso-basi* outside the *lapau* – represented here in his initial refusal to accept payment and the redefinition of such payment as *pitih rokok* – acts to publicly recognize and emphasize social relations between people and downplay individual motives and conflicting aims. It relies on an indirect language in which what is said overtly implies another meaning altogether, and what is meant should not be said overtly.

Returning to our original scene at the *lapau*, we will also see that the individual nature of consumption there is defused further through the *baso-basi* associated with paying for the things that have been consumed. When a man is ready to leave the *lapau*, he recounts to the owner all of the things that he ate and drank (and other things, such as cigarettes, he may have purchased), and the owner tallies up the total. Rather than including only the things that they have consumed themselves, men will often include the drinks and snacks consumed by other men in the *lapau*, particularly

those with whom they arrived or with whom they were spending their time while in the lapau.⁴⁴

If several friends have a meal in a restaurant together, or sit to drink somewhere together, one person in the group will pay for everyone. The idea of splitting the bill is considered crude. Several men told me that the goal was for the group to appear to be *kompak*, or solid, cohesive. The idea of appearances is important here, as it was also explained to me that paying together was important regardless of whether or not the bill was actually split among individuals. For example, one man told me, perhaps after one person pays the bill, other men will quietly slip him some money for their share – what is important is that the group presents a unified public face. Again, we can see that what is important is that individuals do not appear, on the face of things, to be acting as individuals, but rather to be coming together to form a unified group.

The Face of Things

The idea of “face” here is mine, and I do not think it serves as a particularly important metaphor for Minang speakers when they conceptualize baso-basi. It may nevertheless serve as a good way to think about what baso-basi is and what it does. In

⁴⁴ Men may also pay for each other’s cigarettes, but usually only if they were purchased individually rather than by the pack. This is likely a result of the fact that a package of cigarettes can represent a very large portion of a man’s average income for a day. Based on my own observations and the estimates of people I spoke with in Bukittinggi, it seems common for men to spend 25%, and sometimes even 50% of their income on cigarettes. Cigarette prices vary by brand, but an average price for a pack is something like Rp.6,000, or between \$.60 and \$.70. By contrast, the prices for drinks or snacks are often only Rp.100 to Rp.500.

part this is because baso-basi is about the face of things, about the performance of smooth social relationships untainted by any appearance of strain or conflict. A prototypical example would be the interaction between a host and a guest. If both the host and guest practice proper baso-basi, this interaction tracks a basic script that ensures its appearance as friendly and unproblematic.

According to this script (which I base here on both what I repeatedly observed and how people described such interactions to me), the guest comes to the door of the host and announces his or her presence with “*assalam alaikum*,”⁴⁵ to which the host replies “*walaikum salam*,” and (assuming the guest or the purpose of the guest’s visit is identified and accepted) an invitation to enter. The host and guest may then greet each other by very lightly grasping each other’s right hands and then touching their own right hands to their hearts.⁴⁶ The guest is then offered a seat, on the most comfortable and well-kept furniture if possible, and accepts it. (If, however, they sit on the floor – as is always the case in more formal, ritual occasions – a male guest or host would be sure to sit cross-legged, while a female guest or host would be sure to sit with her legs tucked under her and off to one side.) The host then asks the guest if he or she has already eaten, to which the guest replies, “*alah*” (“already”), even if this is not the case. An answer of “*alun*” (“not yet”) would require the host to try feed the

⁴⁵ From the Arabic (and widely used Islamic) greeting meaning “peace unto you.” The reply expresses the wish of peace returned in kind.

⁴⁶ The use of the left hand is avoided in interaction with other people, as it is considered dirty due to its (symbolic, more than practical) association with cleaning oneself on the toilet. Even bus drivers in West Sumatra will not stop for a person who tries to flag down a bus with a left-handed wave, unless the person appears to be a foreigner – meaning someone who is not Indonesian, but also perhaps someone who appears to be from Jakarta – and is assumed not to know any better and thus not to have intended any offense.

guest. This exchange avoids that possibility and the issues of providing for or begging from others that it might bring into being. The host then offers to get a drink (coffee—generally for men only—or tea, or at least water) for the guest, an offer that is likely to be refused at least once, although may ultimately be accepted. The host then gets the drink regardless, as well as, perhaps, some snack to present to the guest. The guest avoids eating the snack or drinking the drink until the host insists. However, before the guest leaves, he or she will be sure to consume at least a small amount of what has been offered. Taking nothing would be a snub. Even so, finishing everything that is served might call into question the generosity of the host, as if what was offered was insufficient, and so this too is best avoided.

In the conversation between the parties, both host and guest maintain an even demeanor, calm or even smiling facial expressions, and display no signs of strain or emotional extremes. Eventually, the guest requests permission to leave, which may cause the host to express regret at the brevity of the visit, and may also cause the host to invite the guest to stay and eat. This is a request that the guest refuses, saying he has already eaten, even if he is starving. The reason for the refusal is not simply that the guest must not appear to want to obligate the host to provide for him, but also because the initial offer may very well have been specious, and to refuse it protects the host. The host may have been offering simply because it is proper *baso-basi* to suggest that everyone may eat together. If the host actually has no food at home, an acceptance of such an offer would result in an embarrassing crisis.

The guest and host thank each other and exchange another round of “*assalam alaikum,*” “*walaikum salam,*” and the guest departs. If everyone is acting according to the standards of baso-basi, the guest-host interaction should occur in this manner even if the conversation taking place concerns a disagreement or a disappointment for one of the parties. By the end of the visit, such a topic will have been addressed, but feelings or strong opinions about it will have been expressed only indirectly.

Speaking indirectly, using what are called *kieh* (or *kiasan*, in Indonesian), is considered to be an essential characteristic of baso-basi. A *kieh* can be a comparison, analogy, allusion, figure of speech, or even the implicit moral of a story. A *kieh* is being used whenever someone says one thing, literally, but there is another, deeper meaning behind the surface of what is said. This indirectness can be used in everyday interactions, such as when payment is reframed as *pitih rokok*.

A common form of *kieh* is the use of *papatah*, aphorisms that generally rely on metaphor to express an idea. This is something that is essential in formal ritual situations, and often said to have once pervaded everyday speech. Today in Bukittinggi, such *papatah* are used only occasionally in everyday speech, but are still conceptualized as a particularly Minangkabau way of speaking, even in comparison to other Indonesian or Malay ethnic groups. I discussed one example in Chapter 2 in the section on conceptions of Minangkabau character. People often explained Minangkabau character by recounting the saying, “Wanting to be on top when pinned down, wanting to be outside when caged in” (“*Taimpik nak di ateh, takuruang nak di lua*”). While it might be tempting to think of *papatah* as clichés, and therefore as not

deeply meaningful, people generally talked to me about them as if they held deeper, purer expressions of truth than could be found in other kinds of language. It is important to realize that because they consist of well-known, set phrases, papatah carry a sort of authority of consensus that an inventive, but individually-conceived phrase can never match. I will say much more about the importance of indirect speech in Chapter 5.

If baso-basi is in part about the face, or surface of things, in another sense it is often very literally a matter of faces. We saw this above in terms of the interaction between a host and a guest in which smiles were exchanged as part of the ritual of the face-to-face encounter. As another illustration, imagine walking down a West Sumatran street and coming up to an older woman standing outside of her house. She looks at you blankly, not quite hostilely, tracking you with her eyes, as you get closer. The look does not change at all until you turn your head to look towards her, make eye contact and greet her with, “*mak*” (“mother”). The blank look suddenly spreads into a warm smile as she nods back to you.

Baso-basi begins first of all with greetings, and greetings serve as a way of initiating the face-to-face interaction that baso-basi regulates. Before greeting the old woman, there is no face-to-face interaction involved, and there is no baso-basi. The greeting transforms the proximity of two individuals into a social interaction, one in which messages are sent in both directions about unity and respect. You initiated the greeting with the old woman, for example, because younger people should greet older people first, rather than the other way around, as a sign of respect. A failure to initiate

the face-to-face interaction of baso-basi is taken as an indication that a person is too sombong to interact at all.

Not every interaction in West Sumatra is guided completely or even partly by baso-basi. There is more to say about how baso-basi relates to other kinds of interactions, and about what it means to say that baso-basi practices involve surfaces and indirection, implying things that are deeper or present in their absence. I will defer that discussion until Chapter 5. For now, I want to stay at the level of the surface and what it seems to show us directly. Baso-basi and its practices represent important ways of interacting in West Sumatra, and are important frames for Minangkabau identity and the assertion of certain kinds of values as significant ones. To clarify how this is so, I will now begin to tie the ethnographic material in this chapter to theories of person, self, and morality. It is my hope that this discussion will not only make a case for one way we can see baso-basi, but that it also will make the case that this is ultimately only a partial vision.

Person, Self, and Morality

Errington: The Minangkabau Person and the Performance of Baso-Basi

In the course of his insightful ethnography devoted to exploring Minangkabau epistemology, Frederick Errington (1984) turns his attention towards the Minangkabau concept of the person.⁴⁷ It is in fact as the core of a chapter devoted to the Minangkabau concept of the person that Errington engages in an extended discussion

⁴⁷ It should be kept in mind that Errington's account, even more so than my own, is based on men's social lives.

of baso-basi. After remarking on the importance of such rituals as inviting others to eat before beginning a meal, he goes on to write: “All of this and much more – including terms of address, ways of sitting, standing, kneeling, coming and going, consuming and serving food – was presented to me as baso basi” (20).

Errington writes that he was initially unclear about why such seemingly artificial performances of etiquette were so central to social interaction in West Sumatra. In Errington’s interpretation of the perspective of Minangkabau men, baso-basi appeared to be not simply a polite way of interacting, but often the very goal of interacting itself. Men seemed obligated, he writes, to venture out into the community every evening to exchange polite greetings. Eventually Errington concluded that while he, like other Americans, “was accustomed to measuring individual worth primarily in terms of a personal self,” in contrast, “the Minangkabau were accustomed to measuring individual worth primarily in terms of the extent to which an individual observed baso basi” (20). In other words, etiquette for the Minang is not simply a pleasant wrapping in which to package the valuable individual person that remains inside it, but is instead the very stuff by which one’s personhood is gauged. To have positive significance, an individual must perform baso-basi. According to this view, a moral person is created by a kind of aesthetics, while an internal self is merely a generic dimension of individual existence.

Errington argues that the reason Minang people measure “individual worth” in these terms is that they believe that people are unknowable aside from their external behavior – except, that is, for the general assumption that people are by nature egoistic

and prone to anti-social impulses. According to Errington, Minangkabau people “believe that if individuals were free to follow their own inclinations – if they were *bebas*, a term with very negative connotations, indicating freedom from constraint – then murder, rapine, pillage, and general mayhem would result” (50). Since people’s natural inclinations are destructive, morality exists only through the creation of norms that are generated by the community and imposed upon the individual in the form of *adat* (which Errington refers to as “*adaik*,” reflecting the Minang, as opposed to the Indonesian pronunciation). By following the rules of *adat* – which in everyday interactions means performing *baso-basi* – people suppress the bad impulses that arise from within by superseding them with the good behaviors prescribed by the community as a whole. It is, according to Errington’s analysis of Minangkabau concepts, the community that acts as the source of morality; only immorality springs from within individuals.

Consequently, Errington explains that *baso-basi* is not taken as a clue to a person’s moral character – that is, it does not indicate some more essential quality of their individual nature, which by definition is immoral – but rather a sign of their moral personhood: the performance of morality is the moral person, and the moral person exists only in observable behavior. This is what was meant above by referring to this kind of ethics as an “aesthetic” one. A “deeper” concept like character is, according to this argument, unimportant for the Minang: all people tend to be selfish and anti-social, but in any case, since we only have their behavior by which we can judge them, there is no use discussing anything beyond that. There is no use in trying

to figure out whether such behavior demonstrates what a person's intentions truly are, for no one can ever know, and in the end this is irrelevant as long as the proper behavior is maintained. For this reason, the only way for people to be moral, and to prove that they are moral – that they have “worth,” in Errington's terms – is to perform *baso-basi*, the public sign of commitment to morality in general. This performance must be continual because when a person is not engaged in it, there is reason to think that that person is instead engaging in behavior motivated by immoral impulses (cf. Siegel 1986: 70).

This should sound familiar from the ethnography presented above. Recall Da Andi's question to me: “How can someone be a terrorist if they are able to socialize well with others?” Errington's analysis makes sense out of this perspective. The person is evident on the surface of an individual's behavior, and the moral person is one who conforms to accepted standards of sociality. The intense focus on socializing (*bagaua*), on conforming (being *biaso*), and on situating oneself within the social body (*awak*) rather than separating oneself from it as an individual (being *sombong*) fit well into this moral framework. Where a person can demonstrate complete integration into the larger community, the person partakes of its moral nature; when a person asserts individual difference, the person is morally suspect.

Western and Non-Western Concepts of the Person

To this extent, Errington's analysis fits into a broader tradition of ethnographic accounts of concepts of the person in non-Western societies, and particularly Asian

and Oceanic ones. I want to take a few pages at this point to remark on some patterns that appear across many of these accounts, in the hope that the ensuing discussion will help to identify (though not yet fully analyze) the ideas that are at stake in the remainder of this dissertation. I will be concerned in the coming chapters with further delineating my understanding of the relationships between “person” or “self” (a distinction I will leave uncomfortably muddled for a few more pages, for the moment following Errington’s terminology and thus relying on the shorthand of “person”) and everyday morality among the people I know in Bukittinggi. In the next few pages, as I sketch some previous anthropological discussions of the person, the term “morality” will retreat briefly into the background, making only a few brief appearances at center stage. Shortly, I will address explicitly the way that morality fits integrally into all of these discussions. In the meantime it may be worth reading the following pages with the awareness that all of the anthropological discussions in question concern not merely what persons *are*, but what is *valuable* or important about persons.

Like Errington, many anthropological accounts of non-Western, and especially Asian and Oceanic societies explicitly contrast the concept of the person in these societies with a model of the Western conception of the person. Such contrasts, though varying in their details and emphases, generally follow a very broad pattern of pitting a Western conception of a person as an individually autonomous being containing its unique essence internally, with a non-Western conception of a person as a being incorporated into and constituted by its relationship to a greater social or metaphysical body.

Writing just before the Second World War, Marcel Mauss (1985) suggested that the person, as a cultural concept,⁴⁸ had gone through an evolution that had begun (and remained, in some societies) with the concept of specific roles within a social or moral order. That is, there was no generalized concept of a “person” at all. Only later – Mauss identifies Roman society as a turning point – did the concept of a *persona* develop, in which a human being, though not all human beings, took on personhood. Personhood was characterized by generic rights and obligations, as if it were a kind of metaphorical mask. Later still did Christianity and the Enlightenment complete the process by creating the concept of an individual as a center of moral accountability and internal psychological structures – that is, what Westerners think of as a person today. In sum, Mauss depicts a gradual process whereby personhood evolved from complete fusion with a social whole to, in modern Western society, its status as located within each individual (see Carrithers, *et al.* 1985 for a series of critical essays inspired by Mauss’s own).

Dumont (e.g., 1980, 1986) has also argued forcefully that modern capitalist society is unique in valuing the individual as a locus of personhood. He has maintained that in all pre-capitalist societies (although his focus is on India), the person is conceptualized within a holistic framework as part of the social collective, defined only in terms of a relationship to this collective, for example in terms of caste

⁴⁸ Mauss presents his argument as being about the development of the very “category” of person or self in human thought. As Collins (1985) makes clear, Mauss’s argument – as well as those he formulated together with Durkheim regarding other categories of thought – is logically flawed in regards to the development of a category of thought, but can be read more sympathetically as an argument about concepts.

status. Like Mauss, he has looked for concepts of the person in broad philosophical and institutional patterns in a given society, and like Mauss (and Durkheim), Dumont has argued that society must be understood as a reality in itself, not as the sum of interactions between individuals. From this holistic, sociological perspective, he has concluded that the members of all pre-capitalist societies also have a holistic, sociological perspective.

Perhaps setting the tone for most American ethnographic accounts of the person in recent decades, however, has been the interpretivist approach championed by Clifford Geertz. Like Mauss and Dumont, Geertz (1984) has concluded that the modern Western conception of the person is, to use his term, “peculiar” (126). As an interpretivist interested in cultures as unique systems of meaning that must be understood from within their own logic, Geertz differs sharply from Dumont in that he displays no interest in creating a typology of concepts of persons.⁴⁹ Geertz argues convincingly that the conceptions of the person to be found in the places where he has conducted research (on the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali, and in Morocco) each draw from quite distinct social patterns and symbolic systems. None of them fit the “conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational

⁴⁹ By singling out the Western conception as “peculiar,” however, he does seem to imply that it is – to use an absurd but perhaps appropriate phrase – especially unique. He may indeed be implying that the social institutions that have come about in the West in recent centuries are radically different from all other social institutions that the world has previously witnessed, and have as their concomitant a radically different conception of the person, even more markedly different from all the others than all the others are from each other. Another reasonable reading would be that because Geertz is writing for a Western audience, and because it is specifically the Western conception of the person that this audience might presume to be universal and natural, he is taking pains to single out that conception as being *as peculiar as any*.

and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (1984:126), which he suggests is specific to Western culture.

It is worth noting that while he does not suggest that other conceptions of person are therefore simply the Western conception turned on its head (e.g., unbounded, generic, integrated into and part of a social and natural whole, and so on), the package of features Geertz highlights as specific to the Western conception of the person have something in common with the observations made by Mauss and Dumont: the Western person is an individual, separated from any greater whole (including a social whole), and constituted by an essence contained in internal psychological structures. At least indirectly, Geertz’s argument reiterates the idea that other conceptions of the person may have, among other features, an ontology founded on the social, the relational, and the interrelational. In different ways, his accounts of Java, Bali, and Morocco bear this out.

Geertz’s most vivid example is that of Bali (particularly in Geertz 1973a). By examining Balinese naming systems, calendrical systems, and style of social interaction, Geertz argues that the Balinese symbolic universe – Balinese culture – defines persons not as individuals, but as embodiments of pieces of an eternal cosmic order reflected in the social structure. Individuals may fill different slots during the time that they are alive – as they move from being a child to a parent, for example – but to the Balinese what the person really is, according to Geertz, is the slot itself, not

the individual occupying it.⁵⁰ This is all reflected, finally, in the way the Balinese behave with each other. They are concerned primarily, he writes, with performance, or with the aesthetics of their interactions, to the point where the performance is real, the actor unreal: “It is *dramatis personae*, not actors, that endure; indeed, it is *dramatis personae*, not actors, that in the proper sense really exist. Physically men come and go, mere incidents in a happenstance history, of no genuine importance even to themselves” (1984:128).

The Balinese could thus be understood as having a sociocentric conception of the person, and one built out of a kind of performance that is considered more real than the performer. This reminds us a bit of the claims Errington makes for Minangkabau people and *baso-basi*, although the kind of sociocentrism involved in each case is quite different. As Morris (1994) contends, the Balinese in Geertz’s account imagine persons as being part of a cosmic or religious order merely reflected in the social order. They therefore seem to straddle the line between having a conception of the person that emphasizes the individual’s ultimate unity with others in the realm of social relations (similar, perhaps, to the Minangkabau), and one that, like other Hindu conceptions, sees the person as ultimately part of a more purely metaphysical unity with other beings.

Morris notes that ethnographies of Oceania and Melanesia often point towards a “sociocentric” conception of the person, and he includes Geertz’s vision of Bali in

⁵⁰ This matches, according to Geertz, the Balinese conception of time, in which one moment replaces another, as opposed to one moment running into the next in a continual progression: there is no individual “person” as a constant continually moving from one position to another, there are rather only positions to fill.

this geographical area.⁵¹ While Indonesia is usually considered to have only one foot dipped in Oceania – its eastern foot, while Sumatra lies at the western extreme of the nation – the general pattern seems to hold true for descriptions of social life in many parts of Asia, to which Indonesia also claims membership. Markus and Kitayama (1991), focusing mostly heavily on Japan, explicitly discuss “sociocentrism” in non-Western societies, in which they see people as primarily oriented towards adjusting themselves to their social context and fitting into it, rather than expressing some pre-existing, unique essence contained within them. Shweder and Bourne (1984), who also frame their argument as a contrast between Western egocentrism and non-Western sociocentrism, draw largely from research in India in making the case for these two types of conceptions of the person.

Ethnographies of Indonesia follow the trend as well, as we saw for Bali. As a further example, Keeler’s (1987) discussion of Java describes how the Javanese person is understood to be a nexus of power and status, with such status being created and embodied in interaction with others: how someone treats you is read as a manifestation of the power you hold and creates the status that you occupy. This conception of a Javanese person is thus situated within social relations rather than within the individual. Keeler, like Geertz, finds that the performance of etiquette is extremely important in Java, and central to the conception of the makeup of a person.

⁵¹ Morris’s three main examples, aside from Geertz’s take on Bali, are taken primarily from Read’s (1955) description of the Gahuku-Gama in New Guinea, Lutz’s (1988) analysis of emotional life among the Ifaluk in the Pacific, and Fitz-Poole’s (e.g., 1982) ethnographic studies of the Bimin-Kuskusmin, also in New Guinea.

Speaking more closely to the case of the Minangkabau, Peletz (1996) argues that their close cousins, the Malays of Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, have a “relational” conception of the person. What primarily defines a “person,” Peletz writes, is the relationships one human being has to another, usually conceived in terms of kinship. A person is – literally or by metaphorical extension – a mother, a daughter, or an elder brother, rather than an individual defined in terms of his or her own unique qualities. This reliance on kinship and kinship metaphors is something that they share with Minangkabau, who attach many of the same obligations and expectations of behavior as do Malays to categories such as “older brother.” Additionally, of course, the relationships are different in different contexts, as the same individual can be a mother as well as a daughter and an older sister, and so on. It is in these specific relationships that one’s attitude, behavior, and moral responsibilities are defined, according to Peletz. While persons do have other properties – they have physical bodies and they have desires, for example – these are generic qualities of all individuals, not particular to any specific person. Relying on Geertz’s description of the Western conception of the person, he notes the contrasts between what he found in Negeri Sembilan and how Westerners think about persons.

Moral Orientations

I would now like to bring the term “morality” back into full view, and address the ways that morality is related to these discussions of person (and, eventually, to the term “self”). By morality, I mean, as Charles Taylor (1989) has put it, not simply

“what it is good to do,” but also “what it is good to be” (3). In this sense, a person is moral to the extent that they can claim some kind of positive significance for their own existence. Taylor identifies three axes of moral thinking along which such significance might lie (15). First, a moral person treats others with the proper respect – meaning one gives to others what they are owed by virtue of their status (as other persons, or as particular kinds of other persons) and does not take from them what they deserve to retain. Second, a moral person lives a life that fulfills its proper potential and is not wasted on unimportant or irrelevant matters. Finally, a moral person has dignity, derived from being positively assessed by others (what we might call “honor”), and/or having a positive assessment of his or her own self (what we might call “self-respect,” or even “self-esteem”). Such dignity may be drawn, of course, from an assessment of a person’s positions on the first two axes.⁵² In this light, we must understand a moral person not merely as a person who makes proper ethical choices, but as a person whose existence is oriented towards the good: the good of respecting what and whom ought to be respected, the good of fulfilling the role (as in a “part” of a larger field of existence) that one ought to fulfill, and the good of being held in esteem.

⁵² Dignity is, as Taylor notes, tied up with issues of pride and shame. As I have explored elsewhere (Simon 1999), this relationship is tricky because in some cultural contexts a person – particularly, a person on the lower end of a hierarchical divide – may take a certain kind of pride, and secure a sense of dignity, in maintaining a sense of “shame” vis-à-vis others. This is not the sting of self-eroding humiliation (destructive to dignity by definition) but rather the humility and deference that reflect an awareness of shame’s looming threat. Dignity, in this sense, is not always a matter of superiority, but can be seen as more tightly connected to propriety. I discuss shame more in Chapter 4.

As Taylor, who is principally concerned with tracing the development of moral thinking in the modern West, remarks, “Probably something like these three axes exists in every culture. But there are great differences in how they are conceived, how they relate, and in their relative importance” (16). Do all human beings deserve the same respect, or do ones of different races, ages, classes, lineages, accomplishments, or so on, deserve different things from us? Do all human beings deserve our efforts to keep them alive and free from unnecessary pain? Or, perhaps we believe that it is more important that certain human beings of high status are given our obedience and loyalty. There may be spirits or gods to whom we must fulfill obligations. Also, what is the definition of a full life? The role that one must fulfill may be determined by one’s birth as the second son in a family of a particular caste; or it may determined by the needs of the state. Or is it rather determined by one’s unique, innate qualities that lie waiting to be discovered and then brought by individual effort into full flower, enriching the world? Finally, one’s dignity may come from the awe one inspires in one’s enemies, the control one imposes on one’s emotions, the status of one’s ancestry, or even from one’s stable nuclear family, well-maintained house and new car.

In short, there can be markedly different cultural orientations towards each of these axes of morality. What seems important to me about Taylor’s argument is less the precise division of morality into these three particular axes, and more the way that

Taylor's approach opens up morality to a more holistic investigation.⁵³ What we can take from Taylor's argument is that doing right and wrong is only one of the ways that a human being can evaluate the significance of his or her existence.

There is another trail down which I would like to follow Taylor, one that connects morality back to the discussion of the person. This is already implicit in the discussion above. It is impossible to imagine any of these axes of morality as completely detached from a conception of person. It is only in conceiving of the dimensions and capacities of persons that we can begin to sort out the nature of the good in human life. For example, in his discussion of the modern West, Taylor examines how the notion of a person as containing interior depths is tied to the moral good of expression. That is, one (though certainly not the only) way we imagine creating a full, significant life is through the discovery, unleashing, and communication to others of the deep, even spiritual meaning and personal insight contained within our individual selves. (The realm of art provides one of the key examples.) Such a concept necessarily entails both a moral vision of what is good and a vision of what constitutes a person. We cannot imagine the good of such expression if persons did not have depths; nor can we comprehend such depths without a moral orientation towards them: once they are recognized, what is one to do with them? Are interior depths to be expressed, or are they rather – as the ethnographic material in this

⁵³ We could ask, for instance, along which axis a concern for (to take just one example) hygiene might fall. It is possible to imagine it as a matter of care for the self and the body that brings one closer to the ideal image of a human being, or as a matter of securing the esteem of others, or even as a way of properly relating to God (as in the ritual washing done before Islamic prayer). It can probably be all of these things, but classifying it according to an axis, or each instance in which it becomes important, adds little to the discussion.

chapter would appear thus far to suggest is the case for Minangkabau people – to be suppressed or overridden by something else? Knowing what one is cannot be disentangled from confronting what one should be. As Taylor writes, “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary” (28).⁵⁴

The anthropological explorations of person discussed above are all explorations of moral orientations as well. They all address culturally shaped visions of the good, and can generally be reread as descriptions of important moral orientations in the societies in question. The good may be understood in terms of hierarchy, kinship obligations, a cosmic order, spiritual power, submission to God, and so on. This is certainly true for Errington’s suggestion that the Minangkabau concept of the person exists as a performance of the good of self-control and normative social interaction. Essentially this is a claim for a particular moral orientation in Minangkabau society, a moral orientation that then acts as a kind of lens through which the nature of the person is viewed.

Accepting the case for the enmeshment of person and moral orientation, however, may sow the seeds for an unfortunate temptation. Once we are viewing persons through the lens of moral orientation, it may be easy to gaze only through the

⁵⁴ Taylor (1989) contends that modern philosophies that deny the existence of *any* “constitutive” source of the good – identifying any conception of the good as either the product of pure subjective projection onto a neutral world or (in the case of some “post-modern” philosophies) as an arbitrary construction born in the service of an oppressive regime – are completely incredible. He argues that these philosophies are themselves hinged on implicit conceptions of the good, such as freedom and autonomy, even as they deny any possible moral source that could sanction such a good over any other.

widest and most sharply defined moral orientation that we find in a given society. Having identified the orientation that we believe is most central for people in that society, we may then declare that we have also identified the nature of “the person” in that society. However, there is no reason to believe that any society is characterized by a single, all-encompassing moral orientation, so such an approach is likely to leave us with a very limited understanding of persons in that society. To accept such a limited view is to accept as well a very limited definition of the term “person” – a word that normally invites us to believe that we are talking about something quite profound, reaching into the very heart of matters of human existence. While a more limited definition may be defensible, at the very least it needs to be made explicit enough that claims made about “persons” that are in fact quite narrow do not appear otherwise. The next question, then, is what is meant by “person” in the ethnographic accounts discussed above? It is to a discussion of the use of term “person” – and the use of the related term “self” – to which I now turn.

Dimensions of Person and Self

Taylor in fact uses the term “self” rather than “person,” and this is also the case in some of the ethnographic literature I have discussed above (e.g., Keeler 1987, Markus and Kitayama 1991). Several scholars have remarked that these terms often become conflated, and have pointed to the way that even a single term like “self” is used to mean different things by different authors (e.g., Harris 1989; Spiro 1993; Lindholm 1997). There is no long-established rule of usage for these terms, so

arguments about person or self need to be examined individually to determine what kinds of claims are being made.

Still, each term pushes in a different direction. In general, “person” tends to be used when indicating the nature of an individual’s particular social and moral relationships with other individuals and with larger social and metaphysical collectives. A “self” can better be understood as a person’s living of their own particular personhood, a locus of both experience and agency. Echoing Hallowell’s (1955) seminal essay, several scholars have more recently reminded us that the self can most fruitfully be seen as having an experiential element, as “that part of consciousness that comes into play when a human being begins to take him- or herself as an object” (Hollan 1992: 284), or as “the human being as a locus of experience, including experience of that human’s own someoneness” (Harris 1989: 601). Parish (n.d.) emphasizes that even beyond the fact that selves are experienced, the self must also be seen as an agent, a means of making a life as a human being in the world.

Mauss (1985) uses equivalents for both “person” (*personne*) and “self” (*moi*) in his essay, and also distinguishes between self as an experiential sense of one’s own “individuality, both spiritual and physical” (which he takes to be a human universal, and emphasizes is not the topic of his essay), and self as a “notion or concept” (3). Yet Carrithers (1985) argues that Mauss conflates *personne* and *moi*. Whereas the person must be seen as the “conception of the individual human being as a member of a (1) significant and (2) ordered collectivity” (235), he writes that the self is the “conception of (1) the physical and mental individuality of human beings within (2) a

natural or spiritual cosmos, and (3) interacting with each other as moral agents” (236). In Carrithers’ reading, Mauss starts out tracing the history of the former and ends up trying to claim that it evolved into the latter. That is, to put it in different terms, that a concept of the person that centered on human beings as fitting into the larger social or moral order evolved in the West into the concept of the person that centered on the internal structures of individuals as autonomous moral actors: selves. The idea then would be that the nature of persons is defined in every society by that society’s particular cultural conceptions, but that in contrast the self is merely a *dimension* of one particular conception of person: that which is driven by a moral orientation towards individualism.

Not all scholars differentiate person from self in precisely this same manner, but Carrithers’ reading of Mauss brings up a more fundamental concern. If we concentrate on a limited set of evidence in our analysis of the concept of the person in a given cultural context, the claims that we can make about the significance of that concept are limited as well. Mauss focused heavily on such matters as legal and ritual status, an approach followed by Dumont in his examination of caste. If we concentrate on some very specific ways that persons are members “of a (1) significant and (2) ordered collectivity,” we should not be surprised that in the resulting picture, “the person” is primarily defined by the integration of the individual into a larger collective. This very definition of person pushes us in this direction, and pushes us

away from asking questions about subjective experience or agency.⁵⁵ If we then compare this picture of *their* personhood with *our* selfhood, we end up making unwarranted claims about the radical difference between them and us, the West and the non-West (cf Cohen 1994, Sökefeld 1999).

What seems to seal the conclusion that this or that non-Western concept of person is defined by such integration into a larger collective is the tendency to read persons not simply through certain kinds of public institutions, but through a *single* hegemonic moral orientation represented by these institutions. This is what allows for the creation of the Western vs. non-Western dichotomy. Yet such a dichotomy is unwarranted. Dumont, for example, has been convincingly critiqued for missing the importance of the individual in many Indian communities (Morris 1978) as well as for missing the multiple, sometimes contradictory conceptions of person that play a role even in societies dominated by the hegemony of caste (Parish 1996). Dividing conceptions of the person into two types – one Western/capitalist/modern, the other non-Western/pre-capitalist/traditional – may help to highlight the taken-for-granted contours of our own thinking, and the differences these have from the thinking of other people in other places in the world. However, as a theoretical model, a dichotomy is far too simplistic to tell us very much. Trying to relate the concept of

⁵⁵ It is possible to see how this approach pushes person away from matters of living as a human being. By this I mean not only that spirits and gods that may be part of the significant and ordered collectivity in which human beings participate, and thus be persons, but also that persons can simply be legal entities. In American society, corporations are legally defined as “persons.” While this tells us something about the nature of our society and our moral orientations, what it tells us in a general sense about being a person in American society is obviously limited. It certainly takes us far away from asking questions about experience and agency.

person active in a particular cultural context primarily through the way it differs from – or even turns on its head – “our own” concepts is bound to obscure as much as it reveals. We end up with a partial picture of both person and morality.

Constructing such dichotomies simply requires the assumption that there is a single, unified model that describes the way an entire community – and every member of that community – thinks about persons, all the time. Such an assumption is simply unwarranted, and does not match what we can observe ethnographically (McHugh 1989; Hollan 1992; Murray 1993; Spiro 1993; Lamb 1997). For example, although we may find ways that Japanese people orient themselves towards others, and Westerners orient themselves towards an inner ego, we can also find ways that the reverse is true as well (Lindholm 1997). Similarly, even in societies replete with Buddhist conceptions of the illusion of self and the moral good of its renunciation, it is not difficult to see that people lead lives equally saturated in a (culturally shaped) concern with their particular status, relations with others, and sense of “self-esteem” (Spiro 1996), or what we might identify as Taylor’s moral axis of dignity. Not all Western conceptions of the person are necessarily characterized completely by egocentricity, boundedness, and so on. Certainly there are many and conflicting visions of the person in Western societies, articulated not only in daily life, but also in the explicit formulations of philosophers and social theorists since the Enlightenment (Morris 1997, Murray 1993, Seigel 2005, Taylor 1989).

To take a concrete example of these kinds of problems, we can turn back to Geertz’s analysis of Bali. One difficulty with accepting Geertz’s analysis of Bali is

that, even though he uses the term “person” and not “self,” he explicitly argues that he is talking about the subjective states of individuals and their experiences of themselves. He is not merely arguing that Balinese philosophy or religion contains a conception of the depersonalized person, but that Balinese people experience themselves primarily as pieces occupying slots in a cosmic order, and not at all as individuals with thoughts, feelings, and life histories. In Geertz’s analysis, a single conception of the person becomes not merely the *only* conception of the person available to the Balinese, but by virtue of being the only conception available, it also become the only conceptual tool by which Balinese people can experience themselves.⁵⁶ Person occupies and erases self.

In fact, the accuracy and completeness of Geertz’s account of Balinese conceptions of the person has been challenged. Hobart (1986) has suggested that Geertz failed to ask how the Balinese experience the symbolic systems that he analyzed. For example, does the Balinese calendar really lead to, or reflect a subjective sense of “punctual” time in which one moment does not flow into the next, but remains isolated from the moment before and after it? Or, is the calendar instead relevant to a more philosophical understanding that the universe of deities runs according to a “complex order *distinct* from the variability of human affairs” and thus

⁵⁶ So Geertz seems to claim some of the time. He also argues that experience leaks through this conception, and that the Balinese emotion of *lek* is like a “stagefright” in which they worry about something leaking through their aesthetic performance of personhood. In a separate article (1973b) Geertz’s analysis of the meaning of cockfights in Bali points to a far more complex and fascinating mixture of moral and religious ideology, social tensions, and emotional experience. These contradictions provided by Geertz’s rich ethnography are perhaps clues that his analyses of public cultural patterns need to be disentangled from his theoretical claims about their relationship to subjectivity.

relates only peripherally to the human experience of time (142, emphasis added)?

Wikan (1990) counters Geertz's depiction of Balinese people as unconcerned with their own selves and emotions by describing both dimensions of Balinese personhood that Geertz leaves out of his analysis – for example, conceptions about “hearts” and emotions – as well as the experiences of individual Balinese people consciously struggling to get by in everyday life. Geertz's picture of Bali gives a rich sense of some dimensions of person and morality in Bali, but it is a partial picture. For the sake of creating an integrated cultural picture, and due to its reliance on only certain kinds of public culture, it dismisses other dimensions of person and morality that may be important to the Balinese themselves. The Balinese may understand themselves both as manifestations of eternal pieces in a cosmic order *and*, in other contexts, as autonomous agents managing their very real hearts.

This argument can be taken even further. Cultural conceptions of person and self can act as ideological blinkers, focusing consciousness on the things *should* be, or might be in a perfectly ordered world. While such conceptions may be used in order to understand the experience of self, they do not necessarily succeed at explaining all experiences. When experiences run counter to those ideals, the cultural conceptions of person, and of self, may even help to obscure those experiences, making them resistant to clear interpretation. Wikan (1990) explains that there is a difference between the broad, abstract structures of “culture,” and the actual experiences of individuals:

“‘Culture’ may be depicted as neat and orderly. Life characteristically is not.
 ‘Culture’ may be represented as being composed of constituent parts that articulate in

a structure of logical and reassuring consistency. But life overflows, messes up things, and strains a person's comprehension and powers of endurance even when the 'answers' or 'solutions' provided by custom seem simple and clear" (1990: 27; cf. Wellenkamp 1988, Hollan 1992, Spiro 1993).

Partial Visions: The Person as Baso-Basi

I bring up these theoretical arguments at this point having only offered an ethnographic slice of life in Bukittinggi, concentrating in this chapter on an inter-related set of themes: social unity, conformity, and formalized face-to-face interactions. In one sense, this is not an ideal moment to relate theory to ethnography, for the ethnography has been too partial, too limited to use robustly with the theories I have presented. My discussion of self may therefore be a bit impoverished. I do not want to push the theory too far, substituting abstract claims for ethnographic ones. That it is too soon to be thorough about these matters is exactly the point I hope will be made clear by beginning a discussion of theory at this time, in a chapter devoted to a particular ethnographic theme.

I have been specifically interested in this discussion in focusing on approaches to person and self that highlight social integration as a key to, or even the very stuff of persons and selves in particular societies. As I discovered in Bukittinggi, and Errington found in the village of Bayur several decades before me, social integration is an important theme in Minangkabau social life, reflecting a certain vision of the good. It would be possible to offer this vision of the good as a description of Minangkabau

personhood, arguing that Minangkabau people see the person as situated in the social whole, and as existing in the performance of social interaction according to a recognized set of norms. It would also be possible to offer this vision of the good as the definitive description of Minangkabau morality, the complete vision that shapes Minangkabau conceptions of personhood and experiences of self. This would be a distorted and incomplete conclusion.

As the discussion above has suggested, it would be necessarily only a partial picture of what it means to be a person – certainly to be a self – in West Sumatra. It would also be a partial picture of what it means to be moral. These are important dimensions of life in West Sumatra, as other kinds of “sociocentrism” or “holism” – whatever term seems most appropriate for a particular ethnographic context – undoubtedly are for life in other parts of Asia, Oceania, and beyond.⁵⁷ Yet, Minangkabau personhood and visions of the good also incorporate other dimensions, and individuals’ experiences of life in West Sumatra bursts the seams of any single, neat conception of the relationship between individuals and the community.

Errington’s claim that Minangkabau people “measure individual worth primarily in terms of” baso-basi as opposed to a “personal self” seems to imply that for Minangkabau people, personhood is in some sense situated in such formalized

⁵⁷ By lumping Mauss, Dumont, Geertz, Shweder, Markus and others together I have no doubt destroyed much of the subtlety of their positions, and undersold their very significant differences from each other. My hope is that my crude handling of their theories serves to do more than merely provide cheap filling for a larger straw man. I hope that in situating these theories at their point of commonality, I can also make clear that, at the very least collectively, they have some substance. That is, it is not a coincidence that so many theorists, though coming from different perspectives, have seen something similar. There is something there, even if we might question what exactly that something is.

social interactions. I think Errington is correct, but this gives us only a partial account of how “worth,” or moral value, attaches to individuals in West Sumatra. I think he has identified a particular vision of the good that gets expressed in Minangkabau society through certain kinds of everyday interactions. As my own ethnographic material in this chapter has shown, there is a conception of the good in Minangkabau society that recognizes the performance of social integration and the muting of individual autonomy as a site of moral personhood. This does not mean that this is the only way that persons and the good manifest themselves in Minangkabau society.

The contrast he makes between Minangkabau “persons” and Western “selves” – as if we somehow recognize a “self” of depth with an inconsequential surface, where they recognize a “person” of surface with an inconsequential depth – also threatens to close off the path to inquiry regarding the way that Minangkabau people actually experience themselves engaging with the demands of this vision of the good. The identification of a certain dimension of self (e.g., self as constituted in the public performance of etiquette) as superior to another dimension (e.g., self as an autonomous agent) pushes us to see the devalued dimensions as not quite real, or as irrelevant (Parish nd). No matter how devalued, these dimensions may be far from irrelevant for the experience of living.

Recall from Chapter 2 above, Kahn’s (1993) argument that the Minangkabau have come to represent themselves to the world in terms of an objectified and ordered “adat” in large part because Dutch colonialists and social scientists imagined them this way. Errington argues that adat acts as the ultimate truth in Minangkabau

epistemology, and that in this epistemology meaning can always be found on the surface of things, not buried beneath in deeper layers. He ties this to what he sees as their understanding of the truth contained in the performance of baso-basi, and the irrelevance of anything like an internal character lying beneath the performance. It is possible, however, that the lack of depth Errington found in his informants' answers to his questions about the meaning of various cultural symbols was due to the fact the fact that the ideology of adat is in general more about the framework of adat, of the existence of a definitive Minangkabau order, than it is about specific, meaningful content. Further, the privileging of the order of adat (including the performance of baso-basi) in defining what it means to be a Minangkabau person would seem to recreate this vision of Minangkabau people as defined by such objectified rules of social order. We have to be careful then not to confuse what it means to be a "Minangkabau" person with what social life is like for Minangkabau people.

Although he does not explore all of the implications, Errington's own ethnography is quite clear on the fact that baso-basi is limited both as a description of actual behavior and a lens through which people experience their lives. He does not make the claim that Minangkabau people's entire subjective experience of being a person is dominated by the performance of baso-basi, or that this is taken by them to be isomorphic with their own selves. To the contrary, he is quite clear that the very concept of baso-basi is premised on the idea that persons contain motivations and intentions that they try self-consciously to keep hidden. He even notes that "concealment of private motives and objectives is socially commendable and is in fact

essential if there is to be social order. But concealing motives may also be used to evade public scrutiny and undermine social order. It is this second aspect of being impenetrably oblique that creates among the Minang a fundamental uncertainty about what anyone is really up to” (1984:45-6).

It is this not knowing what anyone is really up to that leads, in Errington’s analysis, to a strong tendency among Minangkabau people to resist situations that place them under the control of others. Instead, he notes that there is a prominent element of individualism in Minangkabau affairs (50-51), and that as a form of social control, baso-basi “is substantially limited to the public realm and is, moreover, even there further limited in the case of young men” (36) who often do not conform to its rules. My own ethnography has also commented these other elements: the tendency for Minangkabau people to favor small, independent businesses; the importance of securing the consensus of all individuals in group decision-making; and the emphasis placed on the moral value of individual autonomy (see Chapter 2 above).

These are areas where, it seems to me, there is a sort of failure of the moral vision expressed through baso-basi – or, if not a failure, at least a butting up against limits. No one can ever be truly committed to the vision of reality contained in baso-basi, because no one can ever be sure if and when anyone else is committed to it. Errington writes that baso-basi “forms a daily ritual in which individuals attempt to demonstrate that they are suppressing their selfish inclinations in the interests of social order *rather than* concealing them to evade and undermine that order,” (54; italics added). We have seen, however, that baso-basi can *always* be both of these things,

everyone knows this to be the case, and no one can ever be certain of the difference. Like the famous “cleverness” of Minangkabau people, baso-basi can be an expression of the good, or a means to something else entirely. This opens up an entirely new, more dynamic way of understanding the relationship between persons and baso-basi.

Us and Me

At the beginning of this chapter, I argued that the sense of “usness” signaled by the use of the term “awak” did more than emphasize the integration of individuals into a larger whole. I argued that, simultaneously, it created a space in which an individual could, and was expected to act autonomously. Rather than frame an interaction as one containing the possibility of conflict between individual wills, “awak” frames it as one that cannot contain conflict, for it represents the actions of a united whole. It is not the only frame available to people, however. As a result, “awak” does not actually obscure, in people’s consciousness, the fact that individuals act autonomously and that conflict is possible. By removing the threat of public conflict, what it does is to provide a kind of “personal” (if not completely private) space in which individuals are therefore free to act autonomously, and to imagine themselves as active moral agents. In effect, I will argue, much of baso-basi provides for this same dynamic. Minangkabau people have ideas about persons – and about themselves – as socially integrated moral actors and as autonomous, morally valuable individuals. Baso-basi must be understood not merely for the way it reflects socially integrated persons, but

for the way its performance engages autonomous selves as well. Like “awak,” a person partakes of “usness” without erasing the “me.”

The following three chapters will continue to address moral experience among Minangkabau people in Bukittinggi, looking not merely at the ideology of an ideal and integrated community, but also at the way individuals engage with that ideal, and with the actual, imperfect community that they live in. In Chapter 5, many of the issues raised directly here will resurface, and I will examine them in light of additional ethnographic material. I will show how the norms of “depersonalizing” public interactions also are fueled by and in turn create particular (that is, culturally shaped) psychological and social spaces in which individual identity and autonomy are fashioned and elaborated upon. To present that discussion in a way that makes sense, however, I think it is first useful to take a step back and get a wider view. Specifically, I wish to examine the ways that Minangkabau people talk and think about the moral and immoral dimensions of persons, and how they imagine morality and immorality moving into and out of the self. It is to this discussion that I turn in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

MORAL SELVES in an IMMORAL WORLD

According to the Nov. 17 article, Margaret Hassan, the director of CARE International in Iraq, was apparently killed by her captors, shot in cold blood. From what I have read and heard, Hassan was not only against our invasion of Iraq, she was a longtime resident and citizen of Iraq, married to an Iraqi and was a Muslim convert. She worked for the CARE humanitarian organization that helped more than 17 million Iraqis. She gave her life for Iraq.

For those who still want to call the animals who murdered her “insurgents,” call them what they really are. Evil.

-- Letter -writer Maureen Dickson to the editors of the *Los Angeles Times*. November 18, 2004.

US Prepared to Oppose Iraq On Its Own. Because it's sombong, it forgets the whisperings of its conscience.¹

-- *Padang Ekspres*. March 14, 2003.

An Islamic Conception of Evil

When I asked people in Bukittinggi why they thought there was evil in the world, they virtually always answered me by turning to their understanding of the Koran. They explained that, after creating Adam, the first human, God ordered the angels to bow down before Adam in deference to his superior nature. The angels were dubious, seeing only Adam's potential for causing trouble, but most eventually submitted to God's instructions and acknowledged Adam's special link to God. There was one angel, however, who still refused, insisting that he was superior to Adam and thus above this display of deference. This angel, Iblis (identified with the Biblical

¹ “AS Siap Sendirian Lawan Irak. Dek sombong, lupo bisikan hati nurani.” (Pojok. *Padang Ekspres*, 4. March 14, 2003).

Lucifer, or Satan), was then cast away and damned to hell.² Refusing his proper place, Iblis ends up banished completely. Separated from God, he is the ultimate representation of both evil and of ruptured social relations.

Though banished, Iblis did not just disappear. It was at this point that he entered the human world. Before beginning an eternity in hell, Iblis requested and received a reprieve from God. He was allowed to postpone until judgment day his descent into hell. Meanwhile, Iblis would attempt to lead Adam and all of Adam's descendants astray from God's path. Anyone who followed his call would also eventually join him in hell.

There is no original sin in Islam – at least, no original *human* sin. Human beings are born morally pure. Instead, the “original sin” that carries evil, pain, and suffering down through the ages is the transgression committed by Iblis, who continues to try to lead human beings astray.³ This original sin is in fact understood as an original act of *sombong* (arrogance). Iblis was too *sombong* to bow down before

² “Verily We created you and gave you form and shape, / and ordered the angels to bow / before Adam in homage; / and they all bowed but Iblis / who was not among those who bowed. / ‘What prevented you’ (said God), / ‘from bowing (before Adam) at My bidding?’ / ‘I am better than him,’ said he, / ‘You created me from fire, and him from clay.’ / So God said: ‘Descend. / You have no right to be insolent here. / Go, and away; you are one of the damned.’” (Koran 7: 11-13; English interpretation from Ali 1993).

³ Iblis thus tempts Adam and Hawa (Eve) to eat the forbidden fruit, which they do, and they are expelled from paradise. Some people in Bukittinggi thus explained to me that human beings are all born outside of paradise as a result of this punishment (*hukuman*) of Adam and Hawa. However, they did not see this as implying any sort of impure moral status adhering to Adam and Hawa's descendants, at least not at birth. When I asked about the presence of evil and suffering in the world, no one ever turned to the fall of Adam and Hawa as an explanation, but rather always to the story of the fall of Iblis that preceded it. Of course, the ability of Adam and Hawa to be tempted is precisely the sort of thing that made the angels dubious about God's creation of Adam. The Koranic story thus leaves an opening for immorality to stem from human capacities as well. This is *nafsu*, which I will discuss below.

Adam, considering himself – incorrectly – to be superior to Adam and above a display of deference to him. The legacy of this act of sombong is that human beings are under constant threat of being led away, by a corrupting world, from a proper moral life, and into being sombong themselves. Iblis inhabits the human world. In this conception of Islam, evil is only inherent in persons to the extent that they cannot help but be a part of the corrupting world. Like Iblis, humans can come to embody evil through their own dislocation from an original state of moral purity. In West Sumatra, such dislocation is often imagined as one in which the individual self has moved away from its proper place within the moral community.

In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of sombong, explaining how central it is to people's moral judgments about each other. I noted that it was applied to anyone who did not mix in properly with others, particularly if they were seen as making themselves somehow greater than everyone else, or than the collective as a whole. The metaphor underlying the term's etymology, as I pointed out, appears to be one of swelling or bulging out, so that the sombong person is a person who sticks out of proper bounds, or swells up out of place. Archetypal examples of sombong involve the refusals or avoidance of socializing with other people, such as failing to properly acknowledge someone in greeting, failing to join the community in celebrations, or (especially for men) not participating in everyday interactions at the coffeehouse, prayer house, or other arena of public interaction. As I have also explained, sombong is also applied to a person who wears markedly flashy clothing, insists too vehemently

that their own opinion or base of knowledge is correct or superior, or shows signs of being more highly educated or richer than “normal” (*biaso*) people.

There is a much more general term for evil or moral badness in Minang: *jaek* (*jahat*, I). However, while I occasionally heard ideas or people (from murderers to naughty children) described as “jaek,” I constantly heard them condemned as “sombong.” Moreover, I almost never heard “jaek,” as an attribute, used as an *explanation* of bad behavior. Someone was more likely to do something jaek because they were too sombong to appreciate the immorality of the act than they were to do something jaek because they were themselves essentially jaek, or motivated by it, as if it were a force in the world. Jaek is a classification of behavior, but sombong speaks to a model of personhood.

This is not to say that a conception of a totalizing immorality does not also find a place in West Sumatra. As an example, Da Palo once spoke with me about people whose “hearts had been stamped (*hati dicap, hati distempel*) with blackness.” That is, unredeemable people whose very being had been turned over to immorality, and who had been marked by God as such. He told me that he knew of this from the Koran, and mentioned it as something of a caveat to the point he had been making at the time: that no matter how bad (jaek) someone was, they always had a bit of good, or “cleanness” inside them from which a complete moral cleansing could begin. Yet, I was struck by the pervasive the use of “sombong” and its synonyms to describe the

nature of immoral behavior relative to the rather infrequent use of concepts of essential badness.⁴

Some of the moral failings named above may sound relatively trivial, and accusations of *sombong* can be made in regard to petty matters, or even be made jokingly. The fact that *sombong* is also perhaps the key characteristic of Iblis, however, underscores the seriousness of *sombong* as a conception of immorality, and the way that the translation of “arrogance” does not quite convey the pull of its gravity. Any immoral act, or any rejection of the Truth of Islam and its moral code, can be understood as an act of *sombong*, an act of swelling up beyond proper boundaries.

This includes immoral acts that result in major bloodshed. U.S. foreign policy in general and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq most especially were said, in the newspapers as well as in people’s everyday conversations, to be *sombong*. They were said to be a result of misplaced certainty in the righteousness of some cause, leading to

⁴ A crude analysis of the transcribed texts of eighteen recorded sermons and religious lectures given in the Bukittinggi area in 2003 provides some additional data on this point. I ran word searches on these transcriptions, looking for all the Indonesian and Minang terms for “arrogance” that I could come up with, and discovered thirty-nine instances in which one of these terms was used. At least one of these terms appeared in seven of the eighteen transcriptions. “*Sombong*” appeared twelve times, while some version of “*takabua*” appeared twenty-three times (twelve of them in a single sermon). The latter is a “*sombong*” synonym derived from Arabic, and is most closely associated with religious matters (unbelief, rejection of Islam), which helps to explain its relative frequency. I discovered only eight instances in which “*jahat*” or “*jaek*” (meaning “evil,” or “morally bad,” or just “harmful”) was used. These were spread over six of the eighteen transcriptions. In two cases they took the form of “*kejahatan*,” which references the larger concept of “evil” or “evilness.” More general terms for “bad” (e.g., “*buruak*,” “*jelek*”) appeared forty-one times, but only twice in a form that clearly indicates a larger concept of badness: “*keburukan*.” The idea of “sin” (“*doso*,” “*dosa*,”), which classifies an act, appeared ninety-four times, and in thirteen of the eighteen transcriptions, though there were no instances in which a term meaning “sinner” (e.g., “*pandoso*”) appeared.

an inability to make proper moral judgments. While George W. Bush was framing America's struggle as one against an "axis of evil," people in Bukittinggi talked more about the dangers of rampant *sombong*. Not only was Bush himself described repeatedly as *sombong*, but terrorists (*teroris*) were as well. Two people volunteered to me that the problem with Osama bin Laden specifically was that he was *sombong*.⁵ That is, he was seen as being so committed to his own personal vision of the good that he became oblivious to the greater moral clarity of the global Muslim community. Even to the extent that his ideology or his goals were considered correct (and, for most people in Bukittinggi, this ideology seemed to be identified with barely more detail than "Islam is good and should be defended"), his insistence on forcing it upon others, even to the point of using violence, were still understood as a kind of grave hubris.

Relying on the idea of *sombong* as the cause of immoral behavior is a bit different than relying on the idea that immoral acts are performed by evil people. The letter to the *Los Angeles Times*, quoted above, provides a clear example of the latter. In letter's final sentence consists of the single word, "evil," standing alone. That self-

⁵ When I arrived in Bukittinggi, only a few months after September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden was seen by some people there as a heroic figure. T-shirts with his image were sold in the marketplace and his portrait had been painted by someone on a wall in the city, next to an older likeness of Bob Marley. Bin Laden, like Marley, seemed to be popular as a kind of international pop star. It was never clear to me that most people had a very detailed understanding of his politics, and the support for him seemed to stem primarily from a vision of him as a defender of Islam who had been *falsely* accused of launching deadly attacks on innocent people. The idea that the accusation was false, and made by people interested in destroying Islam, was the common assumption, I believe, of people in Bukittinggi at that time. By 2003, the conventional wisdom in Bukittinggi seemed to have shifted toward an assumption that Bin Laden was indeed responsible for terrorist attacks (which few, if anyone, would defend), and his star faded. The comments about him being *sombong* came when this latter assumption took hold. To some extent, a mix of these two views and uncertainty over which one matched the facts persisted in Bukittinggi, and made Bin Laden an ambiguous figure.

contained quality epitomizes the concept of evil expressed in the letter as a whole: evil is totalizing and inexplicable, leaving no room for anything else, including anything human or comprehensible in terms of human motivation. The letter-writer, for example, calls the murders “animals.” She rejects even the label “insurgents” as granting too much of a sense of human motivation to them. After all, wasn’t Hassan on *their* side, a Muslim, an Iraqi citizen, opposed to the US invasion, and dedicated to the welfare of Iraqis? Murdering her is inexplicable in any human terms, so the murderers can only be embodiments of evil itself, their very essence a drive to cause harm.

The quotation below it from the *Padang Ekspres*, a regional daily newspaper popular throughout West Sumatra, also expresses moral condemnation, but frames it in a very different way. The passage in question comes from a feature in which the previous day’s headlines, written in the national dialect, are paired with brief comments, mini-editorials only a sentence or even a phrase in length. The comments are written in the local dialect of Minang and designed to come across as a typical reader’s reaction – typically a cynical one – to the previous day’s news. In the days before America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, the coming war was the top story in Indonesian newspapers, and U.S. policy was nearly universally condemned as immoral throughout Indonesia, so the editorial comment contained in this passage was unremarkable in this manner. What caught my attention about this particular comment, however, was the way it attributes the actions of the United States government to *sombong* and posits that this had somehow trumped “conscience.”

This seems to imagine the behavior of the U.S., as a metaphorical person, to stem not from an immoral essence, but rather from an inability to make use of its own moral knowledge. The U.S. could be seen as sombong and immoral in behavior, yet still in possession of a moral core. The U.S., like one tempted by Iblis, had not remained within its own self.

I do not wish to claim that Americans imagine immorality in terms of evil while Minangkabau people imagine it in terms of sombong. Such a neat conclusion is of course facile. As Strauss (nd) shows, Americans engage in complex discourses about what causes immoral behavior, and the idea of “evil” or essentially corrupt character is merely one strand. Minangkabau discourses are equally complex. I pair sombong and evil here to bring into relief the significance and contours of sombong as a key moral concept, and to begin to link it to larger questions about person and morality in Minangkabau society. Where do morality and immorality come from? How do they get into and out of persons, and into and out of the things people do? What are the relationships between immoral and moral dimensions of persons and the larger world in which they exist?

These are the questions I will try to answer in this chapter. As I explained in the previous chapter, I believe that conceptions of the nature of persons are inextricably intertwined with evaluations about what is moral and immoral. By “moral,” as I also explained, I mean claiming a positive significance for existence as a person. This sometimes means doing “good,” and much of this chapter will examine ideas about how people come to do good or do bad. However, in referring to morality,

I use the phrase “positive significance” to suggest something broader than making ethical choices in action. Following Taylor (1989), I think that what is at issue here is being, through the living of one’s life, the realization of something of value, something that is in some sense celebrated – that is, “the good.” In this chapter, I want to examine various conceptions, known and used by people in Bukittinggi, that assert what persons are and what about their existence realizes the good. Much of this will concern ideas about ethical action, although as will become apparent, of concern here are also the ways that ethical action does not fully define moral experience for people.

After a brief note about the translations of some of the Minangkabau and Indonesian terminology that will appear in the chapter, I will begin by arguing that an assumption of dualism undergirds Minangkabau conceptions of the person: persons exist both as physical actors in the visible world, and as invisible spiritual centers of agency and experience. I will then turn to an examination of Minangkabau conceptions of the moral capacities of human beings. I will show how a discourse about *nafsu* (appetites) and *akal* (powers of reason) mesh with a conception of human beings as innately immoral and in need of control by outside forces. I will then demonstrate that, despite this discourse, when people in West Sumatra actually talk about human beings as moral actors, they often employ very different assumptions. The moral relationship between *nafsu* and *akal* is disturbed, transposed or simply abandoned. Instead, people talk about persons as containing moral motivations, such as moral feelings (*raso*), in the “heart of hearts,” the deepest, most authentic dimension of self. I will discuss specifically moral feelings of compassion (*ibo*),

shame (*malu*), and respectful shame management (*sagan*) as examples. In engaging with the world, however, people experience themselves being pulled away from these motivations, dislocated from these moral centers. Before returning to a discussion of *sombong* at the end of the chapter, I will show how five respondents used these ideas to talk about morality, and to fashion themselves as moral actors.

Translation and Commensurability in Concepts of the Person

[Da Dan answering questions about his use of the term “*nur*” to describe the entity inside people that gives them life and returns to God after death:]

GS: Is it the same as what’s called the *jiwa*, or the *roh*?

Da Dan: It might be the same.

GS: It might be?

Da Dan: It might be the same. Because the definition of the *jiwa* or *roh* is, you know, also shadowy. It’s not – it’s not certain, right? You ask someone, “What’s the *roh* like?” right, and they aren’t going to know either, after all. It’s just – it’s not that they don’t know, they – if we want to feel it – if we chant [*zikir*], it comes alive, it moves, it can be controlled by our thoughts, and we can have a good connection to it. You want it to move to the hand, move to the head, you want to use it here, or here, or here – you can.

The concepts that people in West Sumatra use to think and talk about persons and their nature do not form a single, well-integrated model made up of sharply defined objects, processes, and relationships. Although there are various concepts that Minangkabau people repeatedly turn to in order to make sense of their lives and direct their interactions with the world, there really is no such thing as *the* Minangkabau concept of the person. Discourses about persons involve, among other concepts, bodies (*badan*); spirits/souls and life forces (*jiwa, roh, nyao*); appetites and desires (*nafsu*); powers of reason (*akal*); thoughts and minds (*pikiran* and *pangana*); feelings

and emotions (*raso*); and deep, moral cores of the self (*hati ketek*). There are certain common patterns to the way these concepts are used, and I will be exploring these in the following pages. Yet the concepts also overlap, interact, and sometimes contradict each other, or even contradict themselves when used in different contexts.

It is common in ethnographic texts to warn that translations of terminology from one language and cultural context to another distort the meanings of the original terms and the conceptions that they reference, and such a warning is undoubtedly appropriate here. For example, above I translated an editorial comment from the *Padang Ekspres* as claiming that the United States had not listened to the whisperings of its “conscience” due to the fact that it was sombong. The rendering of “*hati nurani*” as “conscience” gets the point across, but is also a bit misleading. Later in this chapter, I will explain more finely the outlines of *hati nurani* and related terms.

Despite such a warning, it is equally important to keep in mind that many of our own terms, into which the foreign ones are translated, are polysemous and bound by indistinct, flexible borders. What exactly is an “emotion”? What is a person’s “soul,” “spirit,” or “self”? What does it mean when we talk of our “heart” as a center of feeling and emotion? There may be a range of answers to any of these questions, depending on the individual answering the question and the context in which it is being answered. We may not even be able to articulate clear answers to these questions, though we might feel that we know a self or an emotion when we experience one.

If cultural difference means that translations are necessarily misleading, the flexibility built into some of the concepts that deal with complex matters of human experience can perhaps help to temper such distortions. These concepts never completely capture or bind our experience of living, allowing them a degree of malleability that can be exploited when we wish to understand the ways that other people have defined and redirected their own experiences.⁶ Taken in their most tentative and least circumscribed ways, the translated versions of these terms are a resource, a point of departure, as well as a distortion. Language cannot create meaning out of nothing (or wholly out of abstract relationships within its own structure), but must ultimately draw meaning out of human experience, even as it then clarifies, obscures or reshapes that experience.

It must be made clear that I am not arguing for the unproblematic use of translated terms. In the pages that follow, I will make extensive use of Indonesian and Minangkabau terminology to avoid an excessive reliance on distorting English translations. I simply wish to emphasize that just as English terms for complex dimensions of human existence often maintain a sense of nebulous malleability, so do many of the terms used by Minangkabau people. To offer precise definitions in some cases may be misleading in itself.

⁶ It is perhaps this same malleability that has allowed Minangkabau people to integrate terms from a number of sources – from Arabic (as in *pikiran*: thought), from Sanskrit (as in *jiwa*: spirit), and more recently from the English (as in *emosi*: anger; unrestrained behavior motivated by strong emotion) – and use them in various combinations, even as new terms are introduced, and, presumably, the meanings of old terms shifted.

An argument could be made that terms with complex meanings can only be accurately translated through a processes that eliminates all but the most fundamental, universal of concepts from the translation. This is the approach used by Wierzbicka (e.g., 1992, 1999) in translating complex terms between languages. However, this method has the disadvantage of assuming a fixed, rigidly defined meaning for a given term. In addition, the resulting translations – precise and technical in feeling – do not allow us to take advantage of the way that more complex terms guide us empathically toward more nebulous areas of experience. These may be in a certain way the least distorted translations achievable, and Wierzbicka’s method often does a marvelous job of breaking down complex terms and revealing their basic meanings in a clear manner. Such translations are certainly more accurate than simply identifying the closest English equivalent to a word and leaving it at that, but they also introduce characteristic distortions of their own by artificially fixing the meaning of any given word into a rigid frame, regardless of context and the creative powers human beings display in using language.

As Bruner (1990) has argued, understanding folk psychology is ultimately a matter of understanding something narrative rather than categorical: it is how terms are used to make meaning rather than how they are defined abstractly that ultimately is of interest. I hope in the following pages I can refer to terminology and concepts as a way of conveying a sense of moral life in West Sumatra, rather than explore moral life in West Sumatra in pursuit of a final set of definitions, or even a final model in which every piece of the puzzle settles snugly in its unique place. As my overall approach

nevertheless suggests, I do see people in Bukittinggi drawing their ideas from recognizable sets of larger patterns. It is the topography of this cultural forest, at least as much as the individual trees, that I concern myself with for much of this chapter.

The Seen and the Unseen: Dualism in Minangkabau Concepts of Person

Most of the rest of this chapter will explore specific concepts that are used by people in West Sumatra in when they talk and think about the nature of persons and moral life. It is worth starting by addressing an underlying assumption that helps to frame many of these concepts. This assumption is that persons exist in two different dimensions: as physical beings acting in the visible world, and as spiritual beings acting and experiencing in an unseen world.

The *badan* is the physical being of a person, the body, including both its visible form as well as its internal components.⁷ The *badan* also grounds a living person in the physical world, acting as a location at which all experience, either physical or metaphysical, congeals. In a physical sense, the *badan* is thus identical with the person, as all elements of a person adhere to the *badan*, sometimes in particular parts of it – for example, *pikiran*, or “thoughts” in the head (and specifically in the *banak*, or brain), and *raso*, or “feelings” in the *hati (ati, M)*, the liver. A person as an experiencing and agentic subject, however, also exists in the realm of the *batin*, the metaphysical realm.

⁷ Like “body,” the word is not specific to human beings. It can be used to refer to other things that seem to cohere into forms with some degree of animation: animals, ships, and organizations, for example.

Formally, the batin is contrasted not to the badan itself, but to the *laia* (*lahir*, I), the visible, physical realm of existence of which the badan is a part. The use of “*laia*” in West Sumatra tends to be restricted to its formulaic and rather formal partnership with batin. People take the *laia* to be the everyday realm of existence, and rarely specify that they are talking about the *laia*, unless it is to contrast it with the batin. Batin itself actually refers to the entire metaphysical realm of existence as it relates to human experience. The batin is where things happen that are not accessible through the normal senses of the body. It is where magic operates, where people interact with spirits (or with each other’s souls), and where God, angels and devils exert influence on people. As this implies, a person exists partly in the realm of batin. It is where invisible aspects of experience take place, such as the feelings, *raso*, that are attributed more metaphorically to the *ati*, or liver.⁸ Unexpressed *raso* resides solely in the batin, and only comes out into the *laia*, the physical world, when a person reveals it through behavior, including speech or facial expression.

People often talk about batin in a way that makes it somewhat resemble concepts of “soul” – that is, it is an inner dimension of a person that exists in a metaphysical realm, and it is where faith (*iman*) exists. People talk about what happens in their batin, the state of their batin (e.g., calm or in turmoil), or what they feel or know in their batin. Yet as Geertz eloquently argued in his ethnographic discussion of the Javanese use of this Islamic term, a person’s batin is not really used

⁸ That the use of “hati” as the seat of human emotions is at least partially metaphorical is emphasized by the fact that the term “*lever*” has now been adopted to refer to the liver as an anatomical object with biological, as opposed to emotional, functions. Animal livers are still referred to as “hati,” however.

in reference to a thing or “a separate seat of encapsulated spirituality detached or detachable from the body, or indeed to a bounded unit at all, but to the emotional life of human being taken generally. It consists of the fuzzy, shifting flow of subjective feeling perceived directly in all its phenomenological immediacy...” (1984: 127; see Geertz 1960 for his more extensive exploration of the ethnographic material). It is not the essence of peoples’ individuality, or the piece of themselves that will continue to exist after they die. It is an entire dimension of existence, and parts of every person exist within it.

As shorthand, however, people refer to their *batin* when discussing their own particular existence in the metaphysical realm. There are other terms that are used to refer more directly to the self as an object within the *batin*. As mentioned above, one of these is the *hati*, literally meaning “liver,” but more tellingly and commonly translated as “heart.” Feelings, sentiments, and emotions – all considered *raso* – arise in the *hati*. Thoughts (*pikiran*) may also be located in the *hati* to the extent that they are part of the self, such as an opinion, rather than the work done by the self. That is, analytical thinking is not taken to be a kind of *raso*, though a conclusion one reaches after such thought may be a *raso*. I will return to this point below.

More generally, people refer to the *jiwa* (*jio*, M – though I rarely heard this pronunciation used) as the non-physical entity that exists inside them and gives them life. It is within the *jiwa* that a person thinks, feels, and senses. A person with a mental or emotional disorder is understood to have an illness of the *jiwa*.⁹ *Jiwa* is

⁹ *Sakit jiwa*, “illness of the *jiwa*” is the formal Indonesian term for mental illness.

sometimes translated as “spirit” or “soul,” but it does not get elaborated upon in a religious discourse with any degree of intricacy.¹⁰ Instead, it is mostly used to talk about the things that people experience internally, whether or not they are expressed externally. A person can look happy, but their *jiwa* can be suffering, for example. When understood this way, *jiwa* is closer to “mind” in its broadest sense. However, a *jiwa*, unlike a mind, is clearly something that could exist independently of the body, and will do so after the body had died.¹¹ Da Dan, quoted above, used “*nur*,” derived from Arabic and meaning “light,” in a similar way – a usage that appears to be rather rare in West Sumatra, but does draw from a long history of “light” imagery in Islam, particularly Sufi traditions (cf. Bowen 1993a: 106-123).

Geertz continues the above cited sentence by noting that the *batin* in a Javanese context is “...considered to be, at its roots at least, identical across all individuals, whose individuality it thus effaces” (127). Here there begins a subtle but significant

¹⁰ The term derives from Sanskrit, and a more sharply defined model of *jiwa* could have been displaced by Islamic conceptions. In an Islamic context, meticulous theorizing about the nature of God or of something like the human soul is often condemned as being *zanna*, a fruitless and misguided waste of time trying to comprehend something that humans have no possibility of truly comprehending.

¹¹ The term “*roh*” is often used as a way of speaking about what exists of a person after they die. The term is not used very often in connection with living people, and it is an abstract, experience-distant concept. No one talks about what happens inside their *roh*, or feelings, qualities, or experiences of their *roh*. Instead, the term is applied to beings – human ghosts or other spirits – that exist entirely in the metaphysical realm. While people might understand themselves to have a *roh*, or perhaps assume that they will become a *roh* upon their death, the *roh* is not identified with the self in the way that the *jiwa* is. For example, if people talk only abstractly about what may happen to their *roh* in the afterlife, as if the events will happen to some being other than themselves. Thus when people express worry that *they* will experience torture in the afterlife, they do not express this in terms of their *roh* being tortured, even though this is ostensibly the same thing. The *roh* is understood as “me” only intellectually. I never got the sense that most Minang people actually thought of the *roh*, the *jiwa*, and other similar terms relating to soul, spirit or life force (e.g., *samangaik*, *nyao*) as distinct entities, though each term tends to be used to express somewhat different ideas (cf. Bowen 1993a:115-118).

parting of the ways between his analysis of Javanese concepts of the person and my understanding of the way Minangkabau people employ related conceptions.

Minangkabau people often do talk about all people being ultimately the same, made up of the same stuff at the level of *batin*. All human beings are created by God, and all human beings are creations of the same morally pure essence. It is only through the living of life in the world that differences between individuals emerge. Yet the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this living of life are experienced in the *batin*. When Minangkabau people talk about a person's *batin*, while they may not be referring to a particular encapsulated unit, they may very well be referring to a person's particular place or shape of existence in that realm, everything that pertains to their *hati* and their *jiwa*. *Batin* contains both the sense of a universal essence and the sense of a deeply individual (not to say individualistic) expression of that essence. The concept of *batin* does not efface individuality any more than the theory of elementary particles effaces the distinctions between a rock and a ball of cotton.¹²

Batin can refer to both individual experience and universal essence because ultimately what goes on in the *batin* is not completely separate from what goes on in the visible world.¹³ The two interact and influence each other. For example, events in

¹² I will not make the claim this is also true in the Javanese case. However, Geertz's hedge ("at its roots at least"), and the rather mind-bending idea that *batin* could be considered both the immediately perceived, subjective experience of individuals and simultaneously be exactly the same for everyone adds credence to the suspicion that Javanese people, like Minangkabau people, can use the concept of *batin* to think about both universal and individual dimensions of personhood.

¹³ Geertz again: "An inner world of [...] emotion and outer world of [...] behavior confront one another as sharply distinguished realms unto themselves, any particular person being but the momentary locus, so to speak, of that confrontation, a passing expression of their permanent existence, their permanent separation, and their permanent need to be kept in their

the physical world cause people to feel *raso* (emotions, feelings) in the *batin*, and *raso* in turn manifest themselves through the physical body, such as when a *sadiyah* (sad) person cries, or a *malu* (ashamed) person turns away from someone they have wronged. The faith (*iman*) that exists in a person's *batin* has profound effects on their functioning in the day-to-day world. The core of Minangkabau religious practice, Islamic prayer (which I will discuss in Chapter 6), can be understood in part as a practice that fuses the *batin* with existence in the physical world. Spirits in the realm of the *batin* can cause physical harm to people, and physical objects can become conduits through which unseen spiritual power is manifest in the physical world. Bowen's (1993a: 107) remarks regarding the way, for the Gayo in Aceh, the two terms mark "the relative distinction between two states of being" resonates with the way they are used in West Sumatra, as does his comment that they describe "a continuum extending from the most outer, physical states to the most inner, spiritual states," with physical objects at one end and God at the other.

People in Bukittinggi only occasionally draw upon the formal discourse of *batin* and *laia*. It would be a mistake to be overly fine in defining the exact nature of the distinction between the terms, and they will appear only rarely in the material that follows. However, the larger idea that persons can be located in two interrelated yet still distinct realms is a key assumption that underlies much of the following discussion. The terms *laia* and *batin* address this idea, but in and of themselves do not

own order" (1984:128). Of the two contradictory elements that make up the picture Geertz is painting here, the idea of a sharp distinction or separation is contrary to what I am trying to describe. My ideas here resonate, however, with the notion of personhood as a kind of engagement between realms – albeit an interaction more than a "confrontation."

define its boundaries.¹⁴ The importance of this underlying dualism should become clearer as this chapter unfolds.

Locating (Im)morality in the Person: Nafsu and Akal

Nafsu and Akal

I now wish to begin an examination of the moral capacities of human beings as they are understood by people in West Sumatra. It is useful to begin this discussion by examining the concepts of *nafsu*, “appetites,” and *akal*, “powers of reason.”¹⁵ These deserve to be discussed concurrently both because they often appear in people’s talk as counterparts to each other, and also because they have been examined as a pair in previous ethnographic works on Islamic societies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world. I start with them for these reasons, and because it will be easy to see how they can be fit neatly into the concept of persons that Errington (1984) attributed to the Minangkabau villagers that he came to know: that individual persons are by nature immoral, and only become moral through outside influence. This idea be partially reconfirmed and also challenged in this discussion.

¹⁴ For example, there does not appear to be any obvious hierarchy in the *batin/laia* duality. In discourse using these terms, one is not asserted as the superior alternative to the other. Yet in the material that follows we shall see how observable behavior and unobservable essences and intentions become, at different times and in different ways, the focus of beliefs about what is really real.

¹⁵ A more typically Minangkabau pronunciation of these terms would be more accurately rendered as “*napasu*” and “*aka*.” However, many people in Bukittinggi are prone to use the Indonesian pronunciations of the terms, “*nafsu*” and “*akal*.” This may be because a good deal of public religious discourse is carried out in Indonesian, and these terms are tightly tied to Islam. The ethnographic literature referred to here generally uses the Indonesian-Malay version of these terms, so I will also use these forms throughout this discussion.

People talked to me about *nafsu* in ways that have led to me translate it as “appetites” rather than “desire” (as in Brenner 1995, 1998) or “passion” (as in Peletz 1995, 1996), although all of these capture something of the term as it is used in Bukittinggi.¹⁶ However, “appetite” seems to best invoke the sense of the instinctual, innate origins of *nafsu*, as well as the way that *nafsu*, as a concept, keeps a certain distance from people’s immediate experience. A person feels desire or passion, and there are other words for these things in West Sumatra. In contrast, a person *has* “appetites” as a built-in aspect of their personhood, and these in turn express themselves as experiences of specific desires for food, sex, material wealth, comfort, progress, success, and so on. All of these are understood to be instances of *nafsu*. *Nafsu* is a constant presence inside a person, perhaps (as some people told me) dwelling in the *hati* (the “liver,” as the seat of emotions and feelings), but only at times does it make itself felt, and even then it can be felt in varying strengths (and thus *nafsu* is not always as intense as “passion” connotes). Human beings are thought to share

¹⁶ Rather than settle for a single term in English, Siegel’s (1969) account of Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra, describes *nafsu* (or “*hawa nafsu*” in the Acehnese language) for the Acehnese as “the part of man’s nature that he shares with the animals. It is everything that arises from within man, and hence hunger and sexual yearning, as well as love for the world, are manifestations of *hawa nafsu*” (1969: 99). In his glossary, Siegel is more careful with the definition, amending the latter part of it to say that *hawa nafsu* is “everything within man that arises *spontaneously*” (286; italics added). Because *nafsu* is generally contrasted with *akal*, note that this definition would exclude *akal* from being something that arises within a person, at least spontaneously. It is instead understood as something that arises from outside the person. I do not believe that my respondents in Bukittinggi would agree that *nafsu* is everything that arises from within a person, spontaneously or otherwise, although as will be clear below, this is a logical extension of some ideas about *nafsu* that are active in West Sumatra. At the very least, however, people in West Sumatra move outside of the discourse on *akal* and *nafsu* when talking about a good deal of internal states, and reinterpreting these other things in terms of *akal* and *nafsu* would be a special exercise. I believe that the rest of Siegel’s description would apply to the way that people in Bukittinggi understand *nafsu*.

the quality of *nafsu* with animals, which function primarily or solely based on such appetites.

Akal refers to powers of reason or rationality that a person can employ in the dispassionate understanding and analysis of a concept or situation. Unlike *nafsu*, *akal* is understood to be innate in human beings only as potential. Human beings, unlike animals, have the God-given capacity to analyze, contemplate, and understand the world, but this capacity can only be fulfilled through effort, and is not yet developed at birth. *Akal* is associated with the *banak* (the brain), and sometimes appears in people's talk as a synonym for *pikiran*, or "thought." *Akal*, however, is narrower than *pikiran*, as it implies an analytical quality not necessarily present in all *pikiran*, which can sometimes be irrational or chaotic. Also, while people consciously experience *pikiran*, *akal* is more distant. It is an ability carried out through *pikiran*. Sometimes people also use the word "*logik*" (logic) as the equivalent for *akal* as well. While *nafsu* causes feelings (*raso*) that "float to the surface" (*timbua*) and is sometimes said to "come" (*tibo*), and while thoughts and memories may be said to "pass by" (*talinteh*) or "arise" (*tabik*) in one's mind and memory (*pangana*), *akal* remains intentional – it something that a person must consciously make an effort to bring into existence. The self can develop the capacity to produce *akal*, but *akal* is not part of the self.

Nafsu and *akal* are often paired in people's talk, as they are seen as alternate and usually opposing ways for people to relate to the world. *Nafsu* manifests itself as all kinds of desires, pleasures, and drives, and is usually linked rhetorically to the immoral acts that can result when a person indulges them. Greed, a kind of *nafsu*,

leads to corruption, gambling, and a disinterest in the well-being of others; sexual nafs (perhaps the archetypical example of nafs), leads to improper sexual behavior; even the enjoyment of a warm bed early in the morning is a kind of nafs, and can lead to the abandonment of obligatory morning prayers.¹⁷ When nafs is discussed, it is generally to refer to it as the animalistic cause of moral failings, as the source of selfish behavior that causes harm to others and violates religious principles.

When discussed in tandem with nafs, akal is seen as way to understand moral principles and consciously choose to apply them – which therefore means countering the impulses driven by nafs, and acting as the positively moral side of the equation. Akal is understood as the tool and expression of free will through which human beings can understand the world and choose how to act in it. They may choose to reject their appetites, give in to them without any constraints, or to fulfill them in morally acceptable ways by managing and channeling their nafs with the powers of akal. It is nafs that the devil is said to exploit in an effort to make people disobey God, and akal that enables people to understand God’s commands and obey them. Akal is learned through socialization, and guided by knowledge – especially religious knowledge – of right and wrong that must be obtained from others. In this equation, the individual is a naturally immoral being. It is only the ability to choose to submit to social and religious standards that gives human beings the potential to become moral.

¹⁷ As Da Palo made sure I understood, my own desire to obtain an advanced degree in anthropology is also a result of nafs (for prestige, knowledge, and so on), and has the potential to lead to moral transgressions.

It is thus easy to see how this conception of human nature resonates with the idea (see Chapter 3 above) that human beings, as individuals, are immoral by nature, and can only become moral by conforming to something external to themselves. The two terms in question here are Arabic in origin, and the underlying assumptions in the discourse about them came to Southeast Asia through Islam, and reflect Islamic conceptions of the person and of morality. As Peletz (1996:244-45) points out, these were in turn likely shaped by early Greek and Christian moral conceptions that also continue to influence the Western world.

Certainly a moral system defined by self-control, in which reason triumphs over desire and passion, recalls a Western tradition crystallized as early as Plato's *Republic*. Even if our understanding of the relationships between all of these terms has shifted in the intervening millennia, as Charles Taylor (1989) shows, such a conception remains "one of our contemporary options" (124) in defining moral life. Americans and others in the West may thus find these ideas quite familiar in outline, if not in detail. The standard West Sumatran discourse on *nafsu* and *akal* frame a hierarchical concept of the self in which such reason is asserted as superior, while felt motivations – desires, passions, appetites – are denigrated. Like other hierarchical concepts of self, it asserts certain kinds of human capacities as more human than others – that is, it suggests that some should be made the center of self, while others should be pushed out (Parish nd). In this case, one way to read the discourse is that the self is disposed toward the inhuman and must be remade, through its engagement with the community, into something of significance.

Nafsu, Akal, and Gender

Americans are also unlikely to be surprised at the way that these ideas intersect with gender. Although the importance of gender will be apparent in much of the remaining discussion of nafsu and akal, let me trace the broad outlines of this intersection first.

Nafsu and akal are often used among Minangkabau people to discuss differences between men and women. This is most clearly the case with the use of akal. Men are usually said (by both men and women) to have a greater degree of akal than do women, and this is used to justify or explain the idea that men are the “heads of the family” and are the gender best suited for public leadership roles. Their greater use of akal allows them to come to the best decisions possible, taking into account all the facts, circumstances, and consequences of various choices. Sometimes people explained this in terms of inborn traits, so that it seemed men were better suited for certain positions because of their greater akal.

However, it is worth noting that sometimes people express the idea that men *had* to use a greater degree of akal because their social roles called for it. For example, men do not inherit houses or land, and yet they are expected to make a living and provide for their families. Everyone knows this is not an easy thing to do. People are poor; jobs and success in business are hard to come by. The only way men can achieve them is through being clever in discovering and taking advantage of the rare

opportunities that arise. This takes akal, and so therefore men cultivate and utilize akal.

The relationship between nafsu and gender seems less clear. Some people told me that women have more nafsu, some people told me that men had more nafsu, and some people said they were the same. Others described them as having different relationships to, or qualities of nafsu. This was particularly true when the topic was sexual nafsu – something which I discussed much more with men than with women. For example, Da Palo, an underemployed man in his mid-fifties, explained to me that men’s sexual nafsu was a “ten,” while women’s was a “one.” Men’s nafsu comes on quickly, he said, and disappears quickly as well. As for women, he says, “It’s hard for them to hold back that single one.” It is only a “one,” he says, but it is one big one, as opposed to men’s many smaller desires: once women become sexually excited, they cannot hold back. Da Jik, a successful business owner in his early forties, offered a similar explanation, though he expressed it somewhat differently. He argued that women always had stronger nafsu in all matters, including sexual desire, but were generally better able to control (by some means other than akal, apparently) their reactions to the nafsu better than were men. However, like Da Palo, he also believed that in comparison to men, women could reach a more extreme level of sexual desire, at which point they would lose all their abilities to resist it. For both of these men, women seemed generally less effected by nafsu in daily life, but their nafsu was also more dangerous and unpredictable.

Regional Discourses

The terms *nafsu* and *akal* are widely used in a similar way throughout many Indonesian and Malay communities, and have received a fair amount of attention in ethnographic literature for the way they frame people's ideas about moral life and about gendered behavior. Although the details vary, the outlines of the concepts generally follow the description above (cf. Peletz 1996: 333-348). For example, in his ethnography of Aceh, an Islamic society on the northern tip of Sumatra, James Siegel (1969) discusses Acehnese concepts of *akal* and *nafsu*, the latter generally referred to as "*hawa nafsu*" in the Acehnese context. He writes that Acehnese religious conceptions posit *hawa nafsu* as a part of human nature that, while "neither good nor bad" in and of itself, is nevertheless "the cause of all evil acts" (103). It is *akal* that must be employed in order for human beings to fulfill their role as God's agents in the world. The development of *akal*, he explains, is understood particularly as tied to the maturation of boys into men, as they leave the female world (where their *hawa nafsu* was indulged), learn the Koran, and prove themselves productive and capable in the world of the village and beyond it.¹⁸ Through this process, they gradually learn to control themselves through work and religious discipline, cultivating their *akal* and studying Islam in order to make sure that it is employed in the service of morally proper action.

¹⁸ Siegel's book makes an argument that by the 1960's, when he conducted his fieldwork, men's conceptions of themselves, framed in large part by concepts of *akal* and *hawa nafsu*, were in tension with their social roles. See Peletz's (1996) for a critique of Siegel's analysis.

Brenner (1995; see also Brenner 1998) links the concepts of *nafsu* and *akal* to Javanese gender ideology and to notions of prestige in Javanese culture. She notes – drawing from and paralleling the account of Anderson (1972) – that the idea of self-control is tied in Javanese culture to conceptions of spiritual power. In Java, controlling oneself through ascetic practices and by restraining from displaying emotions or indulging in the fulfillment of one's desires is said to result in the accumulation of spiritual power. Men are said to possess greater powers of self-control than do women, as demonstrated in their more austere emotional and verbal style, and relatively greater penchant for participating in ascetic practices. Men, or rather maleness, is thus thought to be prestigious. Brenner demonstrates that these concepts merge nicely with the Islamic concepts of *akal* and *nafsu*, so that men are said to have greater powers of *akal*, powers of reason that allow them to constrain their *nafsu*, and thus cultivate their spiritual powers. Having *nafsu* is said to be a normal part of being a human being, but being controlled by it is thought to be a moral failing.

However, Brenner also finds that these standard assumptions are sometimes reversed, particularly when Javanese people discuss the relationship between gender and money. In this context, men are said to have more trouble than women in controlling their desires. This helps people to explain why, or provide justification for the fact that men routinely give the money they make to their wives. While their wives channel the money toward practical purposes that benefit the entire family, the men are likely, it is said, to waste the money by succumbing to their *nafsu*, spending it on such vices as gambling and women. Brenner's work helps us to see that discourses

about the makeup of persons (about their akal, their nafsu, or their gendered natures, for example) are likely to be ambiguous because the experiences and behaviors they address are too complex to be encompassed neatly within a consistent model.

In a key piece of the ethnographic literature on akal and nafsu in Southeast Asia, Peletz (1996; see also Peletz 1995), researching the Malay population in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia,¹⁹ discovered a pattern in local discourses about gender and self control that bares a close resemblance to the one discussed by Brenner for Java, and he comes to some similar conclusions. Peletz reports that the “official/hegemonic” (1996: 259) view in Negeri Sembilan is that men have more akal (which he terms “reason”) and less nafsu (which he terms “passion”) than do women. He also writes that according to this view, these two aspects of human nature “are forever struggling against one another, as are the forces of good and evil, and those of life and death. The point is often made that an individual’s proper actions testify to the dominance, however temporary of ‘rationality’ over ‘passion,’ and that improper actions bespeak an inability or lack of concern to control baser impulses” (205). As this implies, and as Peletz confirms, nafsu generally has negative connotations, while akal is thought to be its necessary countervailing force, the creator of moral action. Women, with their extra nafsu and their lack of akal, are less able to control themselves, and are thus

¹⁹ This population traces its origins to Minangkabau migrants who first came from Sumatra perhaps five hundred years ago. Like other Malay populations, the Malays of Negeri Sembilan share many cultural characteristics with Minangkabau populations. However, Negeri Sembilan is often especially linked to Minangkabau because of their more recent common roots and because both share matrilineal traditions. Most other Malay populations are characterized by bilateral descent. However, Negeri Sembilan Malays consider themselves (and are generally considered by others) to be ethnically Malay and not Minangkabau. Similarly, Minangkabau people see their society as closely tied to (or even as the source of) Malay society, but generally do not consider themselves to be Malay.

morally suspect.²⁰ Men's greater degree of akal, and thus their greater control over nafsu, are seen as the underlying explanation for men's superior prestige and their positions as official leaders of family and society.

This "hegemonic" account, it turns out, comprises only one of the ways that Malays in Negeri Sembilan talk about akal, nafsu, and men and women. The individuals Peletz interviewed offered a number of different opinions as to whether men or women had more akal or less nafsu, and often tied their answers to specific examples or men's or women's relationships and actions, not just to general principles about gender. Most notably, many of his informants, and most of the women he interviewed, expressed the opinion that men actually had more nafsu than did women. Like Brenner's Javanese informants, they cited men's tendencies to moral weaknesses that led them to indulge their own desires rather than control them for the greater benefit of their families. Since women were seen as less likely to participate in these vices, less likely to be lazy and irresponsible, this was taken by some of his informants as evidence that men's nafsu was actually greater than women's nafsu. Peletz ties these counter-hegemonic conceptions (of men as prone to nafsu) to historical shifts in the economy of Negeri Sembilan, dating back to the colonial era. He argues that men have become increasingly encouraged to act as individuals vis-à-vis property, rather than within the clan system, and this has placed economic burdens on men in their roles as husbands and fathers that many men find too heavy to bear successfully.

²⁰ Women are, however, said to be more prone to *malu*, or shame, and this can act to prevent them from indulging their nafsu. As I will discuss below, shame works in ways parallel to akal.

Nafsu and akal certainly seem to be far more central to discourses about persons, and gendered persons, in Negeri Sembilan or Aceh than they are in West Sumatra. Most ethnographers of Minangkabau society say little or nothing about these concepts. For example, akal and nafsu are almost absent in two recent ethnographies focused on Minangkabau village women, by Blackwood (2000) and Sanday (2002). Blackwood specifically writes that the villagers she knew did not use these terms with her, and she notes (2000:49) that this has also been reported by other, though not all, ethnographers of Minangkabau society (cf. Kahn 1993:126). While residents of Bukittinggi may be somewhat more likely to employ these concepts (perhaps by virtue of their greater exposure to national and international Islamic discourses) than are the residents of villages where most ethnographies of Minangkabau society are set, I did find that akal and nafsu were not the master terms that they appear to be in Peletz's account of Negeri Sembilan, or even in Siegel's account of Aceh.

In contrast, the centrality of akal and nafsu in Peletz's analysis even threatens to reify gender as a domain created by a unified, structured discourse, and this sense is strengthened by Peletz's use of the term "hegemonic" to describe one facet of the discourse and "oppositional" and "counter-hegemonic" to describe another facet. He writes of this "counter-hegemonic" discourse on men's lack of self-control that "dominant ideological formations both produce and limit the forms, scope, and force of the challenges with which they must invariably contend" (1995: 111), as if he were dealing with a self-contained domain in which there was not so much ambiguity as a

logical, structured thrust and counter-thrust.²¹ All of this is in fact in tension with the most important theoretical arguments Peletz (1995, 1996) offers: that “the segregation and compartmentalization of gender as a distinctive subject of study ‘in and of itself’ is altogether untenable,” (1995: 79) and that, instead, various domains of social life (e.g., prestige or status systems) should be analyzed for their gendered nature; that we must understand gender as encompassing ambiguous and contradictory elements ; and that gendered conceptions of social life are tied to specific social and historical contexts, such as the position of Malay men in the rural capitalist economy of Negeri Sembilan. Although sometimes obscured by the hegemony of the akal/nafsu model presented by Peletz, these are the insights for which his analysis is most notable.

In all of these ethnographic accounts, nafsu is conceptualized as an innate part of human beings, and the cause of immorality. Morality is conceptualized as something imposed on the self from the outside. That is, it is a power of “self-control,” with “self” here being identified with nafsu and immorality. A person must have knowledge of something beyond the core of the self – must have internalized

²¹ In his book, Peletz (1996) is also hindered by the way he uses interviews to illustrate the varied, contradictory relationships between akal and nafsu and ideas about men and women. He presents the interview data from some individuals as representative of the “hegemonic” account of gender, while other individuals provide various versions of “counter-hegemonic” accounts. This seems to imply (unintentionally, it would appear) that certain people believe the hegemonic version, other people believe a counter-hegemonic version, and together they make up an ambiguous discourse or culture of gender in Negeri Sembilan. Presumably, Peletz would believe that each of these people could or would, in other contexts, invoke different gender representations. However, his presentation works against this understanding, as it implies that each person has a piece of the overall system of gender representations, rather than having access, as individuals, to multiple, contextual, and thus ambiguous representations. Discussing caste in Nepal, Parish (1996) presents a clear ethnographic example of the way both hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic representations may be available and meaningful not only within a society, but also within the consciousness of any individual.

something external to self, such as religious knowledge – in order to make use of the capacity for akal, which can then be turned toward controlling the self and its nafsu. We also learn from these accounts that because people employ the concepts of nafsu and akal in thinking about complex human behaviors, the discourses using the terms can be complex and ambiguous. We saw this clearly in the ethnographic accounts by Brenner and Peletz in regard to gender. For example, Javanese and Malay men are not always moral, and in fact they tend to engage in some characteristically (culturally) male forms of immoral behavior. People's experience sometimes goes against the grain of the dominant discourse about male nafsu and akal, and leads them to rework the discourse to make sense of it.

Transposed Terms

One lesson to draw from this, as Peletz does, is that gender conceptions are contextual, ambiguous, and contradictory. These descriptions might just as easily apply to moral concepts, or to concepts of the person, or of the self, more generally. In Peletz's account, the personhood (or "self" – he uses "person" and "self" without distinction) of Negeri Sembilan villagers is conceived to be essentially "relational" (202) and is rather uncritically contrasted with Geertz's (1984:126) definition of the "bounded, unique" (and so on) individual of the West, discussed above in Chapter 3. In contrast, I want to suggest that in West Sumatra, ideas about moral personhood are contextual, ambiguous, and contradictory. Moral experience sometimes contradict the idea that the self is the source of immorality that must be controlled by outside forces;

desires and passions can be agents of morality, and rationality a tool for immorality; and the self is sometimes understood, or even experienced, as innately moral, and forces that take control of the self from the outside as the source of immorality. Just as Peletz's informants sometimes flip the relationships between reason, passion, and gender, people in Bukittinggi quite often rearrange the relationships between nafsu, akal, and morality. They often simply go beyond this rearranging by using other terms that also reference human capacities for thoughts and feelings, though with very different moral assumptions attached to them. They imagine alternate ways that their experiences of living take on positive significance. This last point, however, is getting a step ahead of where we are now. Let us first re-examine the concept of akal.

We have already seen how akal occupies the position of superiority within the nafsu/akal discourse. Within the discourse, persons are divided into the two capacities, and in people in West Sumatra identify rhetorically with akal as it represents morality. Akal is indeed thought of as a good thing, for it can be used for productive purposes. Earning money, solving problems, and making decisions that impact the future of one's family and community are all activities that require the use of akal. Akal thus has marvelous potential for good. However, when understood as a capacity of human beings more generally, rather than simply as part of the discourse akal vs. nafsu, akal becomes far more ambiguous, for whether it is actually used for good is a matter of doubt.

Outside of its rhetorical pairing with nafsu, the term "akal" actually has negative connotations in Minang (and in Indonesian). In the right context, it means

not some noble quality such as “reason” or “rationality,” but rather a “trick” or “deception.” This should come as no surprises in light of the tensions over Minang people’s self-identification as “clever” (discussed in Chapter 2). To say that someone has a lot of akal (“*banyak akal*”) is generally used as a backhanded compliment, implying that the person is clever in the sense of being crafty or cunning.²² Scheming, plotting, and getting away with evil and selfish deeds takes akal as well.

Da Jik relied on this idea while explaining to me why he thought people sometimes acted immorally. He began by explaining that people act immorally when Iblis exploits their nafsu, tempting them to do bad things. However, thinking that I, as a non-Muslim and a rational Westerner, might not believe what he was saying, he tried to put it in terms with which I could sympathize. He explained that Iblis was, in experiential terms, simply any immoral tendency that we have. However, at this point, Da Jik switched, apparently without conscious recognition, from talking about our immoral nafsu to talking about our immoral akal. He explained to me that Iblis could be understood as our own immoral akal, which provides us a way to do bad things (as well as a way to stop ourselves from doing these things):

Da Jik: Maybe you’re not quite convinced, Greg. You won’t—you don’t believe in Iblis like that. But it’s just akal. Right? Akal is also divided into two: good akal and bad akal. It depends on whether in your head – in Greg’s head – what part is good. What percentage is

²² Watching traffic rumble into a Bukittinggi along a main route, a man once pointed out to me the different license plates, the initial letters of which indicated the province of origin of the vehicle. Plates beginning with “BM” are from Riau, and he joked that the letters stood for “*banyak minyak*” (“a lot of oil”), referring to Riau’s large oil industry. Vehicles from North Sumatra had “BK” plates, which he joked meant “*Batak Karo*,” in reference to an ethnic group from that region. West Sumatran license plates all begin with “BA”: “*banyak akal*,” he said, grinning.

good like this, and what part is greater, the good akal or the bad akal.

GS: You mean akal to do good things or—

Da Jik: Yes, yes.

GS: —akal to (un)

Da Jik: Yes, what part is the bad akal. If, say, the akal in your head, the bad akal is more prominent than the good akal. Then certainly you'll do all sorts of things that cause people trouble.

GS: What is an example of bad akal?

Da Jik: Akal—bad akal – well, it'll be bad. Well, for example, you want to rob a bank. A bank. To get into the bank, how are you not going to get caught? You need akal, right?

GS: Oh, yes.

Da Jik: Right? Right?

GS: Right.

Da Jik: And it can be conquered by that good akal. "Oh, if I rob it, what kind of damage will I cause? [What] if I shoot this and this, and how about this person?" It's conquered by that.

GS: So akal is not necessarily good or bad?

Da Jik: You can't be sure.

As it turns out, when taken to be a concept about the human capacity for feeling, desiring, and engaging emotionally with the world – and not simply as a foil to akal – you can't be sure whether nafsu is good or bad either. The negative connotations of nafsu are already clear. When people in Bukittinggi use the term nafsu spontaneously, they seem to almost always mean something neutral at best and likely worse than that. Nafsu is often just shorthand for depravity. Yet nafsu is not entirely without its merits either. For example, Da Lis, an underemployed, but rather highly educated man in his mid-20s (the newlywed we met in Chapter 3), while acknowledging that people don't generally talk about good desires as examples of nafsu, told me that they really are just that.

Da Lis: With nafsu there is – *nafsul mutmainnah* it's called, right? There's good nafsu, there's bad nafsu.

GS: What's an example of good nafsu?

Da Lis: Good nafsu is, for example – nafsu is desire, right?

GS: Right.

Da Lis: Desire. Good nafsu is the desire to do good deeds. For example, now I—but people don't – don't – don't – don't usually use that.

GS: Uh-huh.

Da Lis: People don't usually use that. For example, good nafsu is my desire to go to the mosque. That's a desire, right? It's good nafsu.

This more positive, more ambiguous understanding of the innate appetites called nafsu also has roots in Islamic conceptions of personhood,²³ as indicated by Da Lis's use of the Indonesianized Arabic term "*nafsul mutmainnah*," which is a term mostly limited to specialized and educated discourse in West Sumatra. This is what Da Lis makes clear when he finds himself momentarily stumbling over his words, trying to express both an important idea and also the fact that this idea is not often discussed in precisely this way.

²³ As noted above Siegel's (1969) account of Aceh also reports that nafsu is not understood as bad in and of itself. It also notes that akal is understood to have the potential to be misdirected toward immoral acts. Rosen (1984:31-32) quotes an informant in Morocco: "So nafs...really has two sides to it: We need desire, for example, in order to have children, but if it is not controlled by reason we would just be like animals. We need to think about ourselves in order to get money and provide for our families, but if we don't control it with our reason we would just be greedy. We say that when a man 'has nafs' he has 'self-respect,' but if he is 'in love with his nafs' he is just an 'egotist.'" Woodward (1989) discusses a Sufi-derived Javanese typology of *nepesu* that includes morally positive as well as morally negative kinds. In Aceh, Morocco, and Java, as in West Sumatra, however, the negative connotations of nafsu appear to be the most salient ones for everyday discourse. According to Peletz (1996), in Negeri Sembilan these positive connotations for the term are completely absent, perhaps because Sufi influences, which often stress the sacredness feeling and experience, are less prevalent than in these other examples. It is nevertheless intriguing that there would not be a counter-hegemonic discourse on nafsu that parallels the counter-hegemonic gender discourse outlined by Peletz. This, of course, should not be taken as evidence that they have no concepts of positive moral feelings, emotions, passions, and so on – simply that the term "nafsu" is applied too narrowly to be linked to these.

Though not using this terminology, people regularly described positive dimensions of *nafsu* for me when our discussions about moral life became more involved. These discussions often led to people retelling the Koranic story of the creation of human beings, part of which was described at the beginning of this chapter. For while *akal* differentiates humans from animals, and thus makes humans human, the Koranic story of human creation actually concentrates on the way that *nafsu* makes humans human, and superior to angels. For example, when I asked Da Tor why he thought God did not create humans to be obedient to God, he replied, “There’s a different kind of being like that – angels.... They don’t have *nafsu* – they always obey God. They don’t have *nafsu*. So human beings were provided with *nafsu*.”²⁴

When Adam, the first human being, was created by God to represent God on earth and carry out God’s wishes, the angels questioned the wisdom of placing on earth a being with *nafsu*, capable of causing bloodshed and other grief. God indicated that the angels did not know what God knew about Adam’s superiority, and commanded them to bow down before Adam. It was Adam’s ability to identify and name elements of God’s creation in the world that eventually convinces the angels (except for Iblis) of Adam’s superiority.²⁵ Adam’s ability to name things in the world indicated his ability to engage with the world in a way that the angels could never

²⁴ The ethnographic literature on Islamic societies indicates inconsistent conceptions regarding angels in this respect. For example, Siegel (1969) reports that in Aceh, angels are described as lacking both *akal* and *nafsu*. This is similar to what Da Dan, quoted in the text below, tells me. However, at least one person in Bukittinggi explained to me that angels had only *akal*, animals had only *nafsu*, and human beings alone had both. In contrast to all of these assertions (and anything I was told by people in Bukittinggi), Rosen (1984:31) quotes an informant in Morocco who explains that all living creatures, including angels, have *nafs*.

²⁵ In the Koran this is recounted in 2:30-34.

match. Da Dan explained that it took both nafs and pikiran, thought, to make human beings perfect, unlike angels. I asked him why nafs was necessary to make human beings perfect, considering that it also gave them the potential for disobedience. He replied, “It’s like this: nafs is worldly pleasure. Human pleasure is nafs. That’s what it is: pleasure. Angels don’t have pleasure. They don’t have enjoyment. Humans have enjoyment because they have nafs. It’s just that nafs is reined in – has to be reined in by pikiran. That is nafs that is perfect.”

Da Tor also saw the value of nafs in the way it made engagement with God’s creation possible: “Oh, if angels, without having any nafs, were in this world, this world would never develop, because they don’t need to eat, they don’t need anything at all. That’s the thing. They are a kind of being – a supernatural being, right? So human beings have nafs. They make – they enrich this world, right? They make roads, they make houses, organize life, make rules. This is because human beings have nafs, right?”

The more complex picture that emerges from comments like these shifts our understanding of akal, nafs, and the moral dimensions of persons. Nafs is not the moral corruption innate to human beings, but rather their ability to engage with the world – a world that, as I will discuss later, is corrupting. Nafs is what makes people vulnerable to evil, but it is not evil itself. This corresponds nicely with the broad outlines of Islamic thinking about human nature, which generally has not recognized concepts such as original sin, or other conceptions of human beings that regard them

as inherently immoral by their very nature.²⁶ Instead, morality and immorality lie in the way people meet the challenges presented to them by the corrupt world.

This more complex vision of moral life explains why, when people in Bukittinggi are talking about moral life rather than talking about that *akal/nafsu* discourse itself, they often begin using a mix of terminology, or turn the standard connotations of the terms upside down. Within the standard discourse on *nafsu* and *akal* there is a rhetorical identification with the moral value of imposed *akal*, and against the immoral nature of innate *nafsu*. Conversations about why people do bad things – or why they do bad things themselves – pull people out of this frame. Feelings, desires, and other things that arise from within the self are not always experienced as immoral. Imposed order from the outside, and rational calculation, is not always experienced as moral. These ideas do not fit with other ideas people have about persons and the way the world works.

Instead, there is struggle. Da Tor's comments illustrate this well.

Da Tor: That *nafsu* is sometimes taken hold of by Iblis or a devil. Sometimes it's taken hold of by – what's it called? – an angel that is obedient to God. So there's always this pulling back and forth everyday in us – human beings. Sometimes we're considering doing something, and according to *nafsu* we should go this way, according to *akal* we should go that way. It's always a fight – the biggest fight.

Is this fight that occurs within a person a fight between devils and angels each trying to control *nafsu*, or is it a fight between *nafsu* (on the bad side) and *akal* (on the good side)? His description begins by pitting angels and devils against each other in a fight

²⁶ For some general comments in this direction, see Esposito 1988 (*Islam: The Straight Path*. New York: Oxford University Press.)

within the confines of *nafsu*, and then falls back on the default model in which *nafsu* represents the influence of devils, and it is *akal* that represents the influence of angels.

Shortly after, Da Tor followed up with this comment

Da Tor: Nafsu, you know, can be for good [*elok*]. It can be for good [*baik*], it can be for bad. But as for the bad, that's Iblis's work. The good – that's still a good thing. So God intentionally created Iblis for that. That's indeed the being that rejected God. So he looks for as many troops as possible in the world. He calls and calls for them.

Feelings and the Moral Self

Even when people explain the positive value of *nafsu* as the source of human engagement with the world, it often seems to carry the whiff of a necessary evil. The explanations of *nafsu* as something to be positively valued remain rather abstract. No one talks about it as a positive moral source, as something from the self that must be developed, expressed, or celebrated. Yet, as Da Lis's comments above imply, it is the use of the word “*nafsu*” here that seems strained, especially to those who may not have a deep formal religious education. In contrast, the *idea* of the self as the source of moral impulses (beyond the capacity to develop or internalize reason) is one that plays a central role in Minangkabau moral thinking.

Broadly, such impulses are classed as kinds of *raso* (M) or *perasaan* (I), meaning “feelings.” These are located in the *hati* (the liver – or the “heart” as the locus of feeling). *Raso* are very much of the self rather than a feature of the world. As I explained earlier, *raso* are said to float to the surface (*timbua*), and so are very much imagined as deep inside a person, as being part of the self. Much like “feelings” in the

folk model of the mind associated with American English (D'Andrade 1987), this means that *raso* cuts across analytical categories of mental processes and states. It can be applied to emotions, belief states (specifically opinions), and even certain perceptions. I would suggest that the use of “*raso*” implies that the state or process in question is imagined as having its locus within the self rather than in the world. The idea that some perceptions can be understood as *raso* may seem to contradict this assertion, but the kinds of perceptions that *raso* can be applied to seem to be those that could be understood as being within the self. Physical illness, for instance, may make a person have a feeling, *raso*, of being weak or uncomfortable, a reference to the body. *Raso* also takes place on the skin or tongue, in which case it refers to tactile sensation and taste, respectively. But the sight or sound of something is not a *raso*, perhaps because these are more prone to being understood as properties of an object rather than subjective experiences of the object. The look or sound of something seems to emanate from the object and is only passively perceived by the self, at a distance and without direct interaction between self and object. This is not the case for touch or taste.²⁷

Da Lis describes how conflict between one's thoughts (*pikiran*) and feelings can lead to anguish, as a person “can become stressed, and they can experience pressure. All sorts of things can happen.” What is worth noting is that his

²⁷ As might be suspected if my suggestions here are correct, the case of smell as a *raso* seems less clear-cut. It is perhaps ambiguous due its intimate connection with taste, but in general, people do not refer to scents as “*raso*.” Further research would be needed to verify my intuitions.

descriptions assume that feelings naturally, automatically orient a person toward what is good, and that it is violating such feelings that amounts doing violence to oneself:

Da Lis: An example would be a corrupt person. A corrupt person is really the clearest example. In terms of their nafsu and their thoughts, a corrupt person wants to get as much as possible, right? But their feelings surely says that this isn't good. Now after people know – after, for example, there is a reform movement, like the way things are now – their hati says that what they've been doing all along is not right. Meanwhile, their thoughts, their nafsu – their thoughts want to take as much as possible. To the point that they get depressed, and some kill themselves. Some hang themselves, some drink poison, some shoot themselves in the head.

As he continues his discussion beyond this passage, he describes both nafsu and feelings as part of the hati, although he has trouble untangling the relationships between them. This is where he explains, as quoted earlier, that nafsu can be good, and that there is an Islamic term for such productive nafsu (*nafsul mutmainnah*), even though people don't usually use the term to refer to the goodness of human beings. After struggling to clarify his thoughts for a few minutes, he comes to realize that he does in fact know a way to express more comfortably this idea of the human being as a source of moral impulses: it is the *hati kecil*, one's "little hati."

Da Lis: There's an enthusiasm to go to the mosque. That's good nafsu, right? As for bad nafsu, for example I want – "How can I manage to take this kid's money?" It's a desire, right? Then the brain thinks, "How can I take it?" Now, at that moment – how did we say it earlier, with those corrupt people? Nafsu...their nafsu to collect, their nafsu of greed, "How can I collect as much stuff as possible?" while their hati kecil – ahh, that's it Greg! "Hati kecil" is what we call it, Greg – while their hati kecil opposes it. [...] Finally the reform movement arrives and people find out everything. They feel regret [*penyesalan*] and their hati kecil – they think, "How come I didn't listen to my hati kecil?" To the point that they feel depressed – stressed, and so on, kill themselves –

right? So actually the *hati kecil* – that’s actually the “*sanubari*,”
 Greg.

GS: Yes.

Da Lis: *Hati sanubari*. That, and those feelings are inside of it – a part of it. Perhaps they’re all branches of it, Greg. What’s clear is that *perasaan* are located in the *hati*, right? The *hati kecil* – that is in fact the core of the *hati*.

GS: Yes. But *nafsu* doesn’t come from that – the *hati kecil*?

Da Lis: Good *nafsu* comes from the *hati kecil*.

Da Lis imagines feelings as a kind of *nafsu*, an appetite for morality that arises from the very core of the *hati*. This is what he calls the *hati kecil*, the “little *hati*,” or the “*hati sanubari*.” There are several terms that are used interchangeably with *hati kecil*, which is an Indonesian term. In Minang, it is the *ati ketek*, which like *hati kecil* can be translated literally as “little liver.” In Indonesian there are also the marginally more erudite-flavored terms “*sanubari*” and “*nurani*,” which may also be used in combination with “*hati*.” (“*Nurani*” is derived from the Arabic term for “light,” and has the same origins as the term “*nur*,” which Da Dan was quoted above as using to refer to a person’s soul or spirit.) Earlier in this chapter, I translated “*hati nurani*” as “conscience”: the *Padang Ekspres* newspaper declared that the United States was ignoring the whisperings of its conscience (*hati nurani*) because it was *sombong*. The idea of a conscience does capture something of the idea expressed here, but as I will explain below, it is ultimately too narrow to work as a satisfactory translation. To avoid the confusion that might result from a proliferation of terms, and because there does not seem to be any substantial difference in meaning or usage between them, from this point on I will use “heart of hearts” when referring to or translating any of these terms, while using “heart” interchangeably with *hati*.

Feelings

Let us now look more closely at these ideas about the self as a source of moral knowledge, beginning with an examination of *raso*, feelings. In discussing various kinds of *raso* with me, people tended to describe them in terms of the scenarios in which particular *raso* might occur, or in terms of motivations and behaviors (e.g., when a person feels X, they want to Y; when a person feels X, they do Y). It was rare for people to describe feelings in terms of physical metaphors or bodily sensations (although a few standard ones are in use, such as “hot,” implying anger). Asking people to tell me what a particular *raso* felt like in their *hati* or in their body would usually result in a description of the particular action that the *raso* made them take or want to take: sit down and be quiet, avoid someone, fight with someone, and so on. As Da Jik remarked to me, when I asked him how he could differentiate the feeling of *bangih* (anger) inside his body from the feeling of *sadiah* (sorrow) inside his body, “It’s not that it’s difficult, but that the language to *communicate* it doesn’t exist.”

Raso are, I should emphasize, absolutely understood to rise up from inside the person, in the heart and in the unseen realm of *batin*. Actions themselves logically distinguished from actions, yet *raso* are understood as moral capacities because they are not merely a matter of passive experience or purely physiological states: they cause moral action. Having a *raso* is understood as having a motivation to act, and any act may have moral consequences. Feelings that we can tie broadly to “compassion” and “shame” offer some of the most important examples of the ways that *raso* act as moral motivations.

Ibo: Compassion

As is the case in many Indonesian societies, and societies throughout the Pacific more generally (Lutz 1988: 144-149; Levy 1973: 317-321; Heider 1991: 70-71; cf. Wierzbicka 1992: 143-147, 152-158), the Minangkabau language includes emotion terms that seem to blend conceptions of what we might think of as love, compassion, and pity. Different terms, such as “*cinto*,” “*sayang*,” and “*kasiah*” touch on these concepts in different ways (cf. Karim 1990: 28-29 and Goddard 1996 on the Malay cognates for these terms). You may feel *cinto* for a lover, a parent or child, for God, or for your country, and this implies a feeling of intense attachment of various kinds that may contain elements of sexual desire, identification, or respect. Love for another person may also be *sayang* or *kasiah*, but these terms imply a sense of feeling *for* the other person, of empathizing with the other person’s needs and feeling compassion over their troubles, and being motivated to care for them. Within the family, for example, a person may (and should) feel *sayang* for a spouse, a child, or a parent. One is less likely to feel *sayang* or *kasiah* for one’s country, as this implies a sort of pity or compassion for it that is generally not applied to abstract ideas or things.²⁸ For this reason, “*sayang*” and “*kasiah*” do not seem to be used in relation to

²⁸ It may, however, be possible to care for a country or an inanimate object – that is, to do things for the benefit of the object in the way one might care for a person that one feels *sayang* for. I recall that when I lived in a student boarding house in Yogyakarta on the island of Java in the early 1990’s, one of the toilets on the property was a Western style toilet, whereas all of the others were squat toilets. On the wall above this one toilet was a sticker that had apparently come with it, displaying instructions on how to properly use and care for this kind of toilet, for those who might be unfamiliar with it. It exhorted the reader to “*sayangilah wc anda*,” or “love/pity your toilet.” Here we can see how the emotion of *sayang* extends out to

God, for one cannot empathize with or pity God (cf. Karim 1990: 28). One also cannot do anything to help or care for God.

The term “*ibo*” is one that also overlaps with *sayang* and *kasiah*. If *cinto* overlaps with these terms in ways that call to mind love and attachment, *ibo* overlaps with them in ways that call to mind pity and compassion. *Ibo* is what a person is said to feel when witnessing another person’s suffering, and it is characterized by a desire to help that person. While *cinto* can reach out toward lust, *ibo* can reach out toward sorrow (cf. Heider 1991: 165-177). The term “*sadiyah*” in Minang translates quite well as “sorrow,” and is commonly used to describe reactions to one’s own suffering and loss, marked by lethargy, silence, and crying. However, I sometimes found that in direct discussions of emotions terms, respondents would respond to questions about *sadiyah* by sliding into a discussion of *ibo*.

Ni Ina was one of these people. Ni Ina, a married civil servant in her mid-forties, participated in a short interview series with me, consisting of about four hours of recorded conversations. This probably represented something close to half of all of the time we spent talking together. She often answered my questions as if she were teaching me, as if trying to find simple ways to help me understand the importance of this or that idea for Minangkabau people, or the reason she held a particular personal opinion. This often resulted – as it seemed to here as she discusses *sadiyah* and *ibo* – in

the idea of acting to care for something. This could be because this is what a person does when they feel *sayang*, but in this case no one would actually be expected to *feel* *sayang* for a toilet.

her highlighting why something *should* be a certain way. I asked her about the emotion of *sadiah*:

Ni Ina: Sadiah. In terms of feelings, Greg, for example we see someone and we're concerned about them. You could say that we're "concerned" [*prihatin*], like that. We're *ibo*.

GS: Is it the same as *ibo*?

Ni Ina: It's the same.

GS: There's no difference between *ibo* and *sadiah*?

Ni Ina: Right. We see someone, right, and this person is suffering in their life, they're really suffering, right? So the feeling of *ibo* comes on when we see them, Greg. The feeling of *ibo* comes on when we see them. We're *sadiah* when we see them. A feeling of pity [*belas kasiah*] comes on for that person. We want to give to them. Uh, what would be an example of this suffering? They have difficulty in finding their fortune, for example, Greg. Meaning that this person hasn't eaten. So, we give them something to eat, for example. As a different matter, for example, they're wearing ripped clothing. So, we give them clothing. That's the understanding of *sadiah*.

Ni Ina is ostensibly discussing *sadiah* here, but her descriptions seem to center on what most people – including, obviously, Ni Ina – would call *ibo*. I asked her if one could feel *ibo* for oneself, and she responded that this was not possible. I asked if a person could feel *sadiah* for oneself, and she again rejected this, saying that both could only “fall toward another person.” She told me that concerning one's own self, one would instead feel patience (*kesabaran*) in taking on whatever God had in store for one's life. It was only later in the conversation, when she began talking about feeling *sadiah* as a result of having been criticized or experiencing the death of a

sibling that she (implicitly) acknowledged that *sadiah* could be a reaction to one's *own* suffering.²⁹

In this way, Ni Ina quickly transformed my questions about the meaning of emotion terms into a discussion of the moral nature of *raso*. A person is supposed to feel *ibo* and to help someone who is suffering. A person is also supposed to accept their own suffering with patience, as a trial from God. In her description, the moral necessity of feeling in these ways means that this is what a person does indeed feel. Feeling bad about one's own situation – feeling *sadiah* – is an understandable condition under certain circumstances such as the death of a loved one, but it is a morally suspect one nonetheless. It may be considered an indication that a person is overly concerned with their own suffering, and is not thinking about others or is challenging the wisdom of God. Even though it was the direct object of my question, *sadiah* almost disappeared in her talk, swallowed by *ibo* for others or patient endurance for the self.

This exchange with Ni Ina took place at the very beginning of an interview before which I told Ni Ina that I wanted to ask her about the meaning of various emotion terms in Minangkabau. It appears that *ibo* is in some ways a prototypical

²⁹ When I asked her if her examples, such as feeling *sadiah* when one's sibling dies, indicated situations in which *sadiah* was indeed directed at one's own circumstances, she froze for a few moments, and then told me that it was difficult to explain. Some respondents were very clear to me that *sadiah* was usually a matter of one's own suffering, while *ibo* was always directed toward others. More significant than the fact that others analyzed the terms in this way when asked directly about them is the fact that, in my observation, this is in fact the way the two terms are applied in everyday speech.

form of feeling, of *raso*.³⁰ Asking about feeling seemed to prime people to think and talk about *ibo*. This resonates with Heider's (1991: 47) finding that "ibo" was one of only four Minangkabau emotion terms that 100% of his Minangkabau informants agreed could be considered a "perasaan hati," a "feeling in the heart," rather than a characteristic or other attribute of a person.³¹

When I began an interview about emotions with Da Palo by asking about *sadiah*, he responded by immediately reminding me that feelings come from the *hati*, and that sometimes people's feeling get hurt and then we feel *ibo* for that person (or, as he calls it, "ibo hati," combining the emotion term with the term for the emotional heart, as is often done for certain emotion terms).

Da Palo: Sometimes I said harsh things to my child, for example, right? Then I feel *ibo hati*. That's what you call a feeling, right?

GS: *Ibo*.

Da Palo: There you go. That's what you call a feeling. *Ibo hati*, right? Sometimes our feelings are hurt because someone hurts – speaks rudely to us, and we feel hurt, right? We get hot hearing them. That's feeling, right? But the thing is, feelings are in the *hati*, too. Feelings and the *hati*, they're the same.

³⁰ It is interesting to note that there are echoes of the ties between feeling, love, and pity in English as well, even if we divide our terms differently than Minangkabau people divide theirs. To "have feelings for" someone implies romantic or sexual love, while a particularly "feeling" person is a compassionate person. To say that we "feel for" someone generally means that we pity them, or at least that we sympathize with their suffering.

³¹ Two of the others were *risau* and *rusuah*, both of which refer to a kind of anxiousness or worry as a disturbance in one's inner state. The fourth term that received 100% support as a feeling in the heart was *sadiah*, sadness. This indicates that it is not *sadiah*'s status as a more marginal example of a *raso* that caused people to slide from discussing it into discussing *ibo*. Heider describes *rindu*, an emotion of "longing" or "nostalgia," as the "Minangkabau emotion par excellence," partly because of its connection to the Minangkabau cultural norm of migration (*marantau*) and partly because it also received 100% support from his informants as a feeling in the heart. However, "rindu" was generally considered by his informants (and mine) to be an Indonesian term, not a Minangkabau one at all, and appears on his cognitive map of Indonesian emotion terms.

People's talk about feelings often focused on the way they act to orient a person toward moral relationships with others, particularly on empathizing with and being motivated to help others who are suffering, as with *ibo*, and on gauging one's own moral status through one's emotions.

It is conventional wisdom in Bukittinggi that women's feelings are stronger than those of men³² – although there is less agreement regarding to what extent this reflects the fact that they feel these things more strongly (as most people suggest) and to what degree they express them more openly. This parallels the idea that associates women with *nafsu*, but it has a somewhat different moral bent. It is often women's feelings that are seen as driving their morality. It is women's *sayang* and *ibo*, for example, that lead them to be especially attentive to the needs of their children, and the needs of their families in general. These feelings in women are often contrasted (especially by women) to the way that men are often oriented toward their own concerns (cf. Brenner 1995). They are usually said to be more egoistic (“*egonyo tinggi*”).

As was made clear above in Da Lis's discussion of corrupt people who nevertheless know through their feelings that they are doing wrong, feelings can be understood as a counterforce against immoral actions. In this way, feelings can work very much the same way that *akal*, reason, is thought to work. That is, when there is a

³² The only clear exception is anger (*barang, bangih*), which is associated with men. Da Dan was the only one who suggested to me that women actually have stronger anger (along with all other emotions) than men. He said, however, that because they also have stronger *malu*, or shame, this prevents them from expressing their anger as freely as most men. He also thought this was why women have a stronger sense of vengeance (*dandam*), something others had also told me was characteristic of women. Not being able to express their anger directly, women would instead hold a grudge and find less direct ways to be hostile to their enemy.

possibility of committing an immoral act, feelings can provide a person with the knowledge that such an act is wrong, and help prevent them from doing it. This also helps people to think through the reason that women are not, despite their association with *nafsu* and their relative lack of *akal*, more immoral than men.³³

I asked Ni Tasi why all of the immoral acts that had been employed as examples during our discussion, such as theft, drinking alcohol, and rape, seemed to be things that were associated with men. She explained to me that she suspected women's feelings drove them to be more moral than men:

GS: I don't know why this is. Are men more evil [*jahat*] than –?

Ni Tasi: I think so. [laughs]

GS: Yes? They really are?

Ni Tasi: Yes.

GS: Is that, uh – well what's the reason?

Ni Tasi: Perhaps with men, feel— you know, people say that women, when doing things, women lean more toward feelings, men toward logic [*logik*]. So maybe it's because of that. For women to do something, well it's their feelings that are in motion, so....

GS: Yes.

Ni Tasi: They're very considerate of others' feelings.³⁴

GS: Yes, so they don't—

Ni Tasi: But as for men, well.... [laughs]

³³ There are some exceptions to this. It was suggested to me more than once that because women are forbidden from praying while they are menstruating, they are forced to be in a less pure moral state on a regular basis. Because men do not face this obstacle they thus have the capacity, according to some people, to achieve a greater – or at least a more frequent – state of moral purity. In general, however, most people insisted to me that there was no real difference between the level of men's and women's moralities, just the kinds of immoral acts they tended to commit. While men more often commit obvious immoral acts such as theft, physical assault, or drinking alcohol, women are understood to be more likely to gossip and to commit the less public sin of disobeying their husbands.

³⁴ The term here for being considerate of another's feelings is *tenggang rasa*. In a good indication of how complex these matters are, *tenggang rasa* literally means to restrain one's feelings – that is, to manage the way one is engaged in a social interaction so that the “feeling” of the interaction does not harm another person. The term is generally used, as Ni Tasi uses it here, to indicate that a person's own feelings adjust, through empathy, to the situation of another person, so as not to hurt the other person.

GS: No, maybe not so much?

Ni Tasi: Maybe not. Not so much.

GS: Do you think that this is indeed the case in general – that women use their feelings more?

Ni Tasi: Yes.

GS: But does that mean that it's akal that leads men to, for example, steal? [Here I stress the word "akal," as if doubtful that it could be to blame.]

Ni Tasi: [laughs] Oh yes, that can happen.

GS: Akal – in what way?

Ni Tasi: Well, surely there are ways! [laughs]... Ways to – well, because...

GS: What do you mean – for example...how does akal lead a person to the point of stealing or [un]?

Ni Tasi: Maybe men are more – what is it? Akal – maybe it's their brains. You know men do in fact have bigger ones than women do.

GS: Brains.

Ni Tasi: Brains. Yeah, there are a lot of ways that – a lot of ways compared to women that they can do things. [The tape flips over.] Ways to, for example, steal. Men have more tricks or maybe – things like that. Relative to women. Maybe men are more creative than women. [laughs]

GS: Oh, you mean ways to – so he can think, "Oh, if I—

Ni Tasi: Yeah.

GS: — do this and this and this, I can – I can get that," maybe? [laughs]

Ni Tasi: Yeah, getting away – for example, if someone finds him out, he can get away over here or wherever. I think that women...I think their fear is greater than men's. Because of the feelings we were talking about earlier, too, I think.

Ni Tasi laughs, I think, because she is undermining the usual discourse about the way men's brains and men's reason (although she starts with the term "logik" and it is I who introduce the term "akal") relate to morality. We have already seen above how akal can indeed be thought of as a tool to be used for immoral purposes, such as deception. Ni Tasi takes this to its logical conclusion, explaining that since women are relying on their feelings rather than their brains, they tend to act more morally by default. Rather than being driven by calculations that are oriented toward

accomplishing some goal (perhaps moral, perhaps not), they are instead driven directly by their feelings to act so as not to hurt others or themselves. While (men's) brains may work well for *managing* learned knowledge about those things outside of the self, such as whether something is right or wrong, (women's) feelings *contain* knowledge of a different sort. Feelings, arising from within the self, contain knowledge about what the self should be and do.

The compassion referenced by *ibo* is thus clearly enmeshed in matters of identity. As Nussbaum (2001) argues, compassion is a judgment about the existence of undeserved, significant suffering of an other, but it is also necessarily a judgment that this suffering is a threat to self. By this, she means not that compassion is an egoistic judgment, but rather that in order for it to arise, the suffering of another must be judged relevant to and in conflict with one's own "scheme of goals and projects" (322). By this, I understand her to mean that feeling compassion is an indication that the suffering in question violates what one takes to be the things one's life is oriented toward realizing. It is a violation of identity, a manifestation of a cognition that references self and not merely the world outside of self.

In this way *ibo* acts as an expression of a person's moral status. It is not only helping others that is morally important here, but also having the feeling that indicates the proper nature of one's own "scheme of goals and projects." Perhaps it is sometimes enough for a person to know that they feel *ibo*, or to say that they do: this provides reassurance and reinforcement, for oneself and others, of one's moral

orientations. For Nussbaum, altruistic behavior is an expected result, though not an intrinsic part of compassion.

As at least some people in Bukittinggi described it to me, *ibo* itself is not only a feeling inside the *hati*, but is itself a motivation to help someone. To place their assertions within Nussbaum's framework, the relevance to self necessary for *ibo* to emerge is manifested in the judgment that self must act to help the suffering other, not merely (as Nussbaum describes it) that such suffering runs counter to one's identity. It is, instead, the motivation to act on such suffering that can be considered an expression of identity. It is significant that the most common examples of *ibo* offered to me had to do with the witnessing of material poverty: one feels *ibo* when seeing a person who has nothing to eat or no adequate clothing to wear, and so one wants to help this person materially. This resonates with ideas about the immorality of superior wealth and its connection to hierarchy, which I will discuss below. Being in the presence of a person who is clearly impoverished when one is clearly not equally impoverished is a moral failing. Moving to rectify such a failing, behaving in an *ibo* manner, is thus a way of realizing one's own morality that cannot be accomplished by merely "feeling" the appropriate emotion.

As Da Tul, the young man who sells illegal lottery tickets, insists to me, "Supposing that someone feels [*ibo*] in their *hati*, it is certain that they will help the person. They will help – understand, Greg? – it is certain they will help. Because of *ibo*, right, it's certain they will help." The only exception, he says, is if the person is truly incapable of helping; otherwise, a person who says they are *ibo* but does not help

is only “ibo on the mouth,” but not in the hati. Similarly, Ni Tasi above mentioned women’s fear (*takut*) as a reason that women would be less likely to act immorally. Fear, understood as a motivation to separate oneself from harm, would lead a person away from doing something immoral, for which they might be caught and punished.

Malu & Sagan: States of Shame and Shame Management

This idea of aversion to or avoidance of the immoral has another important manifestation in people’s emotional lives. Feelings that we can understand broadly as relating to “shame” also involve such aversion and avoidance. In Minang, and in Indonesian as well, “*malu*” covers a broad range of shame-like states. These include those we might identify as shame, embarrassment, and shyness – a group that is lexically unified in many languages (Levy 1983).

Perhaps the prototypical reason for people to feel malu is that they are discovered doing something wrong, and this is especially true in the case that they come face-to-face with a person who was harmed by the improper actions. Malu is also the painful reaction one has to publicly failing at something, to being ridiculed or disparaged, or to being judged by others as imperfect in any significant way. When feeling malu, people are said to duck their heads down, avoid eye contact with others, and even flee social interaction entirely. Perhaps more so than with any other emotion term, I noticed that discussions of malu were accompanied by changes in posture and movement by many of my respondents, as they tended to shrink down and bring their arms to their bodies while trying to communicate to me what malu was like. Although

respondents offered typically meager physical descriptions of how malu feels, a few people offered to me that malu was feeling “low,” and everyone agreed that the malu that resulted from wrongdoing or failure felt bad.

The hiding and “low” feeling associated with malu seem to be connected to the idea that malu is a matter of being judged by others. Malu results from the failure of a person to realize themselves as they should be: they should behave properly, but they do not; they should accomplish something, but they do not. This judgment is seen through the eyes of others. Thus, these kinds of failures, when they are extreme, result in the motivation to disengage socially.

However, there are also times when malu is less immediate, when the awareness of the pain of malu comes into consciousness as a motivation to keep oneself in a proper moral state and avoid failure. In these cases, malu, or the awareness of malu, motivates a person to act morally: to avoid hurting others, bragging, appearing greedy, failing at a task, and so on. Thus, a person may be said to be malu if they are “shy,” – that is, if they tend to act timidly out of a “fear” of such failure.

Malu and the threat of malu can of course mix to stop a person from continuing to do something that will be judged harshly by others. Da Eri described to me an incident in which a young woman, his neighbor, grabbed a knife and chased her sister, who barricaded herself in a bedroom. She threatened to kill her as soon as she came out of the room. Da Eri managed to talk to woman out of this, he says, admonishing her, “We [awak] will be malu towards people. It’s our own sister, you know? You

can't kill your very own sister.” The fact that Da Eri framed his argument at least as much in terms of malu as in terms of the inherent immorality of killing the sister helps to demonstrate just how powerful a moral principle malu can be.

In a different way, malu can also motivate people to engage in social interaction. One context in which malu is particularly salient for people in Bukittinggi is that of being excluded. If everyone is doing something or talking about something that you cannot do or do not understand, you are likely, people say, to feel malu. Da Eri provided the example that when he was still in high school, and had not yet begun to smoke, he would sometimes find himself in situations in which everyone around him was smoking. If someone offered him a cigarette, he would take it (even if was just to quietly stick it in his pocket) because he felt so malu at being excluded. In all of these cases, malu works like other manifestations of “shame” to create an attitude of deference, so that a person does not assert themselves in an improper way (cf. Fessler 1995).

The capacity for malu is said to be necessary for all people in order to make them act morally. People who act in blatantly immoral ways are said to not “know” malu (*ndak tau malu*), for if they did, they would not be able to act in this manner. Women, however, are thought to have stronger sense of malu than men, just as they have a stronger sense of feelings in general. When people talk the strength of women's malu, the examples they give are most often concerned with matters of sexuality and the body: young women will be malu to approach young men that they like, women are more malu than men to walk around without being adequately

covered by clothing, women are more malu than men if they fart in public. These are all things that women are said to be less likely to do because of their stronger malu in general. Of course, these are all things that are generally considered more inappropriate for women than for men. Women *should* act (or not act, as the case may be) in these ways, and they must therefore have a stronger sense of malu than men. There are other things that would cause malu particularly in women (e.g., being seen drinking alcohol, smoking, or playing dominoes) or in men (e.g., being seen doing a lot of domestic chores), but these things never were offered to me as examples of how men or women had more or stronger malu. Instead, it was primarily in terms of matters that directly concerned the body and sexuality that women's greater malu was understood to be manifested. Women whose sexual and bodily behavior is appropriate are thought to be properly malu.

It is thus apparent that the moral states associated with malu range from those in which the self is in moral crisis to those in which the self is, thanks to the deference of malu, fashioned as appropriately moral. If a person's awareness of malu keeps them from transgressing it is a good thing (it is thus good to "know"), though if it has failed to keep them from transgressing it is a painful thing (cf. Simon 1999). The relatively egalitarian nature of Minangkabau society, however, means that malu, unlike some shame-like emotions in more hierarchical societies (e.g., *lajya* in South Asia as described in Shweder 1993 and Parish 1994:199-217) is not usually thought of as an attitude that should be assumed by any class of person in their daily interactions. A partial exception to this (and a somewhat faint echo of ideas about *lajya*) is the idea

that women – especially young women – should display some *malu* in their public interactions. However, while this means that they should be somewhat less aggressive than men in asserting themselves, and avoid certain topics of discussion (especially sexuality) with men in public, it does not mean that they are expected to be overly deferential in their daily interactions. Further, many Minangkabau women, especially those who have already been married, do not seem at all concerned with displaying a particularly “feminine” *malu*. While people might be expected to be *malu* around those of high status, the kind of deference involved in these interactions is more often described in terms of fear (*takuik*) or in terms of “*sagan*.”³⁵

Sagan refers to the feelings involved in consciously managing one’s moral relationships with others, and particularly with negotiating certain kinds of moments in which the self may face some kind of failure of realization. In West Sumatra, people use *sagan* in ways that overlap with but diverge from the ways that they use *malu* (cf. Goddard’s 1996 analysis of the Malay terms “*malu*” and “*seگان*,” employing the “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” approach, in which he comes to conclusions similar to those offered here). I often asked respondents to explain to me the differences between the two terms, or the two feelings they refer to. Although the more people talked, the more their responses seemed to settle into very similar patterns, the range in their initial responses is indicative of the complex ties between the two. Some people began by telling me that *malu* and *sagan* were almost or even completely identical. As these people talked in more detail, however, they always

³⁵ Heider (1991:211-214) also notes the way that “fear” and “shame” are interrelated in Minangkabau.

discovered ways that this was clearly not so. Others began by telling me that malu and sagan were completely different and not connected at all. Eventually, these people would inevitably introduced scenarios in which, they acknowledged, a person's emotional reaction could be understood equally well as malu or as sagan.³⁶

There is no adequate single-word translation for sagan in English. It packages sentiments and attitudes that English tends to separate into two areas: one connected to shame and referred to with words such as “embarrassment” and “shyness,” and another connected to the concept of respect and feelings ranging from regard to reverence. Sagan is closely linked to the idea of “*hormat*,” or respect. If you have hormat for someone, you will feel sagan when interacting with them. Feeling sagan is feeling hesitant, careful, and even reluctant in interacting with someone, and acting sagan is thus being hesitant and careful when interacting with someone, or even reluctant to interact with them out of concern that one might not be careful enough when doing so.³⁷

Sagan, which does not appear to be particularly associated with any gender, typically occurs when dealing with someone of equal or, especially, higher status than oneself – someone whose reaction to you is important for your own social (and thus

³⁶ The relationship between these terms is closely parallel to what Hildred Geertz (1961) describes for the Javanese terms *isin* and *sungkan*. Geertz suggests that *isin* is translated reasonably well as “shame,” while *sungkan* implies a more subtle mastery over the proper performance of social interaction.

³⁷ *Sagan* bears a relationship to the term *anggan* (M), to be reluctant or hesitant, and its cognate *enggan* (I), to be reluctant or unwilling, neither of which carries connotations of respect. In a society with a strong egalitarian ethos mixed with some elements of structured hierarchy (such as the ranking of lineage titles), it perhaps makes sense that respect for a person is often communicated by passively disengaging from or avoiding that person rather than by making an effort to actively mark the person's superior position.

moral) status. Da Eri, for example, said that his neighbor was willing to listen to him and put her knife down because she was sagan toward him (especially since he was older than her), and so she was interested in how we would respond to what she did. Sagan is generally not described as feeling particularly good or bad, but it can have a little bit of either one. It often occurs in situations in which there is potential for either malu or *bangga*, pride. If you are careful and act properly, things may go well, and you may feel good, perhaps even *bangga*. This will happen when the person you feel sagan toward seems to feel sagan toward you (and thus shows you respect by acting carefully and kindly toward you), or at least seems pleased with you in the case that they are your superior. If things end up going poorly, however, you may cause someone to disrespect you or think poorly of you, which as we have seen causes malu. Sagan can even be used to describe the feeling you feel when you are avoiding coming face-to-face someone that you treated badly. You are sagan, reluctant to interact with them, because if you do you will then feel malu. Da Tor explains sagan as follows:

Da Tor: We're not sure whether what we're doing is appropriate or not according to the other person involved. For example, to an older person, or something like that. We're not sure whether what we're saying or what we're doing is, in the feelings of that person – whether they won't accept it. "Maybe they won't accept it," we think. Maybe this person won't accept it – the person that we are sagan toward. It's like that, as an example. Maybe it's not proper. So, we're sagan.

GS: This feeling is different from malu.

Da Tor: Oh, it's different.

GS: It's different.

Da Tor: The point is that it hasn't happened yet. With sagan, things are still in the stage of preparation – they haven't happened yet. Nothing's happened yet. It's just that according to our thoughts – it's just a feeling of whether if we do this it will feel

proper or if we do this it won't feel proper, like that. But we're going to do something. It's just at the beginning.

Da Tor explains that a sagan person will be very careful. He gives the example of a person who wants to bring his boss a gift. The person, he says, will be sagan about giving an appropriate gift, something that will not be considered inappropriate or even “unusual” (*lua biaso*). Speaking with your *sumando*, a man who has married a member of your clan, might also cause sagan, he says, if one is not certain how the *sumando* will react to what you have to say. “You’ll be scared [*takuik*] he thinks it isn’t right – that he doesn’t accept it.” This, he says, is sagan. I ask him what happens he indeed does not accept it. “Ahh,” he replies, “then you are malu.”

The egalitarian ethos of Minangkabau society is evident in the way people talk about *sagan*. Ostensibly, anyone of high status – e.g., men with high lineage titles and senior women in a lineage, wealthy people, those with deep religious knowledge, high government officials – is “*disagani*,” meaning “treated in a sagan manner.” This is a way of saying that they are respected. However, people pointed out to me that if a high status person is merely powerful, but not actually considered moral, people do not *really* feel sagan toward that person. Here Da Dan is imagining becoming a rich person who is only interested in accumulating wealth, but not in helping other people:

Da Dan: What's clear is that we'd be isolated by society. That's plain, right? Maybe society would even be sagan with us, only “frightened sagan” [*sagan takuik*]. Fear – that word, “fear,” it should be toward an animal. Maybe we can call it “fear” if it's toward an animal. That means that people are equating us with an animal. “Oh, I'm frightened of Greg” – means [that you are] being equated with an animal. Only sagan is different. So, if a person accumulates too much, people feel frightened of them.

He continues on to say that if we, as rich people, give our money to help others, then people will feel a debt toward us, and as a result: “People will help us wholeheartedly, rather than people helping us who are being paid to do it. Maybe we’ll be happier.” Ni Yas similarly says that sagan toward a person we really respect is different than what people call sagan toward people we do not respect. In the first case, we would feel malu if we requested something from the person and they turned us down; in the second case, we would feel repugnance (*jajok*).

The idea that people feel sagan toward those who have been good or kind to them ultimately overshadows the idea of sagan as a matter of hierarchy. Such kindness creates a sense that one must be good and kind to this person in return – to respect them – and the uncertainty over whether one will be able to achieve this is experienced as sagan. It creates, according to Ni Yas, a heightened consciousness regarding one’s own behavior toward that person. If this person invites us to celebrations, she says, we will feel sagan toward them, especially if it happens that we do not invite them to our celebrations. In such a situation, she explains, we might eventually feel malu if we see this person, having failed to act in the moral way that our feelings of sagan urged us to.

Sagan thus captures a sense of being in control that is absent in malu. If malu carries knowledge that one’s own moral standing is facing danger, sagan carries knowledge that one’s own moral state is being carefully managed. Unlike malu, sagan does not feel particularly good or bad, nor is it associated with obvious and involuntary changes in posture and speech. Like malu, however, it acts as a way of

knowing the moral status of the self, and it references a concern with the way that moral status is built in the process of interactions with other people.

Feeling and Inspection: Raso jo Pareso

The term *raso jo pareso* is used to capture the way that two kinds of human capacities contribute to moral consciousness. We have already seen that Minangkabau people may divide human capacities between “thought” and “feeling” in terms of akal and nafsu. Raso jo pareso reflects a similar duality but applied in a very different way so that it does not imply a dichotomy. Raso, as we’ve seen, is “feeling,” and refers (among other things) to all the kinds of moral feelings and the motivations they engender that I have discussed above. The term “*pareso*” means “inspection,” and so the phrase as whole means “feeling and inspection.” Pareso refers to more analytical kinds of knowing, ones that aren’t tied as closely with immediately felt motivations, but allow a person to rationally dissect the implications of their actions. This is, in other terms, the use of akal to think carefully about a situation and decide how to react to it. When people say that proper social interaction must be done with raso jo pareso, they mean that a person should be in touch with propriety and morality through both intuitive and analytical channels. They should be able to sense and to closely examine the consequences their actions might have for other people, and then act so as not to hurt others.

One formal definition of the concept, taken from Minangkabau writer and cultural observer Amir M.S.’s (2003) book outlining ideal Minangkabau society and culture, reads: “Raso jo pareso means to habitually sharpen a sense of humanity or

one's noble heart of hearts in everyday life. In facing every problem, we are enjoined to habituate ourselves to carrying out a fastidious examination to achieve the authentic truth, and to not act in haste" (2003: 86).³⁸ Amir also recounts the following aphorism, which divides the term into its two parts, with *raso* representing the "feeling" side, and *pareso* representing the "thought" side: "Raso grows in the chest / Pareso emerges in the head" (2003:86).³⁹ In parenthetical inserts, he indicates that "the chest" (*dado*) refers to the *hati*, while "the head" refers to the *otak*, or brain.⁴⁰

In Chapter 2 I mentioned the phrase: "*Adat Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah*," meaning, "Adat is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Koran," and often shorted to simply "ABS SBK." As I explained, this phrase is used in West Sumatra today to imply that adat and Islam are seamlessly intertwined (with adat ultimately founded on the Truth of Islam), despite the ever-lurking concerns that elements of adat, like matriliney, fit uncomfortably with Islam. Da Palo, whom we have met above, told me that he personally thought that the phrase was incorrect. Adat, he said, was actually based on *raso jo pareso*. His first example was, indeed, the principle of matriliney. According to Islam law, he noted, men would inherit most property. According to the principles of adat, of course, this is not the case, and Da Palo explained that this is because adat involves the practice of *raso jo pareso*, through

³⁸ The original reads as follows: "*Raso jo pareso* artinya membiasakan mempertajam rasa kemanusiaan atau hati nurani yang luhur dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Dalam menghadapi setiap masalah, kita dituntut membiasakan diri melakukan penelitian yang cermat untuk mendapatkan kebenaran yang hakiki dan tidak tergesa-gesa dalam bertindak."

³⁹ The original, which haphazardly mixes Minang and Indonesian, reads as follows: "Raso tumbuh di dado / Pareso timbul di kepala."

⁴⁰ Errington (1984), based on his research in a Minangkabau village in the mid 1970's, describes a very different meaning for *raso jo pareso*. I will address this in Chapter 5.

which men come to consider women's need for that property, and thus allow them to have control over it.⁴¹

I will return to the idea of raso jo pareso in the following chapter, but one final comment on it here is appropriate. Although formally raso jo pareso can be divided into two kinds of moral knowing, I never heard people use it in the course of conversation as a way to highlight the difference between these kinds. While the discourse on akal and nafsu often represents kinds of thinking and feeling as inherently at odds with each other, the idea of raso jo pareso stresses the way that each complements the other. The phrase is commonly used precisely to refer to the way that all of person's capacities for moral knowledge should be used in concert so that they become aware of the significance of their behavior toward others. This awareness is created through both analytical thought and intuitive feeling. If one seems to contradict the other, they should be deliberated until they reconcile. Analytical understanding of good and felt motivation toward good combine in raso jo pareso.

Moral Capacities

Just before Da Palo spoke the words shown below, I had reminded him that he had told me that even in a person who is bad, or evil (jaek), there was certain to be some good. "There is!" he responded. Asking him to explain further, he told me that

⁴¹ Da Palo's comments regarding adat and Islam were ambivalent. Although he suggested that in the matter of property inheritance raso jo pareso caused men to act more moral than would Islamic law, moments later he complained that the momentum of tradition inherent in adat robbed men of their rightful positions of power as prescribed by Islam.

no matter how evil someone was, they still had some fear (*takuik*, M; *takut*, I).

Although I asked him what it was that was feared, he was more intent on insisting to me that way that good feelings, or “clean” feelings – feelings that motivate a person to be good – are always present in every human being:

Da Palo: They’ll still have a bit of fear. It’s certain that – what you’d call fear, right? – it’s certain to still be there. Now, for example, there is certainly a bit of a feeling of fear and of shame [*malu*]. If not – human beings that no longer have a feeling of fear and shame are crazy people. Crazy people are the same as animals – they no longer have any *akal*. So, kind [*elok*] feelings are certainly still there. Only sometimes because [...] of their *nafsu*, right, their kind feelings are killed by it, or are defeated by the *nafsu*. That person certain *has* those kind feelings. A feeling that they want to come back, a feeling that they are sinning is there. Only, sometimes [they are not apparent] because of *nafsu*. Let’s say now that I’m a *preman* [thug]. However much on the outside a *preman* looks tough [*bagak*], it’s certain that they still have a feeling of fear, there is still a feeling of being wrong. Only because their ego is so strong, their *nafsu* is so strong – [they have the attitude of], “You know who I am?” [“*Siapa saya?*”]. If they make visible this fear, these kind feelings, then [people will say], “What could *that* guy do?” For a *preman* what must be visible is only their ruthlessness [*sadis*].

GS: How is that?

Da Palo: That is what they put out front. If they’re not ruthless, they can’t be a *preman*. That’s the thing. But a feeling of fear, a feeling of *ibo*, those are certainly there. Believe me, Greg, if I don’t have any – there’s someone whose completely a *preman* now, and then he sees someone who’s [un], and not smoking and they say, “Could I ask you for a cigarette?” He’ll give them the cigarette. You see there’s a feeling that’s clean [*barasiah*]. He wants to give, right? There are no human beings anywhere [who just say], “Go to hell!” and they don’t want to give you a single cigarette. [...] Just a little bit – they’ll help just a little bit, Greg. And so there is also, enclosed in their *hati*, just a little bit of kindness.

In Da Palo’s description, fear, *ibo*, *malu*, kind feelings, clean feelings, feelings of regret for wrongdoing, feelings of sin, and a desire for redemption become

intertwined, even equated as different manifestations of the same thing. They are ways of knowing the good that motivates from within, even for those people who need to advertise their ruthlessness in order to secure their positions. Even the capacity of *akal*, which one might assume to be clearly separated from – or even set off in direct opposition to – feelings, becomes *equated* with them: those without fear or shame *are* those who have no *akal*.⁴²

We have seen how *malu*, like *akal*, can be understood to act to suppress immoral impulses. It separates human beings from animals. Feelings, as forms of moral knowing, work in a similar way. Thus Da Palo is clear that they are a particularly human trait: “If we don’t have feelings – if there are no feelings, it means we’re just the same as animals. What is it that doesn’t have feelings? It’s animals.” Peletz (1996: 226-232) also remarks on the parallel between *malu* and *akal* in his discussion Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. He insists that while women there are understood to have more *malu* than men, this does not mean that women are seen as being equally “reasonable” as men.⁴³ This is true in West Sumatra as well, for as we

⁴² At another point, during a conversation I will explore in more detail below, Da Palo tells me that “the key to everything is the *hati*.” The example he goes on to give, however, is that if he sees something that belongs to someone else, his *nafsu* might tell him to steal it, while his *akal* will tell him that he should not steal it. Only in the conclusion to the story does he return to the term *hati*, though by doing so it becomes clear that when he relies on the positive connotations of “*akal*” to make his point about moral behavior, the moral impulse he has in mind is one that arises from the *hati*: “So, I don’t take it, right? My *nafsu* is defeated – *akal* prevails. I don’t sin. That’s the key to everything, the *hati* is the key to everything.”

⁴³ Peletz (1996) also writes: “All men [interviewed] agree that women have more ‘shame’ than men, and more than a few of them made the point that if they did not, they would be like wild animals and chaos would reign throughout the world” (277). While this idea resonates with the kinds of things people said in Bukittinggi, it is interesting to note that men are often associated with animals, especially dogs, for precisely the reason that they actually have less *malu* than women.

have seen, the capacity for akal is particularly associated with men, even though malu is thought to be stronger in women. Ideas about akal branch out in one direction, and ideas about malu branch out in another. However, in people's moral experience in Bukittinggi, they also tend to intersect, reinforcing the larger idea that human being harbor capacities for moral knowing.

These intersections are not surprising considering what we know about emotions as a human (or even broadly mammalian) phenomenon. Increasingly, scholars of emotion have asserted that emotions are themselves manifestations of cognition (e.g., Damasio 1994, Lazarus and Lazarus 1994, Nussbaum 2001). That is, they are appraisals of aspects of the world and how they relate to self, and are thus manifestations of the capacity to process information about the world and one's place within it. In no way are they inherently irrational or do they necessarily cloud judgment, but rather they are powerful ways of knowing something important about the relationship between self and others. Akal can, in the right contexts, be equated with raso because both involve assessments of the world that ultimately allow a person to behave in a proper manner.

It would be possible to explore in more detail the significance of each of the kind of feelings Da Palo mentions – ibo, takuik, malu, sagan, and so on – and the specific contexts in which each one become enmeshed in people's lives in West Sumatra. Here, I have only given some basic outlines. (Of course, other kinds of feelings – such as those involved in kinds of anger, longing, joy, and so on – are morally significant as well.) My goal has been to highlight the fact that feelings are

seen as sources of moral motivation in human beings, as ways of knowing the good, and by knowing therefore acting for the good, and ultimately staking a claim to realizing good in one's own life. A related goal is to show that feelings, while understood as manifesting themselves in social action, are also understood to have their source within the self. To make this clear, we need to look more closely at the nature of the heart of hearts.

The Heart of Hearts

Above, we saw that Da Lis identified the source of these moral feelings as a person's "heart of hearts." Recall as well that Amir's (2003: 86) definition of *raso jo pareso* also makes use of this concept: "Raso jo pareso means to habitually sharpen a sense of humanity or one's noble heart of hearts in everyday life." Here, Amir equates the heart of hearts with "a sense of humanity" (*rasa kemanusiaan*). In both Amir's formal definition and Da Lis's informal contemplations, such moral knowledge is something more than a human capacity like a conscience. It is instead a manifestation of the deepest, most authentic dimension of self.

The idea of a conscience is narrow in the same way that Charles Taylor (1989) suggest much modern moral philosophy is narrow: it is oriented toward a conception of ethics, of right and wrong action, as something separate from the larger realm of the moral. In this narrower view, right and wrong are imagined to be external to a person – that is, they are located in what a person does and leave unexamined the question of who a person is. A conscience keeps a person aware of the outlines of right and

wrong action, but it sits off to the side of the core of the self. In its manifestation as a Freudian superego, it is an internalization of social forces that actually works to suppress a person's most fundamental and innate impulses.

The heart of hearts does perform the function of a conscience. Thus, Da Lis discussed the way that it opposes the actions of a corruptor, and at another point makes the claim (echoing Da Palo, above) that no matter how immoral a person may become, the seeds of their redemption are always within them, in their heart of hearts. Da Dan, to take another example, explained to me that as a young man he moved to Java and found himself engaged in petty theft as a way to make enough money to buy something to eat. His heart of hearts, however, was opposed to this behavior, and (even though he tried drowning the voice of his heart of hearts by getting drunk) he eventually returned to Bukittinggi to get away from it.⁴⁴ The feelings and knowledge that arise in the heart of hearts are never immoral, and so they act like a conscience to keep a person's behavior from becoming immoral.

Still, the heart of hearts is engaged with morality in a broader way than is a conscience. In Chapter 3, I discussed Taylor's three moral axes: treating others with proper respect, living a life that fulfills its proper potential, and securing dignity by being held in esteem. I argued that what Taylor shows us is that morality brings together multiple ways in which human beings evaluate their own significance. If a conscience is primarily imagined as a piece of the self that is attuned toward the first of these axes (treating others with proper respect), the heart of hearts is imagined as

⁴⁴ He also explains this as his *naluri*, his "instinct" being opposed to his behavior.

the very core of the self, and thus as a well of knowledge about the self's moral status along the other axes as well. When knowledge or feeling is said to be in one's *hati*, one's heart (as opposed to just in one's mouth, to take Da Tul's remark about *ibo* as an example) it is understood to be genuine; when these things are identified as having arisen in one's heart of hearts, they are marked as absolutely, unquestionably authentic. The heart of hearts tells a person how they matter in the world, what the nature of their significance is, and how that significance may come under threat.

Da Eri is quite eloquent in describing his own sense of who he is, identifying his heart of hearts as the reservoir of this knowledge. Recall that Da Eri, a highly educated part-time lecturer in his mid-thirties is considered humble and pious by his peers. In this passage, I am asking Da Eri near the end of our long interview series to describe for me who he is:

GS: Supposing I asked you, "Who, in fact—"

Da Eri: — "is Da Eri?"

GS: What would your answer be?

Da Eri: This is hard!⁴⁵

GS: Is it hard?

Da Eri: Because I don't know what I'd answer. I am – a different answer that I'd give is, "I am me" [*ambo adolah ambo*]. OK? But I want to say, "I'm a Muslim." Because the goal – my goal in life is that I want to be a Muslim. Secondly, outside of me being a Muslim, secondly I am – what's clear is that, well, general things. I'm an Indonesian, I [work at this institution]. But what's clear is that I'm a Muslim, that is what's clearest of all. And then, although in front of other people I could say, "I'm this, I'm that, I've been there, I can do this or that," in my heart of hearts Greg, OK? I say, "I can't do anything." I'm nobody.⁴⁶ Because I know my own limitations, you know? I can't say that I'm the best. No. I can never say that, OK? You have the right not to believe what I'm

⁴⁵ We had just been discussing whether the next question was going to be a difficult one.

⁴⁶ He says this sentence in English.

saying, Greg. But when I'm contemplating by myself at home, I know I'm nothing. Like mere fog.

We can see here how in the heart of hearts identity and morality are intertwined. Da Eri's knowledge of who he really is comes to him from his heart of hearts. He may try, he says, to claim something other than what it tells him is true, but it is ultimately the voice of his heart of hearts that carries his deepest, most authentic vision of himself. This is the one Da Eri is aware of when he is removed from situations in which he may be making claims in front of other people. His heart of hearts orients him toward a vision of his true significance, no matter what he may otherwise claim, as a Muslim – that is, as one who has completely submitted to God and is thus in the larger picture no more substantial than fog.

We know, of course, that Da Eri does not always feel himself to be “nothing.” He acknowledges this quite directly at the beginning of the passage when he says that “I am me” is another answer he would consider giving to my query.⁴⁷ (Similar responses were very common when I asked people to summarize for me who they were, and I will discuss this more in the conclusion to this dissertation.) We can also recall from Chapter 2 how Da Eri describes his refusal to be treated with disrespect by his rich and powerful new boss, and how he says he refused to be deferential to her because his self-respect (*harago diri*) had been assaulted.

The “heart of hearts” provides a way for people reflect on their significance in the world, but there are multiple ways that people in West Sumatra imagine

⁴⁷ He later says that he could perhaps claim to be somebody if he were like Hatta, a proclaimer of Indonesia's independence.

themselves to be significant. The heart of hearts is never clearly *immoral*, but it nevertheless can make multiple, even conflicting claims as to one's moral significance. Da Eri's piety leads him to supersede what he might otherwise give as his answer ("I am me") with a different one. He makes a claim for his ultimate significance as being tied to his relationship of complete submission to God. Yet there are other ways that the self is understood to become significant, and these too are reflected in the heart of hearts.

Contrast Da Eri's comments above, for instance, with the ones he makes about one of his friends. This friend suffered from a psychotic break, going crazy (*gilo*) after failing a test to become a lecturer at a college. A third friend of theirs, who Da Eri says was clearly far less qualified, passed the test. According to Da Eri, his friend's insanity was a result of the stress (*stres*) that overtook him when his heart of hearts could not reconcile to the reality of the situation. I asked him if before this had occurred, this man had been normal. Da Eri replied, "He was normal. But what's clear is that he was very hard working – ambitious. When his dreams were confronted with reality – even though he was smart, the fact was that he did not pass – his heart of hearts could not accept it. The thing is that he'd made such an effort to become the best, and then it turned out like that."

Here, the heart of hearts is confronted with a failure of realization. The man's heart of hearts cannot reconcile with reality because reality conflicts with his sense of who he is, or who he *should* be: a man esteemed for his skills and hard work. Perhaps, Da Eri suggests (subtly tying this story back to his argument that, ultimately, one's

religious orientation trumps other dimensions of the experienced self) the man had lacked the proper sense of patience (*saba*) in enduring what life presented to him.

We can turn to Ni Gan for a more direct example. Ni Gan is a woman in her late 20's. In Chapter 2, I mentioned that she complained about the capriciousness of the title-holding man in her lineage, and told me that the traditional role of Minangkabau senior women as *bundo kanduang* was merely something out of history and was no longer relevant. Ni Gan lives with her second husband and her two children in a sparsely furnished house on *pusako* land (land under the control of her lineage, to which she has use rights). Her husband is usually gone fifteen hours every day earning a meager income selling *maco*, dried fish, in the marketplace, while Ni Gan takes care of her children and the house. She dislikes being trapped at home most of the day, and she is anxious about her family's finances. She feels that her neighbors are suspicious and jealous of her, and this increases her isolation. Ni Gan is outgoing and aggressive, and she laughs and jokes a great deal. She often seems uncomfortable or impatient if our conversations become too abstract or if I seem to treat them in an overly formal manner. She dislikes questions that require deeper contemplation, and she is primarily interested in pleading her troubles to me. She is clearly miserable. While she makes frequent jokes, they often have a cynical or even hostile undertone to them, and I almost always feel anxious when I am with her. She is prone to throwing small objects at her children or to giving her toddler a purse to play with and then "jokingly" telling her, "OK, you can go out now – and don't come

back!” The mixture of anxiety and humor that came to characterize our interactions is apparent in the passage below.

Ni Gan had told me that despite (or perhaps because of) her problems she often does not pray, even though she knows that she should, and would be better off if she did. She remarked that it was as if she were angry with God. In this passage, I question her about this comment, and she responds by referring to her “little brain,” a phrase that I have only ever heard from her. Primed to laugh to help ease the anxiety of interacting with her, I initially treat her use of the term as a joke, but she is serious. She equates it with the thoughts that arise in the “little hati” – that is, the heart of hearts.

GS: So, sometimes you feel – what is it? – “angry⁴⁸ with God”?

Ni Gan: No. I feel annoyed (*kesal*), but I don’t feel angry.

GS: Okay. But that is what you said last week, that sometimes – “as if” you’re angry, perhaps.

Ni Gan: Well, how can I say it, Greg? I have so many problems. I’ve prayed the daily prayers, I’ve prayed the *tahajud* [optional, midnight prayers, often performed by those in distress], I’ve kept the fast, and those problems keep coming anyway, coming anyway. It’s as if this annoyance arises in me – yes, annoyance or what do you call it?

GS: Uh-huh – it’s not—

Ni Gan: It’s like I’m fed up [*januah*] with it. Because there are just so many problems. My brain can’t figure out it. We have brains – two brains, a big brain, and a little brain [*utak ketek*], right? It’s our little brain that – it makes my head hurt.

GS: Little brain?

Ni Gan: Yes, little brain.

GS: Where is the big one?

Ni Gan: [laughs]

GS: [laughs] What’s the difference between the little brain—

Ni Gan: The little brain, the big brain.

⁴⁸ I use the word “*berang*” here for “angry,” although in fact she had used “*bangih*” when making the original comment. See Chapter 5 for more on anger emotions and terms.

GS: — and the big one?

Ni Gan: The big brain is the one that thinks, well, not all that much – doesn't think about things so thoroughly. The little brain – how can I say it, Greg? – it still thinks, Greg. If there's a problem, it still thinks about it, Greg. You know? Go and see, if you have a big problem, you might not think about anything else, Greg. It's like now, you say, "Ah, just let it be." You know? "Just let it be." People say that to me, right? But surely in my heart of hearts [*hati ketek*, "little heart"], Greg – surely, it will cut in with, "What did I do wrong? Why are things like this for me?" That's what I'll think. That's the way it is, right?

GS: Uh-huh.

Ni Gan: According to the whole universe, well, I shouldn't think about it, Greg. "It's not a problem. Just forget about it. Let it be. The main thing is, I don't bother other people." Ah, but inside my heart of hearts, oh Greg, what is it? My brain, Greg, it thinks, "What is it that I've done? Why are things like this – people, going so far as lots of people being jealous of me, suspicious of me?" and all that. That is what I think. That's the little brain.

Ni Gan is aware that she should not dwell on her problems (as Da Eri also suggests is true for his troubled friend). She feels that she has behaved properly, both in relation to God, by praying and fasting, as well as in relation to other people, by not causing them problems.⁴⁹ At the same time, she feels that both other people and God have responded by treating her as if she were a moral failure. She has failed to be seen and treated as the kind of person she feels she should be. This sense of failure arises spontaneously in her, even despite her desire to counter it. Unlike other aspects of her consciousness, such as her "big brain," she cannot control what comes from her "little brain," representing the thoughts that arise from her heart of hearts. This is not the

⁴⁹ Of course, while she says that her problems have mounted even when she regularly performs her prayers, she has also said that this has in turn led her to sometimes skip her prayers. This is what led us to this discussion in the first place. I will examine Ni Gan's relationship with prayer more extensively in Chapter 6.

pain of malu (shame), nor is it the pain of a guilty conscience, but another kind of pain, also of moral failure, that arises in the heart of hearts.

If the heart of hearts is always moral, and if it represents the deepest part of the self, why do people fail to be what they should be, and how is such failure imagined? This question brings us back to question of the existence of evil and suffering in the world. In the case of Ni Gan, or of Da Eri's friend, or of Da Dan in his days of petty theft, there is a belief in an authentic, good self, but also an acknowledgment that this self is not always manifested in the visible world. The good self is brought into engagement with the world through circumstances – the pull of hunger while living far from home, a failing grade on an exam, a life of poverty amid suspicious neighbors – that challenge it. The self in the world becomes something different than the self in essence.

The Corrupting World

The Devil

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained that in the Islamic perspective adopted by people in Bukittinggi, human beings are never evil by nature.⁵⁰ However, it is considered a fundamental feature of life in this world that human beings are constantly being tempted by Iblis, the devil, into becoming morally corrupt. Iblis can

⁵⁰ Before I began person-centered interviews using the Minang language, I had a research assistant, Yessi Asiswanti, check the wording of some questions that I might ask during these sessions. One of the questions concerned whether people were basically good or basically bad. She told me that she was certain everyone would respond to this question by saying that people were basically good. With only partial exceptions, she was right.

be imagined as a kind of being, an embodiment of evil or personification of sombong. Sometimes, the term *iblis* (*iblih*, M) or *setan* is used to refer to one in an army of beings that perform this same function. (As there is no coherent model shared by Minangkabau people for the relationship between Iblis, iblis, and setan, and they all appear to be used more or less interchangeably, I will use “the devil” or “a devil” to refer to and translate all of these.) It is the devil that, as Da Tor put it, “calls and calls” for human followers.

People in Bukittinggi often describe immoral acts or desires as manifestations of the devil. The devil may sometimes be said to “enter into the heart” – though never into the heart of hearts – and cause a person to do something bad. This is particularly true when a person suddenly does something especially bad, such as commit an unjustified act of violence. More often, the devil is said to simply “whisper” to the heart or the head. Da Luko, for instance, told me that the whisperings of the devil would keep him from praying. In this case, such whispers were heard only subconsciously: sometimes, he said, he went out with the intention (*niaik*) to attend Friday prayers at the mosque, and yet when the time came he would find that he had forgotten to go in spite of these intentions. Other times, he would feel as if someone was closing his eyes in the morning when he should be getting up. (It was particularly common for people to refer to the devil when describing the feeling of wanting to stay in one’s warm bed early on a cold morning when one should get up to pray.) In both of these cases, he identified the devil as the culprit, making him do something (forget

to go to the mosque, close his eyes and sleep some more) that he didn't *really* want to do.

As a very different example, Ni Tasi explained to me that she became frightened when standing at a great height and looking down. "There's a feeling like I want to jump down," she said. I asked her if she was afraid that she might follow this feeling. "Yes," she replied. "Sometimes a devil will influence us, right? And so we'll jump down."

The degree to which devils are identified with immorality is also apparent in Da Tor's comments to me about the afterlife. He had told me that in hell a person "couldn't do anything anymore." Unlike life in this world, where even when a person sinned they could also continue to engage in religious devotions (*ibadah*) to gain God's favor, in hell that person could no longer do anything but receive punishment. In contrast, he speculated that in heaven where "the atmosphere is safe and calm," everything a person did was an act of religious devotion. Interested in the relationship between free will and the afterlife, I asked him the following question:

GS: In heaven can people still do bad things?

Da Tor: No, they can't do that anymore.

GS: They can't.

Da Tor: They can't do that anymore. I mean, this is the gift they've been working toward this whole time, and they've done good things during that time. So it's really not possible for them to do bad things anymore.

GS: By "it's not possible," do you mean that they have no desire to do it?

Da Tor: Perhaps they have no desire.

GS: They don't.

Da Tor: The reason is that the devil does not go there. There's no devil there in heaven. There are just good angels only, right?

It is easy to see how desires and motivations – particularly immoral or frightening ones – are excluded from the self by being assigned to the devil. It is not Da Luko that does not want to go to the mosque or to get up in the morning, but rather these are the devil's desires at work on him. Ni Tasi considers jumping from a great height to be obviously self-destructive and therefore not something that she would want to do unless she were influenced by the devil. In this way, the existence of unacceptable desires and behaviors can be explained while the self is still seen as essentially moral.

Nevertheless, care must be taken not to oversimplify the role of the devil and the relationship of self to immorality. The devil is indeed an explanation for immoral desires and behaviors, but not an effective excuse for them. Although people frequently claim that their moral failures are manifestations of the devil and the devil's influence, it is simply unacceptable to claim – at least directly – that the devil is responsible for such failures. The existence of free will means that a person can ultimately determine whether or not they let the devil influence them. A person may claim that their moral failings would not exist were it not for the devil, but the devil is a fact of life, and a person's obligation is to resist the devil. This is what ultimately determines their fate in the afterlife. This is the central message of the Koranic story that recounts the fall of Iblis: living the world means being constantly pulled away from a moral life, and it is the responsibility of each individual to resist this pull. While the devil can be understood as the source of immoral motivation, the actual immoral act belongs to the person who commits it. Shifting moral responsibility to

the devil would be like shifting moral responsibility to the very fact of being alive. This is fundamental to Islam, and I cannot recall anyone contradicting this idea overtly.

We can turn to some remarks made by Da Dan for an illustration of how the devil can be used as an explanation, but rejected as an excuse. Like Ni Gan, Da Dan finds that, despite himself, he often does not pray. In light of the fact that he thinks he should pray and sees no reason at all that he does not pray, he tells me that he has no explanation for his own behavior, which simply puzzles him.⁵¹ As we discuss this, he tells me that “it might be the devil” that keeps him from praying regularly. However, he immediately offers this caveat: “That doesn’t mean that I’m blaming the devil. Clearly, I’m blaming myself.” Several minutes later, when I ask him about this comment, he explains at great length that the devil can only use powers of persuasion, but can never force a person to do anything. “It really depends [because] the people that can be persuaded are weak like me,” he says. “If you yourself are at fault for something, don’t blame it on the devil,” he explains in an irritated tone, adding that people who do this make him angry. Yet the times I heard people “blame” their actions, or the actions of others on the devil, it was always in the same manner that Da Dan had done it: indirectly, by implication, and never with the accompanying assertion that they were, therefore, blameless themselves.

As mentioned earlier, Da Jik explained that if I was not convinced that devils existed, this did not change anything: the point is that there are good and bad thoughts,

⁵¹ I will explore Da Dan’s troubles with prayer more extensively in Chapter 6, where I will also return to Ni Gan’s similar struggles.

good and bad desires that each of us experiences. Devils *are* the bad thoughts and desires inside of us, our motivation to be immoral. They cannot be disentangled from the experience of living. Being alive in this world means that immorality is always assaulting us, and must be constantly resisted. Devils are not purely metaphorical, at least for many people in Bukittinggi who are sure that they are real. But what they are outside of their manifestation in human consciousness is beyond discussion and comprehension. From a human perspective, the subjective experience of a devil *is* the existence of a devil. For this reason, in the course of everyday life, a devil is not something that is to be cast out of the body or forced to release a person from its grip (cf. Csordas 1990).⁵² There are evil spirits that may possess people, but this is an extraordinary phenomenon, something else entirely. Iblis can be resisted but never completely disentangled from the self. Da Dan, who had speculated that his lack of prayer was a manifestation of the devil, is very clear about what the devil is from the perspective of a human being: “Those things that are bad goings-on, our bad attributes [*kejadian-kejadian jelek, sifat-sifat jelek awak*] – that is Iblis.”

It is thus only partially correct to say that assigning immoral motivations to the devil excludes them from the self. Iblis, and the morally perilous world he represents, are parts of the self, although they are parts that are conceptually marginalized from its core. As humans make their way through the world, such “bad goings-on” become a part of them. Yet giving “our bad attributes” a name, an existence as a kind of being, suggest that even as they are “ours,” they are not quite fully part of us. Iblis, a symbol

⁵² The topic of possession will be addressed briefly in Chapter 5.

of both immorality and dislocation, inhabits precisely that ambivalent space where the boundary is blurred between self and not self, between what belongs to the self and what belongs to the world. The experience of engaging with that world (and thus the devil) is also the experience of being pulled toward immorality, of finding oneself and that world becoming impossibly intertwined. This is the experience of living a particular life. What “the devil” does as a cultural object is help define the shape of that engagement: it insists that no matter what one’s moral failings, there is always a place in the self that remains distinct from the immoral act and retains the agentic capacity to resist evil.

Externalizing Morality in a Corrupting World

This is a pattern of conceptualizing moral life that in Bukittinggi goes beyond references to devils. Referring to devils acts as a sort of shorthand for referring to the difficulties the world presents for living a moral life. When people discuss the ways that immorality comes into being in human lives, they do not always mention the devil, but more often than not they identify the source of immorality as external to persons. As with references to the devil, this does not mean that people cannot be accused of being immoral. Instead, it means that human immorality is seen as existing in those parts of the person that are most closely engaged with the world. These are the parts that are often considered to be external, in the *lahir*, such as bodies and behaviors, as well as human consciousness of such behaviors.

There are several ways that living in the world is thought to lead to immorality. The most direct way is that a kind of immoral essence can be passed physically into the body. This is generally thought to happen through food, with mother's milk being the most common example. As Ni Saia explains, if the mother is gossiping while nursing, the child may grow up to gossip as well. She explains that even the moral or immoral behavior of a mother during pregnancy will be transferred into the developing fetus, so that a child whose mother behaves immorally during pregnancy will be more likely to behave immorally as well. Da Palo points out that children who drink cow's milk will certainly take on some of the attributes of an animal, while those who nurse from a good (*elok*) mother will become good.

It is also thought to be dangerous to the moral state of a child for that child to eat food bought with *pitih haram*, "forbidden money," – that is, money obtained through immoral methods. Money men obtain through gambling, for example, is never supposed to be given to their wives for domestic use. Not everyone agrees, however, that immorality can be transmitted this way. Da Tul, who earns *pitih haram* selling illegal lottery tickets, is adamant that his young sons' moral status would not be affected if their food were purchased using his *pitih haram*. He still refuses to give this money to his wife unless there is an emergency, but his explanation for this is that he feels that his own sins would be compounded if he did so. Nevertheless, he is clear that his sins are his alone and cannot be transmitted to someone else. The idea that each individual is responsible for his or her own sins has strong resonance in Islam, and contrasts with ideas about the transmission of moral corruption. The latter, more

closely resembling Hindu conceptions of pollution, are perhaps echoes of West Sumatra's pre-Islamic history.

Although the physical transmission of immoral essence through food or through the flesh (as in original sin) runs counter to Islamic conceptions, there are ways that people in Bukittinggi see the body, as an outer layer of self, as the locus of sin. This is particularly notable in certain ideas about death and the afterlife. Upon death, a person's spirit (*roh, jiwa*) leaves the body, yet the corpses of those who led particularly immoral lives are said to shrink, swell or to twist into grotesque forms – or to feel strangely heavy when being carried to the grave. In the afterlife, it is often said that it is one's body – not one's physical body, but the “body” of one's spirit – that answers questions about one's deeds during life. As Da Tor put it, “Each part of the body tells what it has done.” A person could not possibly deceive the angels that ask the questions by answering falsely because the body literally speaks for itself. Finally, it is of course the body of the spirit that is the site for the punishments of hell, the burning away of sins that occurs until one is completely cleansed and ready to enter heaven.⁵³ It is understood that a Muslim person, though almost certainly required to spend some time in hell first, will eventually enter heaven after such cleansing, for being Muslim means having a “clean” piece of the self at its core. In contrast, by this standard account non-Muslims remain in hell forever, becoming the very wood whose burning cleanses and tortures Muslims during their time there.

⁵³ Some people think of the common descriptions of these tortures as metaphors used to communicate the unfathomable kinds of pain that the non-corporeal self suffers in hell.

There is a general consensus that people in Bukittinggi today are less moral than their recent ancestors. Most of the theories people use to explain this change also rely on the idea of an outside influence that results in corruption, and locate the corruption in the living of life rather than inside persons. These often include influences from outside the society, such as the foreign influences that arrive through the media, primarily television. However, quite frequently I was told that people are less moral today because of “the times.” The idea seems to be that there is a sort of self-perpetuating rise in immorality: as people become more immoral the world becomes more immoral, and as the world surrounding them becomes more immoral people in turn become more immoral. Immorality is thus seen as both cause and effect. To the extent that this is connected to internal changes in people, it is generally through the idea that in “these times” people no longer feel the moral emotions of malu (shame) and takuik (fear) as strongly as they once did. Middle-aged and older respondents in particular often told me how it had once been the case that a person would be too malu or too takuik to even enter a room where their mamak was sitting, and such reactions kept them morally upright.

Sometimes the idea that “the times” are the cause of increased immorality is given a bit more substance by linking it to economic conditions. Conventional wisdom in Bukittinggi is that today it is much harder to make a living than it once was. When this “once” is situated can vary: it might mean back in the early 90’s before the Asian economic crisis began, it might mean a few decades ago, or it might

mean generations ago in some indistinct pre-modern time.⁵⁴ Now that it is so much more difficult to provide for one's family, people are forced to cheat, steal, or pin their hopes on gambling in order to make the money they need to survive. This is not necessarily thought to make these immoral acts acceptable. What it does is provide an explanation for the supposed increase in immoral behavior that does not rely on the idea that there has been a decay in the internal moral character of people today as compared to people of the past. Instead, circumstances are identified as the cause of this rise in immorality. Immoral acts caused by desperate circumstances were sometimes seen by my respondents as less bad than those that took place outside of such a context.

Perhaps because gambling is an acknowledged "sinful" activity that is nevertheless widespread and relatively openly pursued – at least widespread and open in the form of petty stakes card games among men and the purchase of illegal lottery tickets among men and women alike – it was commonly framed in this way. Ni Yas, for example, defended her betting on the illegal lottery (a pervasive pastime for a substantial portion of Bukittinggi's residents), by explaining to me that she only did so

⁵⁴ Several times people used the historical value of the rupiah to demonstrate to me how much harder it is to make a living now than it used to be. Without taking into account general inflation, they would simply note that, for example, one hundred rupiah used to buy a great deal, while today it is impossible to buy anything for that amount. There is also a countervailing idea in Bukittinggi that people used to be much poorer and that progress has now been made: people now have electricity, motor scooters, brick and cement houses, and so on. Both ideas are of course correct, and are not really at odds with each other. There is much more available for consumption in West Sumatra today than there was decades ago, and many people are thus materially richer than their forbearers. However, with fewer and fewer people able to rely on agriculture to fulfill their wants and basic needs, and with so many more things around to want and need, there is understandably a sense that making a living is a much more problematic undertaking than it used to be.

when she did not have enough money for her needs and saw no other way to get it. It was a way, she said, of “inviting” fortune to come to her. Using the Islamic terms for the forbidden (*haram*) and the acceptable (*halal*), she added, “When you’re in a tight spot, the *haram* becomes *halal*, too.” She complained that those who were truly immoral were the people who were rich but nevertheless gambled anyway. Da Palo expressed the dilemma as follows:

Da Palo: It’s just sometimes there are circumstances that force you – there are you, know? – to do [something immoral]. It’s like, for example now, in terms of food. In economic matters. Sometimes it’s like this in Islam. Poverty will lead to *munaḡikan* [religious hypocrisy, or acting like a non-believer though professing Islam]. Hypocrisy. How could it be said that it doesn’t lead to hypocrisy? It’s obvious that some money is – it’s *pitih haram* [forbidden money], right? Money from gambling – it’s *pitih haram*, right? Because you’re destitute, like it or not, you take it and give it to your child, too. The circumstances force it, right?

While people talked to me about the physical transmission of immoral essence, the influence of the times, and the pressures of economic circumstance, by far the most common general explanation for immoral behavior that was expressed to me was that it was caused by *bagaua*, socializing. In Chapter 3 I demonstrated that *bagaua* is a key moral concept in Bukittinggi. To *bagaua* is to demonstrate that one is part of the social group rather than *sombong*, outside of and unequal to (greater than) others in the group. Those who are unable to *bagaua* properly are seen as moral failures. It may even be seen as better to participate in a little bit of immoral behavior, such as drinking alcohol, than to be *sombong* by refusing to do what everyone around you is doing. This is a delicate balance, however. A person may feel that he needs to drink (to continue with the current example) to properly socialize, but on the other hand he

faces the pressure of knowing that, at least in the eyes of some, drinking is absolutely immoral. It is precisely in such socializing that other dimensions of a person's moral status become vulnerable. Though the act of bagaua with the ideal moral community is the enacting of moral personhood, the act of bagaua with the actual, imperfect community can just as easily be the enacting of immoral personhood.

Da Jik was one of the men who told me that he had felt it necessary to drink and gamble a little bit when he worked with the preman (thugs) at the bus terminal. Like Da Palo, quoted earlier, Da Jik said that it was necessary for the preman to act this way in order to maintain their positions. He said that they did not act this way because they wanted to, or because they were hard (*kareh*) inside, but for show. "They have to," he said. "It's the environment that invites hardness like that." It was this environment that led him to the drinking and gambling, though he says he always kept these from getting out of control. After the interview in which we talked about these things, we were discussing them further with another man, Da Hendi. Da Jik noted that Da Hendi was very pious and had gone to religious school, but that if he were in the bus terminal environment every day, he would probably stop praying regularly. Da Hendi agreed.⁵⁵

I was told repeatedly that people become immoral because of their socializing, where and with whom they bagaua. This was true whether people were talking about others or about themselves. While the bad desires of *nafsu* were assumed to always

⁵⁵ This was actually a strange assertion for Da Jik to make in light of the fact that he had told me that, during his own time working at the terminal, he had continued to pray. He described himself as alone among his peers there in doing so.

play a role in such behaviors, these did not differentiate a moral person from an immoral one or moral moments from immoral ones: everyone has *nafsu*, and it never goes away. There are therefore two kinds of explanations for immoral acts. First is the failure to prevent oneself from engaging in the immoral act, and second is the way a particular environment makes an immoral act likely to occur. This is where a person's socializing becomes key.

In the interview passage below, Da Lis attributes Da Tul's immorality to both of these factors. Da Tul, the man who sells illegal lottery tickets, is known to drink regularly and heavily, and admits that he is addicted to alcohol.⁵⁶

Da Lis: Da Tul says that he gets up at 5:30, and then he prays. Isn't that right?

GS: Yes.

Da Lis: Now, he knows that praying is a good thing, right? And yet why does he also drink alcohol every day? He says that he needs to do it right? And, it's true, such is the case with his environment that everyone drinks. But see what would happen if he were in the company of people who were educated, right? Perhaps then his friends could tell him, "Da Tul, this is no good. You're damaging your body," and so on. So one's environment is maybe seventy percent of what influences a person to be good or not, you see. And it's also true that it's the strength of the *hati*, right? If Da Tul were strengthened by his *hati*, "I'm going to stop drinking," then there is no doubt he could stop. What's important is to be aware and be made aware, right, that something is good or not, or bad.

What is important to keep in mind here is that Da Lis is well aware than Da Tul *knows* that drinking is forbidden by Islam and (if done in excess) harmful to the body.⁵⁷ Da

⁵⁶ Da Tul insists, however, that he is a *paminum*, a "drinker," rather than a *pamabuak*, a "drunk," because he only drinks to keep from feeling ill and does not drink so much as to become inebriated. However, he has a history of drinking until passing out publicly, and though he has reduced the frequency of such episodes, he does often display the effects of intoxication. While he sometimes claims that no one has ever called him a drunk, this is obviously not true.

Lis and I have both heard Da Tul acknowledge this. Da Tul is thus in some sense clearly “aware” that his drinking is immoral, but according to Da Lis this awareness does not reach a critical level that would cause him not to drink. The awareness does not extend to Da Tul’s behavior.

We might be tempted to read Da Lis’s statements here as offering a sort of theory of internalization, but this would be misleading. We could imagine that, despite knowing that drinking is bad, Da Tul does not deeply internalize this cultural knowledge, and so is not motivated to stop drinking (cf. Spiro 1987). His social environment does not provide the context for such motivation. However, it may be more appropriate to say that Da Lis is offering a theory of “externalization.”

Anthropological theories of internalization are primarily concerned with the way cultural schemas do or do not become linked to an individual’s “self,” arguing that it is only to the extent that a schema does become linked to self – that is, is felt to have relevance to a person’s own life and identity – that it will motivate behavior (Quinn 1992, Strauss 1992, Strauss and Quinn 1997). To be deeply internalized is thus to reach deeply into the person where the self resides, and to form the self as an agent that acts in a particular way.

In contrast, Da Lis is concerned with the way that what is inside the self, in the *hati*, is or is not brought out – externalized – into the person’s social behavior. Thus,

⁵⁷ This also makes it immoral. In common interpretation, Islam forbids causing harm to one’s own body. It is also considered, simply by “common sense,” bad to damage one’s own health, and therefore counter to the proper way to live life. Many men who drink argue that drinking is beneficial if not done to excess, and is especially helpful in Bukittinggi’s “cold” climate. These men may also argue that it is getting drunk that is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. Others (non-drinkers) argue, however, that it is the substance of alcohol itself that is *haram* and that imbibing even a drop is therefore a sin.

Da Tul may have an internal awareness and knowledge of the problem. However, Da Tul lives in, and his consciousness is situated in, a social environment in which drinking is accepted, his awareness remains limited to his internal dimensions. Da Tul, as a social actor, remains not fully “aware” of his own immorality. While Da Lis sees this environment as the most important determining factor in Da Tul’s behavior (70%), he also emphasizes that, if Da Tul applied his own internal moral capacities – his *hati* – he could “no doubt” stop drinking. Da Tul is thus ultimately responsible for his actions. In this sense, he is arguing that Da Tul is not properly externalizing his own moral motivations. Da Tul’s moral motivations remain locked inside the internal self, while as a social actor he continues to be immoral.

This is essentially the same way that Da Tul presents himself during our interviews. He tells me that he was an obedient child, good student, and one of the most accomplished Koranic chanters in his class until sometime during middle school. He says, “When I got to middle school, I went to school regularly. In the third year of middle school, that was when I first become obstinate [*bandel*]. It was my socializing [*pergaulan*]. I was obstinate about it.” I ask him about this rapid change, which he characterizes as “one hundred percent,” and he replies, “Yes, it changed fast. It was my socializing, yes. My socializing and the environment in which I had my friendships, so to speak.”

Da Tul spends a great deal of the time during our interviews finding ways to link various topics – his past, family, health, religion, emotions, and so on – to his own moral failures, particularly his drinking, and fashioning our discussions into arguments

for his own essential morality. He drinks, he says, only because he is addicted, not to get drunk. He says many supposedly pious people secretly engage in grave sins like illicit sex or even child rape, and are thus hypocrites, the worst kind of sinners; meanwhile, people assume that because he drinks he must do all kinds of immoral things, but he does not. He describes the legitimate jobs he has held when he has had the opportunity, and notes that even selling illegal lottery tickets is more legitimate than many civil service jobs: he makes his money through effort, while they make their through stealing from the people (that is, corruption).

He also describes how he is slowly praying more, drinking less, and moving toward repentance. He often frames his transformation explicitly and implicitly in terms of a division between the *pasa* (marketplace, city) and the *kampung* (village, neighborhood), echoing the conceptual split I have discussed in previous chapters.⁵⁸ During the day, he spends his time in the *pasa*, which is where he sells his lottery tickets, drinks, and does not pray. At night, he lives with his wife in a *kampung* outside of the city, and he tells me that there he prays, avoids people if he is not sober, and (as described earlier) avoids giving the *pitih haram* he has earned in the *pasa* to his wife for domestic needs, so that he does not compound his sins by introducing them into a previously uncorrupted sphere. He tells me that he is glad he has married a woman from the *kampung*, as they are not corrupt like the people in the city. His lives in both worlds, but identifies himself with the pure world of the *kampung*, and his goal is to inhabit it entirely. Echoing what Da Lis said about his lack of

⁵⁸ Literally, he spends his days in neighborhood close to the center of the city. He describes them as “*pasa*,” in opposition to the “*kampung*” where he lives with his wife.

“awareness,” Da Tul tells me the following as he describes this slow process in himself: “A human beings is sure to become aware [*sadar*] eventually. But I don’t know when I’ll be aware.”

Situating the Self in Practice and in Essence

The idea that (im)moral motivation and even awareness are situated largely in the flow of social life rather than primarily locked up within the psychological structures of an individual has similarities to “practice” theories of social life. Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of habitus, for example, sees human beings as formed by social environments in such a way that they recreate those environments without ever having to become self-conscious of the patterns they create. Bourdieu offers little if any description of the psychological mechanisms at work, instead asking us to imagine human beings as existing in the flow of social interaction – in practice – itself.

Although a full discussion and critique of this theory would take us too far away from the ethnographic material in question,⁵⁹ it is easy to see the relationship between Bourdieu’s concerns and those of my respondents. Like Bourdieu, my respondents often pushed me to see moral behavior as a matter of acts embedded in social interaction, rather than in internal or psychological processes. In contrast, however, they were *also* concerned with the fact that moral life involves experiences of desire, internal conflicts, and a sense of agency. My respondents, each in different

⁵⁹ Among the many critiques of the theory, Strauss and Quinn (1997) offer a persuasive case for the way that sophisticated cognitive theories of culture mirror the compelling qualities of habitus theory without suffering many of its limitations, including its lack of psychological complexity.

ways, highlighted the interplay between an internal self, often seen to retain moral motivations and agency, and an acting self that often became caught up in a corrupting world and was “unaware” of what it did. They located moral personhood at times in inner dimensions of the heart of hearts and its moral intentions, and at times in the flow of social interaction and its dangers. The idea of a person as constituted by practice, embedded in the person’s environment, was not an idea they used to describe the nature of human beings and social life in general. Instead, they used this idea to talk about how one’s “self” as constituted in social action remained in a dynamic relationship with – that is distinct, though not necessary disconnected from – one’s “self” as constituted in an internal essence. Each of my respondents balanced these ideas in different ways, depending on what they were trying to communicate to me, often depending on what they were trying to communicate to me about themselves. Five examples will help to illustrate the particular ways that some people in Bukittinggi recruit culturally salient conceptions of person and morality, constructing claims about their own moral selfhood.

Ni Tasi: The Person Doesn’t Want to Do It

GS: Where do desires come from – desires that aren’t – to do things that aren’t good?

Ni Tasi: Hmmm. From what I see, these desires might originate in the influence of other people.

GS: They’re usually from—?

Ni Tasi: Usually that’s the case. There isn’t any desire, possibly, from one’s own self. And then later there’s influence, to try something out or something like that.

GS: So there’s nothing from inside that person—?

Ni Tasi: I don't think that there is. [pause] But I don't really know. Maybe there is something... [trails off].

Ni Tasi is a single woman in her mid-twenties who is currently pursuing a three-year vocational degree (a higher degree below the level of a bachelor's degree) in one of Bukittinggi's private schools. We have met Ni Tasi several times already: she described her desire to someday have one boy child (since boys, she said, have more freedom to live near and assist their parents), the way that women's feelings make them more moral than men (whose greater akal allows them to get away with immoral acts), and her fear of having a devil make her jump when she's standing at a height and looking down.

Above, I quoted an interview passage in which Ni Tasi tells me that desires (*keinginan*) to do bad things do not usually originate in a person's own self, but instead originate in outside influence. She says, "There isn't any desire, possibly, from one's own self." She was particularly persistent in her emphasis on the self as morally pure and circumstance as the cause of immorality. As her hedge ("possibly") indicates, Ni Tasi is nevertheless a bit reluctant to claim that the external nature of such desires is absolute. "Maybe there is something..." she says, referring to the possibility of bad desires that arise from within. As I continue to question her, she indicates that such influence can exist in the circumstances of a moment: an opportunity to do wrong leads the person do wrong.

GS: Is it the same for all kinds of bad desires? For example, the desire to drink, to steal, to rape? Is it the same for all of these?

Ni Tasi: Yes, certainly these are because of influence. It may very well be. Or, because there's a chance to do it maybe. [laughs] An opportunity, so....

GS: Yes?

Ni Tasi: Yes.

GS: But in that case – if there's an opportunity, for example, to—

Ni Tasi: To steal, for example.

GS: The opportunity is there for that – from where does the desire come to —?

Ni Tasi: [laughs] Ah, yes. Maybe that comes from within the self!

GS: That comes from within maybe?

Ni Tasi: Yes. Or influence. Yes, maybe in fact the person doesn't want to do it, but because of the *circumstances* [keadaan], maybe. So, yes – there is a desire because there is an opportunity. [laughs] I think that if the person is, well, if they're a Muslim, maybe – you know, we're taught from the time we're little – I think that it's not possible for them to have a desire like this from within their own self [*diri*].

GS: Oh. If—

Ni Tasi: What's more in the case of Minangkabau. [laughs]

Ni Tasi resists the idea that the “desire” (*keinginan*) to do wrong originates in the self. She nevertheless struggles with the idea, laughing at tense moments as she momentarily declares and then quickly retracts her belief that such desires arise from within the self to meet an opportunity that has come to the fore. It seems clear to me now, looking back at our interaction, that I was pushing her to give me an explanation for the origin of bad desires that made more sense to me. Having trouble conceiving of a bad desire arising *from* an opportunity rather than *in reaction to* an opportunity, my attempts to have her clarify her thoughts unfortunately strayed into pressuring her to think more like I do. She clearly understood my way of thinking about the relationship between opportunity and desire, and was tempted to insert the self between the two at my urging. This did not sit right with her, however, and ultimately, Ni Tasi pushes immoral acts out of the self almost entirely, creating the

idea of an ideal self – one that is both the way a Muslim and a Minangkabau person *should* be.

Her statements should be placed in the larger context of her self-representations during our interviews. Ni Tasi was unusually guarded during our interviews. Though eager to be interviewed repeatedly, she often evaded direct answers to my question, or seemed to stiffen when I asked certain kinds of personal questions. She told me directly that she made herself seriously ill by keeping too many of her thoughts and feelings inside of her: she wanted to talk, but could not. She was unwilling, for instance, to offer me an example of a time she had been angry – something that was not difficult for any of my other respondents – eventually admitting that she found it difficult to talk about the subject. She did tell me that she would talk to me about a particular incident involving anger, but only if I asked her about it; as I pointed out to her, and she quickly agreed, I could not possibly ask her about a particular incident that I did not know the first thing about. She often led me in these circles, dropping hints about her complex emotional life without ever being willing to address it too directly.

Ni Tasi presents an extreme case of tendencies that I witnessed in many (certainly not all) of the people I interviewed. Reluctant to talk too directly about themselves, people would offer “hypothetical” examples even when I requested ones from their own experiences, and even though these hypothetical examples sometimes seemed to be based on that individual's own circumstances. Indirect ways of speaking

are not, of course, unusual in Minangkabau society, as I discussed in Chapter 3, and will return to again in the following chapter.

Ni Tasi was particularly concerned with protecting herself in these ways. She does, however, appear to be speaking very much about herself here. When she says of Muslims (and Minangkabau people), “I think that it’s not possible for them to have a desire like this from within their own selves,” she seems to be talking about herself – a Muslim, a Minangkabau, and a good person. Continuing from the passage above, I tread lightly as I try to get her to discuss her own immoral desires and behaviors:

GS: Have you ever experienced that? Perhaps not to the point of stealing or – but in the case of some more simple matter – mainly, doing something that maybe you’ll regret, but there’s an opportunity –?

Ni Tasi: Yes, I’ve seen this happen a lot. And then later they regret it.

GS: Do you have an example?

Ni Tasi: Hmmm...stealing, maybe.

GS: Have you ever experienced this yourself – maybe not to the point of stealing something, but–?

Ni Tasi: Ah, yes, hmmm...a desire, for example that—?

GS: Yes, there’s a desire, or maybe there’s an opportunity to do something that you shouldn’t do, but there arises – or maybe it’s not to the point of doing it, but there’s a desire?

Ni Tasi: What would it be? [laughs]...I don’t have one. [laughs, and then is silent for several moments] I don’t think I have one. [then, with a bit of humor in her voice:] I try just to be good.

GS: Yes, but surely sometimes there’s –

Ni Tasi: Yes, maybe there is.

GS: – even though you resist?

Ni Tasi: Ah, yes.

GS: There’s a desire.... So, if a situation like that arises, where do you think – where does the desire come from?

Ni Tasi: [laughs] It could be from the self – from within.

Ni Tasi is unable to talk very much about what it is like to feel an opportunity or circumstance arouse an immoral desire, only inching ahead when I push her, even

lead her. Most of her effort goes toward describing the self, particularly her own self, as good. When she refers to a “self,” either by using the term “*diri*,” or by referring to herself, it is to indicate its essentially morality: bad desires do not or cannot arise from it, and she herself cannot describe them. She distances the idea of self, and her own self, from immorality, which instead remains somewhere out in the world.

Da Lis: The Crime is not Due to the Desire of the Actor, but Due to the Opportunity

Da Lis provides us primarily with another example of the ways people in Bukittinggi often describe immorality as growing out of outside influences, including the opportunity to be immoral that presents itself in the flow of life. Da Lis, however, answers questions without any of the tension displayed by Ni Tasi, and provides a more overtly personal and sophisticated account of how the self, even without being bad in itself, comes to perform a bad deed.⁶⁰

We have also met Da Lis several times already. He is only a few years older than Ni Tasi, and like her he has completed some higher education, though he has not achieved a degree. He is newly married, and has held several jobs helping to run small businesses, but he is currently underemployed. Above, Da Lis told us that “good” *nafsu* comes from the heart of hearts, and explained that Da Tul’s drinking was

⁶⁰ At one point, he remarks to me, “Sometimes it’s hard to talk about the *hati*. I mean, intentions, feelings, and all that – badness, goodness, it’s hard, too, you know?” I ask, “Why is that?” and he laughs as he begins his reply, “Well, it’s something that’s quite complex. I mean, there are lots of complex issues. From – I understand it and all, it’s just how to *say* it that’s difficult.”

a result of his environment causing a lack of awareness on Da Tul's part, as well as the inability of his heart to take control of his actions.

Da Lis tells me directly that people do bad things because of a combination of internal and external factors: badness in their hearts on the one hand, and outside influences on the other. However, in what he calls "the external factors" [*faktor eksternnyo*], he includes things like an alcoholic's need for money to buy alcohol or a womanizer's need for money to lure women, either of which could lead to a robbery. He says, "These are external factors, right? There's something pushing from the outside, for example, to do it." I follow up:

GS: What is it that's pushing from the outside?

Da Lis: The need – that need the person has. They're not drinking now, right? "Nuuugh" [sounds of a person feeling ill]. They're not drinking, but then there's this demand from inside that asks for alcohol, because of an addiction. It keeps asking for alcohol. So what can one do? There's no money. This is a factor that influences from the outside, Greg, right?

GS: From the outside?

Da X: Ah, it's from the outside. And so they steal, and get money to buy the alcohol. And then the next day they do it again. They want to drink again, there's no money, and they go pick someone's pocket. This is an external factor, right? The inside factors [are] because there really are intentions that are bad [*niaik-niaik buruak*], or to cause harm to someone, something like that, right?

Even though an alcoholic's need for alcohol comes (is felt) "from inside," he still considers it an external factor, one that can be seen as pushing on the self from the outside. It is something in the person's life that leads them to be immoral, and is distinct from bad intentions from within. Below, notice how even when I ask about such bad intentions, Da Lis instead focuses on how an immoral act results primarily

from what a person experiences in the world. Resentment toward a person is an *outside* influence that may lead to a bad deed:

GS: Where do the bad intentions come from?

Da Lis: Those bad intentions, like I said before, they are from the outside and from the inside. From the inside it's that the hati really is evil [*jaek*], right? The hati is dirty. From the outside it is – for example, abusing. If we abuse someone. We feel resentful when we see that person. That's an external factor – it's from the outside, right? Influence from the outside. Ah, that's how influence from the outside is: we feel resentful when we see that person. Inside, we say, "Oh, I resent this person," right? "I feel resentful." Then those two meet, and so the bad deed occurs.

Da Lis acknowledges more easily than Ni Tasi the possibility of the existence of something bad in the self. He argues that immoral acts occur at the intersection of internal and external factors, yet he still seems to describe bad deeds as coming into being primarily as the result of circumstance and experience in the world. When I ask him for a personal account of committing a bad deed, he tells me the following story:

Da Lis: One time I stole a music tape. I went to a friend's place, right? So the tape in this case was Bon Jovi. It was a Bon Jovi tape. Now, I really liked Bon Jovi, you know? At the time I didn't have enough to buy it – I was in high school then. I didn't have enough to buy it, so, I thought – from the external side, there was this Bon Jovi tape, and the person who owned it wouldn't know, right? From inside there was this intention [*niat*] that I wanted to have a Bon Jovi tape, and I didn't have the money to buy one. Meanwhile, on the outside there was this tape there, and the person wouldn't know – the person whose tape it was wouldn't know. So eventually this desire arose to take the tape, right? And the desire did indeed arise from within me. There was a desire to buy the tape, and on the outside there was indeed the tape there, and the owner wouldn't know. Ah, the bad deed was committed: I stole the tape.

In his story, Da Lis does not seem to really have bad intentions.⁶¹ What comes from inside him is a desire to have the tape, which he describes as a desire to buy the tape legitimately. However, he has no money to do so, the tape presents itself to him, and the tape's owner is not present. The point that Da Lis draws from his own story emphasizes the role of "opportunity" in creating immorality. He quotes from popular television crime show: "'The crime is not due to the desire of the actor, but due to the opportunity.' You see? Opportunity, right, it's from outside, right?"⁶² Da Lis never refers to himself as having bad intentions, or as being pushed from the inside by evil or greed or jealousy of his friend's possessions. Nevertheless, in Da Lis's story we see, much more clearly than in Ni Tasi's account, a self performing an immoral act. His innocent desire to have a Bon Jovi tape became entangled in circumstance until his desire was transformed into a desire to steal it. Though the immoral act resulted from opportunity rather than some bad part of himself, he ultimately takes possession of the bad desire that arose "within" him, and describes himself as responsible for the immoral act: "I stole the tape."

⁶¹ When I asked Da Lis what he thought after he stole it, he replied: "Well, after that, I enjoyed it, right? Now I had the Bon Jovi tape." He laughed, but then acknowledged that he felt guilty (*rasa bersalah*). He concluded, "Yes, there was a sort of regret, but the deed had been done. It would be a pity to return the tape."

⁶² The quotation is from the character Bang Napi (The Inmate) who acts as a sort of host for the daytime show "Sergap" on RCTI, one of Indonesia's nationwide television networks. "Sergap" (a word with connotations of "attack," but also used to describe "catching" a criminal) tells true-crime stories, and at the end of the show Bang Napi offers a short monologue that ends with a warning to the viewers that they too can become caught up in criminal behavior because crime is created by opportunity as well as intention. (Da Lis's version leaves out the "as well as," putting more emphasis on opportunity than on intention.) Bang Napi, a frightening, partially masked figure standing behind bars, then ends the show by pointing threateningly at the viewer and yelling, "Beware! Beware!" ("*Waspadalah! Waspadalah!*").

Da Luko: I Don't Know My Own Self

At about thirty years old, Da Luko is similar in age to Da Lis and only a handful of years older than Ni Tasi. He has a very different background, however. Da Luko has an elementary school education, and after leaving school he spent much of his early adulthood living in the marketplace. He is now married and lives with his wife and their two young children. His family owns a car that they use in a small transportation business, ferrying passengers around the city along routes not as well served by the city's public cars. Above, I described how Da Luko named the devil as the cause of his forgetting to go to Friday prayers, or feeling his eyelids close early in the morning when he should be getting out of bed.

During our final interview, I sat alone with Da Luko in a nearly empty room in a house owned by members of his lineage. I was in my final weeks of fieldwork and I had made an extra effort to track him down. He had not shown up the previous week when we had planned to meet, and while this was not unusual (for many respondents, not just Da Luko), I knew if I did not find him soon I would not get to see him again before I left Bukittinggi. It was the fasting month, I was hungry, and had just finished an especially long interview that had exhausted me. Da Luko had been feeling sick (and he was therefore not fasting), but he decided we might as well talk right then or else there might not be another opportunity. Inside, he sat and smoked, answering questions in a more quietly contemplative manner than usual.

He brightened when talking about how having children made everything in life richer and more meaningful for him. When I asked him about the challenges of

fatherhood, he quickly told me that the responsibility of having to provide was heavy, but that when he was working he had enough for himself and to share with his sisters and their children. He then interrupted himself.

Da Luko: If I'm working – right now, the truth is that my heart is *maleh*, Greg. Even though there's a car I could drive, sometimes I have someone else drive it now. With that car, I'd get about three – two hundred thousand⁶³ a week. It's just, I have no idea what the problem is with my mind [*Cuma awak tu, pangana awak tu ntah baa lo doh*]. I'm *maleh*. My heart is *maleh*.

To be *maleh* (*malas*, I) is to be unwilling to act, either out of a general aversion to making an effort (“laziness”) or because of an aversion to the specific act in question.⁶⁴

Da Luko: If my heart is *maleh* it doesn't want to do anything.

GS: Why is it *maleh*?

Da Luko: Well, my heart has no interest [*ndak maadok*] in driving that car. I have no idea what kind of illness I have.

GS: The reason is uncertain?

Da Luko: There is none. There is no reason.

GS: There is none.

Da Luko: There is no reason. It's *maleh*.

GS: [un] *maleh*.

Da Luko: When in fact I have responsibilities. People say I'm stupid [*bodoh*], actually. I *am* stupid, aren't I? I have responsibilities, there's a car I could drive, and I don't want to drive it. In truth, I'm stupid, and I admit I'm stupid. But what can I do? If my heart isn't interested, Greg – I've tried, Greg, and I just don't make any money picking up passengers.

He quickly adds that this last point isn't literally true, but says that when he feels this way, he makes much less than usual, and only enough to cover the operating

⁶³ Two hundred thousand rupiah, or roughly \$20 – a reasonably good weekly income for someone in Bukittinggi in 2003.

⁶⁴ For example, when Ni Tasi told me that she was *malas* to answer one of my questions, she meant that she felt unwilling to discuss the topic in question, not that she was too lethargic to answer it.

expenses of the car. He does not say that he works fewer hours or changes his methods when he is maleh. His being maleh and his poor results when he works are linked, but he does not claim to know a causal mechanism. The whole problem remains frustratingly mysterious to him, with no explanation. There is “no reason” for him to act this way. He knows he has a moral responsibility to work, and is “stupid” for not doing it, but finds he is not capable of earning any money. He tells me he hopes that after the holidays (at the end of the fasting month) he will be able to work, but right now he’s at a loss (“*sadang buntu*”), and does not know what will happen.

It is later in the same interview when I ask Da Luko the same question that I asked Da Eri above: who is he, in his own thinking? “In my case, generally, I am just normal [*biaso-biaso*],” he says. He adds that he would be a person of note if he had a high lineage title, or if he were a successful businessman or a government official, and was celebrated in the public eye. He continues:

Da Luko: If I look at my own self, what can I say? If [...] I’m not seen as anything by society, Greg, I’m not influential, I can’t say I’m anything. I [can’t say], “Oh, I can do this. I’m really great.” I can’t say that. I’m the same as other people. But if I were rich, if I had money – the idea being if I had a lot of money, I could buy anything. Then surely I could say, “This is who I am. Don’t mess with me.”

His comments here echo Da Eri’s claims to be “nobody,” though without the link to piety and with a greater emphasis on the ability of money and power to make him into someone of significance. Of course, knowing what we do about Minangkabau morality, Da Luko is making a positive moral claim for himself by claiming to be normal, and not a braggart.

Nevertheless, he also genuinely sees value in the possibility of being rich, of being someone of high social status. I rephrase my original question, asking him what someone would need to know about him to know who he is. He explains again that he is just a poor person, though he says – in fractured sentences filled with starts and stops – that he *wants* to be *sanang* (happy/wealthy), to pursue wealth and be recognized widely by the community (*dipancaliakan urang banyak*). This leads him back to what is on his mind: his inability to work and provide as he believes he should. He connects his concerns about his current state of mind with the question of who he is. He concludes that the strangeness of not being willing to work as he knows he should means that he really does not *tau diri*, does not “know himself”:

Da Luko: But because I am – because my thoughts are sometimes at a loss [*buntu*], so to speak, so I don’t know my own self [*ndak tau awak diri awak tu sendiri doh*]. Even if there’s nothing for me to eat, I’m still maleh to work. That is not knowing my own self. But if someone [...] does not have things to eat, and wants to try to make money, then they know their own self, their own individual personhood [*paribadi*]. They know their own self. It’s like me right now, I don’t know – I don’t know my own self, is what it comes down to.

GS: You don’t – you feel that you don’t know?

Da Luko: I don’t know my self. I already have three people to be responsible for. And sometimes I’m *maleh* in earning money. That’s what people say is not knowing oneself.

GS: But then how can you make it so that you know yourself?

Da Luko: That’s what...If I knew myself, Greg...If I knew myself, for example, if I knew myself like I was saying earlier – my children and wife need to eat, right? I’m maleh to work. That is me not knowing myself. But if I *wanted* to work, ah that would be me knowing myself. By self, I mean – you [asked about] “knowing myself” in my own thoughts, about who I truly am – that’s what you said, Greg? Well, that’s what it is – knowing myself.

The phrase “not know oneself” is not one that Da Luko creates on his own. It can be used in Minang or in Indonesian to mean that person is literally unconscious, or to mean that a person is acting in an improper manner. Da Luko does not use it as a mere cliché, however. He instead turns to the concept of not knowing himself to try to explain the incongruity between who he thinks he should be and how he actually acts in the world. There is no clear inner/outer distinction here, and we cannot say with any precision where the unknowing self is located and where the unknown self is located. There is, however, a clear gap between moral knowledge and moral action. If he “knew himself,” and that gap were closed, he would act in a moral manner.

If we look at one final interview passage, we will see that Da Luko ultimately concludes that his problem is very much one of circumstance:

GS: If we don't know ourselves, what should we do?

Da Luko: Like I'm doing right now. Just let that person go hungry. That goes for me, too. Let me go without smoking, let me go without eating. That's not knowing oneself.

GS: Until?

Da Luko: Until my mind [*pangana*] opens up, Greg.

GS: Until you know yourself again?

Da Luko: Until I know myself.

GS: You have to wait for it?

Da Luko: This sometimes comes spontaneously. What I mean is, because I *can* be like this, Greg...because my parents are still around – that's my weakness, actually. That's my weakness.

GS: You can depend on them.

Da Luko: That's it, actually. But if there were nothing for me to eat from my parents, maybe I wouldn't be maleh to work anymore. You meant – this is what you meant, right? “Know yourself,” like that – who I truly am.

GS: Yes.

Da Luko: That's what you meant, right?

GS: Yes. Yes. It's a pretty broad question.

Da Luko: [This dependence] is the problem. But if people – if there really weren't, so to speak, a place for me to depend on, maybe I

would do the work. I would know myself – when I’d eat and when I wouldn’t.

Although he knows he should work, he admits that his ability to rely on his parents means that he does not starve when he is not working. Were he to go without eating and smoking, his mind might open up, his circumstances might force a spontaneous change so that his moral knowledge again extends out into his behavior. He might then reconnect with who he really is.

Da Eri: People Forget Themselves

Da Eri is the pious part-time lecturer in his mid-thirties who told me that he was actually nobody, like mere fog, and who in Chapter 2 insisted that Minangkabau people will never abide being treated like slaves. He holds a degree from a respected university in Indonesia, but he is from a humble family and his economic situation remains difficult. Our interviews always feel comfortable and conversational, and he seems genuinely concerned with helping me to learn about him and how he fits into his own society.

During one of our conversations, Da Eri and I were talking about the feeling of being *sanang* (“happy,” although also used to mean “wealthy” or “healthy”). He had told me that overcoming challenges is what makes people *sanang*, so that life would be monotonous (*mono*) if we had no problems. I asked him if his life was ever monotonous, and he laughed:

Da Eri: Well, how could it be monotonous? I think it’s rich people whose lives can become monotonous. They have a lot of money,

and then it's, "Now what? Now what?" I have a bad image, you know, of people who've become rich.

GS: A bad image?

Da Eri: Yes. After a person has become rich, when they have a lot of money, at first they might – at the beginning, right – they might be true. Then when they have a lot of money, they forget themselves [*lupo diri*]. In Minang it's said they "forget themselves." They go gamble, become gamblers, become drinkers, get home in the middle of the night. That happens when people get a lot of money, Greg. There are a lot of examples of this, actually. So, maybe it's rich people that live monotonous lives. The thing is that if you're poor, you have to pursue money all the time, right? [tape flips] I saw an example of this with this person, an acquaintance. I knew this person. After he had a lot of money, he began to frequent bars, drink alcohol. He placed bets on ballgames up to five hundred thousand rupiah. I thought he was crazy.

(Note that this is the flip side to the argument that poverty can force people into being immoral because their basic physical and mental needs are not met: wealth can lead a person into immorality because their consciousness is no longer tied to anything important like making a living.) Da Eri adds that this man also stopped praying after he became wealthy. When I ask him what the connection is between not praying and being rich, he again repeats "People forget themselves, Greg. When they have a lot of money, people forget themselves." As Da Eri notes, to "*lupo diri*," "forget oneself" is (like to "not know oneself") a phrase known Minang speakers. A person who faints or suffers from amnesia can be said to *lupo diri*, as can a person who, like Da Eri's suddenly rich acquaintance, acts in an unreasonable, immoral, or crazy manner.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Note that Usman's (2002) Minangkabau-Indonesian dictionary equates "forgetting oneself" and "not knowing oneself" with terms that he also lists as synonyms for "sombong": "*bangak*" and "*ongeh*," respectively.

There is a close parallel here to the way Da Luko described his own situation. In Da Luko's case, merely not being faced with starvation was seen by him as enough to keep him out of touch with his own self. In Da Eri's story about his rich acquaintance, it is instead a surplus of wealth that pulls a man away from his own self. Suddenly freed from the struggle of making a living, and able to spend money on drinking, gambling, and so on, the man's acting self becomes disconnected from his knowing self.

Again, it is not clear if the self that is forgotten is the one that acts or if it is the essential self that endures separate from action. In the first case, the self as locus of awareness becomes unaware of ("forgets") what the self as actor is actually doing; in the latter case, the self as actor "forgets" who he *really* is, and thus acts in a way that does not reflect the moral knowledge held inside this real self. My sense is that it is not particularly important which way we see it (or that both ways are implied), as the point seems to be the division between different dimensions of self that hold moral knowledge and relate to moral action in different ways.

Da Eri admits to me that he is worried that he could become "unaware" of himself as well:

Da Eri: So, sometimes I get frightened. When I get a lot of money, will I – will I still be aware or not? I'm frightened that I'll become unaware. [un] I'll forget myself. Because I never drink alcohol – I've never done it. It must not happen [jan-jan] that sometime I get some money – for example I get millions of rupiah – that I feel rich, and I start going to bars, too.

He admits to me that he does not think this will happen, as he has already made himself aware of the possibility beforehand, but nevertheless insists that it could happen:

Da Eri: Hopefully it won't happen. But I'm frightened. Sometimes I don't like to be around a lot of people [*rami*], Greg. I'm frightened. Human beings are not always in a state of awareness, are they? There are times when human beings are unaware. As I understand it, people – well, because they're having too good a time, they do things that are wrong. I'm frightened of that.

GS: Can that be dangerous as well – a feeling of happiness?

Da Eri: It can.

GS: It can?

Da Eri: I can give you an example now, Greg. But, forgive me if expose myself a bit here, OK? I like to look at things that look good, OK? Including women. That's a matter of beauty, OK? I see beauty, and then my brain thinks, soberly, "I have a wife at home, and I'm responsible for my family." Perhaps – there's some event, maybe. Say that my co-workers and I go on a trip. And then there's a good-looking girl and all that, and she keeps cornering me. Maybe she's an aggressive girl. It could happen, right? Until I forget myself. That's what I'm frightened of, Greg. Of getting weak – of sinning. Because I know, sometimes, the limits of my abilities. I know. My faith slips away. The main thing is that I'm frightened of things like that, Greg. Until I forget my family, forget my religion, forget to pray. That's what I'm frightened of. So, it's hard. You know, sometimes in life, I have trouble resisting myself. That's what I'm saying. I have trouble resisting my own self. Not resisting other people.

In Da Eri's final comments it becomes clear that he sees his self *both* as the moral agent that knows morality and must resist immorality, and also as the actor in the world who might be drawn by circumstance – wealth, a girl who corners him – into an immoral life. What frightens him is that his experiences in the world might draw one self away from another. If he cannot resist that force, he might forget who he is.

Da Palo: These Eyes are Liars

Da Palo: Ah, so that's my life for you, Greg. I am, in terms of my background, I am – [it's been] ups and downs [*suko dukanyo*] up to this moment. I'm just good at carrying it [without showing it], Greg. I mean, in terms of being diplomatic, you know, I'm good. That's it. But [laughs] if you look inside here – oh boy, I'm shattered. Not even just at home – in my household, but what's more – it's just that I still have a lot of patience inside me. But if people just glance at me – you know because my roots are as street kid – if they just glance at me, they'll have to say that I'm brutal. But if people truly got inside, only then would they know who I am.

These are the words Da Palo spoke to me at the end of our first interview.⁶⁶

After offering an hour-long summary of his life, he was emphasizing to me that he was only *kareh* (hard, tough) on the outside, but actually *lunak* (soft, gentle) on the inside. Only on the inside, where he felt “shattered,” could one find his true self.

Da Palo is now in his mid-50's. He is a quarter-century older than Da Luko, but their backgrounds have some similar features. A native of Bukittinggi, his father died when he was a boy. Having, he says, no one to be “frightened” of after this, he became an *anak pasa*, a “street kid,” trying to earn a living in the marketplace, but sometimes ending up eating others' refuse or not eating at all. He did not lose contact with his family, and his *mamak* (mother's brother, who in the Minangkabau kinship system bears responsibility for looking after him) eventually sent him to live elsewhere in Indonesia to try to improve his behavior. His formal education lasted until middle school, and he spent much of his young adulthood in Jakarta and in Medan (a large city on the northern end of Sumatra). He often socialized with a tough

⁶⁶ Before this, we had already spent hours talking less formally and less privately.

crowd. He drank and he fought. When he returned to Bukittinggi to be married, and to pursue work as a skilled laborer, he was seen by the community as a preman (thug), as hard and brutal. When the time came for him to give a ritual speech at an adat event, he says the other men looked around wondered how the ritual could be completed, assuming that he was incapable of performing it. He surprised them by knowing what he was doing. He has even maintained the hopes of securing his lineage's high title, a datuak title, when the current holder of the title passes away. Yet he has never given up many of his old habits, and he is still seen by many as a preman. Today he lives in Bukittinggi with his wife, who owns a tiny shop, and several of his children. He is also a grandfather. He rarely works now, though he is proud of his strength and aura of youth and still feels capable. He is willing to work only, he says, if he is treated with respect.

I have mentioned Da Palo several times already, most notably when he argued above that everyone, even the toughest of preman, has a bit of good inside him, in his hati, his heart. He connected this good with feelings of ibo (compassion) and fear, which he also linked to akal (reason). That day, I had begun our interview with a follow-up question from our previous conversation. I had asked him to clarify the relationship between two different comments that he had made: first, that food purchased by parents with pitih haram ("forbidden money" obtained through immoral means) could negatively influence a child's moral status, and second that sins were not transferable from person to person. Although I had planned to talk to him about other

topics after he clarified this point, we never got to them. This one question was enough to launch him into a two-hour long discourse on moral issues.

This was not particularly unusual for Da Palo. Interviews with him often took the form of two-hour⁶⁷ near-monologues that seemed to wander far beyond the horizon of their point of departure, only to eventually (at least usually, and to my surprise) circle back around to reveal how everything he had been saying truly was connected together for him. Nor was it unusual that many of his comments about abstract moral issues that day appeared, on closer examination, to be comments about himself. The preman with good inside him sounds a great deal like the description of himself that he had first given me weeks earlier at the end of our first interview.

The fact that Da Palo regularly talked at such length with only minimal direction from me makes it especially easy to see what was on his mind. Throughout our twenty-something hours of interviews, Da Palo repeatedly returns to two themes: that he is not who people see him to be, and that his wife is mistreating him. The two themes are wound tightly together. He is concerned that people see him as a bad person: a mere aging preman, prone to drinking and to whatever other degenerate behaviors that go along with it, and ultimately someone of no positive significance. Meanwhile, his wife has been complaining about his drinking and criticizing his lack of financial contribution to the household. She has recently been given control of a

⁶⁷ After two hours my second audiocassette of the session would click off, and I usually used this as a reason to stop for the day. Da Palo often claimed he could talk with me all night long if I wanted, and I came to believe him. I should make it clear that he was willing to talk at such length not only because he wanted a chance to express himself, but also because he wanted to help me gather material for my research.

piece of her lineage's agricultural land, and he complains that now that she does not need him to provide, despite all he has provided in the past, she sees him as worthless. She tells him he needs to improve himself and repent, but he complains that she does not understand him and how to help him.

He admits that he has his moral weaknesses. Among other things, he still drinks (though not as much as he used to), and often neglects his prayers. He tells me that when he does go to Friday prayers (when all the men in the community are supposed to gather together in mosques to pray), people ridicule him. Although he may be heading toward the mosque just before the time for prayers, and just as others are headed that way too, people will ask him where he is going. Because people have seen him drinking, gambling and so on, he says that they think he is only mocking religion by going to pray. Rather than be seen as a hypocrite, he lies and tells people that he is going to go buy supplies for his work. He avoids wearing the clothing that would indicate that he's going to pray. Rather than appear to be using religion as a "mask," as some people do – publicly presenting themselves as pious, but secretly acting in immoral ways – he says he prefers to let people think what they are bound to think about him anyway. "People judge me from the outside. My outsides are judged by people, right? So my insides, people – people don't know about my batin, right?" he says, referring to the unseen spiritual dimensions of a person that are contrasted to the lahir, the realm of observable phenomenon. "The conventional wisdom is, many people say, 'The lahir indicates the batin.'"

To the community, Da Palo is as his lahir indicates: he is an immoral person. Da Palo is not willing to accept this judgment. While the community locates his moral personhood in the lahir, he declares that who he really is can only be found in the batin, something that other people cannot see directly. At the same time, he knows that the things he has done and continues to do things are not good. He must find ways to explain this that allow him to preserve a sense of moral selfhood, to disturb the idea that the lahir indicates the batin in any direct way. The person he is in society, in the visible flow of social interaction, cannot be the same as the person he truly is, the one that people cannot see.

Like others we have heard from above, Da Palo describes ways that people's immoral behaviors are a product of context, of having to live in an imperfect world. Earlier, I quoted him as arguing that poverty can lead to such immoral behavior, forcing it on a person who is desperate to make a living. When he discusses himself he tells me that he has tried to reform himself, and for a while he is good (he does not drink and prays regularly). He insists that the intentions in his hati remain good, but that sooner or later a disturbance (*gangguan*) comes along and "then suddenly I leave it again." He explains:

Da Palo: It's like now, I have the intention, Greg – right now my intention is, "When the fasting month gets here, I will fast, and then I will pray." I promise this now. I intend it. "I will not neglect to pray into the future." That's my intention. [un] My intentions are good intentions, right? But they don't reach [the goal]. What can I do? There comes some disturbance – then what am I to do? But those *intentions* – I still have those good intentions. [...] Well, hopefully if my intentions are good, God won't [consider it] a waste. He instructs people to be good. Who knows, maybe I'll remember to be good, right? God's mercy will just come on, right,

and I won't want to neglect it anymore, right? It's just, where it often gets me is in terms of finances, right? Finances. That's where it gets me. Often it's like that that really [gets me]. Sometimes – after finances, add to that quarrels at home. What's more now, if there's no understanding. My wife – if she understood, like you do, Greg, perhaps I'd be alright, too!

Da Palo also explains to me that it is much harder to be moral in today's world than it was for people back in the simpler time of the prophet Mohammed, or even for Minangkabau people in the generations the preceded him. When I begin one of our interviews by asking him to tell me what he understands to happen to human beings after they die, he quickly moves into talking about how we are judged for our sins in the afterlife, and from there directly into a discussion of how few people these days are truly good rather than simply wearing the “mask” of piety. He says, “In the old days, if a person were religious, truly religious, there just weren't that many things to interfere,” and so it used to be relatively easy to be good. In contrast, he says, today the world presents us with many obstacles to maintaining morality, such as the way that some women dress.

Da Palo: So with us, now, normal men: it so happens that we see a woman wearing sexy clothing – why, we look at her, right? Sometimes, seeing that, nafsu comes on. That's a devil working. So, it's not from us. Sometimes, hey, these eyes want to look at something good looking. Of course they do. Try looking at a corpse. We don't want to look at it, right?

For Da Palo, male lust, nafsu, is attributable more to the object of the lust than to the man who does the lusting. The lust itself is not our own, but rather from the devil. He describes our eyes as independent agents, physical beings that are completely oriented toward the physical things in the world: attracted to the physical

beauty of a woman in sexy clothing and repulsed by the physical ugliness of a corpse. They act purely on the qualities of the physical world of which they are a part. That world, not the self, determines what they see and what they do.

More than this, however, he describes this physical world as less than fully real. Continuing from the passage above, he calls the eyes on our faces “liars,” and contrasts them to the *mato ati* (or *mata hati*, I – he uses both), the “eye of the heart”:

Da Palo: Ah, so these eyes are liars.... Eyes are liars. What’s true is our eye *here* [he points at his chest] – the eye of our heart. That’s the true one. Greg, those eyes, your lying ones, where can they penetrate to? They can see up to certain limits. In these surroundings, Greg – right now, right? – perhaps you just see these surroundings. But try with the eye of your heart. Let me give you an example now. Greg, try seeing [your wife] Jenny in America now. What are you looking with now, hmm?

GS: Right.

Da Palo: You see? [he laughs, delighted]

GS: With these eyes [on my face] it’s not possible, right?

Da Palo: You can’t see it.

GS: You can’t see it.

Da Palo: But try to see. Close those eyes, try to see Jenny now. You see her, don’t you?

GS: I see her.

Da Palo: This eye is the one that’s true. [laughs]. You see what I mean, Greg! Now you can imagine it. From here, from this house, in America, right, where you live [un]. Where Jenny goes to school, where – what things are like for her in America now. Shut them, close your eyes, Greg, and see now, and you can see Jenny in America, Greg. With these eyes you can’t see her. You see the wall, Greg, don’t you? That – *this* [he points at his chest again] is the awesome [*santiang*] eye. So the key to everything is the *hati*.

In Da Palo’s description, it is the eye of the heart that is the awesome one, with the power to see what is real. Our physical eyes can literally not see past the physical manifestation of things – whether that be a wall or a woman in sexy clothing. Without being able to see past these things to what is real, our eyes are simply lying to us. In

contrast, in our hearts we have powerful access to those things that are truly important to us and define who we are. He has me close my eyes and “see” my wife, who had preceded me back to the U.S. several months earlier. The vision of my wife – someone Da Palo knows is important to me and to my identity, and yet from whom I am physically separated – provides a stark contrast to the anonymous sexily clad woman whose physical appearance creates an immoral impulse, a lie that “is not from us.”⁶⁸

In arguing for the reality of the heart and insisting that what our eyes see is a lie, Da Palo is also by extension making the case that the way people see him (“on the outside,” as he has said) is a lie, and that what is in his hati is what is real. Our discussion on this occasion was not about him in any overt way. On the surface, what he says could be taken simply as cultural information, an example of the way Minangkabau people think about the hati and related concepts. Yet it is clear that he is motivated by his particular concerns to emphasize these specific pieces of the larger cultural universe available to him. The links back to his personal concerns become even clearer as he continues to talk, explaining that it is only through the hati that we

⁶⁸ Compare Da Palo’s words to those of Parish’s (1994) respondent, Shiva Bhakta, who also describes closing the eyes and seeing images in the heart. For Shiva Bhakta, this provides an example of “the god who dwells in the heart” (192), creating in human beings powers of perception and cognition. Although Da Palo and other Minangkabau people do not share Shiva Bhakta’s overtly Hindu framework, and would not describe Allah as existing inside the heart, they do nevertheless identify the hati as the point of contact between human beings and God. More generally, Da Palo and Shiva Bhakta seem to share the sense that the images that can be detected by the heart are transcendent and capable of identifying a reality that is as or more real than the one that can be seen with the eyes open. In Bowen’s (1993a) work of the Gayo in Aceh, Sumatra, he discusses on the importance of *maripët*, “powerful depictive imagination,” as a way of connecting with unseen realities. He notes (1993a: 122) that an early example of *maripët* given to him was of his ability to internally picture his village in the United States despite being physically in Sumatra.

can become “aware,” and thus good. Such awareness cannot be forced from the outside:

Da Palo: If a human being wants to be aware, it's the hati that commands us. It's the eye of the hati that's the key one. For example, now, I demand that my child prays – or does good, or that I *myself* do good. Say that my habit right now is that every night I gamble, for example, right? That's no good, right? Those are immoral games, right? How is someone going to tell me what to do, forbid me? They can't do it, you know? Our own fathers and mothers tell us what to do, and people still won't stop. But if and when our *hati* tells – if it tells us, “I will not fool around” – only then will it happen. If it is the hati that says, “I want to pray.”

Because –

GS: Only then can you do it?

Da Palo: Only then can you do it. But if it's merely someone – just someone telling us, “You, go pray! Do this! Do this! Do this! Be good!” If it's like that, there's just no way it will happen. But if it's our hati that is in motion, that is what will get the job done, that will make a person be good.

Commanding someone to be moral is exactly what he has faulted his wife for many times in the past. Only a week earlier he had complained that she tried to order him not to drink, but that this approach made him less likely to stop drinking rather than more likely, as “nobody else can take charge of my problems. Because I am going to take charge of them myself. They're up to me alone.” (He also repeatedly defended one instance of drinking that she had criticized by explaining that an old friend had shown up in Bukittinggi with alcohol and an offer for them to sit and drink together, as they had many times in days gone by. It would have been wrong to refuse to drink with him, Da Palo points out.)

He'd gone on as well to point out that his wife was a hypocrite because according to Islam, it was not permitted to force someone to be moral, but rather it

was taught that we should offer only advice and prayers. His wife was therefore being immoral by commanding him to be moral. He compared her methods to those of Jemaah Islamiyah, the organization of radical, fundamentalist Muslims in Southeast Asia that has been blamed for most of the bombings in Indonesia in recent years. Just as they tried, misguidedly, to “purify the world” through violence, his wife tried to make him moral by force.

Da Palo’s arguments stake out a claim for a certain kind of moral self. He makes a claim for a self with the qualities of autonomy and intention, both understood as inherently valuable attributes. It is a self that works to bring into existence a greater, more enduring truth than that which is apparent in his daily behavior and interactions. It is also a self that never quite brings itself out into the world. “My intentions are good intentions, right? But they don’t reach [the goal]. What can I do? There comes some disturbance – then what am I to do?” He is uncertain if God will judge him on those intentions, or simply on his behavior. Da Palo can imagine the way he truly must be, but living in the world means he is constantly forced to live something other than that self, something that others see and judge as lacking. Inside, he is good, yet he remains very much caged in on the outside.

Sombong Reprise

I began this chapter with a discussion of sombong as a key moral concept for people in West Sumatra, demonstrating the tight connection between sombong and Islamic ideas about the origin of evil in the fall of Iblis, the devil. Iblis was banished

from heaven, destined to remain forever outside of God's embrace, and granted the task of luring human beings outside of that embrace as well. While to be sombong can be understood as to be outside of normal social boundaries, to refuse to mix in with the moral community, I also suggested that it meant being outside the boundaries of one's own self as well. We saw this in the idea, expressed in the *Padang Ekspres*, that sombong caused the U.S. not to hear its own conscience – that is, we now know, its own heart of hearts – and thus to act immorally. After the subsequent discussions in this chapter, we are hopefully in a better position to understand sombong and how it fits into larger patterns of moral experience in West Sumatra

As a way of conceptualizing immorality, sombong contrasts with “evil” in that it is neither an essence nor even necessarily an attitude, but rather an actual relationship. It does not describe what is inside a person, but rather it describes the actual conditions of a person's social existence. Just as Da Palo could be considered immoral in his social existence, yet rely on ideas about his own essential morality to manage his sense of self, the U.S. could be imagined as immoral in its actions, yet moral at its core.

When Heider (1991) elicited scenarios from informants for the words that appeared in the “arrogance” cluster of his cognitive map of Minangkabau emotion terms – a cluster anchored by the term “sombong” – he found that they were indeed characterized by a concern with actual broken social relationships:

In the antecedents the person is superior in some way, quite often in terms of wealth. The outcomes are overwhelmingly social isolation – either the self breaks off relationships or others do. This pattern is different from my own intuitive formulation of the American English

pattern in two major respects: Conceit or arrogance are often based on a false estimate of importance, whereas in these Minangkabau scenarios there seems to be always real superiority (at least as measured by wealth). Second, in the American English scenarios the arrogant, snobbish person associates with some but snubs other people, whereas in these Minangkabau scenarios the implication is general social isolation.

We must understand this cluster of words in the context of Minangkabau culture: First, the explicit egalitarian ethos that rejects and resents status differences, especially of wealth; and second, the persisting importance of individuals' embeddedness in the social network. In light of these two features, the type scenario of this "Arrogance" cluster resembles a cautionary tale. In no other scenarios are the outcomes so clearly the punishing or discouraging of a particular emotion, and rarely is the importance of social life so emphasized. (86)

Heider's comments resonate with the arguments I have made, although I would hesitate to characterize *sombong* as an "emotion." Indeed, Heider uses "emotion" in a very broad way so that it covers any term that was considered by at least *some* of his informants as a feeling in the heart, *perasaan hati*, rather than as a characteristic, *sifat*, of a person. He reports that only 33% of the informants in his sample considered *sombong* to be a *perasaan hati* (313). I never heard anyone say that they "felt [raso, maraso] *sombong*," or refer to it a "raso". Most of the time, at least, it is framed as a state of being rather than as an experienced feeling or even an attitude. In a certain sense, *sombong* can be characterized as a judgment of value made about objects in the world and how they relate to self. This makes *sombong* and emotion, if we accept Nussbaum's (2001) definition of the concept. In this case, they are judgments about the relative value of self – self's opinions, self's position, and so on – in relation to that of others. Yet one who judges another to be superior in some way cannot be described as *sombong*, but rather as an observer of *sombong* in the other person. It is

thus an “emotion” that, at best, one imagines in another. It is a strange sort of emotion that is experienced mostly by the observer, indirectly.

I would also reject the idea that *sombong* always involves “real superiority.” A person can certainly be *sombong* by failing to greet another person, or by not socializing. These behaviors may be described as *acting as if* one is superior, or even *as if* one is wealthy (if not actually “thinking” that one is superior). Nevertheless, people who fail to socialize properly need not be actually superior or wealthy in any other way. Certainly, of course, Iblis is not seen as having any “real superiority” in comparison to human beings or to God. In short, I would argue that people who have some real superiority *and* people who do not can and will be considered *sombong* as long as signs of their (real or falsely assumed) superiority are apparent in the way they relate to others. What is at issue here is the inappropriate appearance or expression of superiority (real or affected), not the actual superiority itself – which may after all, being something superior, be an admired quality.

What is clear is that *sombong* describes a person’s apparent relationships regardless of his or her intentions. It identifies these relationships as a dimension of “a person” – as part of personhood – where we might be tempted to identify them as only the context for the existence of a person. This was driven home to me a number of times when I made what I considered to be humble remarks and was accused by friends, albeit somewhat jokingly, of being *sombong*. In each instance, someone had mentioned something positive about my abilities or accomplishments, and I had tried to deflect the “personal” praise by pointing out that I had simply been fortunate

enough to have “external” circumstances that had been advantageous for me in accomplishing that thing. For example, when some friends complimented me on how well I spoke English, while they had to struggle to learn it, I noted that it was simply my native language and I had spoken it since I first learned to talk. I similarly downplayed my educational achievements by noting that the economic conditions in America made it much easier for many people there to obtain an education than it was for most Indonesians. I thought that I was making the case that my achievements and abilities, when put into context, said little if anything about me or my personhood. Pointing out these advantages was interpreted by others, however, as a kind of bragging about myself. Being born in a wealthy society, and one where the advantageous language of English was spoken, was seen as being a part of *me*. The context was part of me, and drawing attention to it was *sombong*.

I was also praised quite a bit for how remarkably *not* *sombong* I was because I did simple things like sit at the local coffee house to socialize and attended community events. One evening, chatting with members of a friend’s family after a wedding ritual held at their house, a man began praising me, remarking on what a good person I was, and how most Westerners did not come to these events (and by implication, were not good like me). This surprised me. Of course most Westerners did not come to these events! Virtually all of the Westerners in the city – a few thousand a year – were tourists who were not invited to such events, had no way of knowing about them, and could not communicate with anyone if they did try to attend. Yet he still saw their

absence as a moral failing because they maintained no signs of a proper social relationship with the rest of the community.

It is thus not surprising that Westerners as a class are considered *sombong*, for they do not mix as equals with Indonesians and they display signs of wealth and power that clearly mark them as different and superior. Perhaps more significantly, much of the anti-Chinese prejudice in Indonesia is predicated on this same idea: Chinese-Indonesians are said to be unwilling to become Indonesian, instead clinging to their distinct habits, attitudes, and most significantly their wealth, all of which makes them stand out.⁶⁹ It is also notable that Jews, the group of human beings that comes closest to being considered, at least at times, *essentially* evil, are generally referred to as “*sombong*.” Following Siegel’s (2000) ingeniously argument – which ties together what might appear to be the unrelated anti-Chinese and anti-Semitic ideas that circulate in Indonesia – it is precisely the fact that Jewish persons cannot be found in the flesh in Indonesia, and thus do not socialize at all, that makes “Jews” work so well as the incarnation of immorality. Siegel shows that Jews (conflated with “Zionists”),⁷⁰ rather than being understood as evil *persons*, are most often imagined as a pernicious

⁶⁹ Many people in Bukittinggi seem to agree with the general criticism of Chinese-Indonesians as failing to adapt themselves to Indonesian society. However, when people talked to me about this, they usually added that in contrast to the national situation, Chinese people in Bukittinggi (or in West Sumatra generally) had adapted very well. In 1998, when major anti-Chinese rioting struck many large cities in Indonesia, there was some destruction of Chinese-Indonesian owned commercial property in Padang and Payakumbuh the largest and third largest cities in West Sumatra respectively. There was none in Bukittinggi, the second largest city in the province, located between the other two.

⁷⁰ In my observation, these are also at times conflated with Israel or Israelis, or even – though less consistently and more vaguely – with America.

influence that seeps into Indonesians regardless of the intentions and even outside of the awareness of those who are affected.

People find support for the idea that Jews are essentially bad in particular interpretations of the Koran, though Siegel cites Bruinessen (1994) as noting that Indonesian anti-Semitism is primarily a late 20th century Middle-Eastern import.⁷¹ It is worth noting that many people in Bukittinggi knew that I was Jewish. I cannot fully address the implications of this here,⁷² but I will note that, as Siegel (2000) also explains, there is something of a disconnect in Indonesia between ideas about “Jews,” which are quite salient, and the idea of actual Jewish persons, which is not. I observed a tremendous amount of anti-Semitism, much of it in newspapers and religious lectures or sermons, but it seemed to have little obvious impact on the way people treated me. This supports the idea that the evilness of the “Jew” is understood more as a force in the world than as an essential characteristic of particular persons. Nevertheless, after discovering that I was Jewish, one respondent asked me – in what struck me as a somewhat mischievous manner, but only half in jest – “Are you evil [*jahat*]?” I said that I was not, and our relationship continued as normal after this. What seemed most important to her was how we interacted, not the fact of my Jewishness. It seemed like ultimately it was the extent of my ability to socialize, and not be *sombong*, that was going to determine her assessment of me.

⁷¹ Some Koranic passages describe Jews as essentially righteous, as they are believers in God. Other passages, apparently concerning conflicts that occurred between particular Jewish tribes and the early Muslim community under Mohammed’s leadership, make reference to Jews as duplicitous and dangerous. Such passages can be – and, in recent decades in the Islamic world, often are – read as being about Jews in general.

⁷² See Simon 2006 for an account of one instance in which an anti-Semitic rant placed my Jewish identity into conflict with my fieldwork agenda.

As Heider also points out above, wealth is indeed tightly associated with *sombong*. It seemed to be the virtually universal opinion of people I spoke with in Bukittinggi that rich people were usually – though not quite inevitably – *sombong*. Aside the possibility that envy causes people to ostracize those who are relatively wealthy, and the possibility that some rich people may in fact feel superior to and wish to be kept apart from poorer people, there are several reasons why rich people may have trouble successfully mixing with the rest of the population.

First of all, any physical indication of their wealth automatically separates them from “normal” people, creating a morally suspect hierarchy. If they buy and wear clothing that others cannot afford, or purchase consumer goods that are out of the reach of most people, this can automatically make them vulnerable to being considered *sombong*. So, a wealthy person who does not live exactly like a poor person always runs the risk of being *sombong*. This was evident in Da Eri’s remarks in Chapter 3 regarding the way that, when he was a schoolboy, some wealthy classmates were *not* *sombong*: “...sometimes rich kids adapted themselves to us. Their style – it was everyday style. Even though they were rich, their style was just simple. Jeans, thong sandals, things like that.” In fact, Da Eri mentioned this story to me on several occasions, twice expressing his admiration for (and mild surprise at) the particular fact that one boy he knew had worn average shoes like everyone else, despite being able to afford something better.

Even rich people who generously share their wealth with poorer neighbors do not escape the charge of *sombong*. Ni Tasi made this clear to me when we were

discussing her rich neighbor, whom she disliked and described as very *sombong*. She was describing to me and my wife how this man frequently gave out money to poor neighbors, and my wife asked her if he was still considered *sombong* despite this. She said, yes, of course he was because he was treating everyone as an inferior (and hoping to buy their loyalty). The man may have shared some of his wealth, but he still did it in a way that made him stand out as superior to others. In the end, any indication of wealth separates a person from others – nice clothing, a large home, a car, and so on – can mean that a person is *sombong*. The only sure ways a rich person can manage to be not *sombong* are to either never show signs of their wealth or to share it completely with others until they are once again, in local terms, *biaso*, or “normal.”⁷³

Ni Yas, a poor woman of about forty who lived in a small, rented house with thin boards of wood serving as walls, complained to me a number of times about a new neighbor who had moved in down the street to a large, fenced-off home. His business was selling “alternative” (*alternatif*) medicines, and several days a week he offered his services from his home, charging relatively wealthy customers substantial amounts of money (\$15 to \$20 a treatment) to cure their various ills. On the days he offered treatment, the street was packed with the cars of customers who had come from all over Bukittinggi and beyond. Ni Yas and others in the neighborhood did not

⁷³ Of course, wealthy people may also have some motivation to separate themselves from others. They have more to lose and less to gain (at least materially) by failing to socialize with their neighbors. Poor people often depend on their neighbors to help them when they have temporarily run out of food, or when they are sick. They cannot afford to not help others because then they will have nowhere to turn when they need help. Wealthy people are less likely to find themselves in need of such help. In addition, they may find that even if they do help others, as long as they are still wealthy they may still be considered *sombong*.

complain about the crowds, but rather that this man had not involved them in the events. For example, rather than letting them know that the crowds were coming, and suggesting that they could make some money selling food, he simply sold food at his house, thereby keeping all of the benefit for himself. I asked if, aside from the way he had handled his business, he was able to *bagaua* properly with his neighbors. She said simply, “No. Never. He’s not interested.”

Our conversations about the healer led Ni Yas to describe to me how rich people would get themselves in trouble. They did not want to *bagaua* with their neighbors, but what would happen if they got sick or needed help? No one would come help them, she said. They would talk behind that person’s back: “Just because he’s rich, he thinks he’s so great [*sok*], he doesn’t even know how to exchange greetings with people properly.”

In contrast Ni Yas presented herself to me as a poor woman who was nevertheless willing to share whatever she had with those around her, and as someone who maintained good relationships with her neighbors. This was the reason why, she explained to me, that she did not want to be wealthy. “If I got really rich, then I’d become *sombong*,” she told me, and laughed at the accusation against her imaginary, rich self. She continued:

Ni Yas: Then *sombong* would just come anyway [*Tibo se lo sombong tu biko*]. A person’s not *sombong*, there’s no problem, and then it just comes on. Without being aware of it, *sombong* just comes to a person. They don’t give it away to other people anymore. It’s best that we just live simple lives, rather than being *sombong* after getting rich.

Ni Yas imagines sombong overtaking her regardless of any intentions on her part. In fact, she immediately makes clear to me that, despite imagining herself as rich and sombong, this has nothing to do with her intentions. These intentions – her impulse to be moral – remain crucial to her sense of herself, even this imaginary self.

Ni Yas: If I were too rich, my intentions – sure I'd still want to help people, that would be my intention. That's my intention. If I had enough for myself, for example, I'd want to help others – that's my intention.

GS: Supposing you became rich, that would still be your intention?

Ni Yas: That would be the intention in my heart of hearts.

The Dislocated Self

Ultimately, the social dislocation referenced by sombong can also be understood as a dislocation of self. It arises as a person ventures into a corrupting world that constantly threatens to lure them astray from their own moral essence, their own good intentions, just as Ni Yas can imagine a life of wealth causing a dislocation between her intentions and her behavior. The “external” quality of a person’s moral status that is implied by the concept of sombong – that is, locating morality in a person’s relationship with an ideal moral community – does not mean that a person does not need an internal moral essence in order to *be* moral. On the contrary, it is precisely this internal essence that must be preserved, sharpened, and kept within reach, because living in the actual world is corrupting. Staying grounded in a moral self is the key to staying fixed within a moral community. This vision of moral personhood involves a dynamic negotiation between an unseen, often unrealized

essential self, and a socially constituted self that is revealed in the world of behavior and relationships.

We should not imagine Minangkabau people having (or them imagining that they have) several distinct selves, each one an object and subject leading a separate existence. Even the dualistic discourses about persons that they employ do not necessarily suggest – are not always used to argue – that such a division is absolute. *Laia* and *batin*, for example, though it divides human existence into two dimensions, proposes something more subtle than this. *Laia* and *batin* are both self, interact with each other, and yet are not identical.

In this chapter I have presented a broad account of ways people in Bukittinggi imagine morality and immorality to move in and out of persons. This has necessarily led to me to discuss not only the capacities and dimensions that are attributed to persons as bounded individuals, but also how those capacities and dimensions are understood to reach out into the world. Moral questions necessarily come back to the ways that selves are imagined to be part of the world, or be separate from it, because they ask for what the self can be held responsible: if one's actions or qualities are a creation of the world in which one is embedded, such actions and qualities may not be considered "choices" that arise from within the self. If they do not arise from within the self, the self may not be seen as responsible for them at all.

In exploring the American discourses surrounding the Columbine shootings, Strauss (n.d.) found that debate to revolve largely around opposed impulses to attribute the shootings to corrupting social influences or to reject such explanations as

a failure to hold the shooters themselves morally responsible for their choices: did these horrible acts belong to the people who committed them or did those acts instead belong to the corrupting world? Both positions represent ways that Americans are able to think about the nature of persons and moral responsibility. The letter-writer to the *Times* that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter made an argument that blame could be located wholly within the murderers themselves. Such an accusation of evil fixes moral responsibility unambiguously on a person's fundamental nature. In arguing that no elements of context or circumstance are relevant to understanding an immoral act, "evil" protects from the possibility that we will be unable to come to a clear moral judgment; the result, however, is that it leads us to see some human beings as incomprehensible "monsters" (Pocock 1985). The availability of multiple models does not prevent people from taking up, in a given moment, a rhetorical position that denies them. Extreme cases, such as these murders, seem especially likely to push people toward more strident rhetorical stances.

Not surprisingly, Minangkabau people use multiple models as well, even if pressed at times to think about persons as essentially made up by the world – or essentially made up of an inner essence. Perhaps more intriguingly, the broad framework from which they think through everyday questions of moral action suggests that moral life is an ongoing struggle among multiple dimensions of self, and that immorality need not always be located in one dimension or another, but in their interactions and dislocations. A person need not be essentially evil to commit an evil act; a person need not be devoid of agency and responsibility to include parts of the

world in its constitution. This suggests that we acknowledge the cultural tools with which people think through the nature of persons, and themselves, are not merely multiple, but also dynamic, geared less toward decidedly fixing the nature of the self, its boundaries and its responsibilities, than in grappling with the impossibility of doing so.

Chapter 5

PUBLIC INTERACTIONS and “PERSONAL” IDENTITIES

In fitting with their personalities, Minang people rarely say things in a straightforward manner [...]. But what is certain is that Minang people are idealists, are rich in imagination, and give priority to feelings, so that shame and mutual consideration of feelings become the standards for morality. Minang people want to create something apparent with something not apparent. It is here that the roots of their character are planted. This means that the Minang personality is closed – it’s true. The further something is closed off, the more valuable it is. And the human instinct is to search for it.

Yus Dt. Perpatih (2002)
“*Kepribadian Minang*” (“The Minang Personality”)¹

The Night Fair

The small night fair, or *pasar malam* in my neighborhood set up in an empty field at the bottom of a hill in the weeks before Ramadan, the fasting month. There was live Minang pop music, a Ferris wheel, small rides for children (like the one in which they could sit in diminutive military tanks and ride in a slow circle), ring-tosses and other games with prizes (ranging from a small package of tissues to a television), as well as food and drink. There was the “magic girl,” whose head attached to no body, and the “wheels of death,” where you could stand at the top of a large cylinder holding out money to the men on motorbikes who drove earsplitting circles around the interior walls, veering perilously close to the unguarded top of the cylinder to grab the bills.

¹ This is an audiocassette, available for purchase in the marketplace in Bukittinggi. Yus Dt. Perpatih is a Minangkabau scholar and observer of Minangkabau culture, and the cassette consists of an extended lecture on this subject.

I squatted with a small group of men, sharing a single bag of steamed peanuts that someone had bought for us all, tossing the shells (and eventually the plastic bag) into a loose pile on the grass. The crowd included a large share of adolescents walking around in single-sex groups of two or three or four, but there were also some couples with little children, or grandmothers with their grandchildren. The older boys were smoking and, very occasionally, dancing briefly and rather phlegmatically to the music being performed by a man with a keyboard and a pair of women who took turns singing. The girls, like the boys often holding hands or hanging on each other, usually had on jeans and t-shirts and uncovered heads, but still looked more carefully dressed than the boys. For the most part, people were milling about, standing or sometimes (in the case of men) squatting and watching the musicians or the other people who were also standing and watching. The group of men would shrink and grow as men – sometimes in twos or threes, sometimes alone – would arrive or depart for endeavors elsewhere. The fair was a much a place to be, and to be with others, as it was a place to do things, and for me it was an opportunity to watch people interact in a space of informal amusement and pleasure.²

² It is the pasar malam, or night fair, that Indonesia's most acclaimed writer, Pramoedya Ananta Toer (2006), used as a foil for feelings of isolation and disappointment in his story *Bukan Pasar Malam* (*It's Not an All Night Fair*), originally written in 1951 and recently released in book form in its 1973 English translation: “‘Yes, why is it that we have to die alone? And be born alone too? And why do we have to live in a world where there are so many people? And if we're capable of loving someone and that person too loves us...’ He went down on his knees and looked through the window into the middle of the room where the body was lying alone. He went on, ‘like our late friend for example – why then do we have to be parted in death? Alone. Alone. Alone. And born alone too. Alone again. Alone again. Why wasn't this man born in the midst of the hustle and bustle of life and why didn't he die in the midst of that hustle and bustle? I'd like the world to be an all night fair’” (77).

Although this was an informal event, like more ritualized happy occasions in Bukittinggi – feasts (*alek*) to celebrate weddings and other important occasions for example – most people did not appear particularly excited. The music was loud and boisterous, but most people were subdued in facial and vocal expression, and their movements were unhurried and measured. When a boy would crack a joke, laugh, and lean into his buddies with pleasure, it stood out to my eye.

There is a distinct sense of restraint in most public interactions in Bukittinggi, even in interactions that do not appear to be prototypical examples of the ritualized manners of baso-basi, as discussed in Chapter 3. Emotional expression is generally moderate, and when it is ritualized it is generally a ritualized muting of the kind described in Chapter 3, where a guest and host discuss a contentious issue without overtly expressing displeasure in each other. People may cry at funerals, but there is no ritual wailing; some boys may dance around the margins of adat events (Chapter 2), but such a thing is never a necessary part of “celebration.” Ritualized behaviors tend to obscure individual desires, emotions, and will, and everyday informal interactions tend to retain the feel of such moderation as well. As I argued in Chapter 3, there is real moral weight pushing people to construct themselves as an integrated part of a relatively egalitarian, even homogenous community. We have seen that being overly demonstrative, standing out too much, invites the accusation of sombong (arrogance), or at least the belittling label of “MPO” (*menarik perhatian orang*), “attracting people’s attention.”

In Chapter 3 I discussed how ritualized manners, baso-basi, can be read as a performance of a de-individualized personhood, in which anything that might be seen arising from within the individual – emotions, desires, anything that makes an individual stand out *as* an individual – is displaced by signs of conformity and the integration of the individual into the larger group. These latter dimensions of personhood can be imagined in this performance as superior to, or even more real than, the former ones. I call it a “performance” here, although I am not sure this is quite the right word. Part of my argument in Chapter 3 was that baso-basi – and, more generally, the pervasive emphasis on proper socializing and conformity that I described – is not merely superficial. People genuinely evaluate the moral status of themselves and others using the vision of the good expressed in baso-basi behavior. Persons really are, in part at least, their social relationships, judged in terms of conformity and sombong, and managed through emotions of restraint, such as malu and sagan, and those of altruism, such as ibo (Chapter 4). Such emotions arise from within the individual, but are moral emotions because they orient that individual toward realizing themselves in terms of a relationship to others.

It would be a mistake, however, to represent such emotional and expressive moderation, and the muting of the individual – a characteristic description of social interactions throughout much of Southeast and East Asia, despite its diversity – as absolute or unvarying. As I argued in Chapter 3 as well, it would also be a mistake to jump too quickly from the observation of these social interactions to conclusions about their meaning for people or about the way they interpellate the selves of those people

participating in them. In this chapter, I will argue that the kinds of behaviors guided by baso-basi must be understood not as ones that replace or erase individual emotions, desires, and identities, but as ones that manage and define them in particular ways. That is, they do not make these things less real, or even mean that they are devalued, but rather they assign particular places for their experience and expression, and particular kinds of value to them. Aside from generally enriching the ethnographic picture of Bukittinggi that I have offered up to this point, my goal is to demonstrate how the norms of interaction in West Sumatra reflect a dynamic conception of the relationship between individual subjectivity and public behavior.

I will be especially concerned here with the limits of public expression, and those things that are expressed indirectly, indistinctly, or are hidden away from public view, but are nevertheless central to people's consciousness. These are things that are as important as what is on the surface, expressed directly, and are inextricably intertwined with them. There are times when what is expressed directly in public interaction is designed deliberately and consciously to reveal the shape of what has been hidden away, even as it is also designed to keep it concealed. I want to demonstrate that by pushing dimensions of experience out of the realm of direct public expression – either because of moral concerns or because of the dangers of exposing oneself – the norms of public interaction also define a social and psychological space of the “personal” in which essential parts of the self are formed and preserved.

Part of what I want to do in this chapter is to examine these issues by looking at how their broad cultural outlines become relevant for individuals in very particular

circumstances. This is in fact necessary in order to make my point, for it is crucial to understand that the pathways for “personal” expressions of identity cannot be fully institutionalized. This means examining them through the lenses of individual actors. In this chapter, Ni Saia and especially Da Luko will play the largest roles. At the same time, I do not want to lose sight of the larger cultural processes with which these actors are engaged. The stories about Ni Saia or Da Luko or others are not meant as examples of what “Minangkabau people,” in general, do. Crystallizing one’s identity in a private poem or a series of scars on the body, or realizing one’s moral identity through an unspoken mystical battle with a friend are indeed not institutionalized cultural practices. These are practices that have been transformed by the self for its own purposes. They *are*, nevertheless, cultural practices; they come about through an engagement with the particular patterns of social and cultural life in West Sumatra. For this reason, I now turn back to those patterns.

Baso-Basi Reconsidered

A Short Review of Baso-Basi

A brief review of the major outlines of baso-basi as described in Chapter 3 will help to situate our discussion here. Broadly speaking, baso-basi refers to self-consciously proper ways of behaving when interacting with other people. To behave according to the standards of baso-basi, to babaso, is to behave in a way that properly respects the moral values conceptualized as those of Minangkabau society (and those as those of Islam), as defined by adat (traditional culture). Generally, this means

overtly stressing social unity, and muting expressions of anything that emphasizes individual motives, emotions, desires, and so on. It means avoiding assertions of superiority over, or difference from others. Some prototypical baso-basi behaviors include offering invitations for others to eat and drink before one begins to do so oneself; framing financial transactions with others, especially those with whom one shares other kinds of ties, as social ones (such as by referring to the payment for a service as “pitih rokok,” cigarette money); avoiding the appearance of splitting a bill into individual portions when paying for food or drinks; and discussing serious matters or conflicts with others without demonstrating overt signs of conflict. More generally, to act in a baso-basi manner is to acknowledge other people, such as by greeting them properly, and to participate in activities with them (*bagaua*, socialize) as an equal – although where there is an element of appropriate hierarchy, such as in interacting with one’s elder, this must be acknowledged and respected as well.

There are two things that must be kept in mind about these behaviors. The first is that they are not absolute, and they depend greatly on context. There are some circumstances that call for a scrupulous attention to baso-basi, and there are some that do not, or for which too much baso-basi, too much self-conscious propriety, is actually inappropriate. This is important because it helps to demonstrate that baso-basi does not define the singular moral vision for the relationship between individuals, and between individuals and society, but is one moral vision that applies (sometimes more, sometimes less) to specific circumstances and relationships.

The second is that to babaso is in many instances a matter of appearances. What I intend by this is something different than what Errington (1984) argues when he explains that Minangkabau people find meaning to adhere to surfaces and do not imagine that greater meaning exists at some level deeper than what is readily apparent. In his view, Minangkabau people tend to interpret the nature of “persons and of social forms” in such a way that they “find meaning in each case to be very close to the actual, tangible, literal experience itself” (29; cf. Drakard 1999). He thus sees Minangkabau ethics as essentially based on aesthetics. He argues this, as I have shown, in spite of also being very clear that Minangkabau people never trust people’s behavior to be a reflection of the motives and intentions that lay beneath the surface. His argument, I think, is that this paradox drives them to focus their attention only on surfaces as ultimately reliable and meaningful, and thus as real.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the phrase “raso jo pareso,” meaning “feeling an inspection,” and argued that it was used to express the idea that moral consciousness could only be achieved through a careful application of both intuitive, emotional capacities as well as analytical capacities. I also cited this definition from Amir M.S. (2003: 86): “Raso jo pareso means to habitually sharpen a sense of humanity or one’s noble heart of hearts in everyday life. In facing every problem, we are enjoined to habituate ourselves to carrying out a fastidious examination to achieve the authentic truth, and to not act in haste” (2003: 86). When Errington conducted ethnographic research in a Minangkabau village in the mid 1970’s, he came away with

a very different understanding of *raso jo pareso*, and fit it into his overall argument about the way Minangkabau people interpreted meaning:

It is a characteristic Minangkabau habit while explaining something to make a few largely descriptive observations and then to lean back, smile, and say ‘Ah.’ This suggests that all is now clear when, at least to the Western observer, the question seems to have been only broached. The Minang term for this capacity of quick comprehension is *raso jo pareso*. This capacity rests on a sense of compatibility, the perception that an interpretation or figure of speech fits comfortably – *cocok*—with an established sense of what the world is like [...]. The perception of truth – based on the sense of the fit characterized as *cocok*—is essentially an aesthetic reaction. (1984:107-108)

This understanding of the term is at odds with the way people used it during my time in Bukittinggi, and with the definition, provided above, by Amir. The importance of some kind of intuitive knowledge is consistent with my understanding of the concept. However, the idea that *raso jo pareso* is merely about quick understandings based on an aesthetic reaction runs directly counter to the idea that it refers to careful consideration, and is difficult to reconcile with the central place in the phrase of “*pareso*,” which generally refers to detailed examination. Errington’s version also seems less involved with empathy and moral behavior than my own, or Amir’s understanding of the term. The term may have been used differently when and where Errington conducted his fieldwork. It is also possible that Errington – who managed to digest a remarkable amount about Minangkabau social life during a truncated period of fieldwork – simply misapplied the term.

Examining my own ethnographic data, I wonder if Errington was picking up less a Minangkabau style of interpretation that placed meaning in surfaces, and more a Minangkabau style of expression and communication that found deeper meanings to

be evoked, rather than directly defined, by such surfaces. Perhaps Errington found himself (as Minang people sometimes do) without the proper framework (“an established sense of what the world is like”) to reconstruct the deeper meanings evoked – and obscured – by the surfaces he saw Minangkabau people as so concerned with.

My understanding of baso-basi, and what it implies about persons and about meaning, is quite different: baso-basi is often predicated on the awareness that what is overtly expressed or demonstrated is partial, misleading if read literally, or meant to convey something that is obscured from direct view. Baso-basi cannot be fully understood if seen only as a method of erasing immoral and unreal individual depths with moral and real socially integrated surfaces. It must instead be seen as a way of expressing and experiencing both the social integration of self and the individual autonomy of self appropriately, managing each of these so that they remain in their proper places. Baso-basi is a self-conscious way of managing and expressing the complex and morally fraught relationship between individuals and the between individuals and the communities which they help to constitute.

We cannot read a Minangkabau conception of the person through an interpretation of the overt messages sent in baso-basi because Minangkabau people themselves do not find the full meaning of baso-basi in these overt messages. People in West Sumatra are aware of the self-conscious nature of baso-basi behaviors, and this awareness is intersubjectively shared. What baso-basi celebrates as real and good is never taken to be the only reality and the only good. Instead, it is understood to be

the real and the good that is appropriate for overt expression in (certain kinds of) public interactions. Baso-basi does not delineate for us the nature of “Minangkabau values” (what is valued, what is devalued), nor does it delineate for us the “Minangkabau conception of the person” (what dimensions of person are real, what are unreal). What it does delineate is a pattern of management for different dimensions of the good and different dimensions of persons that emerges in many Minangkabau social interactions, with different dimensions experienced and expressed in particular ways. This means that the moral vision celebrated in baso-basi behaviors is, itself, not wholly apparent on the surface, for it is in the process of baso-basi as much as in its content.

To make these points more clearly, it is necessary to first add more flesh to my ethnography of the interactions that take place in Bukittinggi. First, I will briefly describe the contextual nature of baso-basi behaviors: they apply to face-to-face interactions of a certain degree of intimacy. Following this, I will examine the ways that baso-basi behaviors are understood to be about surfaces that are designed to conceal, and at the same time provide clues to, underlying meanings and emotions. It is here that I will discuss the importance of indirect expression in West Sumatran social interactions.

Context and Ritual Interactions

I have described how interactions between men in the lapau kopi, the coffeehouse, demonstrate the norms of baso-basi: the way men greet each other, invite

each other to eat and drink, and perhaps pay for each other. I have also explained that in a meeting in a home between a guest and host to discuss an important issue, similar greetings and invitations must be offered, and in addition both parties should attempt to maintain an even demeanor and discuss their conflicts in an indirect manner. These kinds of ritualized behaviors and the emotional muting that often goes along with them are pervasive, which is why they are so important to recognize. However, it is only the most self-consciously ritualized behaviors that can be identified as “baso-basi,” and even then it is only the everyday ones. Such ritualized behavior is simply “adat” when it takes place on special occasions. While the ethos of baso-basi can be recognized in many or most daily interactions among people in Bukittinggi, it is important to recognize that “baso-basi” is defined against other kinds of daily interactions, or other elements of those interactions.

Baso-basi behaviors are always very controlled and refined, and emotionally neutral. They are ritualized. Interactions that consist entirely of baso-basi would be nearly devoid of actual content, for baso-basi provides an ideal way of smoothly interacting with others that might be disturbed by anything other than a ritual exchange (cf. Errington 1984, Siegel 1986). In the lapau kopi or in one’s own home or the home of family and friends, most of the interaction that takes place cannot be characterized as baso-basi.

Proper socializing in the lapau requires performing the basic routines of baso-basi, such as exchanging greetings and invitations to eat and drink. However, men in the lapau also exchange crude jokes, engage in conversation about the price of goods

or the latest lottery numbers, tell obviously exaggerated, amusing stories (what we might call “fish stories,” although the stereotype in West Sumatra is that Minangkabau men tell such tall tales about wild pig hunting), or remark on current events that are reported on the evening news. Not all men enjoy or approve of these kinds of talk, and those who find it a waste of time are likely to spend less time in the lapau.

Generally, when men and women who are friendly with each other interact in the kampuang, they introduce only basic elements of baso-basi into their interactions. Their exchanges usually do not involve vivid displays of emotion, but neither are they self-consciously refined or rigidly ritualized. The same is true for life inside the home. Some elements of baso-basi may be very important to maintain within the household. Ni Yas, for example, told me that her husband would become very angry at her twenty-year-old son (from an earlier marriage) because the son would sometimes sit down to eat without making sure to offer him an invitation. At the same time, people living in the same home do not turn down offers to eat when they are hungry out of baso-basi, as a guest might. An overemphasis on baso-basi when interacting with friends or family may be seen as stilted. Guests in informal situations (where serious matters are not to be discussed, and no one feels in danger) may even be encouraged not to be baso-basi (just as they may be encouraged not to make unnecessarily displays of malu, shame), an admonition designed to encourage a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Baso-basi carried out in one’s own home, or when enjoying the company of close companions is also problematic, for it brings to the fore the possibility that the intimacy of the actors is insincere.

Baso-basi creates a degree of intimacy as well as a degree of distance between social actors. It assumes a face-to-face interaction in which all of the parties involved have something of their identities at stake in the way they treat each other. This is what I mean by “intimacy”: not necessarily emotional warmth or familiarity, but rather an interactional closeness in which each actor is immediately affected by and responds to the others. At the same time, to babaso means to act in a very careful, restrained way toward others, and thus to keep at a certain social distance from them. In other words, baso-basi manages the significant relationship it acknowledges to exist.

As behavior that is conceptually connected to adat and to interactions in homes, neighborhood coffeehouses, and other places where people come face-to-face, baso-basi can of course also be conceptually tied to the kampung (the village, the neighborhood) as opposed to the pasa (the marketplace, the city) – a useful, if artificial dichotomy I have explored several times already. Certain kinds of interactions in the pasa are not seen as involving or requiring face-to-face interactions at all, and thus the norms of baso-basi do not apply to them.

For example, in a restaurant, people usually do not bother to extend an invitation to eat and drink to those sitting at another table, as they would do in the neighborhood coffeehouse. Neither do they extend greetings to others as they walk in. To introduce baso-basi into the restaurant would be to introduce the norms of face-to-face interaction into that setting, and doing so would automatically increase the intimacy between the people there, who otherwise more or less ignore each other.

A more dramatic example may be found in the city's traffic. Drivers of cars, motorbikes, trucks and buses all scuffle along, pushing past and around and in front of each other – and pedestrians – with little trace of formality or restraint. There is no *baso-basi* under these circumstances, and there is no intimacy, for the interactions that take place are not face-to-face ones. To introduce *baso-basi* into the norms of traffic would also mean treating driving as a matter of interacting “face-to-face” with others out on the road, which would mean acting in a self-conscious way to express concern for the experience of other drivers.

This can be seen clearly in comments made by Bukittinggi's mayor, Djufri, as reported in a West Sumatran newspaper on the occasion of Bukittinggi's receiving a national award for having the most orderly traffic of any small city in Indonesia.³ This was in fact the ninth time Bukittinggi received the award (and compared to many other places in Indonesia, Bukittinggi's traffic is indeed rather tame). The paper reported that according to the mayor this did not mean that the goal of orderly traffic had been achieved, but he hoped it reflected a continuing effort to improve traffic in the city. The story continues, “This is because, according to him, the problem of orderly traffic is in essence linked directly to the community [*“masyarakat”*]. The community in general is the main thing that is connected to the matter of traffic, in terms of both pedestrians as well as vehicles.” This rather vague assertion seems to argue for traffic as a *social* activity, not just something that happens anonymously between vehicles. This interpretation is supported by the mayor's continued comments, as reported in the

³ “*Djufri: ‘WTN’ Bukan Tujuan Akhir*” (“Djufri: ‘WTN’ is not the Final Goal”).*Padang Ekspres*, March 27, 2002: 11.

article: “Traffic that creates a comfortable and orderly atmosphere characterizes the desire of tourists. As good hosts [*tuhan rumah yang baik*], according to Djufri, it is all the citizens of the city who have the role of bringing this into being.”⁴ In other words, the mayor urges the city’s citizens to think of traffic in a different way by framing it metaphorically as a relationship between a host and guest, the prototypical face-to-face interaction governed by baso-basi. This turns driving from an anonymous act into a more intimate social one, and requires a conscious management of the relationships between drivers.

It was interesting for me to contrast my own interactions with people while I was out in the streets of the city with my interactions with them that took place inside a home or even inside the confines of a public car. The intimacy of a face-to-face interaction is perhaps something that is hard to imagine when considering a foreigner, especially considering the assumed linguistic barriers. When my wife and I were out on the streets of the city, we would often find people yelling at us, making strange noises at us, laughing at us, and occasionally even throwing things at us. This behavior – much, but certainly not all of it done by young people – appeared to be motivated by various degrees of excitement, interest, and even hostility. Whatever the precise mixture of sentiment behind a given instance of this kind of behavior, it was certainly far from anything that might be considered baso-basi.

⁴ As is the case with this story, West Sumatran newspapers often paraphrase people, or at least mix quotation, paraphrase, and narrative without indicating where the lines are drawn between them. The use of “*masyarakat*” and “*tuhan rumah yang baik*” appear to be taken directly from the mayor’s words, although the story, as written, indicates this only indirectly.

In contrast, when we would speak to people face-to-face, they were almost always pleasant and measured.⁵ This was true for both adults and children. I might find myself shoved aside as several people tried to secure seats aboard a public car (small vans with benches lining the sides of the interior), but once on board, all of these kinds of behaviors would almost always disappear. While bus terminals are known as the loci of the crudest of behavior, places where *baso-basi* does not apply, once *inside* the public car, where passengers find themselves face-to-face or body-to-body, the proper norms of person-to-person social interaction begin to reassert themselves, and people are much more circumspect and careful in their interactions.

My wife, Jenny recounted an incident on a public car that demonstrates this point quite well. She boarded a car at the terminal together with several other people, including a young boy accompanied by several adults. People in West Sumatra will frequently call out to foreigners in public, often using the standard Indonesian greeting for foreigners, a strident, “Hello Mister!” Children are especially likely to do this, and adults will sometimes prod younger children into offering this greeting. These are not exactly impolite greetings, and certainly not hostile, but they are not *baso-basi* greetings, and do not resemble proper ways to greet other Indonesians. “Hello Mister!” is not often offered as a way to initiate a face-to-face interaction. It is rather a shout across an otherwise unbridgeable social divide. Children yell it out to

⁵ Siegel (2000: 35) recalls similar experiences in the city of Solo in Java: “Other times on my bicycle I had been pelted with stones and, on foot, I was frequently verbally assaulted. When, however, I addressed my assailants in Javanese, merely saying the Javanese equivalent of ‘hello’ or reprimanding them gently in the proper speech forms, they were instantly polite and, while not apologizing for their behavior, seemed to put it out of mind.”

foreigners as the pass by, not to people with whom they expect to have a continuing interaction. In this case, the young boy was being urged by his caretakers to direct such a greeting toward Jenny as they sat in the confined space in the back of the car, but he refused. He finally explained that he would do that in the *pasa*, but not while in the car. (The adults in the car found this amusing, and repeated his answer several times.) The child could clearly detect the difference in the kind of behavior that felt appropriate for each context.

The norms of *baso-basi* thus apply only partially to many interactions in the *pasa*, just as they apply only partially in the *kampung* as well. *Baso-basi* is especially important when an interaction requires being especially careful with the way one treats another person.⁶ People are particularly *baso-basi* when there is something personally significant at stake and there is thus some tension between them and the person(s) with whom they are interacting. This means that people tend to be *baso-basi* with their superiors, with important strangers, or with people with whom they share a tense but important relationship. (An example of the latter, and one I will return to below, is the relationship between a man and his sister's husband, both of whom may hold some authority and responsibility in the same household, especially over the children who live there.)

Vital Appearances

⁶ The structure of the term “*baso-basi*” itself implies something complex and multi-faceted, reflecting the fact that the behaviors it refers to consist of many different small gestures.

Baso-basi is thus not the way people interact, but the way they interact in particular kinds of context. Some elements of baso-basi – the general “ethos” of baso-basi, as I have termed it above – is apparent in most face-to-face interactions, though to a greater or lesser degree depending on the particular circumstances involved. When employed, these patterns of behavior work to create the appearance of a social interaction in which individuals are harmoniously integrated into a social whole. That baso-basi involves the self-conscious creation of an “appearance” is something of which people are quite cognizant. This does not necessarily imply that such appearances are unreal. As I have emphasized, the moral weight involved in carrying them out is significant. They are taken very seriously, and are indeed seen as quite real. It is tempting to think of appearances as things that are “mere” or “only,” but in this case it would be inappropriate. These are vital appearances.⁷ Further, the more work is put into maintaining an appearance, the more the appearance shapes the reality as a whole. However, because they are indeed appearances, they are never taken to be reality in its entirety.

Certainly when people discuss a conflict without showing overt signs of tension or displeasure, they know that tension and displeasure still exist. This is, after all, the very reason that baso-basi becomes so important in such circumstances.

Similarly, people are very aware that baso-basi invitations are (or, at least, may be)

⁷ I think there is an echo here of Geertz’s (1973: 400) description of the Balinese “polishing of the surfaces of social life” as being both a matter of “playful theatricality” and at the same time “not lighthearted but almost grave.” Although the particular aesthetic tone Geertz is interested in describing does not apply to Minangkabau society, the idea that there is a very serious concern with managing or performing social surfaces is clearly applicable to both of these Indonesian societies (cf. Wikan 1990).

performances of invitations rather than genuine ones. In the lapau, before taking their first sip, men do not invite other men to drink expecting to have to share their coffee or tea. When a guest in a home turns down an offer to stay and eat with the host, it is not merely because the guest does not wish to appear greedy. It is also because the guest knows that the host's offer was not necessarily made in earnest. Accepting it might create quite a problem: the host might not even have enough food to make good on the offer.

Part of what baso-basi does is to create a sort of social space, a field on which important social interactions can be played out. It manages these interactions so that they constantly reiterate the importance of social unity, and so that the actors involved relate to each other employing the values that are appropriate for social interaction. Baso-basi insists that in a given situation, *this* is what needs to be dealt with in interacting with *this* other person. This social space exists on the surface of the interaction. It keeps people (as long as they are face-to-face and engaged in such behavior) from acting improperly toward each other, and sends messages about the commitment of everyone involved to strive to participate in and uphold the ideals of social integration. These are the ideals that should be expressed in social interaction. This "surface" of interaction is where they belong, and to fail at keeping them there is to fail at this dimension of personhood. It is, as I have described, to fail to bagaua properly.

In some cases, "proper" ways of interacting are self-consciously geared toward third parties who are observing the interaction. This is the case, for instance, in an

example I offered in Chapter 3. When a group of friends eats together in a restaurant or drinks together in a coffeehouse, it is considered best for one member of the group to (be seen to) pay for everyone, even if money will later be quietly exchanged so that the group has actually split the bill. The members of the group want to present themselves as *kompak*, cohesive, and paying this way sends a message to others about their relationship.

Similar considerations apply to many of the behaviors that are considered proper ways to show respect within the household. Take the following example, described to me early in my fieldwork by someone who was trying to familiarize me with the kinds of interactions that I would see going on in the household into which my wife and I had just moved. Recall that this is the house in which Inyiak Datuak and his sisters grew up, and it is lineage property, the use rights to which fall to Inyiak Datuak's sisters, who continue to live there. Da Lin also lives in this house, as he is married to Inyiak Datuak's sister. He is a *sumando* in the household, meaning that he is related to the household (and the lineage) through marriage. According to *adat*, he is a guest in the household, and should therefore be treated with respect, and not casually. This means among other things, I was told, that Da Lin should always be served his food by his wife (or another woman in the household), and should never serve himself. Also, it means that Inyiak Datuak should avoid bathing in this house, as he must not let Da Lin see him going to and from the bathroom in an undignified bare-legged condition. Da Lin and Inyiak Datuak should maintain a more formal relationship than this in part because they both share authority and responsibility in the

household and over the children there (Da Lin's children, who are Inyiak Datuak's kamanakan), and are therefore always faced with the possibility that they might clash if they are not self-conscious about their relationship with each other.

However, as these "rules" were described to me, what was actually important was that other people not *observe* these things happening. Da Lin could (and often did) in fact serve himself, and neither he nor Inyiak Datuak may be bothered if Inyiak Datuak walked by in bare legs. These things were not necessarily problems as long as, more generally, Da Lin felt respected and was treated well, and he and Inyiak Datuak did not feel at odds with each other. To demonstrate the existence of this respect to others, however it was important that these rules of propriety be followed whenever an outsider was observing – a sort of shorthand or code implying the existence of the less obvious forms of everyday respect. Otherwise, people might begin to gossip about the lack of respect for Da Lin within the household, or even try to influence him to see himself in this way, thereby sowing the seeds for dissension within the household. Like paying together, these performances send messages to others even though those observing understand that they may be performed precisely for their benefit.

Indirection and Autonomy

It is clear that the maintenance of certain kinds of observable behavior is important, even when these behaviors are understood to be consciously employed to cover or mute things that everyone knows are still there. Avoiding the direct expression of certain ideas and emotions is important for several reasons. It maintains

vital appearances and it pushes actual social interactions to conform to ideals of social unity. It is also a way of properly valuing other individuals. Refraining from directly expressing certain ideas and emotions allows others a greater sense of control over their own experiences and actions. It avoids forcing others to feel certain things they might not wish to feel, and it creates a space in which their autonomy to act by choice – an essential moral principle – is preserved.

It should already be clear that certain things should not be expressed openly because they are inappropriate public assertions of the self. Drawing attention to the self or asserting the importance or superiority of the self is *sombong* (Chapter 3). Below, I will discuss further the ways that people do and do not talk about themselves, and the reasons they have for doing so. In this section, I want to concentrate on the ways that avoiding certain kinds of direct expressions creates a social and psychological space that properly respects other individuals and their autonomy while also preserving the proper surface of social interaction and its realization of social unity.

As will be apparent repeatedly below, these kinds of indirect communications involve all of the interlocutors (“speakers” and “listeners”) as active participants in the construction of meaning. Drawing from cognitive linguistics, Linger (1994) has reminded anthropologists that this is true for any kind of symbolic communication. Meaning is not transferred from one person to another via the “conduit” of a symbol, although we often talk (or theorize) as if this were the case. Instead, meaning only exists in the minds of each interlocutor, with symbols acting to evoke meanings, not to

actually carry meanings from one mind to the next. Two minds never really “meet” directly through symbolic contact. To the extent that the meaning of a symbolic communication is shared, the interlocutors must share a great deal already – not just the general cultural schemas that one builds up from participating in a particular society and learning a particular language, but also knowledge of particular contexts, histories, and interests. They must apply this knowledge in similar ways as well to what is being communicated. Listeners must do as much work as speakers.

The English language and some of the metaphors we have relied on to discuss culture may tend to obscure the fact that meaning cannot be found on or in symbols themselves. This may lead us to imagine that communication – and, in particular, speech – provides a direct link into the mind of the speaker. Ethnographers have noted that this same assumption, common in western language ideology, is not made by many people in the Pacific, where meaning is instead often conceived as something constructed primarily by the listener rather than as something that originates in the mind of the speaker and is then revealed to the listener (Schieffelin 1986, Duranti 1992, Silverstein 1998, Robbins 2001). In the most extreme of these cases (generally the Melanesian ones) others’ minds are taken – at the very least, ideologically – to be entirely inaccessible via language.

The kinds of communications I will be concerned with here place a great deal of weight on the work of the listener in constructing meaning as well. However, they do not assume a complete disconnect between minds and words. Rather, they depend on the notion that words and minds are intimately connected – that minds effect words

and words affect minds. Through social interaction, selves become complexly interwoven. This fact poses a problem for everyone. Speakers do not always want their minds exposed, and listeners do not always want their minds affected by an outside force. These communications involve constant play with the powers of a listener to create meaning when that listener is provided with an evocative communication – but only as long as the listener is already *primed* to have that particular meaning evoked. This point is important, because by so clearly relying on the particular knowledge, history, and context of the listener to construct particular meanings, these communications shift responsibility for meaning construction, and all that stems from it, onto the listener.

Sadness

The overt expression of certain emotions can be seen as immoral if taken too far. Showing too much *bangga* (pride), or expressing one's longing (*rindu*) openly involves sharing concerns for the self that should be kept private. These are improper assertions of the self. In some other cases, however, the open and direct expression of an emotion may be improper because that emotion is undesirable, and to display such a negative emotion is likely to make it worse and to make other people have to feel it as well.

Wikan (1990) discusses extensively similar ideas about emotional expression in Bali. She reports that Balinese people fear negative emotions because they understand such emotions to damage one's health. By avoiding expressing such

emotions openly, a person can accomplish two things. First, a person can shape his or her own experience of emotion through managing its expression. Thus, expressing a positive emotion actually helps to displace or dampen the negative emotion and its dangers. Expressing negative emotions openly is also understood to encourage other people to feel such emotions as well, thus endangering their health. As a consequence, the second thing that avoiding the direct expression of negative emotions accomplishes is that it protects other people. This, in turn, protects the self because it avoids making other people angry or resentful at being harmed by such dangerous emotional expression – something that could lead to them taking revenge, perhaps with deadly witchcraft.

While people in West Sumatra do say that bad emotions can make a person sick, this usually refers to only extreme cases of intensity and extended duration. In addition, no one ever offered this as a reason to avoid their expression, or told me that expressing such emotions would put a person in danger of being attacked. What people did tell me, however, was that expressing negative emotions directly could cause other people to feel those emotions, or to feel them more intensely than they already do. This can make other people feel worse, and is thus a crude and improper way to behave.

As an example, Da Jik told me that it is unusual for people to express *sadiah*, sadness, directly. He explained that people usually do not cry to express *sadiah*, with the most likely exceptions occurring when a loved one dies or becomes severely ill, in which case such a reaction is perfectly understandable. For the most part, however,

his comments concerned the kind of *sadiah* that overlaps with *ibo* (Chapter 4): feeling bad about something bad that has happened to another person, particularly when there is nothing to do to help that person directly.

In the following interview passage, he describes how people make clear their feelings through indirect means, and explains that to do otherwise might only make the bad feeling worse. He is talking here about interacting with someone who is struggling with a bad problem or series of problems:

Da Jik: Here we don't usually say, "Oh, I'm so *sadiah*."

GS: You don't express it—

Da Jik: We don't usually utter those words.

GS: "Sadiah."

Da Jik: Yes. "I'm *sadiah* seeing Greg [like this]," – I couldn't do it like that. But I can do it just with my attitude. Every time I see you, I say, "So how is it going, Greg? Are things better?" With that question it means that you, having this problem, understand: "This means Da Jik is also thinking about my problem and sympathizes [*ikut simpati*]." So [...] you feel you are being paid attention to. So, it's not usual to say, "I'm so sad to hear that."⁸ It's not usual to use those [words].

GS: To directly—

Da Jik: —say it.

GS: —say it.

Da Jik: Perhaps it's just not usual. People would feel somewhat "uneasy."⁹

GS: Why is that?

Da Jik: Supposing someone dies, for example, right? The family is there, and I come and say, "I'm also feeling *sadiah* about this death,"¹⁰ and so on. Ahh, but there are different words for it. Different words, in the form of *kiasan*.

⁸ He says this in English.

⁹ He uses the English word here.

¹⁰ The term he uses here for "death" is itself a euphemism: "*musibah*," literally meaning "calamity." This usage is standard.

In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of kieh (or “kiasan,” I). This is language that communicates indirectly. This may include comparisons, analogies, allusions, figures of speech, implicit morals conveyed in stories, and so on. Kieh can be used for many different purposes, although their use is considered particularly important in *kato malereng*, “slanted words,” a register of speech that is used to communicate in a respectful manner.¹¹ Many Minangkabau people identify an extensive use kieh as a particularly Minangkabau attribute, even in contrast to other Malay and Indonesian groups.

As I have also previously described, one form of kieh is papatah, conventional aphorisms that rely on metaphors to convey a truth. Since papatah convey conventional or traditional wisdom, they draw their authority from outside of the self. Using papatah is thus a way of making assertions in an immodest way: the truth being conveyed is not merely one’s own opinion, but drawn from a larger, communal store of knowledge: it points to knowledge that everyone “already” knows, which is what makes the meaning of a papatah easily understood by anyone who is properly Minangkabau. As Da Jik continues from the previous passage, he identifies a

¹¹ *Kato malereng* is one of four adat classifications for appropriate speech. It is said to be appropriate for communication between people from different lineages who are connected by a marriage between two of their members, and more generally for speaking in delicate situations to people whom one respects. The other classifications are: *kato mandata*, “flat words,” neutral and relatively direct language for use in everyday conversation between people who are close in terms of age, and familiar with each other; *kato mandaki*, “climbing words,” language that emphasizes respect for another person, for use when speaking with one’s elders or with people of high status, particularly if one is making a request; and *kato manurun*, “descending words,” language that conveys commands made to one’s inferiors, sometimes considered appropriate only for use with children. In some more hierarchical Indonesian societies, such as Java, these registers have become elaborated into what amount to several distinct dialects, but this is not the case for Minangkabau.

(somewhat altered) version of a well-known kieh that might be used to indirectly express one's feeling of *sadiah*, and explains that such indirectness is preferable because it makes such bad feelings "lighter" rather than heavier.

Da Jik: Kiasan. In Minang the saying is, "If it is our eyes, they are closed the same. If it is our stomachs, they are emptied the same."¹² That's what we say there. It means, "I am so sad to hear that." That's what it means.

GS: That's what it means, but it's not direct?

Da Jik: It's not direct.

GS: If someone says it directly – "*sadiah*" – what would people think about that?

Da Jik: They would get more *sadiah*. They would get more *sadiah*. So, in fact this language makes it lighter. It makes it lighter. It's more subtle than saying, "I am so sorry to hear that." It's like with, "Our eyes, they are closed the same. Our stomachs, they are emptied the same." It means, "If you are hungry, we are hungry the same."¹³

After offering several more examples of *kiasan* that might be used in similar situations, Da Jik points out that it would be much more acceptable to make a direct statement about one's sadness if one were to say it in Indonesian rather than Minang.

¹² "*Kok dimato samo dipiciangkan. Kok diparuik samo dikampihkan.*" Slightly different versions of this saying are used to express condemnation of favoritism, such as when a person in authority treats someone differently from (more favorably than) others merely because the two are from the same family. Da Jik's version is altered so that it expresses the idea of sameness rather than difference, and thus so it means that his feelings are the same as those of the people to whom he is expressing his condolences.

¹³ Steve Parish (personal communication) points out that Americans are also often careful and restrained in the way they express condolences: we are likely to try to strike a sincere, but emotionally controlled tone when offering them. This allows us to avoid acting as if we, rather than the person to whom we are expressing the condolences, should be the center of attention, and as if our own suffering is more intense than theirs. It also allows us to play the role of a supporter, something that is not possible if we appear to be uncontrolled emotionally. Da Jik's example takes this one step further by keeping even a mention of an emotion term out of the expression of condolences, as if even that brings them too much to the fore. It is significant also that while Minangkabau people may cry publicly at the loss of a loved one, and such crying is not considered inappropriate, it is also not considered a necessary sign of appropriate grieving.

He says that using Indonesian rather than the more emotionally immediate first language of Minang, or expressing oneself in Minang kiasan, do not make people feel their negative emotions more intensely.

There is another thing to keep in mind here, as it will anticipate some of the points that will arise in the rest of this chapter: attempts at expressing *sadiah* – or anything – indirectly, do not necessarily succeed. This is less because expressions that are overly obscure may be difficult to interpret (which is possible, but unlikely in a ritualized exchange of the kind described by Da Jik) than because by being obscure such expressions may be considered disingenuous. Da Palo, for example, complains that most friends do not truly care about each other. If one's parent dies, he says, at *most* a friend will say, "I join you in feeling sad,"¹⁴ but they will not actually cry with you.

To Da Palo, this is evidence that such friends do not really feel anything, but are only offering words. For Da Jik, indirectness and a lack of open emotional expression demonstrates the way people genuinely feel concern for each other; for Da Palo, these same things demonstrate the way that people only hollowly profess to do so. Both of these positions are supported by widely shared cultural ideas about the relationship between expression and moral personhood, even though they seem to be directly opposed to each other. The idea that indirect expression hides a deeper level of meaning unites the two views, but there are two possibilities for what remains

¹⁴ Just as Da Jik suggested would be the case, Da Palo uses Indonesian in this example. The expression he uses is, "*Saya ikut bersedih.*" This is despite the fact that otherwise Da Palo speaks entirely in Minangkabau during this, and almost all other, parts of his interviews.

hidden: genuine depth of feelings that are dangerous and must be expressed in a ritualized, controlled manner; or an immoral void of feeling that is papered over by these same rituals.

This points us again toward the importance of the listener in constructing the meaning of such a communication. The way an expression is interpreted by a individual in a particular instance must be dependent on its particular circumstances, the relationship between the people involved, subtle cues implied or inferred during the exchange, and the biases of the people doing the interpretation. Recall from Chapter 4 that Da Palo believes that people see him as bad, and that this does not reflect his true self, which can be found in the *hati*, the seat of human emotions. He sees many of his interactions as a matter of maintaining false appearances, to the point where he even pretends not to be going to pray when he is in fact headed for Friday prayers at the mosque. Da Palo fits his discussion of condolences into his more general cynicism regarding such interactions. Perhaps Da Jik, who is widely admired by others for being a successful businessman, is less inclined to see things in this way.¹⁵

¹⁵ Of course, it is not as simple as placing Da Jik on one side of the divide and Da Palo on the other. In other contexts, for example, Da Jik argues that, for the most part, other peoples' vision of who he is does not match his own vision of himself. This is precisely because he is a successful businessman and, he says, people see him through the prism of money. Were he to become poor, he says, most people who now act respectful toward him and are eager for his attention would quickly abandon him, for their respect (*sagan*) is not genuine. He sometimes enjoys spending time around the bus terminal, where he once worked before becoming successful, as he enjoys the lack of pretense (lack of *baso-basi*) involved in interactions among the men there. He tells me that these are more genuine than the interactions in which he is normally engaged.

Rejection

Openly expressing a rejection of another person can make a person suffer in a different way than they would suffer from feeling too much *sadiah*, but again it is proper to avoid causing such suffering by avoiding such open expression. The most obvious examples of such a rejection would be turning down a request from someone.¹⁶ It is always preferable to turn down a request indirectly, for example by giving a non-committal or ambiguous response. Often, people will agree to a request even though they do not intend to follow through. This is done for two reasons. First, people feel bad turning down requests. People describe this “bad” feeling in different ways. Sometimes it is “*ndak lamak*,” which is a vague description like “uncomfortable” (“*lamak*” means “tasty,” so this is literally “not tasty”). People may also say that they simply feel too *sagan* (Chapter 4) to turn down a request – that is, they feel hesitant, out of respect for the person making the request, not to agree to it (and, this implies, they might feel ashamed, *malu*, to openly “fail” this person). *Da Jik* relied on the English term “uneasy” to identify how such situations made him feel.

¹⁶ I have already described how offering invitations to eat, drink, visit one’s home and so on are common *baso-basi* behaviors, and how turning down such invitations is part of *baso-basi* as well. Since such invitations may be understood as “requests,” this may seem to contradict the idea that turning down a request is a “rejection” that may cause pain and should be avoided. There are two things to keep in mind here. First, some invitations are quite clearly offered as a matter of convention – for example, inviting other men to drink before sipping one’s coffee in the *lapau*, or inviting a friend encountered on a public car to come visit one’s home when disembarking at one’s stop. These invitations are only very loosely “requests,” and there is thus little at stake in turning them down. Even so, such invitations are generally turned down indirectly. The most common way to turn down an invitation is to simply say, “Thank you” (*tarimo kasiah*).

This bad feeling seems to be motivated in part by the violation of smooth social relations that openly turning down a request entails.

It is also motivated by a reluctance to insult the person making the request, making them feel bad. This was the case, for example, when some people (with whom I had already developed a relationship) did not wish to be interviewed by me, or wished to no longer participate in such interviews. Generally, these people did not tell me this directly, but would find ways to make it difficult for the interview to ever actually take place. This sometimes even included expressly saying that they were interested in being interviewed, agreeing to a particular day and place, and then not showing up. Other people who I talked to about such behavior would always tell me that people probably did not want to insult me by rejecting me, and they would remind me that “yes” often means “no.”¹⁷

Turning down a request is not the only kind of overt “rejection” that people try to avoid. We can turn again to Da Jik for some of the clearest descriptions of such rejections and the reasons for avoiding them. Da Jik’s first example seems innocuous on its face: supposing he and I were having an important, private discussion and another person – say, Da X – walks into the room and begins talking about another

¹⁷ Not showing up for appointments was not unusual even for people who did in fact wish to be interviewed, so it was often difficult for me to know how to interpret people’s words and behavior. I probably failed to pick up on some clues that natives of West Sumatra would likely identify, although it must be said that they sometimes complain of not being able to interpret such behavior with certainty either – a point I will return to below. These instances were certainly examples of a clash of cultural expectations that produced unintended results. I would have preferred being turned down directly, and sometimes felt as if I was being intentionally led on or toyed with by certain people who were actually trying to avoid insulting me.

matter.¹⁸ In this case, he explained, it would not be good for him to say something like, “Give me a minute, Da X, I’m in the middle of something.” Were Da Jik to say this, Da X would likely apologize and leave the room, he said. However, according to Da Jik, Da X would actually feel insulted. Da Jik explained that Da X cannot be told directly what he is doing wrong and what he should do, but instead he must left to figure it out for himself. “Here,” says Da Jik, “it’s more often [a matter of] arranging to make people understand, but they have to understand it by themselves.” This “arranging to make people understand” is a matter of using subtle, indirect clues – in other words, *kieh*.

Notice that this is a paradox: one should make an effort to make another person understand something, but do so in such a way that they understand it by themselves. In the case in question, Da Jik might make a concerted effort to make Da X understand the situation, but he would only do so by using indirect means. This would leave Da X with the sense that he has not been forced to do anything, nor told to do anything by Da Jik, but has been left free to construct his own understanding of their social exchange. It would leave Da X with a sense that Da Jik has kept his distance from Da X’s subjective sphere of autonomy. If Da Jik fails to keep this distance, Da X feels insulted. The word for “insulted” here is “*tasingguang*,” which perhaps not coincidentally, literally means “touched.”

¹⁸ Da Jik was actually basing this example the fact that other people had occasionally entered the room during our interviews, forcing us to wait patiently until they left before we continued.

Anger

Such concerns are central to the avoidance of the open expression of another kind of negative emotion: “anger.” In Minang, the term “*bangih*” is the most common “anger” term, although people also use “*berang*” (which some people claim is Minang, but most seem to think of as borrowed from Indonesian) or “*marah*,” which is the common Indonesian term. These are emotions that people talk a great deal about trying to control, for not only are they considered bad emotions to feel, but they are also considered to be particularly difficult to control and yet dangerous if expressed directly. They are dangerous to express primarily because their uncontrolled expression may damage one’s relationships with the people at whom it is directed.

Many of the examples of *bangih* behavior that people gave me (either in reaction to direct queries or simply in stories they told) involved the *bangih* person being particularly quiet or noncommunicative toward the object of their emotion. Goddard (1996: 439-440) argues that it is actually fundamental to *marah*, the Malay term usually translated as “anger,” that the person who feels it does not wish *do* anything to make the feeling known to the person who is its object. He describes the person “X” feeling *marah* in the following way: “X thinks something like this: ‘Y did something bad. Y knows I do not want Y to do something like this. I feel something bad because of that. I want Y to know this, but not because I say anything about it.’ Because of this, X feels something very bad.” Although Goddard is discussing Malay, “*marah*” is also the standard “anger” word in Indonesian. Goddard notes that even though it is “*marah*” that is the most common Malay word associated with the English

“anger,” there are other words in Malay that must be used to refer to overtly “angry” behavior.

In Indonesian, “marah” is also often associated with quiet or indirectly expressed disapproval. Ni Tasi claimed that if I was “*kecewa*,” or “disappointed,” that she would not answer one of my questions, then this meant that I was also “marah.” According to her, these were the “same” emotional reaction. One form of marah (“*marahan*” or “*bermarahan*”) actually means “not on speaking terms” (Echols and Shadily 1989). Certainly the idea that marah involves a desire not to actually tell a person how they should change their behavior resonates with the discussion above of letting the other person figure out “for themselves” what they are doing wrong.

At the same time, I suspect that in incorporating norms of emotional display into his definition of an emotion, Goddard may have produced an overly narrow definition of “marah,” at least as it applies to Indonesian usage. Certainly, in Indonesian, a person who, for example, yells in reaction to an insult can be described as being or expressing “marah.”¹⁹ The fact that marah is seen as something that *can* be expressed directly makes it all the more significant that it is so often thought to be manifested in less obvious ways. These more indirect expressions appear to derive their power from the very fact that they signal a potentially explosive emotion is being kept tightly controlled.

¹⁹ Goddard also argues that “marah” is always personal, as in a reaction to direct interpersonal interaction. This is not always the case in Indonesian: for example, Da Dan told me that he becomes “marah” when people blame their own bad behavior on others.

This is even more striking for *bangih*, as it is often considered to be more intense than *marah*, which may mean that it is more likely to be expressed through overt “angry” behavior.²⁰ Nevertheless, communicating *bangih* – and other forms of displeasure at another person’s behavior – through indirect means was a central feature of people’s talk about the emotion. This does seem to reflect this more general regional model for how “angry” feelings tend to manifest themselves in social interaction.

For example, in the following passage, Ni Ina describes how she (and other mothers) might communicate such displeasure:

Ni Ina: For example, to our children, if they do something that we find unacceptable: we say, “Oh, mother is pleased to see you behave like that,” is how we say it, right? “That’s really great. Keep doing that, keep on playing,” we say. “Keep doing that,” right? This is, in fact, *bangih* toward them, Greg. We’re actually *bangih* at them, only we say it gently to them. With feeling [perasaan]. “Keep going, keep going, play,” we say. But they know that this is us being *bangih*, Greg.

GS: They know?

Ni Ina: They know. Go ask my child, he’s experienced it. If I’m *marah*, if I’m *bangih* at my child, I don’t [express it] crudely, Greg.

It is important to know that when Ni Ina says things like, “That’s really great,” she is not employing an obviously sarcastic or cloying tone. To communicate her *bangih* she relies on her comments to trigger her child’s own self-consciousness about whatever it is he is doing.

²⁰ Several respondents told me that *bangih* was more intense than *berang*, while equating *berang* with *marah*. A Minang dictionary (Usman 2002) defines “*berang*” as “very [*sangat*] *marah*.” Other respondents told me they were all the same. The Indonesian cognate for *bangih* is “*bengis*,” which may mean “angry,” but perhaps more often means “cruel,” and thus seems to reference behavior more directly than does “*marah*.”

It should be noted that displays of *bangih* are not always considered inappropriate – certainly not by the person who displays it. Despite the example from Ni Ina above, it is actually relatively acceptable to publicly express *bangih* at a child, at least relative to expressions of *bangih* directed at other adults. Just as with other ways of demonstrating respect, discussed above, a wife may refrain from expressing *bangih* at her husband when others are observing, but (as Da Jik put it) once the two are alone, she might even take a swing at him. A display of *bangih* may also be considered a reasonable (or at least understandable) response to a person who is not controlling his or her own behavior appropriately. Ni Ina, shortly after describing her indirect expressions of *bangih* toward her child, also remarked that, in certain circumstances, she would just be direct with people if she were upset with them. Da Luko made the point to me that if someone insults you openly and you do not become *bangih* in response, this can be taken as an acceptance or agreement with the insult, and therefore as “lowering oneself,” which would be worse than becoming *bangih*. Different people, of course, have different perspectives on the degree to which expressions of *bangih* should be limited.

Gender certainly makes a difference here. The idea that open displays of *bangih* are sometimes necessary to respond to insults seems to be most often a male one (and as I have remarked, *bangih* is perhaps the only *raso* regularly associated more with men than with women), but personality clearly is a factor as well. When Da Eri described becoming *bangih* at his boss when she was treating him unfairly (Chapter 2), he was clearly proud of the fact that he had not let her mistreat him. The point of

his story was that he, like other Minang people, would not take such treatment passively. At the same time, he was critical of himself for being “out of control” in his response, even though he had simply fired a quick insult in her direction. In contrast, Ni Yas (the woman of about forty who, in Chapter 4, remarked that she might become sombong were she to get rich) talked to me at length about the strength of her *bangih* and how she was not afraid to express it, even when others were. She was proud of the fact that she would not back down or let people who were causing trouble get away with anything. She explained that she was not good at fighting with her mouth, so she would just hit someone if necessary. It is notably that she often described herself as unusually male in her behavior.

As an example, she told a story about how her three-year-old son once had sand thrown in his eyes by an older child. Ni Yas, upset by this, said, “*Kanciang!*” (“piss”), a potent vulgarity in Minang, but one that could be taken as directed at the situation rather than as an attack on a particular person. The mother of the older boy, however, thought Ni Yas had called her child “*anjiang*,” meaning “dog,” which is a severe insult. This other woman became *bangih* at Ni Yas, and would not accept Ni Yas’s explanation of what she had really said. Eventually, this confrontation resulted in Ni Yas chasing the woman until the woman locked herself inside her house, from where she kept yelling at Ni Yas, but refused to come out to face her. Ni Yas told this story as an example of how she did not hold back when others acted improperly toward her (although she did add that she had refrained from throwing a rock through the window of the house after considering the expense of having to pay to replace the

glass). She made a point of the fact that she later found out that this other woman was a troublemaker, and added that after this incident the woman stopped causing problems.

This sort of celebration of the expression of *bangih* is unusual in its intensity, and is something that I rarely, if ever, witnessed directly. I take the time to describe it here because it does help to illustrate that the need for controlling the expression of *bangih* toward a person is in part dependent upon the level of concern one has for that person. If one has been “touched,” – “*tasingguang*,” or “insulted” – oneself, the need to keep one’s distance from the other person and preserve their space of autonomy may simply vanish.

Children and Autonomy

The way children are treated provides an interesting example of the relevant considerations here. Children are understood to not have a fully developed sense of the consequences of their actions (they have not developed *akal*), and they must sometimes be told what they should or should not do. It is appropriate for adults to infringe on their autonomy when necessary. Nevertheless, the way children are disciplined demonstrates a concern for their developing sense of autonomy. Adults are generally reluctant to take steps to *force* children do something.

For example, when the little girl in my household was still less than two years old, she liked to climb up on the furniture to reach up to a small shelf on the wall in order to pull down and look at small decorative items displayed there. Her mother

would always tell her to stop climbing, and she might even lightly hit the girl's legs a few times to reinforce her scolding, but she would not physically prevent her from continuing to climb. She would stay close to her, positioning her arms like protective railings a few inches for the girl to make sure that she did not fall and hurt herself.

She was forcibly stopped from doing things so infrequently that it caught my attention the first time I observed it happening. She was playing with a small pitcher and a large bucket of water (placed to catch rainwater running off the roof, to be used for household needs). This was clearly one of her favorite pastimes,²¹ but the adults in the household strongly discouraged it because they worried that it would make her ill. Usually, they would just tell her to stop as they walked by, and often she would ignore them. In this instance, she had become soaking wet, and her aunt told her quite sternly to stop, but she did not. When she refused to give up the pitcher, her aunt eventually slapped her hand to get her to release it. Her aunt could easily have pulled the pitcher from her grasp, but made no attempt to do so. Instead, it was as if the girl had to “voluntarily” give it up, even if she needed a small slap on the hand in order to be convinced to do so.

Several parents also commented to me that they were reluctant to force their children to do things, or to be too strict or act too angry toward them, for fear that they might damage their relationships with them. These comments were sometimes made about older (e.g., teenage) children, but they also applied to young children. As Da Wan explained it, an adult could easily remember things that happened to them when

²¹ One of her other favorites was playing with a (reasonably dull) kitchen knife, which she constantly requested and was usually given.

they were seven years old. As a result, he was wary of forcing his seven-year-old daughter to do anything. He feared that if he did, she might not feel as much *kasih* (love, caring, pity) for him when she grew up.²² The emotions that would later serve to integrate the child with the parents rather than push the child away could only be cultivated by granting the child the independence to choose them.

Criticism

The considerations of autonomy involved in (not) expressing *bangih* and in disciplining children are also very much apparent in communicating criticisms of other people, even if such criticisms are not motivated by anything resembling anger. The use of indirect speech becomes very important in these circumstances. *Baso-basi* prohibits direct criticism, which must be instead channeled into messages that are comprehensible and yet innocuous on the face of things. Indirect criticisms are also a type of *kieh*; they may also be referred to as “*sindia*” (or “*sindir*” in Indonesian).

For instance, Ni Tasi explained, rather than telling her that she really should be getting married already now that she is in her mid-twenties, a neighbor might comment in her presence, “Shelvi down the block is getting married. She’s twenty-three.” Ni Tasi takes such comments as criticisms directed at her (or, at the very least, as a form of nagging), but such comments are likely to be said with a smile and in a casual tone. Similarly, Inyik Datuak explained that he might criticize someone for

²² When I asked people to tell me what their parents or other caregivers had been like during their childhood, they virtually always replied by describing them in terms of their relative levels of patience (*saba*) or anger (*bangih*, *berang*, *emosi*), which formed the opposite ends of a continuum.

gossiping by arranging for that person to overhear him talking to a third person about how it was bad to gossip. This method, he pointed out, would avoid confrontation and embarrassment: no one was telling anyone else what to do – at least, not directly.²³

Da Jik, the one who explained that he felt “uneasy” confronting people directly about their shortcomings, claimed that this was in fact a weakness in his ability to be a “professional” in running his business. Rather than dealing quickly with an employee who was causing a problem, he said that he would drop subtle hints for days. The problem, he said, was that sometimes his hints did not work, and he would end up having to tell the employee directly to alter his or her behavior. Afterward, he said, he would feel guilty or wrong (*salah*) for having done so: “It feels too much like being a dictator,” he explained.

Another example, presented to me by several people, involves a (hypothetical) man living in his in-laws’ house.²⁴ The man, unemployed at the time, is sitting in the main room of the house on a sofa in the middle of the day. His mother-in-law walks in, sees a cat lying on the floor of the house, and chases it away, saying, “Hey you, lazy cat! You’re good for nothing but just sitting around all day waiting to be fed! Get out of here!” She never addresses the son-in-law directly, but her message is nevertheless clear to him: he is being lazy and is a burden on the household, and he should be out working. None of this is ever acknowledged directly, however.

²³ Ni Tasi, however, told me that comments of the kind she described above made her feel insulted. It mattered little to her that the criticism was indirect because she felt that her marital status was not any of her neighbor’s business.

²⁴ It is a clichéd example, although I am uncertain of how it is learned.

Of course, the common use of kieh and sindia means that people are constantly ferreting out messages from the comments of others – whether or not the message was actually intended. Ni Tasi is in fact anxious about receiving pressure to get married (and not particularly enthused at the idea in any case). If someone comments on the marriage of a younger neighbor in Ni Tasi's presence, is this necessarily intended as a kieh, or does Ni Tasi simply project this meaning into it?

Not long after Inyiak Datuak had discussed kieh with me, he happened to mention in a conversation that westerners who visit Bukittinggi are often guilty of being rude. One of his examples was that they would eat as they were walking. This immediately made me anxious, as it was only the day before when my wife and I had given in to temptation and ate some snacks while walking home from the pasa, even though we (or at least I) knew that this was generally considered rude behavior: I was primed to construct his words as commentary on my own behavior. I have no idea if someone had seen this and word had gotten around to Inyiak Datuak, and if he was intending to send me a message. It may very well have been a coincidence. He also mentioned a number of other transgressions commonly made by westerners of which I was not guilty.

This is precisely the point: the lack of certainty over when criticism is being leveled means that a person is perpetually reading such criticism into the words of others any time they think such criticism *might* be appropriate. Whether intended as a message to me or not, Inyiak Datuak's comments made me self-conscious and strengthened my resolve not to eat while walking. The practice of using kieh to

criticize ultimately encourages a self-discipline more thorough and scrupulous than what might be created through direct criticism, for this lack of certainty means that such disciplining feels like a constant presence, and therefore must be internalized in order to avoid the consequences of transgression (cf. Foucault 1977). At the same time, this practice reduces the likelihood of open confrontation, and reduces the intensity of shame: in my case, at the very least, I could (and can) still imagine that Inyiak Datuak knew nothing of my transgression, and so the shame I felt in his presence was much less than it would have been had he directly confronted me with it. Neither he (as far as I know, of course) nor I ever had to deal with such a criticism interfering with the smooth flow of our other interactions. I felt – or was allowed, by Inyiak Datuak’s methods, to feel – that I was modifying my own behavior. It felt, subjectively, that I was maintaining my own autonomy, applying my own knowledge of how I should act and deciding to act that way, despite the fact that my choices were driven by a constant monitoring of others’ reactions.²⁵

Consensus

²⁵ There is another side of all this, of course, which is the paranoia and resentment that may accompany the sense of always being criticized, and the potential for misunderstandings to take place when criticism is heard by a listener but unintended by a speaker. I am convinced that in at least one or two interviews where I was asking questions that directly referenced morality, my respondents and I were talking past each other: I was asking about either general issues or about their lives, while they were, albeit indirectly, using their answers to address their relationships with me. This took place in cases in which there was some tension in those relationships, and it is possible that they interpreted the fact that I was asking questions about morality to indicate that I was criticizing their treatment of me as immoral. This was something that I unfortunately did not fully grasp until well after leaving the field.

It is important to remember that the goal of maintaining an integrated, united community in which individuals still experience a sense of autonomy is incorporated into adat in ways that go beyond everyday interactions, although that has been my focus here. In Chapter 2, I discussed the saying, “Wanting to be on top when pressed down, wanting to be outside when caged in,” which is frequently used to describe Minangkabau character. As I explained, when Ni Saia told me that this saying described what made Minangkabau people so good at coming together as a group to deliberate on and solve a problem by coming to a consensus, I was surprised. As I understood it, this saying pointed out that Minang people were very clever, always looking to gain an advantage and turn a defeat into a victory. This seemed to me like it would make coming to a consensus very difficult.

As Ni Saia explained it, however, Minangkabau people were very good at finding ways to keep the group unified while each individual maintained a sense that their own concerns and opinions had been addressed and attended to. My assumption had been that the “democracy” that is usually attributed to Minangkabau adat, emphasizing consensus rather than the overt clash of different ideas and opinions leading to a victory for the majority, would require a conception of person in which the self is ultimately constituted by its integration into the group. But this is not entirely the case. Rather, it requires that part of the self be constituted by such integration, but that this part is the only one that is overtly expressed and displayed by

the time a decision has been reached.²⁶ Further, each individual must choose to accept this decision. Consensus can never be forced.

Recall from Chapter 2 that the consensus that should be reached in Minangkabau democratic processes should, in theory, be a true consensus. That is, every individual involved should agree that the final decision is the final decision, and back it as the proper one. This may mean that an individual understands that their own personal opinion must not prevail because it clearly goes against the opinion of the majority, and therefore agrees that the decision backed by others is “proper.” (This is not entirely dissimilar from someone in the United States voting for one candidate for president, but agreeing that another candidate, having received far more votes, is the “proper” choice to actually become the president.) However, there is no absolute moral imperative to *agree* with the position of the majority, and if one feels that one must continue to oppose that majority, consensus will not be reached – no decision will be made. Such outcomes are possible, and people describe disputes (e.g., property disputes) that can go unresolved for many years because different factions will come to no consensus (cf. K. von Benda-Beckmann 1983). The true consensus required by adat should ideally be a consensus agreed to by all individuals, employing their own autonomy in choosing to accept it. The ability to maneuver and balance conflicting impulses (one's opinion with one's decision to back a different decision;

²⁶ Of course, all of this is not considered an easy task, and points to one of the other meanings of the saying to which Ni Saia is referring, as I have described: the desire to achieve the impossible. This is also to say that these ideals are not always realized. People do not always come to a consensus, nor do they always feel that their opinions and concerns have been attended to. This is especially true when the egalitarian ideals of adat serve as a thin veil for actual inequities in power that grant some people more authority in decision-making than others (cf. Krier 1995, K. von Benda-Beckmann 1983).

being on the outside while still caged in) therefore becomes essential to creating a community that appears – and ultimately, acts – as a unified one.

Face

First in Chapter 3, and now here, I have used “face” in several different ways to discuss baso-basi. I have noted that the norms of proper interaction are often about “the face of things,” and sometimes literally involve the use of faces, such as in greetings. I have also pointed out that baso-basi is essentially about face-to-face interactions. Of course, the concept of “face,” as in “to save face,” is relevant here as well.

Drawing on Goffman’s discussion of “face-work,” we can understand face to reference the “positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes [...]” (1967: 5). Such an image of self, as Goffman describes it, is “diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter and becomes manifest only when these events are read and interpreted for the appraisals expressed in them” (7). These are images of self that can only be located within the process of social interaction. People may thus act in various ways to maintain their face, or to help preserve the face of others, meaning that during the process of social interaction, that social value of self is preserved.

These maneuverings are what Goffman refers to as “face-work,” and this describes much of what goes on in the performance of baso-basi. When everyone acts in a baso-basi manner, everyone’s image of social value is maintained. Goffman is also clear that because face is located in the flow of an interaction, it does not define completely the images of self and other that exist in people’s minds and determine their interactions in the larger arena of social life. People accept the images in question, but, “It is typically a ‘working’ acceptance, not a ‘real’ one, since it tends to be based not on agreement of candidly expressed heart-felt evaluations, but upon a willingness to give temporary lip service to judgments with which the participants do not really agree” (11). We have seen that this is sometimes true for such ritualized social interactions between Minangkabau people. People are well aware that baso-basi creates a public, “working” frame for social interaction that obscures other important elements of social relationships.

As I have shown, sometimes this is the very point of the norms of proper social interaction and the face-work it involves. For example, a person who is criticized or rejected indirectly, as through *sindiran*, maintains their face because they have not been publicly devalued. In the public flow of events, they remain unscathed. While the criticism or rejection is obviously communicated through means that are “public” in the sense of being observable, they are not public in the sense of being publicly acknowledged. They do not enter into “the flow of events in the encounter.” The more they are publicly obscured, the less they effect this public image of a person,

their face, during the interaction in question. Yet, such criticisms and rejections are in fact being communicated.

Minang people do not generally use the metaphor of “face,” but the theory is instructive. It helps us to comprehend the sense in which the “appearance” of these interactions is significant, even if it is also a pretense, a performance. In matters of face, it is always the appearance that is vital. Using Goffman’s theory to highlight the vitality of appearance in some ways turns his emphasis upside down. Goffman writes, “Ordinarily, maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective” (12). He notes that people may have many different motives for maintaining face and certain kinds of face: they are trying to accomplish different things through the maintenance of face. While this is undoubtedly true in the case of Minangkabau interactions as well, we can also see how once there develops a sense of “face” as a real dimension of social interaction, that dimension may be invested with moral meaning. People may indeed be trying to accomplish all kinds of things with the maintenance of face, and yet maintaining it can be a goal in and of itself as well.

In these appearances people stake out ground as moral persons who participate in creating the ideal community, unblemished by division or the clash of individual wills. This last category includes unnecessarily robbing others of their autonomy, or being robbed of it oneself. There is no reason to argue, as has Mao (1994), that a “social identity” and an “individual autonomy” are necessarily opposing, mutually exclusive orientations for “face,” only one of which is likely to be dominant in a given society. In the broad patterns of Minangkabau social interaction, it is not individual

autonomy that is kept out of such appearances, but rather the clash of individual wills, the exercising of that autonomy in ways that cause social division. Outside of such appearances, a person can (and should) criticize and be criticized, reject and be rejected, exert force on others to make them do as they should, or resist the force of others.

The Personal

The fact that face keeps certain things out of public social interactions is important for two reasons. It is important, as I have emphasized, for the creation of vital appearances. However, it is also important because by keeping certain things *out* of such appearances, another space is defined for these things to be *in*. Qualities that adhere to an individual, and thus form individual identity, are known as “*pribadi*” (or sometimes, “*paribadi*,” M), and can be thought of as “personal.” Social roles, character traits, and even property are all “*pribadi*” if they adhere to an individual rather than being shared. Often, however, the logic is carried a step further, and “*pribadi*” is used to indicate those things that *should not* be shared, that must instead be kept out of the public sphere.

If a person’s “face” defines their image of self – their identity – in the flow of social interaction, their *pribadi* may refer to aspects of their identity that are often kept purposely out of this flow. As with “face,” I do not intend to suggest that “the *pribadi*” is a rigidly defined dimension of experience. I am less interested in the

formal Minangkabau categories of things like “pribadi” (as if a formal, stable definition exists) than in the way they are incorporated into people’s identities. This is particularly important to point out here since, as I have stated, “face” is not a significant Minangkabau category. Nevertheless, people’s narratives and their behavior points to a division between things that are made apparent in social interaction (and the work that people do to create these appearances) and things that are not. Some of the latter are pribadi, and thus form essential elements of identity. To see how what is kept “unreal” in the appearance of social interaction is made (perhaps especially) real in terms of identity, it is best to turn to concrete examples. To begin, let us return to Ni Saia.

Ni Saia: I Wrote My Name

The first time I met Ni Saia, she told me about her poem. It was only a short chat, but she was eager to talk more, and said that she wanted to be the first person I came to when I was ready to interview people about their lives. I saw her occasionally in the months that followed, and she would always be sure to mention the poem, and how she would recite it for me. Circumstances interceded, however, and well over half a year passed before I had the opportunity to begin an interview series with her. When I visited her to arrange for our first recorded interview, she reminded me again of her poem. It would tell me her whole, sad story, she said – not just the outlines of a story as I would get from other people. She told me that she wanted her story to be

told in the United States, in English, though she would be malu (ashamed) to have it told in Bukittinggi.

Ni Saia is in her late fifties. She can remember the West Sumatran rebellion of the late 1950's (described in Chapter 1), the city being bombed and her school closing down, permanently ending her formal education at the elementary school level. She remembers the delicate balance in her family between support for the rebels, which was widespread in the community, and the maintenance of ties with some of her kin who worked for the central government in Jakarta. She has lived much of her life in Bukittinggi, though many of her adult years were spent in other Sumatran cities where she was successful in running a small business. She has now come back to live in the same place where she grew up, to rely in her old age on her pusako (lineage-controlled) property, where she lives in a creaky, thirty-five-year-old house of wood and bamboo. She farms a small plot of land, and this makes up part of her family's meager income. Her family has trouble meeting their basic daily needs – a fact that she finds painfully shameful.

I was eager to hear more about her life, and when we sat down for our first recorded interview, I told her I wanted to know more about her background and hoped she could talk to me first about her childhood. She offered a few cursory remarks about her origins and her family, but within minutes her narrative had reached the point in her life when she had been married to her first husband for many years, and was greatly pained by the fact that she still had no children. This brought her to her poem, which was clearly the topic that she felt to be the real focus of our conversation.

“Rather than talk with my neighbors, talk with my friends, I [un] then I got a pen and a notebook. I poured these feelings in my heart into that notebook as I wrote, you know? I wrote what I said [to you] before: my name, ‘Saia’ – that’s the name that was given to me by my parents, right, when I was born.”

“Saia” (meaning “poem”) is, of course, actually the pseudonym I have assigned to her. Her real name is a unique one and is, as she now reminds me, constructed out of the initial sounds of a string of words with which her parents commemorated the historical moment of her birth, and the hope for the future that her birth embodied. She continues:

Ni Saia: Now, so that’s the short version: “Saia.” So finally I thought and thought, “Why is it that my fate is so awful like this? I’ve been married for ten years without a child.” That’s what I thought, right? I thought I was so unfortunate, you know, not having any descendants yet and so on. So, then I thought, “How is it that I am so unfortunate?” I wrote my name moving from the top of the page to the bottom, like this.

She demonstrates for me, writing her name vertically on a sheet of paper, with each letter on a separate line. She then shows me how she constructed her poem from her name, with each letter of the name becoming the first letter in the first word of each line. She recites for me the first verse that she wrote:²⁷

²⁷ I have chosen to translate this first verse in such a way as to demonstrate how Ni Saia constructs the poem from the letters of her name, and so I have adjusted the translation so that her pseudonym, “Saia,” is spelled out by taking the first letter of each line. While my translation faithfully communicates the meaning of the verse, I have chosen to be guided more by this method of construction, and by Ni Saia’s general attention to rhyme, than by the desire to convey subtle elements of poetics and phrasing. Due to the need to preserve Ni Saia’s anonymity, it is not possible for me to present the original text of the poem here, and it is thus not possible for me to analyze it in any detail. In any case, I am more concerned here with the existence of the poem and its meaning for Ni Saia, and in the method that she used to construct it.

**Sitting to ponder alone
 As the day into evening runs
 I ponder the fate that occurs
 All my luck is bad, and my fate is poor**

For the second verse, she explains, she wrote her name a second time and again used each letter to start a new line. In this verse, she addresses God, asking if she was born merely to suffer and cry in disappointment for the duration of her life. She has told me that somewhere she still has the original text, complete with smudges and stains from the tears that fell on the paper as she wrote and reread the poem.

She did not stop writing with just her name. She says that she contemplated some more and then wrote down the name of her kampung, her native neighborhood, and wrote the third verse using those letters. She recites this verse, in which she begs God directly to grant her a child. She then makes sure to tell me that she did not discuss the problem (or her poem about it) with others:

Ni Saia: That wasn't finished in a single day. Then, as tears came down, I appealed to God like that, right? So I cried. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't tell.

GS: You didn't tell?

Ni Saia: No.

GS: You never told—?

Ni Saia: No! If we tell people our family problems, problems between husband and wife, then a "third person" [*orang ketiga*] will get involved. Eventually we can be broken apart just because of this person, right?

GS: So it's better to —?

Ni Saia: It's better to pour the feelings in our heart into the notebook, onto paper. To write.

GS: Do people here do this a lot? Not —

Ni Saia: No! No one. People here, right, they tell their friends, and afterward their hearts feel satisfied. Later their friends become involved, and that's a recipe for no good, right? So—

GS: So that happens a lot?

Ni Saia: Yes, that's the thing. But I don't talk like that.

Talking about this problem would not bring her any help, she points out. So, she says, "It's best we just think, and so that we feel satisfied, so our heart is satisfied, we get a pen [and], ahhh, write it down."

In a process that, she says, lasted days, she continued writing the poem in the night, using her entire address: the name of her neighborhood, the district in the city in which it is located, and then, "Bukittinggi," and finally, "Sumatera Barat [West Sumatra]." The poem was thus constructed out of a description of her identity: her name and her origin. She was not in fact living at this address at the time she wrote the poem, as she had moved with her husband to another city. The address she used located her identity, not her physical presence. In her everyday, public life there was no outlet for managing or even expressing her crisis, but Ni Saia had invented a private ritual through which she could grapple with it.

The poem must have stretched close to sixty lines to cover all of this. She only recites one more verse for me, however, up to the point in the poem that laments the impossibility of making the decision that she must make. She tells me that this refers to her decision as to whether or not to end her marriage, something she felt she could not bear to do. She could not even bring herself to discuss what she was thinking directly with her husband. He did eventually discover the poem, although she suggests that this was an accident: he came up from behind her one day as she was rereading it and crying. Whether she (consciously or unconsciously) arranged this as a way to bring the unspeakable into the open, we cannot know. It did have this effect,

however: it was this event, she says, that precipitated their divorce, which she describes as amicable.

“Do you still remember it all?” I ask. She replies: “I still do, I still do. But later, if—,” she says, cutting herself off abruptly. She gestures toward the tape recorder. “Let’s wait a moment,” she says, and has me turn it off.

Ni Saia never recited the rest of the poem. Saying that she needed to have it written down so that she could recite it smoothly and not make any mistakes on the recording,²⁸ she suggested that she would do this first, or perhaps pull out the original text from wherever she was keeping it. Despite sitting with me for an entire series of interviews following this first interview, and despite reminders from me, she never did either of these things.

During that first interview, after the recorder was turned off, she suddenly said that the *truly* interesting story from her life came from her adolescence, as if she wished to leave the story of her poem behind entirely (although, as will become apparent, this was not the case). She began to tell this new story in earnest detail, but when I asked if I could turn the recorder back on, she told me to wait a moment again. Her story, quite involved, took up the next forty-five minutes (and she was kind

²⁸ In fact, she does appear to make several mistakes in the sections she recites. One of the verses is too short, and another, as recited, obviously misspells the word from which its initial letters are taken. At this point, early in the interview process, Ni Saia appeared to want the recorded parts of the interviews to be more polished than mere conversation, as if they were official documents that needed to be carefully composed. This also was at least one of the reasons that she had me leave the recorder off when she later told me, for the first time, the story of her adolescent success, as described below. As the interview series went on, she became much more accustomed to simply conversing with me without paying attention to the recorder

enough to repeat most of it again for me the following day, this time with the recorder running). It is important to describe the outlines of this narrative.

When the rebellion had put an end to her schooling in the late 1950's, her dreams of becoming a teacher had been broken. Ni Saia's older sister was sent to take a course on women's modern domestic skills, but was not particularly interested in the pursuit. She would bring her assignments home, and Ni Saia, a teenager, would happily work on them. She seemed to have an affinity for it, and sought to learn more from her friends, and even from a short course in town that she attended – this latter activity done without telling her friends or family. Soon she was skilled in many of the arts of a thoroughly modern conception of femininity: decorative sewing, making lace, canning fruit, meat, and fish, and preparing beautiful cakes and other sweets. She made things for friends, and even sometimes to be sold in small shops. She still did not let her mother know about her activities.

One day, a meeting of neighborhood youth had been called, but no one had invited her. She was at home crying over her exclusion when there was a knock on her door. She made an attempt to hide her tears as best she could and came to the door to find that representatives from the meeting had now come to her. It turned out that she had been excluded from the meeting because it had been arranged to discuss her. They told her that they had now arrived with an offer – a demand, more precisely – for her to hold classes for the other young women in the neighborhood. They would pay her what they could, and learn from her. She was going to be a teacher after all. (And

so she was, after her mother, who was initially uncertain about this new endeavor and taken aback to find out about Ni Saia's skills, allowed her to proceed.)

As she reaches this part of her story, she pauses and her face brightens, the muscles in her face tightening as if a smile is about to fully bloom. If it is, she holds it back, leaving only an intense and dignified shine in her moistening eyes. Her dignity is in her achievements, but in the current moment it is also in the careful way she manages her pride in those achievements, and her suffering in their seeming evaporation. Refraining from demonstrating her pride too intensely argues for her current moral achievement: despite the loss of the respect others used to have for her, she will not remind them. Her story argues for the value she had achieved as a young woman, yet it also serves as an argument for the value of her current self.

Eventually, she says, even high status married women came from out of town to study with her, eager for their skills to match their status as modern women. Exhibitions were put on of their work, reported on in the local papers, and even the mayor attended. Several high status men were interested in her, though she felt compelled to turn them away when her younger sister worried about losing her attention and urged her not to marry yet.

When she eventually did marry she moved to another city, and there she put some of her skills to work running a business. She was a success. Yet, she says, circling back around in the end to our earlier discussion, what was point of the financial success if she had no children? So, she says, concluding the story, one evening she picked up a paper and pen.

Ni Saia: I wrote – what was I going to write? I wrote my name. I had no idea what it was going to be. My hand just went right ahead and wrote my name from top to bottom, like this. I wrote my name – that there, from my full name through my complete address – a story of someone who had no descendents, had no children. That’s the story...so, that’s what the story is.

Ni Saia’s story, as she told it, reaches its end point here, and she stops: this is her life. What she most wants to tell me about herself consists of this story of achievement and then pain – though even here, she is ambivalent about what to share, never completing the recitation of the poem. If we take what she chooses to tell me as an indication of what is significant to her identity, we may be somewhat misled, even though she had explicitly argued that her poem would tell me her entire story. After all, she did eventually remarry and now has several children, something obviously important to her as well. What is distinctive about the elements of her identity that she is motivated to recount for me, I think, is that they are ones that are not only significant, but also publicly obscured.

This is clearly the case with her crisis. A central part of the narrative of the creation of her poem is the fact that she felt the need to “pour out” the feelings she had about her lack of children and the decision she faced regarding her marriage, and yet that also believed that she could not talk to other people about it. It was her problem, and not something for others to become involved in. They could not help her, and might even exploit her vulnerability to break up her marriage against her will. She wrote the poem as an alternative to talking to people about the problem, she says. The crisis and the poem were, and remain, important to her identity – and her identity is

literally spelled out in the poem. She represented herself to herself²⁹ in the poem, and it still resonates with her. She is eager to share it – but only outside of the community. She shares some of it with me (and, to a lesser extent, with my research assistant during that first chat), but would feel ashamed to share it with her neighbors. She makes sure that I promise not to play my recording of it for anyone in Bukittinggi.

She also does not want me to allow anyone in Bukittinggi to hear the recording of her longer story, in which she describes the achievements of her adolescence and early adulthood. She is not ashamed of her accomplishments, of course. Yet here there is another obstacle. No one, she tells me, remembers her successes any longer. It goes unstated, but talking publicly about them in order to remind people would be bragging – it would be *sombong* (Chapters 3 and 4). Even those she once helped when they were in difficult circumstances, some of whom have gone on to wealth and success, ignore her now, she says. She refers to herself as old, as ugly (now that her pretty, youthful face is gone, she says, who would want her as their teacher?), as poor, and as a mere farmer. People today, she says, only see others through the lens of money and material goods. If you are healthy and prospering, everyone wants to be near you, but if you're struggling, as she is now, they disappear. It was fate (*nasib*), she says, that led her not to marry one of those high-status men who was interested in her when she was young. She looks at me with watery eyes. Everything is according to God's wishes – though, she says, if she had married one of those men, her life

²⁹ She also represents herself to God, to whom at least parts of the poem are addressed. This makes sense considering that it is only God who is thought to truly know the real essence of a person (cf. Chapter 4) and it is only God who is a perfect interlocutor: one whose influence is always positive (cf. Chapter 6).

might have been different. She gestures to our surroundings: the thin, worn furniture and the sagging house. The message is that there is nothing left in her life worthy of admiration – except of course, her humble endurance of the loss of what was and could have been.

Ni Saia identifies herself both as that young, accomplished woman, and as the old, forgotten one. It is only the latter identity, however, that she believes lives in the minds of others. Like Da Palo (Chapter 4), Ni Saia sees herself as having a public identity that denies the full range of capacities and accomplishments that make up her self. Also like Da Palo – who, it may be recalled, participates in maintaining his “false” image by pretending not to be headed for Friday prayers, even when he is – Ni Saia has no public outlet to express this fuller vision of herself. When she was young, Ni Saia drew from the cultural resources available to her to establish an identity. She drew from notions of modernity and femininity, from ideals of social cohesion, from cultural conceptions of status, from the appeal of her youth and beauty. These same cultural resources have turned on her now that she is poor, aging, and a “mere” farmer who complains that the modern world is characterized by a deterioration of traditional morals.

By declaring her acceptance of her fate, eschewing public expressions of her resentment, and expressing shame at the idea of promoting herself publicly, Ni Saia constructs herself as a moral member of the community. This same process, however, keeps her from fully realizing other dimensions of her identity that also carry moral weight: the achievement, status, and even the experience of suffering and overcoming

that also present themselves to her as desirable qualities of personhood. Talking to me gives her an opportunity to assert those parts of herself that are represented in memories that are available only to her, externalized only in a poem that literally spells out her identity.³⁰

Although Ni Saia never did recite the rest of that poem for me, she did prepare several other short poems for me to record. These were in the form of *pantun*, a common style of Malay and Indonesian poetry in which each verse is a quatrain, consisting of two couplets which usually mirror each other in sound, often employing an ABAB rhyming scheme. The first couplet describes some place, scene, or observation of a natural process, while the second carries the social and psychological meaning of the verse. Two of the *pantun* she prepared for me referenced local places, and addressed my impending departure from Bukittinggi. The first *pantun* she wanted to share with me, however, is the following one. The second couplet is a traditional one, and it describes the way one's suffering is kept hidden away from the public eye:

**Maninjau padi lah masak,
Batang kapeh batimba jalan.
Hati risau dibao galak,
Bagai paneh manganduang hujan.**

**[In Maninjau the rice is ready for harvest,
Kapok trees line both sides of the lane.
With laughter is carried a heart in distress,
Like heat that within bears rain.]**

³⁰ It is interesting to compare this case with Abu-Lughod's (1986) description of the use of poetry by Bedouin women in expressing dimensions of experience that otherwise go unexpressed in daily life. Abu-Lughod's material resonates with my arguments in this chapter regarding the careful management of different dimensions of self into different kinds of expressions that prevent them from violating a moral order. In contrast to the case of Ni Saia, however, the Bedouin women's use of poetry is thoroughly conventional.

Stories about the Self

People in Bukittinggi have conflicting ideas as to whether one should talk about troubles or personal (*pribadi*) concerns with others. Ni Saia's is very clear that to do so invites several kinds of trouble. First, it may invite others to interfere and cause problems for oneself: had she talked to people about her problems having children, they might have used the information to help break up her marriage. In addition, it may expose one in some unfavorable way: she would be malu, ashamed to have me share her story with other people. These are pervasive concerns for people.

At the same time, people acknowledge countervailing forces that push them to share their personal lives with others. Ni Saia says contemptuously that people in Bukittinggi, in general, do in fact talk about their personal lives with their friends, and cause themselves trouble as a result. Despite this, Ni Saia also acknowledges that it is not good to keep one's problems "inside." When we discuss mental illness (*sakit jiwa*), she tells me that such conditions are often the result of thoughts about problems and unrealized aspirations that are "confined inside the heart" (*dipendam di dalam hati*). She says that you need to find a way to keep these feelings from making you sick, but, "If you tell another person about them, it would mean telling them your very own secrets. You'd be ashamed." In the case described above, Ni Saia "poured" such thoughts onto paper in the form of a poem rather than, she says, release them through talk. During our discussion of mental illness, when I ask her how one can avoid going crazy from thoughts if it is a bad solution to talk to other people about personal

problems, she tells me that turning to religion is the key. Her poem, it should be kept in mind, was at least in part constructed as an appeal to God. I will discuss the connection to religion further in Chapter 6.

The idea that persistent and unexpressed thoughts – especially thoughts about personal problems and unfulfilled aspirations – cause physical and mental illness is common in West Sumatra. The standard explanation for mental illness is that such thoughts repeat over and over inside one’s head until one’s entire mental life is in chaos. Alternately, or in addition to these mental consequences, there can be physical symptoms as well. In Chapter 4, I discussed Ni Tasi, a young women who often evaded (or, if I kept pushing her, simply refused) to answer my questions, even though she also appeared to enjoy being interviewed and expressed a desire to talk to me about some “pribadi” things despite her insistence that she was not actually able to do so. Ni Tasi had undergone major surgery to remove a tumor that – her doctor told her, and she agreed – had been caused by keeping thoughts about her problems locked up inside of her.³¹ She thus acknowledged that she *should* talk at least a little bit, about some personal things, but still found herself unable to do so.

These health consequences are one of the major reasons that some people argue that it is important to find someone to talk with about one’s own problems. Many people also told me that it is important to get another person’s opinion about a particularly difficult problem because the other person may be able to see a solution

³¹ In this case, the mechanism was said to be indirect: Instead of talking about her problems, Ni Tasi would eat, resulting in her eating too much and too much of the wrong things, like *bakso* (meatball soup). These poor eating habits were then thought to cause the tumor.

that one cannot see for oneself. Obviously, *pribadi* matters should not be discussed with everyone or just anyone – this would contradict their categorization as “*pribadi*” entirely. However, not everyone is as adamant as Ni Saia that such talk must be avoided, and not everyone finds it as difficult to talk as does Ni Tasi. People often told me that they had one or two people with whom they could share their troubles, although even then if those troubles concern the family, they may be reluctant to share them. It is hard for some people to find this kind of friend, to feel that they can trust someone enough to share what is *pribadi*, especially troubles. As Da Palo put it, “In terms of friends, most are ‘laughing friends’ [*kawan galak*]. There aren’t any friends for crying.” Yet without such outlets, people worry about their own sanity. One respondent mentioned that when too much builds up inside him without a chance at being released in laughter and in crying in conversation with others, he sometimes felt that he wished to stop living entirely.³²

Several of my respondents mentioned that the interviews with me provided them an opportunity to unburden themselves by talking about their problems and worries.³³ The relationship people had to being interviewed also demonstrated the

³² At least one respondent argued that if a person appeared to be distressed, it was proper to acknowledge this and ask them what was wrong. The idea was that people sometimes allow themselves to display subtle signs of distress precisely so that others will question them and thus allow them to talk – something they would be reluctant to do if they had to initiate the conversation. To ignore such signs is to show an improper lack of concern for others. However, the conventional wisdom seems to be that one should not ask too many questions about a person’s problem, allowing them to reveal only what they wish. Pressing for details would be a violation of that person’s personal (*pribadi*) life.

³³ Ni Saia was not my only respondent who considered writing as a way to express realities that were otherwise difficult to express. For example, Da Palo – who as we have seen (Chapter 4) mirrors Ni Saia in that he feels that people do not appreciate his positive qualities, or understand who he really is – once told me that he wanted to write a book called “This is

tension between this opportunity for “release” (*lapeh*) and the discomfort with talking too openly about oneself. There were a few occasions where people told me that they did not wish to be interviewed because they did not want to talk about themselves. This was usually put in terms of a fear of revealing something aib (shameful, disgraceful). For the most part, however, people would not say this directly, just as they avoided too directly rejecting the idea of being interviewed. Other people, however, would tell me that I was likely to have trouble finding people who would be comfortable talking about themselves and would be open with me. This was indeed a struggle. Of course, I did eventually find people who were apparently quite open with me (a number of whom remarked to me that they, unlike other people they imagined I was interviewing, were open with me). Nevertheless, I noticed that many of my respondents tended to answer questions with hypotheticals. Even when I directly requested an example from a respondent’s own experience, it was sometimes difficult to tell if the response was an account of something that actually had happened to the person or was rather a generic example of something that could or often did happen to people. The use of “*awak*” (meaning “I,” “you,” “we,” and so on: see Chapter 3) meant that a story may or may not be intended as a first person account. Such stories often began with a phrase – such as “*saandainyo*” (“supposing”) or “*contohnyo*” or “*misanyo*” (“for instance”) – that implied the possibility that what followed could be a

Me” (“*Inilah Aku*”). It would not be a product of imagination, he said, but would be similar to what I was doing in that it would describe for people what life (in his case, his life) was really like. This was a fantasy, though. He gave no indication that would ever actually do this. Although most of the population in West Sumatra is functionally literate, reading and writing are not common activities.

hypothetical or a generic example. Sometimes, it was only the particular details of a story (or lack of them) that helped me to determine whether the account was taken from direct experience or not.

The dilemma that people face is that they feel a need to express things that are difficult, inappropriate, or even dangerous to express. As we saw in the case of Ni Saia, this applies not only to problems, but to good things as well: a person should not talk too openly about their accomplishments. Things that cause pride as well as shame should not be displayed too openly. So, for example, Da Tor tells me that of course a person wants to tell others when they are proud, *bangga*, of something that they have done, or perhaps something their child has accomplished. However, while *bangga* is an expected and appropriate feeling that results from legitimate accomplishment, being overly demonstrative of *bangga* or talking about such accomplishments is *sombong*, an altogether different kind of pride, and one that is morally unacceptable. One must restrain oneself from doing it very much.

When I ask Da Tor for his own experiences of being *bangga*, he tells me that he has none. Later, he alternately tells me that he is *sagan* (respectfully hesitant) to tell me about being *bangga*. Eventually, he does tell me about a moment in which he felt *bangga* – when he won an award – but makes sure to preface his story by remarking that he is about to expose, or rather “leak” a secret (“*bocor rahasio ciek*”).

The involvement of pride and shame here clues us into the fact that what is at stake is identity. Pride and shame both signal self-evaluations – evaluations of self and evaluations of how self is evaluated by others. Recall from Chapter 3 that in

Taylor's (1989) analysis, the positive assessment of self (as evaluated by self and/or others) is what he calls "dignity," one of the three dimensions of moral personhood (and the one that is often based on an evaluation of the state of the other axes: properly respecting others and fulfilling potential). People feel pride in the realization of a desired identity, shame in its failure.

We can note that among the things that are important to people's identities, particularly the axis of fulfilling potential, are things like winning awards, acquiring wealth, gaining an advanced education. These are all things that are widely recognized in West Sumatra as increasing a person's status – they are achievements of good things. They are things that make people bangga, even as they are also the things, as we have seen, that make them sombong, and are thus dangerous to display. Thus, these are all aspects of identity that can buttress dignity if kept in their proper, pribadi place, even as they can also undermine dignity if they interfere with the realization of other important goods.

Whether desired identities are realized or not, they are by definition meaningful. The things that are pribadi must be given an order so they can become part of identity. These are things that are, we have seen, sometimes difficult to fully order in the everyday practices of social interaction, as they are pushed to the margins or, at the extremes, out of public performance. Yet to be meaningful parts of the self, people must be able to make them into narratives, ordered stories about themselves engaged in morally significant and remarkable (that is, not merely anonymously routine to the point of being literally unremarkable) action in the world (Bruner 1990).

Such narratives can take many forms. I do not mean to use “narrative” here in a narrow sense of a story told in words. As Wikan (1995) argues, rejecting theories that equate self with narrative, we must be careful to look beyond the not to overlook the importance of acts and silences (including perhaps the literally unremarkable) in self formation. Yet acts and silences are not in themselves meaningful unless connected in some fashion to other acts and silences. They, too, must be given an order in consciousness to be meaningful parts of the self. In this sense, the narrative I am concerned with goes beyond speech acts³⁴ and includes attempts to make sense of those things that Wikan places in direct opposition to narrative in the formation of self: the struggles people go through “in a world of urgency and necessity” (1995: 227).³⁵ To the extent that we can see how these attempts take shape, they have to have some tangible form. This order may manifest itself in practice, in talk, and so on. Even silence itself, as the case of Da Luko below will indicate, can take a sort of tangible, ordered form. In the case of Ni Saia, we have seen how she wrote poetry for her own consumption as an organizing practice, helping her to make sense out of her self (and in the interview itself, of course, she used talk about the poetry among other things). At this point, I want to examine another instance in which what parts of the

³⁴ Narratives themselves are important here as well, and I have obviously relied on them a great deal in collecting data.

³⁵ Wikan’s characterization of narrative as speech acts that incorporate “a sense of *plight* into which *characters* have fallen on account of *intentions* gone awry” (1995: 264; emphasis in original) allows her to sharply define a term that is often, as she notes, used without adequate clarity. It strikes me, however, as unnecessarily narrow. In drawing from Bruner (1990), as I do see something like “plight” (moral stakes) and “characters” (agents) as being included in any narrative, but the ordering of events involved, in my use of the term, is not necessarily manifested in a particular speech act, nor does it necessarily involve intentions gone awry, which is merely one possible form of moral stakes.

self can and cannot be shared with others plays a key role in organizing that self – and in organizing a narrative in which this role is revealed.

Da Luko: I Turn it into an Allegory on My Own Body

We began to become familiar with Da Luko in Chapter 4. He is about thirty years old, married, and has two young children. Da Luko has an elementary school education, and he sometimes works as a driver, but complains about not being able to work properly. He says this is because he doesn't "know himself" and upbraids himself for being too dependent on others.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Da Luko spent much of his adolescence living in the pasa, the marketplace. By the time he was around nine years old, he tells me, he was drinking and smoking. At times when his parents found out that he was buying cigarettes with money they had given him to use for daily needs, they would not let him leave the house for two days. They did not want him to smoke because he was not yet able to earn the money himself to buy the cigarettes. (This is a common battle described by men when discussing their youth.)

Most of the time, however, he was unsupervised. His parents were usually in the pasa trying to earn a living, and he says he was influenced by his environment. At the time, he was living in a house near the center of the city, and he says he could not help but spend time with men and boys who drank and sometimes stole. It was different, he says, than if he had been living in his native kampung where he was born and now lives once again – itself only a short walk from the city center. He

stopped going to school. When he tells me these things, Da Luko makes sure to remind me that all of this is pribadi, personal. It is not something that he wants me talking to other people about (although I am sure many people must know the general outlines of his history).

Before he was thirteen years old, Da Luko says, he was only coming home once every few months. He slept in the marketplace, joining other young men who made it their home, scrambling to earn money unloading and hauling goods for other people. The money his parents would give him when he was at home was not enough, and his interest was in earning a living. He reminds me, as he describes this, how open he is with me. He is willing to tell me about how he did the very “lowest” of jobs, with none of the prestige of owning a business or working in an office. Despite the lack of prestige in the eyes of others, he says, he thinks he is just as good as those other people. Apparently as a way of demonstrating his point, he points out that he could earn just as much money as those people if he worked hard enough in the pasa.

I ask him if he was “*sanang*” (happy) living in the pasa, and he replies: “What do you mean by ‘sanang,’ Greg? I had money. I had freedom.” To be sanang can mean to be “wealthy,” or at least to be able to fulfill one’s material needs. As far as emotional “happiness” goes, freedom (*kebebasan*) is what comes to his mind. He could do whatever he wanted. If he lived at home, he would still have to obey his parents, he says. When he would come home, his parents would ask him where he had been, and why he had not been at home. “Why should I come home when there’s no work here for me?” he says he would reply. It was better to live free and not to rely on

his parents for money when he could make his own. In distancing himself and his reliance on his natal home, Da Luko's behavior resonated with established Minangkabau ideals of the adult male (Chapter 2). By the 1980's, however, when Da Luko was a teenager in Bukittinggi, the city offered no organized way for him to pursue such a trajectory. Da Luko's decision to live in the marketplace followed the logic of these ideals, but presented other problems for him: how could he care for himself (especially at such a young age), and how could he fulfill the demand that his pursuits take place out of sight of the community?

Self-reliance is clearly important for Da Luko. We have seen how much it bothers him that he allows himself to fall back on his parents to provide for him when he is not working. When we discuss health issues, Da Luko emphasizes that he takes care of his own health. He will rarely go to a doctor, or seek help from anyone. If he has a headache – caused by too many thoughts, he says – he will drink some coffee. He sometimes drinks brews made from bitter leaves to keep himself strong and healthy. He is not so *manjo* (spoiled) that he will seek out help from others for minor problems. Instead, he reminds me with a grin, he is a *gembel*, a bum, and a wild person who knows the ins and outs (*seluk-beluk*) of things. Although he tells me that he has “never” been to see a doctor, he has previously told me about the time he went to the hospital due to a bad case of diarrhea. So, I wonder, what other events in his health history he is leaving out?

The first time I interviewed Da Luko, he had told me about his time living in the marketplace, and how it had involved constant fighting. Despite his statement to

me that he had been sanang there, he has much more to say about how hard and cruel life was in the pasa, how dangerous and unforgiving. “In search of a mouthful of rice, people will risk it – risk their lives, right? Risk their lives. They’ll just stab you. So you have to, too.... In the pasa, you have to.” During that interview, he told me that each man living in the pasa had to look out for himself, and that friends were willing to fight and possibly even kill each other in order to survive. “All for only one hundred rupiah – one hundred rupiah – people will spill blood,” he explained, referring to an insignificant amount of money. When things were going well for him, he said, this would make other men unhappy, and they would want to take from him what he had obtained.

“That’s life in the pasa,” he had said while pulling up his sleeve. “You see this, Greg?” His arm was full of scars, patches of uneven, tortured skin. In the immediate context of his description of the violence of his earlier life, I naturally assumed that these were the scars left by the battles he had been in. As we shall see, in a way this is exactly what they were. Nevertheless, a later review of the recorded interview would reveal that while he was showing me the scars, Da Luko had, in fact uttered the word “*tatu*” (tattoo) but somehow I did not catch it.³⁶ I referred to what he was showing me as scars, and he agreed that this is what they were.

³⁶ Because the Indonesian or Minang word in question is virtually identical to the English word, it is unlikely that I simply did not understand him. My best guess is that I did not catch his comment simply because it was a single word uttered while my attention was captured fully by the sight of his scars. When I asked if a knife had caused the wounds, he told me that they were caused by a needle (*pinjaik*). This momentarily struck me as odd, but since he had just told me that people would stab each other, I assumed that he was using the word for needle in a broader way than I had previously understood it (perhaps a stiletto, I thought). I

During the interview about health matters two months later, as I wonder if he is neglecting to tell me about other visits to the hospital, I point to his scars, and ask:

GS: You didn't go to the hospital for that?

Da Luko: No.

GS: When you were hurt, you didn't...didn't, uh—

Da Luko: I made these wounds.

GS: Those?

Da Luko: Yes.

GS: Intentionally?

Da Luko: Intentionally – to get rid of this. I sliced it with a safety razor and I put acid on it, I put soap on it, I put camphor on it, and it bubbled up. I took off this one, this one – and blood came out.

Uh, not that one.

GS: That one?

Da Luko: This one, this, this. This one here. Here.

GS: Why did you do it?

Da Luko: To get rid of tattoos.

Da Luko recalls this happening in 1986, when he would have barely been a teenager. Although perhaps younger than many others who went through similar procedures in Indonesia in the early and mid-1980's, Da Luko was by no means unique.

For several years during this period, *petrus* (short for “*penembak misterius*”), “mysterious gunmen,”³⁷ executed several thousand men and left them on Indonesian streets and other public locales. This coincided with a national anti-crime movement, and despite initial denials by the government, it became well known that the killers were actually members of, or working for, the Indonesian armed forces (Van der Kroef 1985; see also Pemberton 1994, Siegel 1998, and Barker 1998 for discussions of *petrus*). Often the corpses that appeared were those of men with tattoos, and soon

was too engrossed in (what I thought was) his story to interrupt him for a discussion about Minang vocabulary.

³⁷ Barker (1998) also gives “*penembakan misterius*” (“mysterious shootings”) and “*pembunuhan misterius*” (“mysterious killings”) as meanings of the term.

there were rumors that having tattoos, in and of itself, was sufficient to make a person a target (Barker 1998).

Tattooed men had come to symbolize – and the publicized images of their corpses came to reinforce – the concept of criminality that the Indonesian state was setting itself against, regardless of whether or not the murdered men had been engaged in any actual criminal activity (Siegel 1998). The Indonesian state had essentially appropriated and run wild with its own version of adat's emphasis on preserving the moral order by targeting for erasure those surfaces that seemed to signal something out of place. Men with tattoos became targets for harassment and violence from the police as well. Rather than risk jail, abuse, or death, many men had their tattoos removed any way they could. Barker (1998: 21), drawing from research in Bandung, West Java, describes the situation:

[M]any people with tattoos were sufficiently frightened that they tried to get rid of their tattoos. During a period of just two weeks in June 1983, two hospitals in Bandung recorded sixty-three people who paid to have plastic surgery to remove tattoos. Others tried to remove their tattoos themselves. Many inmates at Bandung's prison cut their skin off with razor blades or tried to burn their tattoos off using caustic soda; others outside the prison used hot irons (nowadays, one frequently sees bus conductors and the like with huge scars where their tattoos used to be).

Although most of his tattoos are now gone, replaced by the scars (he also has a few newer tattoos, acquired in the 1990's, after it was once again safe to have them), Da Luko remembers each and every one of them.

GS: So, what images did you used to have?

Da Luko: The image of a flower, and image – there was a band here. The image of a band, right? This was the image of smoke,

here. That was an image of a, uh, of a rabbit. The rabbit was a nice image, you know. Colorful, right?

GS: Did it have a meaning?

Da Luko: It had a meaning.

GS: What was the meaning?

Da Luko: The meaning is – at that time I was on the run and I made it. A problem with the police, you know? I made one then.

GS: Why?

Da Luko: The thing was – this is personal, right?

GS: Yes, yes.

Da Luko: The police aren't allowed to know about it, alright?

GS: Yes, they're not – they're not allowed to know.

Da Luko: There was, for example, a time I committed a crime in the pasa, right? I broke the window of a school building once. The police were after me. I fled, and I had a tattoo made. I made it for a, uh, memento [*kanang-kanangan*] of my time in the pasa.

Da Luko's tattoos, as it turns out, were inspired by problems such as this one.

Recall that two month earlier he had originally rolled up his sleeve to show me the scars during a discussion of the difficult, violent life he had led while living in the pasa. He had in part been showing me a physical record such violence had left on his skin. Although his scars were not the result of violence others had done to him, they were the result of violence he felt compelled to do to himself in order to avoid greater violence from others. His scars spoke to the kind of life he had led. However, now that we were actually discussing those scars, it became clear that, beyond this, he was intending to show me a record – now distorted, but still present – of specific and salient experiences of pain and fear that had marked his life before they marked his body. A rabbit represented being a fugitive (“A rabbit,” he says while using his fingers to represent legs running quickly, “right?”), swirling smoke represented a “problem with marijuana,” and so on. He thinks of them now as “mementos,” physical memories of difficult and important times in his life.

Da Luko: Ahh, it's a memento. For example when I'm old someday, right, as old as Da Bayo, I will remember that I was this – uh, that time they were after me.

GS: You'll remember the time it happened?

Da Luko: Yes – that's the meaning – that's what it is for me.

Mmm...for other people, it may be art to them, to make their bodies look good. Not for me. There's a meaning.

GS: So for all of them you had a problem, and then—

Da Luko: Yes. I made a tattoo.

I point out to Da Luko that his “mementos” have disappeared, destroyed when he removed his tattoos, implying that they can no longer perform their purpose, but he corrects me: “They didn't disappear, Greg. The scars are still there.” When he looks at each scar, he still knows what it was that has been erased from his skin. The links back to his original experiences remains unbroken, and those parts of his identity are still articulated on his body in signs that only he can read.

The experiences that inspired Da Luko's tattoos were not simply difficult or memorable, and thus worth holding on to. They were also “personal” (pribadi). He's emphatic that the experiences were ones that he did not discuss with other people, and as a result, he also did not discuss (until now, he says) the meaning behind the tattoos. Just as he had originally referred me to the surface qualities of his now-erased tattoos (the rabbit was a “nice image” and “colorful”) rather than its meaning, he told others that the tattoos were there for their aesthetic appeal.

GS: When you got the tattoos...you didn't tell other people the reasons you got them?

Da Luko: No.

GS: No.

Da Luko: That's personal, Greg. It's a secret. It's a personal secret.

GS: Uh-huh.

Da Luko: It's just to you only, Greg, just now, that I've told it.

GS: Oh, okay. Were there people who asked, seeing the images, what they meant?

Da Luko: Oh, there were. For example, “What is that?” “Just to do it,” I’d say – “that’s the reason.” People would ask.

GS: An adornment?

Da Luko: Yeah, the meaning – “It’s just an adornment,” I’d say.

GS: Uh-huh...you didn’t want to tell about it?

Da Luko: No – that’s personal, right?

These “mementos” were thus meant to keep alive memories of events that could not be openly discussed, to retell to Da Luko pieces of his life that he thought of as too personal to share with other people. There is a very complex mix here of what is expressed and what is hidden. Da Luko went out of his way to hold onto experiences that felt important to him, to keep them literally and figuratively as a part of himself. He placed them on his skin where they were publicly asserted as part of himself, yet did so in such a way as to keep their meaning obscured from public perception. They are hidden in plain view. The parts of himself that he preserves in this way are significant to him even though they were – or, precisely *because* they were – experiences that found no place in his public interactions with other people. The tattoos gave some shape and form, some order, to something that otherwise threatened to either disappear or to invade realms of social interaction in which it did not belong.

Notice, in what strikes me as a key statement, the way Da Luko describes his motivation for getting the tattoos, and their nature:

GS: Is this a common practice for people in the pasa?

Da Luko: A common practice – you can call it truly my very own common practice. It’s a distinctive feature of my very own. For example, I have a problem, right? So that other people don’t know

about it, I – I turn it into an allegory on my own body [*Supayo urang lain ndak tau, awak – awak kiasan ka badan surang*].

In this statement, we learn first of all that Da Luko considers his use of tattoos to be a personal innovation. While other men in the pasa had tattoos, Da Luko asserts that his practice of using them to record significant troubles in his life was his own invention. (As he has noted above, he believes that he is different from other people in that they may get tattoos for merely decorative purposes.) The individual nature of his practice is reinforced by his explanation of its motivation. Not only does he transform his troubling experiences into tattoos rather than talk about them with others, but he does it *so that* (*supayo*) other people will not know about them. Like Ni Saia in creating her own personal poetry, Da Palo had invented a ritual through which he could embody and manage dimensions of his identity that would be dangerous if openly expressed: he keeps these dimensions personal by giving them a personal sort of order. Da Luko indicates that he felt it necessary to create an embodied memory of experiences about which he could not speak openly. But in Da Luko's telling, the practice of turning his experiences into embodied images was not only a way of preserving part of his self, but also a method of actively keeping those parts of his self out of public view, as if without being somehow objectified, ordered, and preserved in a pribadi manner, they might escape from his control and expose themselves.

Da Luko's method may not be a commonly shared cultural practice,³⁸ yet implicit in his statement is the idea that his practice consists of a culturally recognized

³⁸ He certainly did not think it was a shared practice. Although I never heard anyone else describe anything similar, I made no effort to research tattooing in West Sumatra. It would

pattern, a particularly “Minangkabau” method of communication – especially communication of things that are problematic to express directly. This can be recognized in his use of the word “*kiasan*.” I have translated it, admittedly somewhat awkwardly, as “turn it into an allegory.” Da Luko is saying that he transformed his troubles into *kieh*. As I have described above, *kieh* are any kind of analogy, allegory, figure of speech, implicit moral or other type of indirect language used to convey something significant, and are considered a particularly Minangkabau form of communication, and especially a Minangkabau way of expressing something that might otherwise disturb the face of things. Here, Da Luko uses the term as a verb, saying that he makes his experiences into allegorical images on his body.³⁹ These allegories are meant to indirectly communicate something to Da Luko himself, and at the same time their indirectness is designed to conceal from public view the personal (*pribadi*) meaning hidden beneath the surface.

Da Luko’s recognition of his tattoos as a form of *kieh* ties them to
Minangkabau practices, to *adat*. He had in fact made such a connection the first time

not be surprising if Da Luko were not alone in his practice, yet nevertheless it is interesting that he believes himself to be unusual in considering his tattoos to be more than mere decorations. Barker (1998), examining the meanings of tattoos for urban Indonesians, especially from the 1980’s (and drawing from an undergraduate thesis by Arief Sumarwoto), finds that people did indeed invest meaning in them. They used them as “a way of defining a personal or collective self by localizing desires and by creating a memory of these desires” (25). In his examples, the tattoos may be used as distractions from unfulfilled desires, or may themselves be representations of those desires. He gives one example of tattoos as “*kenang-kenangan*,” (25) mementos, however in this case the idea is that the tattoos act as a record of a collective memory of a group of sailors who “exchanged” tattoos “so that when they got home they would not forget their times together” (25). In sum, these examples show others using tattoos as tools in the narration of self and identity, although not explicitly conceived of, as in Da Luko’s case, as ways to avoid more public forms of narration.

³⁹ Elsewhere, I have indicated that “*kiasan*” is the Indonesian equivalent of the Minang noun “*kieh*.” In this case, Da Luko is speaking Minang, in which “*kiasan*” is a verb form of “*kieh*.”

he mentioned his tattoos to me (when I thought I was looking at scars that had resulted from fights he had been in while living in the *pasa*). We can now go back and examine this moment. Recall that just before the following interview passage, Da Luko had been telling me how violent life in the *pasa* could be, with friends spilling the blood of friends for “a mouthful” of food.

Da Luko: They, you know – they were unhappy seeing me happy. They were – “What would it feel like?” if they took the job from me, is the thing.... That’s life in the *pasa*. You see this, Greg?

GS: Wh—what...it was, uh—?

Da Luko: Tattoo.

GS: Uh-huh...scars.

Da Luko: These are the scars.

GS: What was that from – a knife, or—?

Da Luko: From a needle. Being stuck with a needle.

GS: Oh.

Da Luko: So, you see.

GS: That’s rough.

Da Luko: There are a lot of them underneath [my shirt]. The thing is – I came to understand. If I don’t – if I were just in the *pasa*, Greg, maybe I wouldn’t – that my life would be nothing more than this same old thing [*itu-itu sajo*]. There wouldn’t ever be a different life for me. You know, my shirts were no good, my pants weren’t any good, my shirts were ripped. I was standing around the *pasa*, you know. People said I was crazy [*gilo*], too – people said it, you know? “Gilo.” You know “gilo,” Greg – you understand that, Greg?

GS: Yes, I do.

Da Luko: You do understand it, don’t you?

GS: I do.

Da Luko: In the *kampung*, the *adat-istiadat*⁴⁰, it’s strong.

GS: And in the *pasa*...?

Da Luko: In the *pasa* there isn’t any *adat-istiadat* at all.

⁴⁰ Recall (from Chapter 2) that “*adat-istiadat*” is a term that encompasses all kinds of *adat*, from those things (like the practice of Islam) that are considered Truths unalterable by human beings, to conventional norms of behavior that are considered proper in a particular place at a particular moment of history

In Da Luko's narrative, the erasure of his tattoos is tied to his realization that in order to become the person he wanted to become, he would have to leave the life he was leading in the *pasa*. It was this point – using his tattoos and their erasure to link his violent and chaotic adolescence with his more settled adulthood – that he was trying to make this very first time he mentioned the tattoos, during our very first interview. The removal of his tattoos may have been triggered by events arising out of a larger process of the state's management and appropriation of criminal violence, but the meaning of the erasure for Da Luko lies in a very particular narrative of the development of his own self. In the same way, his concern with the experiences memorialized in his tattoos being *pribadi* is tied both a fear of the state (“The police aren't allowed to know about it, alright?”) and to a more general sense that these are dimensions of himself that are not for public consumption (“It's a secret. It's a personal secret.”).

From the point of view of the *kampung*, of *adat*, he had simply been a crazy person. His outward appearance showed no signs of the proper order of society. He was just standing around, and poorly clothed, crazy. He says that in the *pasa* there is no *adat*. There was nothing to form him into the kind of person that was acceptable to most of society. There was no acceptable society there. It was a place where friends would spill each other's blood in pursuit of their own needs. Not only was life violent and chaotic, but it lacked a proper narrative: there would be no change or development for his self in the *pasa*.

We have seen that adat did, in some ways, follow him into the pasa. First of all, moving from his family's home to the pasa he was, in part, motivated by a desire to fulfill the proper role of an adult man: to distance himself from a dependency on his family and his lineage (the wealth of which, after all, should properly be for use only by its women), to become independent and earn a living. In addition, there were dimensions of his experience – petty crimes, involvement with drugs, and other things that he does not describe – that he tried to deal with by obscuring them from public view, in a way that might be considered an echo of the adat way of (not) displaying the self. He considered these things pribadi, and consigned them to a pribadi narrative, told only indirectly.

But while this instinct to create kieh seems to arise from the practices of Minangkabau social interaction – paralleling Ni Saia's poetry – the form his kieh takes still marked him (along with his ragged clothing and lack of proper activity while he was “standing around” the pasa) as a deviant from kampung life: tattoos, conflicting with Islamic teaching and representing Indonesian criminality, have no place in adat. While he had obscured the specifics of improper and out-of-place dimensions of his identity, their existence was still visible on his surface, literally on his skin.⁴¹ Ultimately, it was only in more fully erasing what he had already obscured that he began to organize his self in a way that could make sense of his experiences and

⁴¹ “In sum, there is indeed a sense in which tattoos assert a certain ‘self-identity.’ Both family authorities and religious authorities can find them to be signs of a lack of attention to their respective hierarchies and therefore signs of a misplaced channeling of desires. Undoubtedly the assertion of identity through tattoos is all the more powerful for being territorial: impressed on the body in a permanent form. Especially when they are visible, tattoos serve as a constant reminder to those who see them of an improper channeling of desires” (Barker 1998: 26).

struggles, and still allow him to create an acceptable public identity as well. Relying on the same logic of the more everyday forms of *kieh* used by Minangkabau people, but pushing that logic further than is apparent during the more mundane course of daily interactions, Da Luko's transformation of his tattoos into publicly unreadable scars succeed in making sense of experiences by organizing them in ways that keep them from coming into conflict with competing claims on his identity. It is only in *not* being organized in a publicly recognizable pattern that these dimensions of his experience are integrated satisfactorily in his sense of self. They are *kieh* that only he is primed to read.

What really motivated Da Luko's decisions – to leave home at such a young age and live, “crazy,” in the *pasa*; to tattoo his body with mementos of his troubles; to violently remove those tattoos with razor blades and acid? I have been less concerned here with understanding his original motivations, which are probably buried deeper in his history, and too many years in the past, for me to adequately access. There are some oddities in his story. For one thing, the *petrus* killings took place primarily in 1983 and 1984, it was apparently (if we rely on Da Luko's memory) at least a year or perhaps two years later that Da Luko finally felt threatened enough by the police to rid himself of the tattoos. The *petrus* killings began in Yogyakarta on the island of Java, and primarily took place there, in other urban and some rural parts of Java, and in Medan, the largest city in Sumatra (Van der Kroef 1985). Did Da Luko, barely a teenager and living so far from these urban centers, really face the same kinds of risks that drove other men to remove their tattoos in such a painful way?

My primary interest here has been in understanding how Da Luko today uses his story to think about and represent who he is. It seems to me that the story he wanted to tell me – although I do not think he had this clearly worked out in any way – was about his constant battle to maintain and integrate conflicting dimensions of his experience of self. As we have already seen (Chapter 4), this is something he is still struggling to accomplish. He is still struggling to narrate – to “know” – his self. We will return to Da Luko below.

The Paradox of Unity

Sudah Pandai Membaca Logat Minangkabau [Having Mastered Reading the Minangkabau Dialect] (Rahman 1996) is the final book in a series designed to teach Indonesians about the Minang language and, in the process, to teach them about Minang culture. The stories that appear in this final volume follow the experiences of Pak Munir, who had left West Sumatra two decades ago to obtain an education in another part of Indonesia, and has now decided to come visit his native village.⁴²

In one story in this final volume, Pak Munir joins a crowd gathered inside a house in the village, attracted by the ranting of a village boy who is possessed. The

⁴² I presume that the primary target audience for the series consists of young people of Minang descent who have grown up living outside of West Sumatra, and speaking Indonesian rather than Minang, and who have now “returned” to West Sumatra to live, or at least visit. Pak Munir would thus be an appropriate hero for the stories. As a Minangkabau person returning to West Sumatra, this target audience can identify with him. At the same time, he, unlike the audience, has no shortcomings in his fluency in Minangkabau language and culture, having originally grown up in West Sumatra. He is, perhaps, an idealized father figure.

possessing spirit claims to be the spirit of the boy's dead ancestor.⁴³ The family in the household, as well as many other villagers, are convinced that this is indeed the case. The spirit castigates the family for neglecting their prayers and the family graves, and tells them not to fight with each other. The family thanks the spirit for the advice and for coming to look after them. The spirit then begins demanding things that must be done before the spirit will depart from the boy's body – eggs from a black chicken must be obtained, seven kinds of flowers, and so on – and the family rushes to comply.

Pak Munir knows better. He takes command of the situation, confronting the spirit possessing the boy, and accusing it of lying. Grabbing the boy's head and quietly appealing to Allah, Pak Munir is successful in driving the spirit from the boy's body. He then offers the crowd gathered around a short lecture, explaining that the spirit could not possibly be that of the ancestor because there is no basis in Islam for the belief that the spirits of dead people can possess the living. For this reason, he knew that the boy was really possessed by an evil *jihin*, a non-human spirit, that had gone about trying to trick everyone. (Indeed, he had gotten the spirit to admit the truth of this accusation before it left the boy's body.) Such *jihin*, he notes, will use tricks, such as mimicking the habits of a particular deceased person, so that everyone will believe the *jihin* is indeed the spirit of a member of the family. The *jihin* will then exploit this position by making statements and accusations that will "pit one family member against another" ("*maadu domba kito bapamili*"; Rahman 1996: 49). It will claim that it was sent to trouble the possessed person by one of the other family

⁴³ It claims to be a *niniak* from the household, meaning that it could be a male or female ancestor, possibly one who was alive within the memories of those still living.

members, leading to discord in the household. The *jihin*, he explains, has been our enemy since the times of Adam because he is in the family of *iblis*, the devil, who did not want to bow down before Adam on Allah's command.

This story serves its readers by demonstrating a phenomenon that occurs in Minangkabau society (spirit possession), and in educating its readers to disbelieve in superstitions.⁴⁴ There is also a deeper underlying theme to it that reflects some pervasive concerns for people in West Sumatra about the boundaries between self – not only individual, but collective – and others.

A possessing spirit – whether conceived of as a *jihin* or the spirit of one's own ancestor – is an outside force that takes control of a person by entering their body, displacing the normal self or its normal mechanisms of control over the body. The spirit in this story has clearly violated the boundaries of the self of the possessed boy. He has lost control over his own body due to being “entered” by the spirit. The word used for possession here is in fact “*kamasuakan*,” indicating a condition in which someone or something has been unwillingly or inappropriately “entered” by something else.⁴⁵ This is cause for concern. As the story assumes, no one is pleased at this turn of events, even though the spirit is initially accepted to be a member of the family.

⁴⁴ In this case, the idea that the spirits of dead people can have contact with or possess living people is considered a superstition, as it conflicts with Islam. Many Minang people do believe that such spirits can interact with people, which is of course why the book makes a point of teaching this lesson. Belief in non-human spirits, *jihin*, is generally not considered a superstition. As *jihin* are frequently mentioned in the Koran, disbelief in *jihin* can actually be considered a *sombong* rejection of part of God's creation.

⁴⁵ The root here is “*masuak*,” meaning, “enter.” Similarly, the word “*rasuak*,” which also has the sense of “penetration,” can also be used for possession. “*Kasurupan*,” a Javanese cum Indonesian term for possession, is also used by Minang speakers. It is perhaps derived from a sense of the person unwillingly “withdrawing” from his or her own body, although there is no reason to think that it maintains this sense in current Minangkabau usage.

The family rushes to do as the spirit demands in order that it will leave the boy, restoring his control of his own body.

At the same time, the family also follows the spirit's instructions because it *is* a family member, and comes bearing seemingly good intentions and irrefutably good advice (they should pray, they should tend to the family graves, they should not fight with each other). Pak Munir, in fact, notes that the *jihin* tries to trick people not only by mimicking the personality of a particular family member, but also by giving advice and commands that make it appear to be morally upright.

As the story unfolds, it becomes equally clear that the boy's family (and, perhaps, the village as a whole) has had its borders violated as well. This larger conceptual self – family, community – has been infiltrated. The spirit does not, in fact, trace its origins to that family or that village, but is an outsider posing as an insider. It is therefore assumed to be an enemy (*musuah*), to be an *iblis*. Although its actual requests (for the eggs, flowers, etc.) reach only the level of harassment before the *jihin* is exorcised, the story asserts – through Pak Munir's lecture – that without Pak Munir's intervention, it would have made increasingly difficult and dangerous requests. It would have attempted to cause strife within the family, destroying it from within, all the while posing as a familiar and morally upright figure – one who admonishes the family not to fight amongst themselves even while sowing the seeds for such conflicts. It is this deceptive appearance, the gap between how it appears and what it actually intends, that makes it so dangerous.

The story neatly frames a dilemma that resonates with conceptions and experiences of moral life in West Sumatra: How can the ideal of unity with others be achieved if, in order to protect such unity from being corrupted, it is necessary to keep the “self” protected from dangerous outside influences? What, or who, lies inside the protected borders and what or who must be kept outside to keep the inside morally pure?

The “self” here is not limited to an individual person. The ideal of unity means that there should be an attempt to unite selves into a single “us,” an “*awak*” (Chapter 3). This is the moral community, but can the moral community encompass all human beings? This seems unlikely, as it requires all human beings to be moral. Yet as soon as some portion of humanity is excluded from the moral community, the value of “unity” becomes complicated by the countervailing value of exclusion and the fear of penetration. Is the moral community the Muslim community? By definition this is the case, since the Muslim community *is* “the moral community.” Yet (as I will discuss in Chapter 6), while “Islam” is always moral, the actual community is “Muslim” only if and when it embodies the eternal truths of “Islam,” and it does this imperfectly. Unity can be placed at any level of identity: the national community, the ethnic community, the village or neighborhood, the lineage, the nuclear family, or the individual self. All of these levels come into play in moral life, and each should strive for, but can never fully achieve, unity.

Whenever level of identity can be mobilized in framing the self, that frame of identity becomes its own locus for the moral value of unity, and becomes vulnerable to

violation. To protect oneself from such violations is all the more difficult when it is impossible to positively identify the intentions of others. We have seen that this difficulty in identifying intentions is endemic in the kind of social interactions that take place in West Sumatra: things are said indirectly, meanings may be transformed as they are implied, inferred, or projected.

I have already suggested in this chapter that very practices that create the vital appearances of social cohesion and unity are also used to protect autonomy. Here, I want to add that these practices also protect *against* unity even as, on another level, they create it. Paradoxically, unity cannot exist without protections in place to keep unity from existing. Unity threatens itself because taking the wrong things into the “self” destroys the integrity of that self. The self – at whatever level, not just the individual – must be kept autonomous: the ideal of unity itself fuels such a need.

If we look at Pak Munir’s story once more, this complexity is apparent, as is Pak Munir’s heroic status in overcoming the inherent paradox. After all, the hero of the story – and of the entire series of stories that run throughout the book – is Pak Munir, someone who straddles the line between being an outsider and an insider. He is a native of the village, yet someone who has been away for many years in a foreign place (the city of Yogyakarta on the Indonesian island of Java, a city known as a national center for higher education). He saves the day by bringing in outside wisdom and knowledge gained from his education and experience obtained in that foreign place. The villagers, in contrast, are adhering to the same old “superstitions” that they

have always held. It is only by being removed from the community, and then coming back into it, that Pak Munir is able to bring it needed change.

Of course, the knowledge Pak Munir brings with him is ultimately the key to a larger, more significant unity than the unity of family or village. He brings with him a more correct understanding of Islam, of Truth – and thus the only perfect and necessary “outside” influence, God (see Chapter 6). It is his knowledge of Islam that allows him to see through the jihini’s deception, and it is his appeal to Allah that drives the jihini from the boy’s body. Not only is the boy’s self restored to its proper, unpenetrated state, but the community is simultaneously rid of a nefarious outsider and brought into closer unity with the greater Islamic community. Proper order is created at multiple levels of identity.

Threats to Autonomy

The issues I am trying to address here are an extension of some of those I raised in Chapter 4. There, I showed how even the individual self can be the site of division between outside and inside or – to avoid letting the “outside/inside” metaphor control the analysis – what belongs to the moral whole and what corrupts it. A person can “not know oneself,” or “forget themselves” as they act in ways that are not a reflection of their heart of hearts. Instead, such behavior represents the influence of others, the influences of a corrupting world, or of iblis, the devil. All of this frustrates the ability of the self to realize itself as it should be. It can be difficult at times to be in full contact with one’s own intentions, let alone the intentions of others! Yet, as I

have argued all of these *are* seen parts of the self – one’s social relationships help to define identity, as a human being one lives within and becomes part of a corrupt world, *iblis* is “our bad attributes” – even as they are *also* marked as other. A person is fully responsible for his or her own behavior, no matter how that behavior came to be part of the self. It is the self’s own failure to realize its moral nature that is ultimately to blame.

Making parts of the self “other” marks what the self *should* be if realized in a purely moral form; it is not – at least not clearly and absolutely – a denial of the existence of those immoral dimensions of self. As I have argued, the goal of people’s narratives about moral action is not to rigidly define the contours of an object (“the self”), but to order their experiences into a meaningful sequence of actions, one that defines an identity. That identity can often be found in this *process* of struggle to realize the self and establish those boundaries, rather than in a final, fixed outcome. As Bruner (1990:47) argues, narrative “specializes in the forging of links between the exceptional and the ordinary,” and this is exactly where such struggles take place.

The concerns over influences on the self, and the difficulty in reading the intentions of others to protect against pernicious ones, extend beyond those that I discussed in Chapter 4. There, I discussed specifically people’s ideas about immoral behavior and what parts of the self, or things outside of the self, cause it. We can take this a bit further here by looking at other manifestations of concern over the influence of outside forces on the “self” at all levels, including collective selves. These are forces that rob the self of its autonomy, making it impossible to fully realize itself.

Concerns over the danger of such forces and the boundaries that must be tended to protect against them are repeated in many different ways.⁴⁶

Possession is certainly one way that these concerns are manifested. When I asked people in Bukittinggi about spirit possession, they generally told me that it does occur, although not as frequently as it used to or as it might in more isolated areas of West Sumatra. I never observed a possessed person, although many people I spoke with told me that they had witnessed such an incident.

More common is a less extreme loss of control over the self that is attributed to spirits. In such cases, a person is attacked by a spirit and may lose control over parts of the body. Fittingly, to be attacked by a spirit is to be “*tasapo*,” which literally means to be “greeted,” and thus brings to mind the greetings and other carefully articulated face-to-face social interactions of *baso-basi*. To be greeted by a spirit is the opposite of being greeted or addressed by a human being, for it signals an improper rather than a proper relationship.

For example, one middle-aged man living in my neighborhood suddenly became paralyzed on one side of his body, and had difficulty talking. These were said to be typical symptoms of a spirit attack. The man drove a truck for a living, spending many hours at a time on the road. It was explained to me that he had a habit of urinating anywhere he wanted to along the side of the road. Apparently, he had urinated in a place inhabited by a spirit, and thus offended the spirit, who had

⁴⁶ See Hollan and Wellenkamp (1994) for comparable Indonesian (in this case, Torajan) examples of concern over the vulnerability of self to being influenced outside forces, or to part of the self acting out of the consciousness of the rest of the self.

retaliated. No one who told me this knew where this place might be, or even knew for certain that the man was careless about where he urinated. Rather, it was assumed that he acted like all drivers were known to act, and therefore risked this kind of injury. People said that he had already been taken to a hospital and been told that there was nothing they could do for him. It is widely understood that medical doctors have no ability to treat illness that have non-physical causes. Being told that an illness cannot be treated by doctors is often equated with being told that the illness is caused by magic or by a spirit: it is assumed that if the problem is an everyday medical one, doctors would naturally be able to diagnose and treat it.

Ni Yas had a similar experience with her father, who died when she was a teenager, apparently as the result of having disturbed spirits as well. He and a crew of two men, in the process of working on a government project, used dynamite on a mountainside. The explosion shattered the stone to rubble, and the rubble immediately transformed into snakes. One of the crewmembers began to kill the snakes, stopping only when Ni Yas's father angrily made him stop. That crewmember died on the spot. The other crewmember returned home, but died shortly after. Ni Yas's father was the last to die, suffering for months at home first. His tongue would not move, and he had trouble eating and speaking. *Dukun*, healers who use traditional and often supernatural knowledge, were unable to heal him. (Doctors, who said he had suffered a stroke due to high blood pressure, could also do nothing.⁴⁷)

⁴⁷ Often, as in these cases, the symptoms of a spirit attack resemble those of a stroke. The population of West Sumatra is said to have the highest rate of stroke in Indonesia, ostensibly because of the particularly extensive use of coconut milk and the central place of meat (when

In cases of spirit attack such as these, we can see that the victim has brought on the attack by interfering with the spirit, destroying or polluting the spirit's home. Although spirit attack often involves an individual, the stories people tell about it seem to reflect a more general sense that entering into improper relationships with others – and not respecting them and their autonomy in particular – can have dangerous consequences. The individual who has violated proper boundaries ends up having their own autonomy (and perhaps life) taken from them.

In Chapter 4, I described one way that, in Indonesia, concerns over the penetration of self by outside forces extend beyond the level of the individual. As I explained, Siegel (2000) has shown how in Indonesia, “Jews” or “Zionists” are often imagined as a pernicious influence that seeps into Indonesia causing social conflict. Although the influence itself is derived from outsiders – or, rather from outsidersness, as Jews are essentially absent from Indonesia, and so according to Siegel can represent the essence of being outside of sociality – it is carried into Indonesia by Indonesians. These people may have no intention of spreading this evil influence, and may do so completely unawares. This is why such influence is so dangerous.

On a more mundane level – though similarly tied in to Indonesian national culture – people in Bukittinggi often talk about the dangers of an outside party interfering in a social relationship. Earlier in this chapter, I described how Ni Saia

people can afford it) in Minangkabau cooking. (Of course, as in many places in Indonesia, cigarette smoking is also a major factor in such matters). Bukittinggi is considered the national center for stroke treatment, so the concept of a stroke as a medical problem is certainly familiar to people there. Many West Sumatrans use the term “*strok*” in a loose way, usually to refer to episodes of stress leading to a sudden, often fatal collapse of a person's ability to function normally. However, people did not necessarily connect a *strok* to physical symptoms such as hemiplegia.

insisted that talking with anyone about her difficulty in conceiving a child was a bad idea. By discussing a problem that concerned her marriage with someone outside of that marriage, she said, she would be inviting interference from someone who might try to exploit her difficulty in order to break up the marriage. “If we tell people our family problems, problems between husband and wife, then an *orang ketiga* will get involved. Eventually we can be broken apart just because of this person, right?” An *orang ketiga*, literally a “third person,” is often blamed for troubles that occur in people’s relationships, especially their marriage relationships.

This is reflected in the city’s official divorce statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Bukittinggi & Badan Pembangunan Daerah Kota Bukittinggi 2002: 128), in which divorces are attributed to one of five categories. The categories are as follows: “other causes” (*lain-lain*), “economic factors” (*ekonomi*), “adultery” (*moral*), “polygamy” (*dimadu* – that is, a man taking an additional wife, in this case without having secured the agreement of his current wife), and finally, as it is officially translated, “The Third *Person*” (italics in original).⁴⁸ This final category, kept separate from adultery and polygamy, can only refer to divorces that result from meddling by someone from outside the marriage itself.⁴⁹ Judging from what people in Bukittinggi told me, this is usually assumed to be the parents of the wife or husband, or someone else from one of their families, although it could also be someone who is jealous of the

⁴⁸ In Indonesian, this category is actually listed as “*Pihak ke tiga*,” or “a third party.”

⁴⁹ I never asked anyone about these categories, having only examined them after returning from the field. However, in at least one recorded interview, a woman did clearly differentiate extra-marital affairs from a “third person” as reasons that marriages end in divorce. In contrast, I saw at least one newspaper reference to “*orang ketiga*” breaking up a marriage in which there was an editor’s note explaining that this referred to extramarital affairs.

wife or husband. Ultimately, the marriage falls apart not because of the husband himself or the wife herself, but because the sphere of (what should be) their exclusive relationship is violated by those with whom their lives are intertwined.⁵⁰

“The third person” is ingrained in Indonesian culture, not only West Sumatran culture. The term itself is Indonesian. *Orang ketiga* show up frequently in the press and in television shows, where they are blamed for interfering where they do not belong and eroding what had been a valuable relationship – between not only spouses, but also siblings, friends, or even political entities. *Orang ketiga* are embodiments of the double-edged sword of socializing. In Chapter 3, I explained how proper and persistent socializing, *bagaua*, is read as sign of general moral soundness. In Chapter 4, I described how *bagaua* is also seen as the most common source of moral corruption. It is only if everyone socializes properly with others who in turn behave properly that individuals unite to create the ideal community. In reality, people often do not behave properly, and uniting with them is dangerous.

Another example of this phenomenon takes place in the marketplaces of Bukittinggi and other West Sumatran towns, cities, and roads, where thieves are at work. Thieves who merely use stealth do not really socially “unite” with their victims at all of course. It is a different matter, however, when considering thieves who use

⁵⁰ The statistics themselves are not at all informative. According to the city’s Department of Religion, there were only thirty-five divorces in the city in 2002, twenty-eight in 2001, and a mere eight in 2000. This clearly does not reflect all of the divorces in the city during this time period, and is probably limited, at the least, to those divorces that were adjudicated in religious courts. It is conventional wisdom in Bukittinggi that most marriages that break up do not become official divorces in any case. In 2002, twenty-nine of the thirty-five divorces are attributed to “other causes,” with the remaining six being classified as the result of “economic factors.” For each year listed prior to this (1998-2001), all of the divorces are attributed to “other factors.”

“hypnotism” – stories of which circulate widely in Bukittinggi. The thief will come up to a person in the marketplace and begin to talk to them. If the victim is not careful, and enters into an open exchange with the thief, the thief will use secret methods to hypnotize the victim, after which the victim will do whatever the thief asks. The thief merely has to ask for the victim’s wallet or watch or such and the victim will happily hand it over. It is only several minutes later, after the thief is long gone, that the victim will realize what they have done and they did not actually want to do it. In echoes of the story of Pak Munir and the possessed boy, a person may engage in what appears to be a proper social interaction with someone who is actually using this interaction as a cover to harm them. What appears to be taking place – including the voluntary surrender of valuables – is not what is really happening at all.

The importance of the “open exchange” here should be stressed. It is only in an engagement in which the victim does not somehow protect their own borders that the thief can be successful. As I will have occasion to mention again below, such borders may be protected by talismans, by religious faith (both of which are said to provide a “fence for the self,” a *paga diri*), or simply by not allowing the other person to know too much about the self, about its *pribadi* (personal) qualities.

An interesting example came to my attention during an interview with Ni Tasi, the young woman who often evaded answering my questions and who acknowledged that she was particularly wary of talking to other people about *pribadi* things. As I did with all of my respondents, at one point after having completed most of an interview series with her, I asked her to describe for me who she was. In part because she was

initially unclear about the question (and in part, I think, because she was trying to avoid giving me an answer to the question), the conversation instead was diverted to matters such as who was, hypothetically, asking her the question and for what purpose. This was *not* because she felt herself to be a different person depending on social context, but because, she said, she would not want to reveal anything about herself to someone she did not trust. My suggestion that the question was being asked, hypothetically, by someone who did not know anything about her, thus resulted in remarking that, in this case, she'd say no more than, "I'm Indonesian," because, "There's no way I'd reveal who I am" to someone that she did not already know. (To what extent this was a comment on our relationship, I can only wonder.)

When I asked her about her reluctance to tell a stranger who she was, she pointed out that the person might have bad intentions. "For example, maybe they know how to hypnotize or something, for example. That could happen." She then described for me several times she had be the victims of thieves who, she suspected, had hypnotized her so that she did not realize that they were taking things from her as they conversed with her, until it was too late an they were gone, along with her possessions.

In at least one case, reported in newspapers and discussed by people in Bukittinggi in 2002, hypnotism was also tied to the phenomenon of "*Kristenisasi*," or "Christianization." This combination linked two kinds of outside corrupting forces, one acting at the level of society, the other at the level of the individual. The newspapers in West Sumatra often feature stories on *Kristenisasi*, referring to

activities designed to convert Minangkabau people to Christianity. As Minangkabau society is conceptualized as being founded on Islam (Chapter 2), this was essential amount to the complete destruction of Minangkabau society.

The stories often include screaming headlines and hysterical predictions from local Muslim leaders (e.g., that in twenty years time, half the population of West Sumatra would be converted to Christianity if trends continued⁵¹), or accusations from such leaders that government official are doing nothing to stop these illegal (and immoral) activities.⁵² Even so, I saw little or no evidence that such conversions are anything but extremely rare.⁵³ In any case, attention to the phenomenon was not limited to the newspapers. Many people I spoke with expressed concern that West Sumatra had been targeted for Christian conversion. On a trip to the West Sumatran capital of Padang, I once spotted a large, crudely made banner hanging over the perimeter fence of the provincial parliament building, pleading, “Save West Sumatra from Kristenisasi.”

⁵¹ “*Umat Islam Dikepung Empat Arah*” (“Muslims are Besieged from Four Directions”) *Padang Ekspres*, August 3, 2002: 9.

⁵² They would be considered illegal because it is a crime in Indonesia to actively attempt to convert a person who already professes a recognized religion.

⁵³ I was never able to investigate Kristenisasi directly, both because I never heard of a case of Kristenisasi occurring in Bukittinggi, and because I was certain that had I tried investigating the matter I would have found myself in trouble with local authorities who consider such matters sensitive and would certainly be suspicious of a westerner (assumed therefore to be a Christian) interested in discussing them. This was thus not a topic I could investigate casually. In any case, the newspaper accounts and stories told me to about Kristenisasi are generally extremely vague or involve only a few people, or both. The stories of Kristenisasi are likely tied to broader discourses on the position of Islam in the world, which generally posit that Islam is marginalized in global society and under constant threat of attack and even annihilation.

One of the common features of Kristenisasi stories is that the conversion takes place outside of the will or intentions of the person or people who convert. At the very least, they are seduced (*dibujuk, dirayu*) into converting by being given food or money. In this more extreme case, twenty-three young women (reportedly all women who were veiled according to Islamic teaching) were said to have converted while under the sway of hypnosis perpetrated by Christian university students. It is interesting to note that the use of the term “hypnosis” here appears to emphasize the way the young women – the “victims” [*korban*] – were not actually in control of their own actions. Much of the reported process of conversion, vague as it is, sounds very much like a matter of mundane social interaction: “[There were] acknowledgements by the victims that they had been hypnotized through the gaze of eyes, through food, through the approach [of .the hypnotizers] and through the lending of books by these Christian students.”⁵⁴

Leaving aside hypnosis, there are other ways that people can exert control over the self, causing one’s feelings and actions to diverge from what one really feels (in the *hati*, the heart) or really intends to do. These are supernatural methods, employing *ilmu* (or, sometimes in Minangkabau pronunciation, “*ilmu*”). *Ilmu* is knowledge, and often connotes a certain mystical quality, although the term is also used for scientific knowledge or any detailed and powerful knowledge. One example would be *ilmu mudo*, “young ilmu,” meaning love magic.

⁵⁴ “*Korban Hipnotis Wanita Berjilbab*” (“The Victims of Hypnosis are Veiled Women”), *Padang Ekspres*, November 1, 2001: 14.

The personal accounts I heard of having been under the spell of love magic followed a pattern. This pattern in turn matched the more general statements that other people made about the phenomenon (with the exception that while both men and women are said to use love magic, the only love magic stories – first-hand or otherwise – that I collected were those in which a woman was put under a spell by a man). We can take Ni Yas as an example. A month after graduating high school in another town, she returned to Bukittinggi, where she had maintained a relationship with her boyfriend. However, without even telling this boyfriend, within a month she had married the brother of her sister's husband. When asked she married this man, she replies that she has no idea whatsoever. Yet, at the time, she was so determined to marry him that she did so over the objections of her family, who thought that marrying her brother-in-law was a bad idea. They protested that if either her marriage or her sister's marriage broke up, the other marriage would be strained, as both marriages intertwined the same two families. Nevertheless, her family eventually had to agree, she says, because she was going to do as she pleased in any case.

Within forty days of the marriage, however – and after having moved to another village with her husband – she felt only repugnance (*jajok*) for him. Her family, having been forced to accept the marriage, now forced her to remain in it. When it eventually did end in divorce, she moved away – only to marry the same man again several years later! This marriage too ended in divorce. In both cases, says Ni Yas, she had been affected by love magic. Her husband admitted this to be the case, explaining that he had delivered the spell through his cigarette smoke (which is a

common method of delivery). When he tried to do this for a third time, after their second divorce, it did not work. By this time, she had acquired her own ilmu that provided a “fence” around her, protecting her from magical influence. She also refers to this as having acquired “*jago diri*,” meaning “self guard,” a phrase also used to mean something like “to mind one’s manners.” In other words, she had acquired ilmu so that her self was protected from being taken hold of and made to act improperly.

This case is typical in several features. Stories of love magic generally involve a woman (or man, though I never heard a first-person account from a man) marrying someone for “no reason.” Often, the victim actually disliked her spouse before suddenly deciding to marry him (or, at least, claims this is the case afterwards), and often there were other reasons to object to him as well – for example, he had no income, or her family objected to the match. Finally, love magic marriages (or affairs) end badly. They are, after all, only acknowledged by the victim to be the result of love magic *after* the victim has determined that her decisions have been poor and have not made any sense. It is at this point that a narrative takes shape that assigns these decisions to something outside of the self, preserving the integrity of that self that certainly could not have really wanted to do what it did. It is said that the love inspired by love magic is not authentic – it is not from the hati, the heart – and therefore it cannot last. In Ni Yas’s case, the spell wore off after forty days.

Love magic is only one kind of mystical ilmu, and not the most dangerous (cf. Wikan 1987: 357-358). Some ilmu can be used to make people ill, or even to kill them. The victim may feel unexplained pains, become strangely confused, suffer a leg

swelling painfully and turning black, or break out in a tortuously itchy rash that may become so severe it leads to sleeplessness, wasting away, and death. Although the people I spoke with in Bukittinggi generally agreed that, as with spirit attacks, such mystical attacks in general happen less often today and less often in Bukittinggi than they did in the past or do in more isolated areas, no one ever denied that mystical illnesses exist. Opinions on their frequency ranged from those who said that they are very rare to those that insisted that they happened all the time. Many people I spoke with had experienced being attacked.

These supernatural illnesses can be transmitted in a number of different ways. They may, for example, be transmitted remotely through incantations and the use of spirits, through objects infused with mystical power buried (through mystical means) beneath the victim's house, through food or drink consumed by the victim, or through substances placed where the victim will come into contact with them, such as on the ground outside their house or on their clothing hanging out to dry after being washed.

In cases where substances are used, such as in food or on clothing, the attack may be considered a poisoning as much as a matter of sorcery, but the latter term still applies. Even when they involve substances that are derived from poisonous plants or animals, they also include mystical elements, such as (in the only first hand description I was given of the creation of such a substance), the drippings from a human corpse, suspended upside down from a tree in the forest. Often the preparation

involves mystical incantations as well. The result is a supernatural illness that cannot be treated by a medical doctor.⁵⁵

This illness, however, may be preventable or treatable through mystical means. A powerful talisman (*jimaik, tangka*) can make a substance placed in food or drink harmless, for example. While doctors cannot treat mystical illnesses, dukun may be able to help.⁵⁶ A dukun is anyone with a significant amount of “traditional,” as opposed to “modern” or “scientific” ilmu pertaining to the manipulation of human bodies or of the human batin (the unseen, spiritual dimensions of persons). They may have knowledge of herbal medicines, therapeutic massage, bone setting, or other methods of healing. They may also have supernatural knowledge, and an ability to communicate with and direct spirits, all of which may be used to protect, heal or attack another person.

Such ilmu is not limited to dukun. Anyone may have some ilmu and may be able to dabble in these matters, although if a person is particularly intent on hurting someone else or has been struck by a particularly strong mystical attack from someone else, they may seek the help of a dukun. Dukun who heal (“good” dukun) may expect payment, although they never demand it or set particular terms for their services.

These are the vast majority of dukun. Dukun who attack others (“bad” dukun) demand steep payments.

⁵⁵ Dukun treat “medical” conditions as well. The choice of whether to seek treatment from a dukun or a doctor to treat an illness seems to be in large part dependent upon wealth. Those who cannot afford modern medical treatment generally turn to dukun by default. They may thus be more likely to be diagnosed with a mystical illness as well.

⁵⁶ Some people told me that certain mystical illnesses are incurable, even by dukun, but this was not a unanimous opinion.

When a person becomes ill with what they suspect is a mystical illness, or when a doctor had told them that there is no medical explanation for their symptoms, they may seek out the help of a dukun, who will confirm that they have been struck supernaturally.⁵⁷ The dukun will know the identity of the responsible party (and the victim may of course have suspicions), but (unless they are a “bad” dukun being paid a large amount of money) will never reveal that knowledge. To do so would be to invite a cycle of revenge. As a general rule, accusations of sorcery are not ever made publicly. Peletz (1993) has similarly noted that across the Strait of Malacca in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, while treating victims of sorcery, dukun do not discuss the identity of the perpetrator, and so such public accusations do not take place – something, he points out, that according to Geertz (1960) is apparently true in Java as well.

Like much of social life, then, mystical attacks and the responses to those attacks take place outside of view, where no one can be sure what is going on. The danger that one will be attacked always exists. When I asked people why such attacks took place and how a person could avoid being a victim, people were uniform in their responses: people are usually attacked because they had mistreated or offended someone, and they had almost always done so by acting in that most immoral of ways: *sombong*.⁵⁸ By socializing, treating people properly, and by not being *sombong* one

⁵⁷ My account here is based on what people told me rather than direct observations of dukun at work. As a result, this is not an assertion of what always happens, but rather of what is said to happen according to the generally shared model.

⁵⁸ The only other reason I was ever given for why a person might launch a supernatural attack was that they might simply be testing out their ilmu.

could avoid being attacked. (Having faith in God, a talisman, or other ilmu to act as a “fence” of protection helps as well, in case one offends someone anyway.)

Of course, because people will not tell you directly if you have offended them, and will take their revenge secretly, indirectly, and perhaps magically, it is difficult or even impossible to know for certain whether one is offending them. People stressed to me that it is very important to try to pick up subtle clues as to another person’s intentions and feelings toward oneself – but also that it was ultimately impossible to be sure about these. Like *sindiran*, the indirect forms of criticisms described above, mystical attacks are all the more powerful as gauges of social tension by being uncertain. One must constantly be on guard against them, and one can always imagine that they are taking place. This makes it all the more important to employ *baso-basi* oneself, to be indirect and to respect the autonomy of others. This indirect style of communication protects the self from attack, even as it also fuels the circumstances that create paranoia in others.

This is a situation that has parallels throughout the region. Wikan (1987, 1990) has written extensively about fear of sorcery in Bali, arguing that the great emphasis Balinese people place on appearing graceful emotionally composed (or even, in the case of women, to shine brightly), is in fact fueled by “social uneasiness, great concern with the individual thoughts and intentions of others, and ubiquitous fear” (1987: 338). The fear in question is fear of sorcery (“black magic” in her terms), and she argues that people go out of their way to protect themselves from it by putting on appearances that please others, avoiding offending people (such as avoiding being *sombong*), and

preventing others from having too much intimate contact with one's thoughts and body, both of which could be used as entering bridges in a mystical attack. One's personal name could be used in a similar manner, and so it too is not shared too widely (Wikan 1990: 285). Wikan also demonstrates that because Balinese people feel it is impossible to know another person's feelings and intentions, one must constantly keep up one's guard in this way. She paints a picture of apparently serene Balinese people actually filled with fear and even paranoia.⁵⁹

Wikan's analysis of the role of mystical attacks in Bali follows the general pattern for anthropological accounts of sorcery in Southeast Asia in that it emphasizes the way sorcery is intertwined with the affective lives of the people who are its victims (cf. Ellen 1993a: 19). Especially if we take a wider view of "mystical attacks" to include not only sorcery but also spirit possession, we can see that these accounts stress either the way that mystical attacks reflect and express fears about social relationships, or act as a way to symbolically protest those relationships.

Ong (1987) explains spirit possession among Malay women as a form of symbolic expression of and protest against their subordinate social positions (traditionally in relation their roles in village social life, and more recently in relation to their roles as factory workers). In this, she echoes the earlier accounts of Lewis (2003 [1971]), who argued that possession, even when seen as an affliction, can allow oppressed groups (most notably, women) a way to protest and reclaim some (though never more than some) measure of power and control over their social relationships.

⁵⁹ Her account is reminiscent of Hallowell's (1976) analysis of Ojibwa personality.

Possession is, of course, somewhat different than being afflicted by an act of sorcery (although such sorcery could involve a human sending a spirit to possess a person, so the categories do overlap).⁶⁰ As Lewis points out, it is possession, where the perpetrator is not a fellow human being but an unseen spirit, that allows oppressed people this protest and fleeting taste of power, and thus possession is more likely to take place where social relationships are strained by hierarchy and direct accusations against an oppressor are dangerous.⁶¹

Peletz (1996), looking broadly at mystical attacks among Malays in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, argues that both spirit possession (usually of women) and attacks through poisoning and other sorcery (more frequently victimizing men) reflect “diffuse ambivalence” (193) with social relationships. He argues persuasively that people’s anxieties over being attacked mystically, and over not knowing if others are using mystical ilmu for good or ill, reflect suspicions they have over other people’s intentions more generally. In what could just as easily be a description of their Minangkabau cousins in Bukittinggi, he writes of Negeri Sembilan villagers:

⁶⁰ Holmberg (1983) provides a good example of spirit possession as part of a shamanistic practice that plays a constructive role in relation to other dimensions of religious practice, and does not appear to have the qualities – or, she argues, the socially and psychological therapeutic functions – associated with mystical “attacks.” Boddy (1994) reviews the broad range of phenomena that have been analyzed as “spirit possession” and the array of analytical tools anthropologists have used to understand them.

⁶¹ This is perhaps one factor contributing to the (at least perceived) scarcity of possessions in Bukittinggi today as compared to in the past or as compared to isolated villages. Some of the more rigid hierarchies that exist in some Minangkabau villages play little role in Bukittinggi today. For example, the distinction between members of village’s founding lineages and members of lineages who have come later and do not have full rights to village land and a full voice in village politics (Pak 1986) has been greatly lessened as state politics and the cash economy have come to dominate West Sumatran life. This is even more the case in Bukittinggi than in small villages.

These suspicions are not expressed openly, however; nor are personal desires and individual intentions [...]. The formal rules of social interaction prohibit such behavior, just as they proscribe many forms of direct speech that could possibly enable people to better read what is on the minds of others. Villagers are quick to point out that one's inner spirit or soul (*batin, roh*) is invisible, concealed beneath the physical body (*badan*), and that one's real intentions, motivations, likes and dislikes are similarly shielded from view, and typically unknown. Outward behavior is no indication of what is on someone's mind or "in one's liver" (*dalam hati*), for outward behavior is not only constrained by generally restricted speech codes [...but] also intentionally disguises inner realities. (1996: 194)

As in Wikan's description of Bali, this combination of not knowing what others are really up to, and knowing that people's outlets for asserting themselves publicly are limited, leads to a sort of paranoia about people secretly using mystical powers for nefarious purposes.

It is a pattern that applies more broadly in Southeast Asia as well. Golomb, writing about urban Thailand, argues that indirect styles of communication and the avoidance of open confrontation mean that people are always worried about the unreadable intentions of others, and concerned they are being manipulated and controlled by others in hidden ways, such as by magic:

And if efforts to control people in this way are so commonplace, one can never entirely ignore the possibility of losing one's own autonomy or self-control. When one's social or emotional life seems to be spinning out of control, it is easy enough to imagine oneself as the victim of meddling others. The impersonal competitive, and often frustrating environment of Thailand's urban centers affords their inhabitants ample opportunities to perceive themselves as victims. (1993: 43)

People in Bukittinggi do not, in general, appear to be as constantly terrified of being attacked as the Balinese depicted by Wikan.⁶² For the most part, people told me that they are not especially worried about being attacked with sorcery because they try to treat people well and are conscious of the importance of not being *sombong*. They did not describe their behavior as primarily motivated by fear: they do not avoid *sombong* primarily because it is dangerous (although this is the case), but because it is immoral. Although they describe their motivations in these more positive terms, we might imagine that shame might be a more immediate motivation than fear.

If one is immoral, of course there are consequences. Although it is considered immoral to use sorcery to attack another person (both because it hurts the person and because it is putting one's faith in powers aside from God), people generally described mystical attacks as being caused by something that the *victim* had done wrong. When I asked Da Palo, for example, about the possibility of being attacked despite not having done anything improper, he indicated that this was unlikely. He had given me a commonly used example of mystical attack: A young man approaches a young woman with romantic interest. She rejects him in an open and humiliating way, violating proper norms of interaction, by contemptuously spitting on the ground in his direction. The young man, he said, might then take revenge on her through sorcery, using the spit as a magical bridge to her. What, I asked him, if a person were simply

⁶² I suspect that this is in part because Wikan has, in an effort to demonstrate that Balinese people's behavior is motivated by immediate concerns rather than by more abstract patterns of "culture," exaggerated the role of such paranoia and fear in driving the norms of Balinese social interaction. Her point that this phenomenon is important, however, and must be taken into consideration when evaluating the meanings such social interactions have for the Balinese, is well taken and convincing. It certainly resonates with the material I present here.

bad and wanted to attack an innocent person who had done nothing wrong? He told me that it would not work. If, for example, the young man obtained some spit from the woman, but that spit had not been generated in an act of contempt directed toward him, it would be useless. The emotional connection of that contempt, he said, must be there for the magic to work. This is why, he said, a person could not get a dukun to use sorcery on a celebrity that the person had never met. If the person had no connection with that celebrity, there was no pathway for the magic to use. This follows the same kind of logic as other forms of indirect communication I have discussed: the communication is only effective if the “listener” is primed to receive it. Otherwise, the magic is no more effective in attacking the person than the utterance of completely foreign word would be in “conveying” information to them. I am not sure everyone would, if asked directly, agree with Da Palo’s assessment that an innocent person can never be attacked. However, the sorcery narratives that people offered me seemed to generally rely on this assumption.

Da Palo’s example reinforces the sense that what drives concerns in Bukittinggi with treating people properly and not acting sombong is not so much a fear of mystical attack itself, as a more general sense of what is at stake in social relationships and the thoughts and emotions that drive people’s behavior. Concerns about mystical attack seem to reflect these larger concerns about social interaction, as Peletz (1993, 1996) argues for Negeri Sembilan. Peletz is perhaps not completely clear, however, about the connection between the general paranoia of mystical attack and his contention that some individuals express their concerns regarding their specific

social positions through the experience or performance of undergoing an attack. His general argument, as I read it, is that conceptions of ilmu feed off of and back into the paranoia about social relations, but also provide opportunities for individuals to organize and symbolically express their investment in the larger moral order of their society and their anxiety over the potential for that moral order to be secretly undermined. Being the victim of a mystical attack can be understood as an embodied and publicly expressed reassertion of the moral values that are also apparent in daily interactions: the value of social cohesion and integration over that of the individual. This is not a protest of the moral order so much as a culturally appropriate (indirect) way of reasserting it for people who, Peletz (1996) argues, have a fundamentally “relational” concept of persons undergirding their interpretations of social life.

Peletz’s emphasis is on the underlying cultural themes that tie together all kinds of mystical attacks.⁶³ He believes that the focus, in much of the previous Malay ethnographic literature, on spirit possession among women has resulted in a lack of attention to other kinds of mystical attacks, particularly the less dramatic forms that most often strike men. While his point is well-taken, it does seem likely that the experiences of undergoing very different kinds of mystical attacks (e.g., being possessed by a spirit vs. becoming physically ill from a mystical substance placed in

⁶³ In addition, Peletz appears reluctant to make too many psychological claims. At one point, while offering an interpretation of one woman’s problems with spirit possession, he appears to use scare quotes to distance himself from an overly psychological analysis: “[W]hatever the factors ‘motivating’ Maimunah’s episode...” (175). A reluctance to make strong claims about the psychological motivations of a particular informant is probably prudent, as long as it is not meant to imply that such motivations are ultimately irrelevant to the argument he is making about cultural patterns. It would be difficult to accept that people simply express anxiety over social relations because such anxiety is somehow “in the culture.” Peletz own ethnography is too rich to support such a one-dimensional theoretical vision.

one's food) are conducive to very different kinds of expressive purposes and may have very different kinds of significance for a person's experience of self. Thus, while they may reflect similar cultural themes (or simply be pulled into those themes, considering how general and pervasive a theme such as "concern with social ties" really is), they may nevertheless have a wide variety of meanings for the people going through them or thinking about them.

In Bukittinggi, ideas about the nature of sorcery appear to reflect more general concerns about social relationships, moral behavior, and the risks to one's own autonomy. The status of being a victim – or, as we shall see, a user of mystical powers – can be a reflection of moral status, as can *not* being a victim. As we have seen, mystical attack is also an arena in which much of the action takes place out of view: intentions are unclear, identities unspoken. Like other forms of indirect communication, understanding what is going on when mystical power is involved takes a great deal of interpretive work on the part of the individuals involved in it. All of these things make it fertile ground as a tool for self work. I now turn to a specific example.

Da Luko: He was my Enemy in the Batin Only

Da Luko is now married, with two young children. His income is unsteady – in part, as we have seen, because he sometimes does not work when he has the opportunity to do so – but he is not notably poor in comparison with all of the other people around him struggling to feed their families. His ragged clothing from his days

living in the pasa is gone, and he is now a dapper dresser. He often has a small, crooked grin on his face as he works or relaxes in the neighborhood coffee house.

Da Luko recalls a time when —for reasons that he does not specify—there was some tension between himself and one of his friends in the neighborhood. He knew when he came under mystical attack one night that this friend was trying to hurt him. As Da Luko had already explained to me, such attacks could be dangerous, even fatal. In such a case as this one, if the attacker’s mystical powers were strong, the victim would have trouble fending it off. “If it’s really strong—if that person is superior to me, of course they are stronger in their stuff, in the war they wage inside.” When I ask him what he means, Da Luko understands my question to be about his claim that this war is waged “inside.” He explains, “My batin⁶⁴ was at war with that person, right? It’s—sometimes this ilmu isn’t visible, Greg. A person—a person—it’s their pribadi that knows it,” he says, referring to that which is “personal,” or limited and specific to an individual person. This is a somewhat awkward thing to say, as the “pribadi” is not usually spoken of as a realm of existence that can know something. Da Luko quickly adds, “It’s hard to explain.” Recall that those things which are too personal, too shameful or intimate, to share with others are also described as “pribadi.” Da Luko thus explicitly connects his battle not only with the realm of the unseen (the batin), but specifically with the publicly hidden dimensions of his individual identity. It is this

⁶⁴ Recall that the batin refers to the metaphysical realm of existence in which unseen aspects of the person, such as religious faith and emotional experience, exist. Here, Da Luko uses batin to mean his own particular personhood within the batin; or, in other words, something like a “spirit.”

part of himself that “knows” his mystical power, but it is something that is not meant to be openly expressed.

The mystical battle that began with this attack took place entirely in the batin, moving in the world of the unseen, and within the experience of Da Luko. It existed in the way his body felt, in the way he evaluated his state of mind, and in the way he privately interpreted his social interactions with other people. Like the mystical ilmu used to carry out such attacks, the battle itself is highly individual and personal, something of which only the participants have direct knowledge.

The battle does indeed seem connected to Da Luko’s concerns about a social relationship, and tied to his sense that such concerns were not being addressed openly. However, considering that we know little about the relationship between Da Luko and his friend prior to their battle, we can say little about this mystical attack as an expression of anxiety or marginalization. This is all the more true in light of the fact that, as far as we can determine, nothing during this battle was actually “expressed,” except in the sense that Da Luko expressed something to himself.⁶⁵ This story of mystical attack demonstrates instead the way that the cultural concerns described by Peletz – suspicion of others and prohibitions on individual public assertions – can fuel not only symbolic reassertions of the general moral order, but also provide a less

⁶⁵ This is also not a case where, as Ellen (1993b) describes, an accusation of sorcery serves to draw public attention to an individual’s distress or difficult circumstances. While it is interesting to note that, if analyzed not as an event in itself but as a narrative recounted to me, Da Luko’s story may well serve something of this purpose. Recounting the story to an outsider, however, seems quite different than experiencing or enacting it in the context of one’s family and neighbors.

public forum for a kind of “work of self” (Parish, n.d.) in which assertions of individual will, power, and morality can be experienced.

The initial attack did not alarm Da Luko greatly. He had gained some mystical knowledge from a teacher (*guru*) of his own, and considered his own powers to be superior to those of his friend. As he explains it to me, this time identifying an analogy that a graduate student could presumably relate to, different people have mastered different grades of mystical knowledge. “First, grade, second grade, right? B.A., M.A., Ph.D. [*S1*, *S2*, *S3*]. Meaning that this person is just an M.A.—not a Ph.D.—not the same as me.” Most importantly, Da Luko possessed a talisman, incorporating a verse from the Koran, which would keep him safe. Such talismans act as a protective barrier—a “paga diri,” he calls it, using the common term that literally means a “fence for the self” – that can keep its owner from being attacked magically or from being possessed by a spirit.⁶⁶

Although the attack failed to do much damage to him, Da Luko was still aware it had taken place. There was “contact in the batin,” he says, and he knew something had happened even if it did not cause symptoms that anyone else would notice. “I was struck, but only I knew about it,” he explains. I wonder how he knew it had happened,

⁶⁶ In her ethnography of Malay shamanism, Laderman (1991) also describes a conception of an individual arena of personhood that should be kept protected from outside forces. She writes, “Although most people live secure within the ‘gates’ of their individuality, some people’s boundaries are riddled with tiny openings, more like a permeable membrane than a wall. At times, such people find their thoughts becoming confused, their actions less than voluntary. The heightened permeability of some individuals was offered to me by many Malays, both professional healers and laypeople, as the explanation of *latah*.... It can also open the way to spirit attacks” (1991: 43). Notice the similarity between the symptoms Laderman describes and those described by Da Luko, below.

and he explains that he did in fact experience some effects from the attack, even if they were not apparent to other people:

Da Luko: There were changes in my body.

GS: There were changes?

Da Luko: There were. There were changes in my thoughts, there were changes in my body.

[...]

GS: What changes in thought?

Da Luko: Thoughts – for example, I’m thinking, for example I’m going to go – for example, I’m going to go to Padang. To my surprise [tau-tau] I don’t end up going, though. My mind just wanders all over. I just end up walking around the Upper Market. You know?

GS: Uh-huh.

Da Luko: And my body doesn’t feel – it doesn’t feel good, you know – not – it doesn’t feel fit anymore. My bones just feel weak. That means that I’m not – I’m not, you know...That’s the characteristic signs of being struck.

Da Luko finds himself feeling weak and unhealthy, but his symptoms are difficult to categorize, indicating something other than a mundane illness. Perhaps more tellingly, he finds his mind working improperly. Although he decides to go to Padang, he ends up wandering around the marketplace in Bukittinggi. His behavior cannot be explained by anything internal to his own self, as it is not *he* who decided against going to Padang. He simply finds himself in this situation. Someone else, he concludes, has done something to him, and he identifies the culprit as his friend.

Despite these symptoms, Da Luko is not badly hurt by the initial attack, and he refrains from retaliating in any way. His friend continues to try to harm him, though the attacks still do not “penetrate”—that is, they do not really succeed in hurting him:

Da Luko: Three times it was done to me – it didn’t penetrate.

GS: Oh, three times – by the same person?

Da Luko: Yes. It didn’t penetrate.

GS: Did you retaliate?

Da Luko: I retaliated the last time. The third time I retaliated.

GS: The third time?

Da Luko: Yes – he couldn't – wasn't able to do anything.

GS: The first and second time you just let alone?

Da Luko: Yes.

GS: You let alone?

Da Luko: I just let it be.

GS: But once it was three times?

Da Luko: Only then did I retaliate.

GS: Right. That time did you do it alone or look for—?

Da Luko: Alone.

GS: You could do it alone?

Da Luko: It's a mystical [*mistik*] thing.

GS: You knew from your teacher?

Da Luko: Yes. Studied it from verses in the Koran.

Beyond the existence of his talisman, and the fact that he had studied under a teacher, Da Luko does not say much about his mystical powers. Whenever our conversation turns to this topic, he tends to grin a confident, knowing grin, and offer only brief and vague answers to my questions. He does offer to show me his protective talisman, but after looking inside his wallet—a rather perfunctory search, it seems to me—he puts it away, saying he must not have it in there. I get the sense that there is always more than what he is telling me, more than what he is showing me. Perhaps more importantly, I get the sense that Da Luko wants me to understand that this is the case.

He is not the only one to treat the topic of mysticism in this manner. By their nature, mystical powers are always private, always secret. By not revealing one's own defenses, they cannot be penetrated; by not letting others know what one is up to in the

batin, people can keep their powers efficacious.⁶⁷ Just as uncertainty over others' intentions and powers can make a person tread carefully, leaving others uncertain over one's *own* attributes encourages their respect. Keeping certain details somewhat mysterious helps to communicate to me the vision of himself that Da Luko's narrative is describing.

Da Luko is clear, however, that the mystical powers are tied to Islam. His talisman and his other mystical powers gain their strength from the use of Koranic verses (cf. Bowen 1993b). He even notes that protective talismans are really just a "lazy" substitute for being strong in mind and in faith.⁶⁸ Such strength automatically protects a person from any harm coming to them through the batin. He says that most people in Bukittinggi—and here he includes himself—are too lazy to pray regularly, and thus they need to rely on talismans to protect them. By linking mysticism to Islam, Da Luko defends its legitimacy, meaning both that he defends its reality as well as its moral propriety. He claims that *jihin* (spirits) are the agents that move through the batin and affect the magic. They are invisible, but people with a great deal of *ilmu* can communicate with them.⁶⁹ The existence of *jihin*—and, he says, mysticism in general—are supported in the Koran. There can therefore be no doubt that all of this is real. Further, if a person harnesses such powers through the use of Koranic verses,

⁶⁷ Peletz (1996:159), discussing the Negeri Sembilan Malays, notes that "villagers tend not to talk openly or casually about *ilmu* (to do so is, among other things, not only dangerous but also a sign that one does not really have [much of] it)."

⁶⁸ Strong in mind and faith "like Americans," he says, alluding to his belief that American neither wear talismans nor worry about magical attacks, and perhaps indicating his openness to the efficacy of non-Islamic religious practices.

⁶⁹ Knowing that I am a doctoral student—that is, a student at the level of "S3"—he smiles and cuts me down to size a bit by noting that such people have achieved the level of "S4," a higher "degree" of *ilmu* than any available in the academic world.

it is implied that the power being harnessed is a moral power, and thus a legitimate one.

When Da Luko was attacked for the third time by his friend, he was ready to respond. His goal was not revenge. Instead, he wished to more directly enter in the conversation that was taking place within the *batin* of the two opponents in order to discourage any more attacks.⁷⁰

Da Luko: I responded in the sense that I did it so that he wouldn't do things to me. So that he'd feel just a little bit of pain in his body.

GS: A little bit.

Da Luko: So he'd feel the pain, how it feels to have the squeeze put on him [*baa raso kanai piciak*], and naturally he wouldn't want to do it again.

GS: Uh-huh. A kind of, uh – disciplining.

Da Luko: As a way of letting him know.

GS: Letting him know.

Da Luko: But it was with my *batin* that I let him know.

GS: Yes.

Da Luko: It wasn't with words, you know.

GS: No.

⁷⁰ Da Luko's hints that he used *jihin* and Koranic verses, and that he responded with his *batin*, make it seem less unlikely that he sickened his opponent by poisoning him—that is, giving him a chemically, rather than just spiritually, toxic substance. Da Luko had already told me, as had many others, that this kind of magic could be carried out by putting things in people's food or drink, or by putting something in cigarette smoke that was then blown toward the target of the attack. However, Da Luko rejected my suggestion that he was talking about the use of "poison" (*racun*) in such cases. Da Luko apparently did not consider this a use of "poison" because the substances in question were there to transmit mystical illness, not biological illness. They worked only through their infusion with mystic powers, and thus the association with *jihin* and Koranic verses was necessary for them to have their effects. Nevertheless, there the possibility that Da Luko did put some biologically toxic substance in his friend's food or drink, and that his friend did become ill as a result. Even if we remain skeptical regarding the efficacy of such mystical attacks, and even in the case that Da Luko and his opponent held no intersubjectivity regarding the battle taking place—that is, even if, in fact, his friend had no clue that such a battle was being waged—we must acknowledge the possibility that the battle could have had real consequences for the friend's health and life.

Da Luko: If the person is—if it’s between a *dukun*⁷¹ and a *dukun*, they know. If he feels pain, he won’t want to fight back anymore. If he fights back, it will just get worse. Worse things will come to him. So he won’t want to fight back.

GS: So he realized, he was defeated.

Da Luko: Ah, defeated.

Da Luko adds that the friend, being sportsman-like (*sportif*), acknowledged his defeat. Like in boxing, he said, his friend “threw in the towel.” The two then continued to interact normally, just as any other neighborhood friends might.

GS: After that, you didn’t have a problem again?

Da Luko: No. We were friends again.

GS: Friends.

Da Luko: He was a good friend of mine again.

GS: Up until now?

Da Luko: Yeah, we shoot the breeze and everything. Just normal the way – the way it is in the coffee house.

GS: Oh.

Da Luko: The thing is that we weren’t, what do you call it – weren’t enemies face to face. He was my enemy in the batin only.

GS: So now there’s no, uh...no—no feeling of vengeance anymore?

Da Luko: None.

GS: None. It’s over.

Da Luko: It’s over – yeah, it just resolved like that.

GS: Uh-huh.

Da Luko: It ended just like that. Except that if I wanted to, of course I could retaliate. If I wanted I would retaliate towards him – I would retaliate towards him. It’s just, you know – the thing is I can’t do it like that. It’s forbidden. In Islam, it’s forbidden.

Having begun with some tension between himself and a friend, the battle ends with Da Luko emerging victorious. He had proven the superiority of his ilmu over that his friend. The friend’s ilmu failed to penetrate Da Luko, while Da Luko was successful in his counter-attack.

⁷¹ Da Luko is using the term “dukun” here to refer to anyone with mystical powers. He is thus including himself within the category, even though he is not a healer or otherwise recognized as someone who fulfills the social role of a dukun.

He had also proven his moral superiority over his friend. While the friend had used ilmu in an immoral attempt to hurt Da Luko, the counter-attack launched by Da Luko was both highly restrained and carried out only in the interest of self-defense. He had waited until he was attacked three times before responding, and even then he was careful not to hurt his friend more than was necessary in order to send a message. We see here that Da Luko imagines himself as conforming to moral standards – Islamic standards, he says – that prevent him from expressing the full power of his ilmu, and exacting revenge on his friend. Not only does he accept that such behavior is forbidden by Islam, but he describes himself as having internalized this moral standard, and therefore not wanting (*ingin*) to retaliate. Da Luko's position here is reminiscent of Ni Saia's when describing her triumphs. Both of them are in possession of something powerful, some sense of themselves as accomplished and even superior, yet both achieve a sense of dignity not merely in possessing it, but in holding it back from full expression.

Da Luko sees his restraint here as a method of protecting both himself and his friend. Restraining from expressing the full power of his ilmu protects his friend from any real harm. Restraining from directly confronting his friend outside the realm of the batin protects his friend from having his defeat become a public humiliation, and thus protects Da Luko from the threat of being physically attacked and killed. I ask him whether he had ever discussed the battle with his friend after he had defeated him:

Da Luko: No. It's just that I – that person was shamefaced [*malu mukonyo*] around me. He was ashamed.

GS: He appeared ashamed?

Da Luko: Yes. He was shamefaced around me. For example, he was defeated – his ilmu was defeated by me, right? He was ashamed.

GS: You never said anything?

Da Luko: No, you can't do that, that – you absolutely cannot talk about that [*ndak buliah bana dikecekan*].

GS: You can't.

Da Luko: That's asking for, what do you call it – asking for a fight. If I asked for a fight, I couldn't survive. I survived his ilmu – I couldn't survive a knife you know.

GS: Yes.

Da Luko: I couldn't survive a long blade you know. If I was stabbed in the back, then what? You absolutely cannot do that. Because he would be embarrassed, you know, so of course he wouldn't accept it. He'd take a knife and stab me, right? He'd murder me.

Handling this problem with his friend properly is literally a matter of life and death to Da Luko. Bringing the matter out into the open invites physical violence. Da Luko is less confident that he could prevail in such a battle. When the battle takes place in his batin, he feels that he is superior, and that he can withstand an assault from his opponent. Physical violence—which was a presence in his life the entire time he lived in the marketplace as a young man—is more of a threat.

We might also note, of course, that making sure the battle remains unspoken also protects Da Luko in another way. It protects him from having to alter or abandon his experience of the battle – and thus abandon his victory, his assertion of power and morality, and his conviction that the problem he had with his friend has been resolved and put in the past.

In order to achieve all of this, the battle must still exist as a lived experience for Da Luko. It is Minangkabau norms of indirect communication, along with conceptions of mystical power, that allowed Da Luko to read his symptoms (changes

in his thoughts and body) as a sort of communication to him from his friend. Now, it is such norms that allow him to gather evidence of his victory. Shame plays a particularly important role here, as indicated by Da Luko's comments above. His friend's acknowledgment of defeat is signaled by the fact that he appears "shamefaced" around Da Luko ("*urang tu nyo malu muko jo awak*").⁷² Seeing the shame in his friend's face, Da Luko confirms his victory and superiority. At the same time, according to Da Luko, shame can be so subtly signaled (unlike words admitting defeat), that it is never publicly acknowledged at all, and thus does not lead to public humiliation, the breakdown of normal social relations, and ultimately physical violence. Da Luko knows the shame is there, even if he cannot exactly see it in the usual sense of the term:

Da Luko: The thing is, his shame isn't evident. All you can see is him smiling. The thing is if someone's just laughing it up, with Minang people, it's understood, Greg. We understand what – he's embarrassed in front of me, I already know that. It's "without yet a flash, and already dark" to me. "In the sea fish are swimming, it is apparent if they are male—it is clear to us if they are male or female." That's a Minang saying.⁷³

GS: What does it mean?

Da Luko: "Without yet a flash, and already dark.... In the water – in the water, fish are swimming, it is apparent – it is clear if they are male or female." We already know. It means we already know. That's what it means. For example, he's embarrassed in front of me, I know that.

GS: You can—

Da Luko: Yes.

⁷² In each case, whether I have translated a word as "shamefaced" (*malu muko*), "ashamed" (*malu*), or "embarrassed" (*dipamaluan*), Da Luko is using a form of the word "malu."

⁷³ There are several versions of this widely known Minang saying, all of which express the idea of having intuitive knowledge of something, usually intuitive knowledge of how to read subtle social cues and thus know how they should be handled. Some of the versions involve light and dark, and some involve knowing the sex of fish from only a glance. Da Luko stumbles a bit putting the pieces together here.

GS: —read it?

Da Luko: I've read the contents – the contents of his hea⁷⁴– the contents of his heart.

We cannot know how this battle looks from the perspective of Da Luko's friend. Even the friend's identity—like the nature of the tension between Da Luko and his friend prior to their battle in the batin, and the details of Da Luko's ilmu—is something that Da Luko does not reveal. No definitive statement regarding the extent of intersubjectivity involved in this battle can be made. At the same time, we have to take into consideration that no intersubjectivity was necessary for the battle to unfold as described by Da Luko. That is, the entire battle, according to Da Luko's own retelling, consisted of Da Luko's perceptions and intuitions. He felt changes in his mind and body, he knew he had been engaged in the realm of batin by his friend, and he perceived a virtually hidden shame and submission behind his friend's smile when they would meet. In the physical world, outside of the batin, the two were never enemies, never fought, and never discussed their confrontation at all.

As should already be clear, Da Luko himself recognizes the connection between the nature of his battle with his friend and larger, self-consciously “Minangkabau” cultural themes regarding proper social interaction, particularly indirect communication. He was able to recognize when his friend had surrendered to his greater ilmu by seeing the shame in the friend's smile. It is an “embarrassed” (*malu*) smile as opposed to a “joyful” (*gembira*) smile, he says. Only this kind of indirect communication is necessary here. Indeed, as we've seen, only this kind of

⁷⁴ He starts to say “*kapalo*” (head) here, but stops mid-word and corrects himself.

direct communication is allowable here, for otherwise one risks a complete breakdown in social relations, and even violence and death. Da Luko identifies all of this as an example of the use of *kato malereng*, the “sloping words,” or indirect speech, used by Minang people in the course of *baso-basi* in order to show respect and maintain proper social relations:

GS: But nothing is ever said?

Da Luko: Never – it doesn’t have to be. With the Minang, you can’t do that. That’s *kato malereng* – that’s what it is.

GS: Mmm.

Da Luko: There’s *kato mandata* [“flat words,” or direct speech, especially when used to converse with an equal], and then that is *kato malereng*...it’s – that’s what it’s like, with me and that person. We never, uh – never got into a fight. Never.

On one level we can understand Da Luko’s battle as a response to a specific problem. We can see his battle as a way of explaining and overcome the original phenomenon that marked the battle’s beginning. It had all begun with feelings of physical weakness and a sense that he was not quite in control of his own actions. The battle in the *batin* provided Da Luko with a frame in which he could first objectify and externalize the source of his troubles (*he* was not to blame), and then restore the soundness of his body and mind, reasserting control over himself. We might also speculate that Da Luko’s original symptoms were directly related to the trouble he was having with his friend. Whether or not Da Luko’s original dysphoria was generated from this conflict, at the least his experience of the battle effectively tied them together and allowed him to address both simultaneously.

In these ways, we can see Da Luko's battle as process through which he uses culturally available systems of meaning overcome a problem by transforming it into something quite different from its original manifestation. We could thus read Da Luko's battle broadly as a "work of culture," as described by Obeyesekere (1990).⁷⁵ As Hollan (1994) has shown through an examination of a case of magical poisoning in Toraja, it is possible to read cases of mystical attack in this manner, especially if we know enough about the nature of the original problem from which the symptoms arose – meaning that we need to know both the original circumstances (something unclear in the case of Da Luko) as well as the broader life history of the person in question.

It may be useful to understand the work of culture we see here as a work of self (Parish nd). First, this is simply to acknowledge that the process involved is a creative one in which Da Luko is not simply transformed by cultural meanings, but actively transforms those meanings in the process of making them work for his own purposes. As appeared to be the case with his use of tattoos and erased tattoos, we can see that Da Luko molds cultural patterns in the image of self as much as his self is molded by cultural patterns. There is a great deal of interpretive work that Da Luko must engage in, for nothing in the cultural conceptions of mystical power, the batin, and so on that circulate in West Sumatra requires him to experience his battle in the way that he does. Culture cannot accomplish this work for him.

⁷⁵ It is unclear to what extent, in Obeyesekere's terms, Da Luko is successful at achieving a high enough degree of symbolic remove from the original problem that it is transformed fully from symptom to symbol. We do not know enough about Da Luko's original problem to say much about this.

More broadly, we have to understand Da Luko's battle beyond the boundaries of the specific problem with which it began. In part, this is because we do not know enough about that problem. We may take advantage of this lack of knowledge, however, to take a broader view, seeing that what Da Luko is describing appears to be part of a larger, ongoing process of self formation. Da Luko is not merely managing an isolated problem that can be transformed and put behind him, but managing competing and ongoing claims to his identity as a moral person, and potential failures of moral personhood that come with them.⁷⁶

I certainly think we would miss a great deal by seeing Da Luko's experience of mystical attack as merely a reassertion of the importance of social cohesion and the larger, public Minangkabau moral order – especially considering the non-public nature of Da Luko's battle. We can think back to Da Luko's statement that these mystical battles are a matter of the *pribadi* – that is, of “personal” identity and, especially, identity that must be kept from public view so that it does not violate standards of public interaction. He explained that it was the *pribadi* of a person that “knows” mystical power. For Da Luko, the fact that the visible surfaces of social interaction may hide what is “really” going on is not only a source of anxiety, it is also a source of opportunity. It provides him a way to realize himself as a moral person – a valuable person – in multiple ways. He fulfills the demands of public interaction: he avoids

⁷⁶ It is too simple to ask whether Da Luko's battle represents a successful solution to his inability, in other arenas of life (e.g., work, where as we have seen he struggles), to satisfy his desire to see himself in these ways. The problem being addressed here is too much an existential one, though its specific contours are, I hope I have shown, formed by the social and cultural context in which Da Luko lives.

conflict, integrates himself smoothly with others, and refrains from improperly expressing his individual will. At the same time, self-conscious that his society pushes so much out of public view, he is afforded a social and psychological space to realize himself as powerful, assertive, superior, and autonomous. These are all dimensions of self that may seem to violate the moral ethos that ostensibly drives the performance of self embodied in baso-basi behaviors. However, we can now see that such norms both mute *and* support these dimensions. They create a protected, pribadi space for their realization.

It is difficult to know how many Minangkabau people use the realm of mystical attack for the kind of self work in which Da Luko appears to be engaged. His was the most elaborate story of such a battle recounted to me, although other people's descriptions of being attacked included elements that appear in Da Luko's account (such as intuitively knowing the identity of the attacker and refraining from retaliation). Bowen (1993a, 1993b) reports that healers in Gayo society (like Minangkabau, also an Islamic society in Sumatra) do engage in such inner battles with rival healers over their clients' health, and come away with uncontested stories of victory. Such battles are discussed only cryptically in public banter between healers, whose rivalries never reach the level of open confrontation. Da Luko is not a healer and his battle appears somewhat more idiosyncratic, but Bowen's observations certainly suggest that Da Luko's is not an isolated innovation. It appears that Da Luko has taken broad, shared cultural conceptions regarding mystical powers, and then taken advantage of the fact that they must be engaged in a private realm, creating a

very individual narrative suited to his own needs and circumstances (cf. Luhrmann 1989).

Chapter Conclusion

Let me close this chapter by returning to the quotation with which it began, from Yus Dt. Perpatih (2002), a Minangkabau scholar of Minangkabau social life:

In fitting with their personalities, Minang people rarely say things in a straightforward manner [...]. But what is certain is that Minang people are idealists, are rich in imagination, and give priority to feelings, so that shame and mutual consideration of feelings become the standards for morality. Minang people want to create something apparent with something not apparent. It is here that the roots of their character are planted. This means that the Minang personality is closed – it's true. The further something is closed off, the more valuable it is. And the human instinct is to search for it.

Dt. Perpatih's discussion is abstract. Here, he lists a series of qualities that strike him as important to Minangkabau social life, but does not go on to explain the interconnections between them. How can something apparent be created with something not apparent? What does this have to do with imagination and with the mutual consideration of feelings? What is the connection to dimensions of human value being closed off to the world? This passage caught my attention because, although the author does not tell us (at least, not directly) how all of these things connect, he seems to have identified a set of moral concerns that I found echoed in my own ethnographic data. These are the concerns that I have woven together in this chapter, answering the kinds of questions that Dt. Perpatih's passage leaves us to ponder.

I have tried to show that a concern with what is apparent does not imply a lack of concern for what is not apparent. To the contrary, these two concerns may be mutually dependent, as surfaces are managed in ways that protect and respond to depths, and depths are created every time a surface is self-consciously created. Such management involves trying to make one's way through the challenges and contradictions of moral life: to integrate oneself with others, to distinguish oneself as individually valuable and accomplished, to protect oneself and others from pernicious influence. In many cases the apparent limitations and constrictions of the surface reveal the opposite of what they might at first seem to imply: though apparently caged in by them, people also use them to keep themselves safely on the outside.

I have also demonstrated in this chapter that while these concerns get played out in a mundane way in the everyday interactions that, reduced to a schematic essence, are identified as "baso-basi," this obscuring, revealing, and active construction of meaning are cultural patterns that individuals remake to fit particular circumstances and particular needs. It is here that these patterns transcend their role as self-conscious tools of management, merely proper "Minangkabau" ways of doing things, and become the stuff of self formation. These cultural patterns help to make up selves in Minangkabau, but it is also individual selves that create and recreate these patterns, each in its own image.

Chapter 6

ISLAM, INTEGRATION, and AUTONOMY

I have spent much of this dissertation exploring the ways in which people in Bukittinggi understand the nature and value of persons, and of themselves. I have shown that there are multiple human capacities that are understood to be valuable, and that these may be articulated in a number of different ways. As I will argue in the conclusion that follows the present chapter, the human self, as the arena in which an individual's personhood is lived, necessarily exists at the nexus between the autonomy of the individual actor and the integration of that actor into a larger arena in which it is constituted by relationships. Finding value in the self is thus always a matter of valuing its autonomy in certain ways and valuing its integration in certain ways. The cultural material I have been examining tells us something about how this valuing tends to take place in the lives of people in Bukittinggi, how autonomy and integration are imagined, managed, and expressed in those lives. Clearly, there is no neat system here, but rather an ongoing conversation, falling at the ethnographic moment into some recognizable patterns.

These two axes that meet at the nexus of the self reach out in different directions, and can be conceived as opposed moral orientations. This does not mean that they cannot coexist, but it does mean that they may come into conflict at times. We have seen in previous chapters, for example, that being integrated with others may

mean endangering the autonomous self, or that expressing the autonomous self overtly may mean failing to realize the value of social integration.

Before discussing all of this further in the conclusion, I would like to add one more extended ethnographic discussion. That discussion, making up this chapter, will be centered on Islam. Islam has been a factor in virtually all of the preceding sections in this dissertation, and perhaps most prominently in the discussions of the historical formation of Minangkabau society (Chapter 1), of Minangkabau identity (Chapter 2), and of Minangkabau conceptions of moral personhood (Chapter 4). Here, I will look at Islam in Bukittinggi with a more direct gaze. My focus will be on the way that Islam, as a key cultural arena, becomes engaged with the push and pull of these different moral orientations.

In the Minangkabau context, Islam means Truth. It defines the ultimate reality of the universe, meaning also that it defines the ultimate parameters for moral life. Islam *is* morality, and to realize oneself fully as a Muslim would therefore be to realize fully one's moral personhood. This realization, as I have just reiterated, can only be reached through a path that travels through opposing orientations, and thus through contradictions between autonomy and integration. As the ideal destination, "Islam" therefore must promise a path to each – and perhaps even reconciliation between them.

The ethnography in this chapter will show that in Bukittinggi, Islam is conceptualized as reaching out in both of these directions, and is even understood as the point at which, at least symbolically, the two paths meet. Islam *must* incorporate

multiple axes of morality, for it is by definition perfect. I will show how Islam turns the dangers of outside influence upside down, offering instead the perfect influence of God, and how unity with others is pursued in Islamic practice through methods that rely on the will of the autonomous individual. This is not to say that the reconciliation is wholly successful – it is after all, an ideal, and still a site of contradiction in human practice and experience – but to say that Islam, as an arena representing pure morality, brings into sharp relief the pursuit of moral personhood, including its contradictions.

As a first order of business in this chapter, I will define what “Islam” means, broadly speaking, for my respondents. Islam as conceived and discussed by my respondents is not a product of human social interaction, but it is an objective thing, with its own, perfect existence outside of such interaction. It is through this perfection that Islam promises fully realized social unity, and the complete integration of the individual into the moral whole (God, the community), even though such unity is never achieved in actual human relationships. I will then examine what it means for people in West Sumatra to “believe” in this perfect realm of existence, and how the demand for such belief leads to a struggle to reconcile their individual experience and consciousness with what is, by definition, True. In the final portion of the chapter, I will continue this discussion by focusing specifically on conceptions and experiences of prayer. I will argue that the tensions between moral selfhood as realized through integration and moral selfhood as realized through autonomy are crystallized in the ritual of Islamic prayer.

Defining the Nature of “Islam”

A Chapter on Islam

It must be acknowledged that creating a chapter on “Islam” in this dissertation is largely the result of one of those inevitable decisions an ethnographer must make in drawing distinct organizational lines over the map of social life even where none exist in the course of living it. As I have noted, Islam has been a factor throughout this dissertation, and so segregating this discussion into a chapter on “Islam” is artificial, as if implying that religious life were lived apart from the rest of social life. Further, in no way am I attempting in this chapter to cover everything about Islam and Islamic identities in Minangkabau society. My discussion remains focused on the issues I have described above, which form the running themes of this dissertation. With a different organizational scheme, all of this material might have been interwoven into discussions of identity, morality, and personhood found in the previous chapters.

There is perhaps another justification for granting “Islam” its own dominion in this presentation. Doing so helps to make a point about the way that Islam is conceived and discussed by people in West Sumatra. That is, they often talk as if “Islam” really is a domain apart from everything else. When I asked certain kinds of questions – for example, about what happened to a person after that person died – respondents often made an effort to point out that the matter in question was a religious one and that their answer would be “according to Islam,” or even to interrupt their answers at points midway to remind me of this fact with comments such as, “Now, we’re talking about Islam here, alright? This is Islam.”

At times such comments could be attributed to a discomfort with giving me an answer that might offend me as a non-Muslim. For example, such was no doubt the case when, to stick with the current example of death, the issue at hand was who would end up in heaven and who would remain in hell for eternity. In this case, a caveat such as, “This is according to Islam, right?” helped to preserve the relationship between me and the respondents, as they could distance themselves from the idea that *they* were judging me as deserving an eternity of torture for being a non-Muslim: it was God’s judgment (or, at the very least, it was conventional wisdom), not their own.

This was not merely a way to preserve the relationship, however. Differentiating between their own, everyday opinions and those things that were simply undeniable truths, as defined by Islam, was possible because Islam was understood to be unlike everyday life: it is the ultimate Truth upon which everything else rests. These caveats were useful in keeping me aware of this. Once the topic of discussion becomes self-consciously about “Islam,” different assumptions apply. Personal opinions are no longer in play, and there is no need to seek further justifications for why something is so: it is simply so according to Islam, meaning according to God.¹ My respondents often offered these caveats, I think, to remind me of the assumptions that should be applied, and that the discussion at hand was no longer about them as individual persons or about their own experiences, opinions and beliefs, but about something else entirely.

¹ This is not to say that such justifications are nonexistent, but simply that they are unnecessary. If God wishes something to be so, it simply is, whether or not there is a “reason” for it understandable in human terms.

When I asked Ni Gan the question about what happens to people after death, for example, she surprised me by saying simply, “They don’t exist, they’re all gone. They don’t exist anymore.” With some more questioning did she talk about the roh (spirit, ghost) of a person that may haunt the living if that person died a bad death (her examples were that they might have hung themselves or died clinging to a strong, unfulfilled desire). She discussed this for a few moments, and then announced that she was ready for a different question. Only with my further probing about what actually happens to a person’s roh after they die did she say, “Oh, you want to know what truly happens according to Islam.” She then went on to talk about judgment day (*kiamaik*), heaven and hell (*narako* and *sarugo*), and other clearly “Islamic” ideas. This is in stark contrast to her earlier comments, for the idea that the ghost of a deceased person could haunt the living is widely understood to be contrary to Islamic teachings (as discussed in Chapter 5).

How to address the relationship between what Ni Gan believes about death and what she says about what “truly happens according to Islam,” is a difficult issue. Later in this chapter I will examine the role that belief plays in the religious life of people in Bukittinggi. To pave the road to that discussion, here I want to emphasize the way that Islam is seen as somehow separate from the everyday experiences and activities of daily life, despite also, paradoxically, being seen as the most real thing of all, something that underlies everything else in that everyday life. To this extent, the way people connected Islam to their lives in their discussions with me is mirrored in

the way this dissertation connects Islam to social life in Bukittinggi: Islam permeates everything and yet also stands apart as an object in its own right.

Islam as a Unified Object

This parallel aside, I should make it clear that my own way of thinking and writing about “Islam” in Minangkabau society is quite different from the way that Minang people generally talked to me about it. I do not mean that I disagree with them over the correct understanding of Islam. Rather, I am referring to a difference in assumptions about what it means to make a statement about “Islam” in the first place. I think it is necessary to be explicit about the difference, or else I run the risk of inviting a good deal of misinterpretation by readers. Broadly speaking, without the benefit of this explanation, non-Minang readers (and perhaps non-Muslim readers more broadly) might be misled as to the way that, in my understanding, Minang people tend to think about Islam. On the other hand, Minang readers may be misled as to what I mean when I make statements about Islam in their society.

As an anthropologist, I view religion through the prism of people’s words and actions – even as consisting of those words and actions. Islam in West Sumatra is, in my understanding, made up of things people say about Islam, and things they do that they tell me are related to Islam (or, at the very least, that I can link historically to Islamic influences, broadly defined). This perspective says nothing about the ultimate truth of Islam. It also does not require that people’s words and actions that *they* link to Islam be measured against something objective in order to decide whether or not they

are in fact Islamic; if the people saying and doing them think that they are related to Islam, then by definition they certainly are. I have no position on what Islam *really* is or how any particular concept or practice – whether idiosyncratic or conventional within a society – differs from it.

I do not think this is the way most people I talked to in West Sumatra think about Islam. Most obviously, many Minang people in West Sumatra believe – and virtually everyone at least *says* – that Islam is indeed True. But the difference between the way they talk about Islam and the way I tend to think about it goes beyond the mere fact that they confess faith in Islam and I do not. Because they believe (or at the very least, adopt the rhetorical position) that Islam is True, Minang people often discussed Islam with me as if it were an objective thing, not a dynamic of social life at all. Islam may be practiced (or neglected) by human beings, but it is a product of God – it is, as the usual phrase goes, “from the sky.”² For the people I talked to in West Sumatra, a statement about “Islam” was usually a statement about something that exists, objectively, apart from what people – even Muslim people – actually say or do. Da Tor, a man who prays regularly and otherwise makes a daily effort to be pious, acknowledged to me that it was always possible that, despite one’s best efforts to live according to (what they understood to be) Islam, it was always possible that one had the whole thing completely wrong, and would therefore not end

² This phrase – “from the sky” – is usually used to differentiate Islam, Christianity, and Judaism from other religious systems. The former are said to be creations of God (later distorted by humans, in the case of Christianity and Judaism), the later to be creations of human beings.

up in heaven. It was not Islam that he suggested might be wrong, but rather his, or anyone's, understanding of what Islam actually is.

This objective status of Islam – its existence outside actual human social life – was also evident in the way people circumscribed their answers about “Islam” when I asked direct questions about it. For example, if I asked about any divisions or branches within “Islam,” or about how Islam in West Sumatra could be specifically characterized, people (including some considered part of the local community of *ulama*, or Islamic scholars) as a rule denied that any such divisions or branches existed, or that there was any way to distinguish Islam in West Sumatra from Islam elsewhere. These kinds of questions never led anywhere. Islam was exactly the same everywhere, I was told.³

Although there is, as I will discuss below, an ideological motivation for responding to my questions in this manner, it is also clear that people are aware that Muslim communities are not all alike, and that different approaches to Islam exist. Javanese people, for instance, were often criticized by people in Bukittinggi for practicing their religion in way that was overly influenced by pre- or non-Islamic cultural elements, such as Javanese mysticism. Minangkabau society was said to be more purely and properly Islamic in its traditions. This was not, however, conceived as a difference within “Islam” itself. Instead, Islam remained constant, and to the

³ Occasionally, I asked people (mostly in informal conversations) about Sunni vs. Shi'a Islam. Islam throughout Indonesia is Sunni Islam, but most people I talked to either were not familiar with the distinction or had only a vague idea about what it meant. As one woman responded, whichever one was “normal” Islam was the one that applied to Minangkabau people. It is possible that since I left West Sumatra near the end of 2003, news regarding clashes between Sunni and Shiite groups in Iraq over the past few years has raised people's awareness of this distinction.

extent that individuals engage with it, they therefore engage in something that unites them completely and without defect.

I had the following exchange with an *ustad* (Islamic teacher) from a large mosque in Bukittinggi. He had just finished explaining that Islam was not divided into any groupings or *aliran* (literally “currents,” or “streams,” implying ideological groups or sects). I was trying to find out, in a less formal sense, how he would characterize religious life in Minangkabau society. I thought that he particularly might have something to say about this because he was not Minangkabau, but rather Batak.⁴

GS: Islam in, for example, Minang society – is there something distinct about it? For example, if you compare it to Islam in Java or somewhere else in Indonesia?

Da Ustad: No. Islam in Minang society, Islam generally, even Islam throughout the world is the same. It’s the same. There’s no difference. It’s the same everywhere in the world. The recitation for prayer – it’s the same recitation of Alfatihah,⁵ the verse is recited, the book is recited – it’s the same like that. There’s no – actually there is no difference. Throughout the world. [laughs] There’s no – Islam in Java, Islam in West Sumatra—in my opinion there’s no difference. Islam in Batak society uh.... Islam in the Mandailing area there – like me – there’s no difference. Now certainly there are differences in understanding, certainly.

I asked him what characterized the understanding (“*pemahaman*”) of Islam in local society, and he explained that Indonesians generally followed the school of thought founded by Iman Syafii, which represents one of the four recognized schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam. Each of these schools is usually considered to be a legitimate interpretation of Islam – a sincere effort by learned scholars to get it right –

⁴ A number of the native ethnic groups in North Sumatra are lumped together under the term “Batak.” Most Batak people are now Christians, but a significant number – especially those who are, like Da Ustad, from the Mandailing area – are Muslim.

⁵ The opening chapter of the Koran, recited as part of the daily prayer ritual.

by those who follow the other schools. It makes some sense that Da Ustad stressed, “It’s not – this is not an aliran – it’s not an aliran.” Asked to explain this school of thought, he said, “Imam Syafii is, uh...from what I’ve observed – neutral. Very neutral. Also, he’s very judicious.” He went on to explain that different schools of thoughts might differ on such matters as how high up the arms one must wash during the ritual ablutions preceding prayers. He described such differences as ultimately insignificant.

Here we can see that even when some division, albeit insignificant, is acknowledged, it is framed as something that exists outside of Islam. It is people and their understandings that differ, while Islam itself remains constant. I recall one woman, listening in as I questioned a religious student in his mid-twenties, startle me by reacting with shocked incredulity when I merely asked whether “Islam” in West Sumatra could be differentiated in its *“rasa”* (flavor, feeling, sense) from Islam in another part of Sumatra, where he had previously lived. Although otherwise a silent observer during the interview (which was taking place in her home, adjacent to a mosque with which the student was associated), she interjected, “Oh no!” in reaction to my question, as if to even suggest the possibility of such a thing was repellent, if not dangerous. Certainly, her reaction suggested that my question was not one that should even apply to Islam.

The student, who I’ll call Da Murik, agreed, more placidly, that there were no differences. I asked him if, perhaps, Islam in local society could be distinguished at all from Islam anywhere else in the world. He initially declined to answer, pointing

out that he had no direct experience outside of Indonesia from which to draw, but then he continued:

Da Murik: But from stories I hear, maybe in Yemen, Islam there – they are all veiled. The women are veiled. And when they go to school – for example at eight o’clock, only after the women all go first, only then, an hour later, do the men go. That’s in Yemen.
GS: In Yemen.

Da Murik: In Yemen. But it could be that’s because of their adat – because that’s just the way they do things.

The stories Da Murik has heard paint a picture of Yemen that is quite different from West Sumatra, where some, but not all, women may cover their heads, and where men and women routinely mix casually in public. From both the context of the conversation and his own words, it is clear that he connects these differences to Islam: the veiling and the separation of men and women are done as a matter of “Islamic” practice. At the same time, he is ambivalent about this, and decides that it might be better to account for these practices by seeing them as the “adat” of the place in question, as a matter of local tradition.⁶ (We have seen in Chapter 2 that Islam and adat are terms that stand in an uncomfortable relationship to each other in West Sumatra, with adat having been made subservient to Islam in an attempt to resolve the tension.) As he (re)frames it, this is something people do in Yemen rather than what Islam itself is like in Yemen. Here, again, we see difference as something that is pushed outside of “Islam” itself, and onto people in Muslim societies. Further, such differences are played down so that there is little sense that there is anything at stake.

⁶ He uses the word “kebiasaan,” which refers to habits or informal customs.

Why Muslims Cannot be Terrorists

It is probably worth mentioning an additional example of this phenomenon that speaks to a larger issue. Because I was an American in an Islamic society in the months following September 11, 2001, and through the first year and a half of the United States' "war on terrorism," the topic of terrorism and Islam came up with some frequency in my conversations with people, and I read about it virtually every day in the local newspapers. Widely expressed in these conversations and in the newspapers alike was the belief that westerners equated Islam with terrorism, and that leaders in the United States frequently and openly made such assertions as if they were simply assumed to be true.

There seemed to me to be a disconnect between the way that Americans might use the term "Islamic terrorism" and the way such a phrase was heard in West Sumatra (and in Indonesia more generally, and likely elsewhere in the world). For many non-Muslim Americans, there is no necessary contradiction between the idea that Islam is essentially a peaceful religion and the idea that an individual is an "Islamic terrorist." This depends on the assumption that a real or correct interpretation of Islam exists, and is practiced by most Muslims, but that Islamic ideas may also be incorporated into an ideological framework that motivates acts of violence. This framework is also "Islamic" because the people who employ it assert that it is Islamic, and it draws from traditions and ideas that are unquestionably connected to Islam.

However, the people I spoke with, and the people who wrote in or were quoted by the local newspapers in West Sumatra, did not see it this way. For them, it was

assumed impossible for something to be “Islamic” and simultaneously un-Islamic, as “terrorist” – with its implications of criminality and immorality – is assumed to be. If “Islam” was connected to terrorism, it was the religion itself, not some social phenomenon that was being characterized – and badly mischaracterized at that. As Da Eri explained it to me, refuting what he saw as an American understanding, “It’s not Islam that’s the problem; it’s the person who does wrong.”

Unity

Thinking about things closer to home, in the social world of Bukittinggi itself, people also denied that there were any significant disagreements or debates about Islam within Minangkabau society. No one ever claimed to be troubled or unconvinced by something a religious teacher or leader had said during a sermon or religious lesson. The only partial exception to this seemed to be that people consistently complained that sermons too often branched out into the political realm. Many people were harshly critical of this, and claimed that it tended to turn people off to the speaker. Religion, people told me, should not be tainted by politics. This seems indeed like the exception that proves the rule: it was not something said about Islam that troubled people, but rather that *ulama* were speaking about something *outside* of Islam. As Da Murik pointed out, politics was something that occurred in Muslim societies, but was caused by people, not by Islam. True religion, he said (citing Mohammed as his source) had no political elements at all.

I suspected for a while that people denied the existence of local religious debates or divisions merely because the topic was too sensitive, or because they did not wish to appear arrogant or blasphemous by questioning religious authorities. There is something to this, and after all West Sumatra has certainly gone through periods in which clashes over religion have been prominent (Dobbin 1983, Abdullah 1971; see Chapter 1). However, I think the denial says at least as much about people's conception of Islam as it does about their reluctance to appear impious. People who talked to me openly and at length about social problems and about their own dissatisfactions with religious life in Bukittinggi still had little to say about wider social debates or divisions. And no matter how idiosyncratic their own religious ideas, or how little their behavior adhered to Islamic expectations, no Minang person I spoke with ever challenged the essential Truth of Islam.

It is not surprising that people push division, contradiction, and debate outside of "Islam." At the time of its foundation, Islam was a revolution of social unity. It rejected the traditions of Arab tribalism and the religious quarrels that divided various Christian and Jewish groups from each other, and instead called for all people to be united by the pure faith of the single God. This emphasis on unity has been an important part of Islamic morality ever since, even as Islamic societies have of course been rent by social, political, and theological clashes. Ideally, Islam should unite all human beings into a single *umat*⁷, or society of believers.

⁷ This is the Indonesian, and also the Minangkabau, form of the word, derived from Arabic.

The original Muslim community that arose around the prophet Mohammed is taken to be the ideal model of the *umat*, and it is a basic premise of Islamic practice that there should be an attempt to emulate this model, resulting in a unified society dedicated to the worship of God. This attempt is to be guided by the Koran, and the *sunna*, the practices of Mohammed himself as reported in *hadith*, stories of his words and deeds thought to be passed down in an unbroken link from those who witnessed them directly. This notion that Islam only once, in the past, manifested itself perfectly in the human world certainly contributes to the sense that there is always a gap between Islam and Muslims. Elaborate methods have been used in Islamic societies to try to ensure the knowledge of Islam, manifested directly to human beings only during the life of Mohammed, is faithfully passed down so that Islam can be properly recreated in each new generation (Esposito 1991, Messick 1993, Lindholm 1996).

Despite this, from a practical perspective, Islam's ability to spread quickly into very different societies and to unify Muslims around the world (to the extent that it does) derives from the relative simplicity of its heart. This heart consists of the five "pillars" that are to be adhered to by all practicing Muslims. The five pillars are: the confession of faith in Allah as the sole deity of the universe and in Mohammed's role as Allah's messenger (*syahadat kalimah*), the five daily prayers (*shalat*), the fast during the month of Ramadan (*puasa*), the paying of alms (*zakat*), and the pilgrimage to Mecca for those who are physically and financially able (*hajj*). On the broadest level, these pillars can often be adopted without causing a breakdown in pre-established social institutions.

It is beyond this heart that there is much less agreement within the Islamic world (in philosophy and in practice) over what it means to emulate the original umat. To what extent does it mean that all details of this community's 7th century existence in the Arabian Peninsula should be recreated faithfully in every society, or to what extent does it mean only that the larger outlines, or even the spirit, of that community's moral and religious practices should be pursued? Islam, after all, is not thought of as an "Arabic" religion, but as humankind's one True faith, which manifested itself most perfectly in a final prophet, Mohammed, who happened to be an Arab. This leaves room for the idea that some aspects of life in Mohammed's time were a result of the coincidence of his 7th century Arabian context. Many interpretations of Islam, and certainly those that have long predominated in West Sumatra and in Indonesia more generally leave significant room for regional and ethnic traditions to flourish (Geertz 1968 and Woodward 1989 offer Javanese examples; Saleh 2001 explores Indonesian Islamic theology more broadly). The idea that societies change over time (in Indonesia this is generally framed in terms of progress) due to advances in knowledge and technology is acknowledged and celebrated in many of these interpretations – as long as these things do not conflict with fundamental Islamic principles . It is not always clear, however, where to draw the line between what is fundamental to Islam and what is incidental.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the general relationship in West Sumatra between Minangkabau adat (traditional culture) and Islam. As I explained, while there is a history of tension in Minangkabau society between some dimensions of adat (e.g.,

matriliny) and Islam, today the relationship between the two has been rhetorically positioned so that no such conflict exists. The most fundamental and immutable dimensions of adat are understood to be direct manifestations of Islam, as Islam itself defines the ultimate Truth of the universe. The saying, “*Adat Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah,*” – meaning, “Adat is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Koran,” and often shortened to simply “ABS SBK” – is pervasive in all discussions of this relationship. It signals a general sense of moral soundness upon which true Minangkabau social life is founded, and (when invoked) precludes the need to debate the particulars of the relationship between Islam in general and Minangkabau social life in particular.

In Bukittinggi, I was struck by the degree to which religious discourse was focused on the fundamental practices of Islam, particularly prayer (which I will examine in greater detail below). When I asked people directly about Islam and being Muslim, the responses I most often received focused heavily on what I considered to be the surface of religious life.⁸ The most important thing in Islam was to be a good Muslim, people said, and this would lead to going to heaven instead of going to hell. Similarly, religious leaders giving sermons or lectures in Bukittinggi tell people repeatedly to pray and to read the Koran, and perhaps not to sin.⁹ People told me that

⁸ I base this not on a single question I asked during interviews, but on my experience asking people various questions that required them to talk about the most important (in their understanding) aspects of Islamic life. This included directed questions asking people to characterize the most important principles of Islam or the essence of Islam, but also indirect questions, such as those about the most important things for children to learn in their religious education.

⁹ Once I had listened to more of these sermons and lectures, I understood why everyone seemed to tell me that they never took issue with anything said in them—aside from the

the important parts of religious education were learning to read the Koran (that is, to learn to recite the Arabic properly, though not to understand it) and learning to pray.

These kinds of statements came both from those with the most rudimentary religious educations or weakest commitments to practicing Islam, as well as from those considered relatively pious and those considered part of the *ulama*, or community of Islamic scholars. Most importantly, they were not necessarily jumping off points for discussions about what I would consider deeper aspects of religion, those things that might transform a person's everyday life beyond a compartmentalized sphere of "religious practice." Where I saw only means (praying, reading the Koran), people often talked in the sense of ends. In other contexts people enthusiastically told me of the wonderful results of following Islamic practice: better health, immunity from mystical attack, even a complete lack of significant pain in one's life. Often, people enthusiastically cited scientific research they had heard or read about that had shown that some Islamic practice resulted in a previously unrecognized benefit, usually to one's health. However, for the most part, people indicated to me that the *reason* for following Islamic practice was that doing so was the way to be a moral person, and eventually to receive a reward in the afterlife.¹⁰

This makes sense in the traditions of Islam, defined literally (in Arabic) as "submission" to God's will. The role of a human being is not to justify God's will,

above-mentioned political "digressions." They focused on these very basic, practically unchallengeable topics. A research assistant recorded eighteen religious lectures and sermons in the Bukittinggi area while I was conducting my fieldwork there. I have yet to examine these recordings and their transcripts in depth.

¹⁰ As I will discuss below, Da Dan was a partial exception.

but to submit to it. At the same time, by focusing on these basics of Islamic practice, and by conceiving of them as ends in themselves, discourse about Islam in Minangkabau society preserves Islam as a perfect object, set apart from conflict or difference in the actual living of life, and preserved as the domain of perfect egalitarianism and unity. While divisions between people, and the dangers of outsiders corrupting the moral state of the self (individual and collective) remain problems in the living of life (Chapter 4, Chapter 5), in “Islam” there is always a refuge – incorruptible, unable to be penetrated by anything – in which everyone can be perfectly united. The ideals of unity so important to Minangkabau moral life (Chapter 3) find their purest expression in Islamic identity.

Belief

Da Lis: Faith is the belief that – belief. The essential principle of faith is believing in Allah. Believing in the final day, believing in angels and then in the divine decree and fate, right? In the supernatural.

All Minangkabau people in Bukittinggi, as far as I could determine, identify as Muslims, though their knowledge of Islamic teachings and their participation in its practices varies widely. To what extent, and in what ways, do people in Bukittinggi – and my respondents in particular – “believe” in Islam?

A frequently repeated claim about Islam by those who wish to explain it to non-Muslim westerners is that in contrast to Christianity (and especially Protestantism), Islam is focused on practice rather than belief. In his introductory text

on Islam, Esposito's opening sentence for a chapter on Islamic practice and belief, for example, reads: "For Christianity, the appropriate question is, 'What do Christians believe?' In contrast, for Islam (as for Judaism), the correct question is 'What do Muslims *do*'" (1991: 69, emphasis in original). But as Esposito also warns, in Islamic societies "the emphasis on practice has not precluded the importance of faith or belief. Faith (*iman*) and right action or practice are intertwined" (69). It is true that Islamic scholars have generally discouraged Muslims from pursuing speculative theology regarding the nature of Allah, for example, and have instead encouraged the study of Islamic law. Muslims are expected to follow this law and it is not considered particularly important that one understand why any particular law is important – in fact, it is folly for humans to attempt to understand God. In this sense, what one believes is unimportant. This should not be taken, however, to mean that subjective states like belief or faith are not important in Islam. The issue of *what* to believe may be relatively straightforward, but the same is not necessarily true for the problem of *how* to believe.

The concept of belief is certainly not incidental to religious life in West Sumatra. The first of the five pillars of Islam is the confession of faith. To merely recite it without meaning it would be considered hypocrisy of the highest order, and such a dishonest rejection of Islam is thought to be even worse than an honest and open one. Prayer, as I will discuss below, also requires achieving a mental state in which one is completely absorbed in God. We will see in the material presented below that believing and doing are thought to be intertwined. But as the quotation

from Da Lis above makes clear, the submission to God referenced in having “faith” in Islam does not merely refer to obediently following its practices – performing prayers, fasting, giving to the poor, and so on – but also to a subjective state of belief. Belief becomes important as an element of the proper relationship a person must have with God, and many people told me that belief was the most important element of being Muslim. Without belief, people told me repeatedly, people would not be able to act properly – and if somehow they did manage to act properly despite not really believing, this would be hypocrisy, perhaps the worst sin of all.

Being Muslim in West Sumatra means truly believing in God, in Allah: the standard assumption in West Sumatra is that Islam is synonymous with monotheism, and that all other religions are forms of idolatry. All other religions are assumed to involve the worshiping of multiple gods and, generally, of icons.¹¹ These religions – or any form of worship that does not adhere to God’s instructions on how to worship Him – amount to disbelief in God. Islam is thus seen as the only religion in which people create a direct relationship between themselves and God.

Despite seeing Islam as fundamentally different from all other religions, on another level many people express the idea that all religions are essentially the same, and are merely different ways of carrying out the same thing: of worshipping the divine, of pursuing good behavior, and of trying to get to heaven. These ideas likely draw from national discourses. Belief in one God has long been one of the five official principles of the Indonesian nation-state, the *pancasila*. Indonesia has

¹¹ Christianity, for example, is understood to include two or three gods, and the crucifix is often interpreted as an object of worship.

generally recognized five official religions as representing ways its citizens may adhere to this principle: Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. All of these, in the official understanding of the Indonesian government, are supposed to recognize the ultimately singular nature of a supreme being.¹² Some people (as they talked to the non-Muslim anthropologist) appeared to take great pleasure in the idea that the same basic commitment to being good lay at the heart of all religious practice. While some people encouraged me to become Muslim, such encouragement was infrequent and mild, and almost inevitably accompanied by an apology inspired by the widespread understanding that religion should not be thrust onto others. It is generally thought, after all, to be a matter of belief, something that cannot be created through coercion. Some people, reacting to the suggestion from others that I become Muslim, even rejected this, arguing that it was important for everyone to practice their own religions. These ideas are also connected to national discourses that criticize proselytizing, and aim to ease tensions between different religious groups living side by side. This position does not necessarily imply that other religious practices are the equivalent of Islamic religious practice, but it does suggest that the adherents of every religion believe that it is their own practices that properly worship God.

¹² The rationale here is that all of these religions “ultimately” have a concept of a unified divine essence, such as Brahman in Hinduism. This principle was adopted as a compromise between Muslim leaders who would have preferred Indonesia to adopt Islam as its official religion and those leaders (Muslim and non-Muslim alike) who resisted this idea (Ricklefs 2001).

One perspective of people with whom I spoke in Bukittinggi is that Islam is the path to morality that they “believe” in because they are Muslim, and being Muslim means believing in the truth of Islam. This attitude will be apparent in the material below (and I think it is also sometimes reflected in those moments, described above, where people made an effort to remind me that they were speaking from the point of view of “Islam”). At other times, it seemed to me that people approached their Muslim identity from the opposite angle: they are Muslim because Islam is True. This attitude will also be apparent below.

I suspect that for many people, both of these ways of “believing” in Islam play a role. In either case, however, it is not usually in terms of being a “good” person, of treating other people well, that people see Islam to be fundamentally different from other religions. Instead, the moral difference comes in a person’s relationship to God: in believing in God and worshiping God in the correct manner.

As I will explain below, many people do see a link between worshipping God correctly and being “good” in other dimensions of living: bringing oneself close to God is often understood as a way of shaping oneself into a person who is also good in every other way – something that does not work if one fundamentally misunderstands or does not believe in God. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that many non-Muslims are good people, worthy of respect, and that many Muslims (though ones who are not fully adhering to their own religion) are not good. But this is to judge people according to human standards. This is not, however, necessarily the way God judges people.

In the afterlife (and, perhaps in this life as well), God will punish people for the bad things they do to other people, but also for their failures to treat God properly: to pray, to fast, and to perform other acts of Islamic worship, and to do so in a state of belief. Further, those people who fundamentally accept Allah as the only God – that is, believers – are Muslim, and will eventually reach heaven. This is so even if they fail to pray, fast, and so on, as long as they accept that this is indeed what they *should* be doing. This is perhaps so (although opinions vary) even if they commit very grave sins such as murder, although they will certainly be punished in hell for all of their failings before ever tasting heaven.¹³ Non-Muslims – even those who do pray and so on, but who, in their hearts, have no belief in God – are all tortured in hell forever. God’s justice is a very different thing than justice in the human world.

Here, after discussing matters of heaven and hell with Da Jik, I ask him if he feels that the punishments of the afterlife are just.

Da Jik: Of course they’re just.

GS: Yes.

Da Jik: Yes they are.

GS: In what way are they just? In what way can they be said to be just?

Da Jik: The thing is that in the Koran – in Islam, why is it called just? Well, because one of the characteristics of Allah is that He is just. [laughs]. That’s it.

God’s justice does not require any explanation or rationale, and in fact cannot be evaluated according to human standards: God’s justice *defines* the very nature of justice. Da Jik, however, later explains that from a “neutral” or a “global” perspective

¹³ There are also widely thought to be different levels of heaven, with only the truly pious reaching the highest levels. As Da Jik put it, it is like a hotel, and while he expects to get there eventually, perhaps he will only get an “economy-class” room.

of human beings, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, it cannot be considered just. It is only after accepting (as he does) that Islam is the Truth that such ultimate judgments about morality can be understood as just.

Ni Tasi sees the same problem with the idea that “good” non-Muslims go to hell forever, while “evil” Muslims do not:

Ni Tasi: It’s strange, but what can you do? As a Muslim I have to believe it. And, well, I’m fortunate like that. [laughs] Because I’m Muslim – like that. It really is too bad for people of other religions. They’re good, they never [do bad things] – maybe a Muslim person is even more evil than they are. But, well, I have to believe it.

Ni Yas also finds it difficult to reconcile her sense of human justice (and compassion and love) with the message of ultimate justice (and compassion and love) contained in Islamic teachings about the afterlife.

GS: What about those who do not acknowledge God? Is this just? I mean if the person is good, but they do not acknowledge God, compared with a person that acknowledges God but [laughs] sins a lot.

Ni Yas: That’s considered by God, later. Certainly there are considerations for God, God the Loving, God the Compassionate. Surely God will consider it later. Their behavior is truly good – they don’t acknowledge God, but they’re good. Maybe they can (go to heaven), too. If it’s just my opinion. My opinion – the opinion of a stupid person.

GS: [laughs]

Ni Yas: Maybe they can (go to heaven), too. [laughs] They can be received by God, too, right?

Ni Yas was not the only one to suggest that God may ultimately be more interested in morality between humans than in belief or forms of worship, and that God’s fundamental qualities as forgiving, loving, compassionate, and so on suggested this must be the case. Ni Yas is less rigorous in her religious practice than either Ni Tasi or Da Jik, and has less formal religious education. In fact – like Ni Gan, as I

mentioned above – when I first asked Ni Yas what happens to us after death, she said only (as if it were obvious) that we are gone and do not exist anymore. Only after I asked if an afterlife does not then exist did she describe for me the standard Islamic account, adding the distancing phrases “according to Islam” and “according to Islamic lessons I’ve heard” several times as she did. But when her own opinions seemed to contradict those lessons, she distanced herself from her own opinions as well, telling me that they were the opinions of a “stupid person.” Based on many hours of conversation with Ni Yas, I certainly do not think that she really believes herself to be stupid (and thus the laughter we shared over her comment). Nor did I understand her to be taking an ironic jab at the ideas that contradicted her own sense of justice. Instead, I understood her to be expressing bewilderment ever being able to know how things “really” worked, while also signaling that if her own ideas really did contradict that reality, she was not going to continue to assert them as true. (Doing so, of course, would be sombong.)

Ultimately, the issue of what happens to non-Muslims in the afterlife is not particularly important for most Minangkabau people in Bukittinggi. Although I heard one or two stories about being concerned – as a child learning about these things for the first time – with the fate of a non-Muslim (non-Minangkabau) school friend, for the most part people in Bukittinggi are surrounded by other Muslims. This is a rather abstract issue and has little or no bearing on everyday life. Being asked questions about it by a non-Muslim anthropologist (and friend, as this was also a role that I took on to varying degrees with all of my respondents) was probably the main thing that

heightened the stakes, making this issue of justice an uncomfortable one. The question was a loaded one, and the answers people gave me need to be evaluated with that in mind.¹⁴

However, the larger issue of how God judges whether a person is moral or not, and the consequences in the afterlife, is central to people's thoughts about being Muslim. One cannot be Muslim without accepting it, and if one accepts it, that means taking seriously the possibility of the tortures of hell, to be doled out for every misdeed, every missed prayer, and so on. Many people told me they found the topic terrifying (*ngeri*) and would only rarely, if ever, discuss it with others. The exact nature of such tortures (what exactly is done to what parts of the body, and so on), and their relationships to different categories of sin, are detailed in posters sold in the marketplace, and I saw such posters displayed in several shops and even on the living room wall of a home. Not everyone takes the descriptions of these tortures literally, but the pain that they imply is not so easily dismissed.

There are three things I hope all of this begins to suggest. The first is the importance of one's relationship to God. The second is the central role of belief as a demand Islam places on people in West Sumatra. The third is that the leap between everyday kinds of experiences and evaluations to the things one must believe is not always graceful. In the section that follows, I want to develop these ideas further by

¹⁴ Some people did not seem bothered at all. I can recall Da Eri in particular – one of the more pious people I interviewed, and someone who I consider a relatively close friend. For him, the fate of non-Muslims (that is, my fate) was simply not his business or concern, but only that of God. He could only tell me how he understood things to work, and shrug. It had no implications for *his* relationship with me.

drawing from what a number of respondents had to say about the concepts of belief, conviction, and faith, and the relationships between these and what is real.

Although there is not a simple story here, I think there is a central message: belief in Islam is – like coming to think of oneself as a “good person” – a matter of active management. Most, or all, of my respondents have internalized the idea that Islam represents a Truth in which they must believe. This is an abstract notion, however. It is moving from this conviction in the need to believe to a state of belief itself that becomes the site for such management. In this section I want to tell a cultural story. That is, through a combination of perspectives from various respondents, I want to show that these struggles with belief constitute a shared experience in West Sumatra, even if the details of the struggle differ between individuals. It is a struggle to remove oneself from dangerous everyday forms of (dis)belief.

Between Belief and Disbelief

Above, I quoted Ni Tasi saying, “It’s strange, but what can you do? As a Muslim I have to believe it.” When we talked about conceptions of the afterlife, she had difficulty describing her opinion of them.

GS: What do you think, Tasi, about all of this?

Ni Tasi: I believe. I’m between belief and disbelief. [laughs]

GS: [laughs] Between belief—?

Ni Tasi: Yes.

GS: What—?

Ni Tasi: But, yes, I do believe.

GS: If you believe, why did you say you are between belief and – you mean that you generally believe, basically...?

Ni Tasi: Basically I believe, it's just, well.... If you think about whether it's true or not, well, it's not apparent. So, I'm between belief and disbelief. But after – well, maybe if I – if I read it in the Koran, right...I do believe it.

Ni Tasi goes on to explain to me that she is not convinced or certain (*yakin*) of the truth of all of this, as there is no direct evidence for it, but that she nevertheless *has to* believe (*percaya*, I; *picayo*, M).

GS: But what does that mean? In a situation like that, what does “belief” mean? So, what is the definition, maybe: a person who believes is a person who what?

Ni Tasi: Has conviction about [*meyakini*] something... even though they are not convinced [*yakin*]. [laughs]

GS: Convinced – well, that's what....

Ni Tasi: Yes. [laughs]

GS: Can you have conviction about something but still feel unconvinced as well?

Ni Tasi: Well, maybe generally, you can. In religion, you *must* [*harus*].

GS: What do you mean, “Must”?

Ni Tasi: Even though we are not convinced [*tidak yakin*]...

GS: Yes?

Ni Tasi: ... we must be convinced [*harus yakin*]. Like that. [laughs]

GS: Must.

Ni Tasi: Yes, in religion, it's like that.

Ni Tasi laughs because of the obvious paradox. She says a person must “*meyakini*” though they are not “*yakin*.” Both terms essentially mean “to be convinced of” or “to believe,” and so she seems to be suggesting something impossible. There is a subtle difference, however, even if she does not acknowledge it. Although “*yakin*” is the root for both terms, while “*yakin*” itself describes a state of belief, “*meyakini*” implies, through its grammatical construction, an active process of

believing.¹⁵ There is a sense in Ni Tasi's explanation that a person is required by religion to believe and must continually be pushing themselves in this direction, even if they never quite reach that destination.

I ask Ni Tasi how one goes about being convinced despite remaining unconvinced:

Ni Tasi: That's hard. [laughs] But, well, because I – in my case – because it's just in the Koran, I'm convinced.... Because everything that is in the Koran is certain. Even if our hearts maybe...maybe our heart of hearts, well [it asks], "Is it true or not?"

The problem is that belief or conviction must also be in the heart of hearts (Chapter 4), and so it is really not compatible with such questioning.

Ni Tasi: Surely the [questions] are from our heart of hearts.... It's hard to express it, if in, uh...in religion if we're not convinced, God surely knows. Even if it's in our heart of hearts. [laughs]

GS: Yes, surely.

Ni Tasi: Yes. [laughs] So...this is why we must believe, that's it. Even though we... [trails off].

It is clear that for Ni Tasi there is no clear solution to the problem: lack of complete conviction is fundamentally unacceptable, but doubt arises anyway. One must constantly be moving into a state of belief, away from a state of doubt. Ni Tasi serves to illustrate a position in which a number of respondents seemed to find themselves. Da Dan, for example, also explained that he believed in Islam, but was not yet convinced. Da Dan offered an interpretation that parallels Spiro's (1987)

¹⁵ In both Indonesian as well as Minang, the addition of a *meN-* prefix to a root creates a verb. The addition of an *-i* suffix to such a verb can serve a number of different purposes, but generally it makes the verb transitive, and implies that the action of the verb is done to the object. Thus, to "*meyakini*" something implies that the action of belief is actively carried out on that thing.

theory of levels of internalization, in which ideas may be internalized only to the level of cliché, or even to the level of being accepted as truth, but still not be internalized deeply enough to motivate behavior. Da Dan said that he accepted Islam and its moral obligations, he believed (*picayo*), but did not necessarily carry them out, and so could not be said to be convinced (*yakin*). His belief was not to the point where it shaped behavior. Nevertheless, when I later asked him why he was not convinced, he abandoned his theory (which is not to say he did not strengthen the theory in the process), saying that he was in fact “one hundred percent convinced.” He did not know why he did not follow through on his beliefs.

Belief and Reality

The burden is on the self to believe. This is a natural outgrowth of the idea that Islam is not simply one way of worshipping God, but represents the only real connection a person can have with God. As Da Lis explained, people convert to Islam (a frequent occurrence) because of guidance from God, because there is some actual connection to God felt in the heart. If they learn about Islam with an open heart, they cannot help but come to believe. In contrast, people convert from Islam to some other religion like Christianity (a rare occurrence) because of coercion or influence from other *people*: bribes, promises of economic assistance, and so on (see Chapter 5 on “Kristenisasi”). There is something *real* in belief in Islam, something that is absent in belief in other religions. Because it comes from God, conviction in Islam is of a different kind than conviction in anything else.

GS: What makes you say that it's different?

Da Lis: Yes, because as a Muslim, I am certain that God is the creator of the universe. He is God of all creation – like that, right? So...I am truly convinced that God is the creator. In that, there is a kind of power...to truly convince. Now, supposing a Christian – perhaps they don't think that their God is the God of all creation, of all the universe, right? Maybe – I don't know about [laughs] their beliefs. Maybe they describe it like that. Meanwhile, [for] Muslims, God is the creator of all the universe, God the One, the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, and the other "All"s, right? With that, the depth of conviction is implanted deeper in the heart.¹⁶

Similarly, Da Eri contrasts conviction in the powers of God with other kinds of supernatural beliefs that he says are common in "eastern" societies like his own, and which he attributes to Hindu and Buddhist influences in pre-Islamic Minangkabau. He had been criticizing what he saw as a western tendency to think too logically about everything and thus to miss the ways that God worked beyond the bounds of human logic. Here, I ask him how he differentiates non-logical beliefs that are, in his terms, "bullshit," (he uses the English word here) from the ones he had been defending from an overly logical skepticism. Unlike those other beliefs, he argues, there is something real, even tangible, in Islamic conviction:

Da Eri: As for me, I think that reading fate from cards – bullshit.

GS: So why is that bullshit, but the other stuff – ?

Da Eri: Well, that's –

¹⁶ He goes on to say: "Then, supposing Muslim people are ridiculed, are humiliated. Those Muslim people are quicker to feel insulted in their hearts, [and] to glorify their religion. For example, someone – for instance – for example there is a war. Muslims do not hesitate to [risk] their lives to stand up for Islam. And Christians, I don't feel they're like that in their conviction. Their conviction is – someone talks about their religion, [they say], 'Just let it be.'" This is not a comment on Christian moral teachings (e.g., turning the other cheek), about which Da Lis acknowledges he knows nothing. He is not saying that Christians react differently to the pain caused by affronts to their religion, but rather that they simply do not feel those affronts powerfully enough to react the way Muslims do in similar situations. The point is that, without the element of God, of Truth, underlying their conviction, their religious beliefs and identity simply cannot have the power of Islamic conviction.

GS: – takes conviction?

Da Eri: Conviction is a matter of religion. Religion cannot be bullshitted [dibullshit-bullshitan]. Just take this example: I pray. It's an obligation in Islam, you have to pray five times [a day]. When I don't pray, my spirit is anxious [jiwa ambo galisah], Greg. I am convinced that there is a power that controls my life. So if I don't pray, I am anxious. I worry. In addition, I study the Koran. If I don't study the Koran – I study the Koran, the next day I study the Koran, and then after that I don't study the Koran for a while, OK? I long to [taragak] study the Koran – the wisdom in it, or something – even though it's in Arabic and I don't understand it. Actually I can look in the translation – the dictionary. With the translation, I can [understand it]. But just reading it, my heart is calm. Calm. That is my conviction. But as for other issues, I set them aside. I try to set them aside, even though – because I live in the eastern world, right? So I cannot be separated from it, because the beliefs in society are another matter. But I see it as – let me just be a spectator, like that.

These other connections to supernatural powers surround him, but do not touch his heart like the power of God.

“Belief” or “conviction” in Islam is not about an individual’s assessment, based on experience, of what is real. It is about the degree to which one’s subjective state reflects what is real. It is failure to bring one’s subjective state into harmony with reality that causes one to have problems in the world. It is a failure of the self, because it is an active resistance to what is real. This is also called a lack of iman, or “faith.”

If one can get one’s subjective state to match reality, those problems will disappear. This, as Ni Saia explains, is submission to God:

Ni Saia: There are some people that have acquiesced to their fates. They've surrendered themselves to the One. They have no adversity of any kind. They are convinced.

GS: It's not possible to — ?

Ni Saia: They are convinced – no, really they have no troubles. But those who forget this are the ones who are hit [with problems]. They forget, they are hit.

GS: What's the reason that people who are convinced cannot be—?

Ni Saia: They have surrendered themselves to the One. To God, they have surrendered themselves, like that. The one who brings on disease is the One. The one who prevents it – the One can.

GS: So if one surrenders to—?

Ni Saia: Surrenders to the All Powerful. I think that is the thing, because each of our destinies has been set by the All Powerful.

GS: So how many people can have conviction to that point – to the point where they are protected?

Ni Saia: Yes, well. Well that is what is difficult.

GS: It's difficult, yes?

Ni Saia: One of the most arduous undertakings, I think.

Ni Saia is clear that experiencing problems – that is, to *suffer* as the result of some experience – takes a willful (if almost impossible to avoid) act of “forgetting” to be convinced in God. One makes oneself vulnerable through incorrect belief.¹⁷

In West Sumatra, this theme of vulnerability and belief is a common one in people's talk about getting through life. Ni Saia, for example, was not merely referring to being “hit” by major tragedies. She sees the same process in everyday activities. When I ask her how we come to believe to the point of being protected, she points to her body and says:

Ni Saia: It depends on the faith we have in here. Our belief. Convincing ourselves.... It depends on our belief. It's like, for example, we're driving a vehicle. We're convinced that even though there is an obstacle in front of us, we will get by it. We go

¹⁷ In his typically idiosyncratic way, Da Dan expressed a similar idea, but linked it directly to the kinds of “punishments” that God is usually said to visit on sinners, whether in this life or the after life. God, he said, never actively punished anyone. Rather, God gave human beings knowledge (in the form of Islam) of how to live in the happiest way possible. People who failed to heed God's suggestions (he insisted that they were not commandments, because God did not *need* anything from anyone) simply ended up hurting themselves. They suffered because they did not live in the ideal way that would allow them to avoid suffering. Similarly, he did not think that God punished anyone in the afterlife, but that suffering in the afterlife was merely a consequence of having oriented oneself away from God during life. This meant that after death a person ended up lost, forced to wander aimlessly and alone, out of the presence of God, searching hopelessly for what one really wanted: complete integration.

right through. Don't be nervous. If we're hesitant, that's where we'll be hit. It's like that, no?

Her answer is circular, pointing to the same paradox pointed out by Ni Tasi: we must believe in order to believe. But beyond this, it is clear that she sees belief as actually placing us in the desired reality, while failure of belief leaves us vulnerable.

Vulnerability to mystical attack is generally said to work the same way. We can take Da Jik's explanation as an example. He reminded me that mountain climbing in West Sumatra is associated with many prohibitions. If a climber offends the spirits on the mountain by entering certain areas, climbing up the mountain to have illicit sex, or so on, the climber may meet a bad fate – perhaps simply disappearing. However, Da Jik pointed out, foreigners or even local people that do not have any knowledge or belief in these prohibitions can violate them with impunity. "It's strange," he said, laughing, "If we don't know about it at all, there won't be any [effect]. That's the thing." Like Ni Saia, he compared this phenomenon to the way that fear can become a self-fulfilling prophecy:

Da Jik: I compare it to climbing a tree. Right? If you were to climb a tree, you'd be *gamang* [nervous, especially regarding heights]. You know "gamang"?

GS: Yes.

Da Jik: You'd fall right away. But if you're just standing there, on top of this table, at a height of fifty centimeters, you [feel] safe. But now, [it's different] if it's raised to five hundred meters.... But if you're not wary, there's no problem. That's the thing with mystical powers. I'm convinced of that. The thing is, I once went to an area that is famous for mystical matters, magical matters. But I was safe. I wasn't convinced. "Oh, no way." So, Greg, if you ask me about these matters, I'm between belief and disbelief. "Be careful, Da Jik, if you go over there – you'll be struck." I don't believe it.

GS: So, it's not a problem.

Da Jik: It's not a problem.

GS: But if you're frightened?

Da Jik: That's different.

These idea in fact tie directly back into conceptions of Islam. Belief in mystical powers, although widespread, is also problematic. Any time a belief is tantamount to attributing a power to something other than God, it is considered *syirik*, a violation of Islam's monotheistic foundations. For some people (like Da Luko, who I will return to in a moment), the two can be reconciled. For others – especially those who are more highly educated and considered pious – “belief” in supernatural phenomena becomes a site of tension.

We saw earlier that Da Eri declared that he should be like a “spectator” to supernatural phenomena in which he does not believe. Da Eri does not necessarily mean that he thinks no such phenomena exist. Part of what he means is that these other supernatural forces exist only *outside* of one's belief in God. When one is firmly in a state of conviction, of faith, such forces fail to have any effect.

GS: So you are not afraid of being mystically attacked?

Da Eri: Thank God, no. If I am convinced. But if my heart is weak.... I go by just one basic principle. If I am weak – in my batin [the unseen realm; the spirit] – then someone can penetrate me. But if I am convinced, I don't think someone can do it.

GS: What do you mean “weak in the batin”?

Da Eri: My faith [iman]. My belief in my religion. This becomes the parameter for determining it: whether I have faith or not. If I am convinced – if I am convinced of my religion, that ilmu [mystical power] will not penetrate [un]. This is why I am convinced.

We have seen these ideas before: faith provides a “fence” (*paga*) around the self that protects it from harm (Chapter 5).

It is important to keep in mind that Da Eri thinks it is wrong to accept the reality of supernatural powers other than God. There is more here than simply the idea that God's power trumps others kinds of power. Da Eri is arguing that these other kinds of powers only exist in a certain way, in the realm of human experience. They do not exist in the ultimately real way that God exists. Several times during our interview series, Da Eri discussed an example that was foregrounded in his mind due to the recent birth of his son, Arief. The issue in question is the danger of *palasik*, a spirit that attacks through a sort of evil eye (cf. discussions of *pelisit* or *pelesit* in Peletz 1988, 1995; and Laderman 1991). Da Eri explains the nature of *palasik* and his attitude toward them:

Da Eri: Every baby that's born in Minang society is usually given a talisman for *palasik*, they're called. [...] A *palasik* is a person who, because of her ancestors – it is inherited from one's family – who if she looks at a baby, Greg, that baby will lose blood. [...] It doesn't even have to be the baby: just looking at the clothing hanging out to dry. It's fragrant to her. The baby – Greg, maybe you can't – you can see it, Greg – is like a person who's lost blood, lost fluids. Its eyes are large, and all that's left is bones. It's hard for you to understand, Greg. This really exists. It really happens. I've seen it. That's a *palasik*. [...] But in my heart – when my child, Arief was born, OK – in fact by religion you cannot do this. You cannot believe in the power of a thing, other than Allah. And I am convinced of that. My parents said, my relatives said, my in-laws said, "Use [a talisman]. Use it." "No," [I said]. "God willing, nothing will happen." As it turned out, nothing happened to Arief. I am convinced. But I am considerate of others [*punyo tenggang rasa*], Greg, right? For example, if my in-laws brought their grandchild to a *dukun* [healer, or someone with mystical powers] to get a *palasik* talisman, I would be considerate, maybe, and he'd wear it anyway. Go ahead and wear it. But I would consider it nothing more than a necklace, maybe. Like a bracelet, OK? For ornamentation. Maybe my child – maybe he'll become "underground" – an "underground" musician, right? He'll be a heavy metaler, maybe. It wouldn't mean anything for him to wear

a necklace. It's like that. That stuff – sorry, I don't believe in it, alright?

Da Eri simultaneously insists that the phenomenon in question exists, and that he does not believe in it. He is even willing, if he must, to participate socially in the behaviors that surround this phenomenon as long as he privately interprets it the proper way, which is as something that does not mean anything.

Part of what Da Eri is saying is that while palasik exist, he refuses to accept the idea of relying on a talisman – a mere object – to protect his child. I think he is saying more than this, however. We can think back to what he has said about faith making him invulnerable to attack, and what Da Jik and others have said about belief in a threat bringing that threat into existence. Here, Da Eri makes it clear that he only “believes” in the existence of palasik and other kinds of mystical powers as one believes in other kinds of fictions of experience in which one participates. His example is our “belief” that a woman can be sawed in half by a magician. We see it, we interpret it in this way, but at a deeper level, we do not accept it.

Da Eri: Or a magic trick [*sulap*], for example. In a magic trick, perhaps. OK? It's a sleight of hand, or a trick, right? OK? Sometimes we believe what we see, OK? We believe what we, uh – “Hey, how can that happen?” But we're not convinced, you see. The person is still alive. For example, a person is cut, right? – they get in a box. It's as if we believe, right?

GS: What is it that we believe in that case?

Da Eri: We believe what we see. That is believing what we see, OK? “Hey, her head was cut off!” Our eyes believe in what happened. But our hearts are not convinced. That person is still alive. So, this is what it's like, alright? Or in terms of...what else? In terms of the supernatural [*hal-hal gaib*]...that occur in everyday life, in Minangkabau. It's like me: I believe. I believe that there is a kind of black magic that exists in Indonesia. But because of the foundation of religion, I say – I must – I am not convinced. I am

not convinced that it can happen [to me] as long as I am living prudently [*sacaro elok-elok*]. I believe, but I'm not convinced. That's what I'm like.

Other people take these same ideas and run them in a different direction. Da Luko has less of a religious education than Da Eri. (As we have seen, he has less formal education more generally, having dropped out of elementary school, whereas Da Eri has a college degree.) In the following passage, after talking to me about Islamic conceptions of the afterlife, he distances himself from them, noting that they are simply what he has been taught, but then argues that he “of course” believes in them because he is Muslim. He then shifts to talk about the power of belief more generally.

Da Luko: Maybe that's how it is, right? Because I've never experienced it. That's according to teachings, right? According to the stories from the *ustad* [religious teachers]. But whether what I'm saying is completely right, maybe I just don't know. I've never experienced it, right?

GS: As for those stories from the *ustad* —

Da Luko: That's it.

GS: —do you believe them, or what?

Da Luko: But according to religion of course I believe them. My religion is Islam, of course I – a Muslim person is giving the lecture, of course I believe it. But if a Christian person gave a lecture, of course I wouldn't believe it. [Smiles]

GS: Right. [laughs]

Da Luko: That's it.

GS: Yes.... Or can you be said to be convinced of it?

Da Luko: Convinced of it, believe in it, they're the same.

GS: The same.

Da Luko: And, as well, if we take a medical treatment, if we're not convinced, we won't get healthy, Greg.

GS: Mmm, yes....if we're not convinced of [the efficacy of] that medicine?

Da Luko: Yes – we won't get healthy you know. If we take medicine – if we're convinced with [the efficacy of] plain water, we'll get well. We'll be healthy. Even if we have cancer.

GS: If we don't believe, if we're not convinced?

Da Luko: If we're not convinced, if we don't believe, we won't get healthy. Say there's medicine – specialized medicine given us by a doctor, and we have heart disease. For example, I'm suffering from an allergy, for example, and I'm given a salve that's number one in the world – oh, it's really awesome, right? If I'm not convinced....

GS: It doesn't work.

Da Luko: Indeed my itching, my allergy won't go away. Now I'm given the crappiest medicine, experimental medicine. I believe in it, I'm convinced – it goes away.

I ask Da Luko a bit more about how this works. He says that you need both the conviction and the “medicine,” but that the medicine can be anything, including regular water. In his analysis, it seems that there needs to be some connection to the physical world, but that it is conviction itself that transforms the physical object into something with power.

This may seem to violate the religious ideas expressed by those like Da Eri, and it does indeed depart from that interpretation of Islamic belief. For Da Luko, however, just as he attributed the power of his protective talisman to the Koran, and thus to God (Chapter 5), he attributes belief in a medicine (or in our ability to accomplish other things) to the power of God. Although coming to a somewhat different conclusion about mystical powers, Da Luko reiterates what others, above, have said about God and belief: a person's deep commitment to the really real, to the true nature of the universe allows us to live in that universe, to experience it:

Da Luko: In Islamic ilmu [knowledge, often mystical knowledge], if you have resolved the deepest knowledge [*putuih mangrifai knyō*¹⁸]

¹⁸ The phrase he uses repeatedly here, *putuih mangrifai knyō*, means having the deepest and most thorough knowledge of something, usually in a spiritual sense and often in reference to knowing God.

of plain water, any kind of disease – not being treated by someone else, but treating ourselves – we’ll get healthy. For example, now, I’m sick right now, right? I convince myself – my own self – this plain water here can be medicine. I resolve my knowledge, right, and recite the verses – all the Islamic verses into the water – drink it—I can be healthy.

GS: So, actually, in that situation, what is it that makes us healthy?

What is it that has an effect on health?

Da Luko: It’s the conviction that – the first thing is being helped by Allah. Second is conviction...our conviction helps. Third is resolving our knowledge. It’s like if we’re climbing up a mountain. We’re convinced we’ll climb it, right? So, we climb it. But if we’re not convinced, we can’t do it.

We have already seen in the previous chapter that Da Luko is adamant about the need to rely on oneself to solve problems, something that crops up repeatedly in his stories: his moving to the pasa as an adolescent to earn his own money, his avoidance of doctors if at all possible, his self-criticism over allowing himself to skip work because he knows his parents will provide food for his family, and so on.

There is of course a deeper resonance in these discussions of belief with the material I presented in previous chapters. In Chapter 4, for example, I discussed the idea that the world that humans live in is the source of corruption. I showed how individuals use such ideas to manage their conceptions of themselves and of what is real about themselves and what is merely an illusion. Da Palo for example, argued that his reactions to the things in this world – sexually attractive women, financial troubles, and so on – were predicated on his participation in this world, but were not reflective of the real Da Palo who existed in another dimension, in the batin. He contrasted what is seen by the eyes – merely an illusion – with what is seen by the eyes of one’s heart. Similarly, we have now seen that Da Eri argues that what we see

in the world may be little more than an illusion, a magic trick like a woman sawn in half. What is really real, and what he commits to in his heart, is something else entirely: the singular nature of God.

He and others – in different ways, as shown above – argued to me that human beings must commit themselves to what is real, often fighting against what appears to be the case: that we suffer, that babies may have their blood sucked away by spirits, that we are vulnerable, that plain water cannot cure us of disease. God commands us to move out of those everyday realities and to commit ourselves to a different, deeper level of reality. The command is to make one’s own vision of the real match the greater, and ultimately real, vision of Allah. It is to submit oneself entirely to that vision. This is not experienced, however, as a passive sort of submission to something imposed from outside oneself, but rather as an active struggle to choose submission.

Prayer

In West Sumatra, praying – particularly the ritual of the daily prayers – is commonly called the “*tiang agamo*,” or “pillar of religion.”¹⁹ Prayer is, by far, the most common topic mentioned in sermons and religious lectures: the need to pray, the importance and power of prayer, the failure of people to always pray, and so on. The centrality of prayer to being Muslim (or, rather, to religion more generally) was also reflected in the questions people asked me about other religions, particularly if they

¹⁹ In West Sumatra I heard the word “*tiang*,” meaning a post, pole, or pillar, applied particularly to the daily prayers, although it was understood that this was one of the five central precepts, or pillars of Islam, as discussed above. The word used for these five precepts is “*rukun*.”

found out that I was Jewish. Generally knowing little or nothing about Judaism, people were curious to know about it, and almost invariably the first question that people asked was this: “How do you pray?” They were curious to know the mechanics involved: what movements were made, what words recited, toward what object or direction the worshipper would face, and so on.

Prayer is the most frequent religious activity in which people engage. Like all Muslims, Minang people are supposed to pray five times every day. Along with learning how to recite the Koran in Arabic, learning the mechanics of prayer constitutes the most important part of a Minang child’s religious education. Active instruction in prayer may begin as early as five or six years of age, although children this young rarely adopt the practice. Talk about prayer was certainly at the center of my conversations with people about religious life. This was the case whether or not the person in question prayed regularly or not.

It is difficult to know exactly how many adults actually pray five times a day. If one spends any significant time around any particular individual, it becomes clear if that person is especially diligent or not. There are certainly many people who always pray five times a day and others who do so on a reasonably regular basis; but there are many others who pray only occasionally, if at all. Younger men (particularly those with less education) seemed to be the least likely to pray. As will become clear later in this chapter, when I asked people about their personal practice of prayer, they were likely to at first tell me that they prayed, and perhaps that they prayed five times a day, even if this turned out not to be true. Eventually (and sometimes almost immediately),

people talked to me about *not* praying. In general – and this is an important point to keep in mind for the remainder of this section – whether a person prays or not is not something that they are likely to discuss with other people because it is considered a pribadi (personal – see Chapter 5) matter. Prayer is obligatory, but it is a matter of a person’s relationship to God, and cannot be forced. Forced prayer would in fact be worthless. Prayer must have its source in a person’s heart.

The daily prayers – *shalat* or *sembahyang* – are supposed to take place at specific, predetermined times, according to the position of the sun. These times are announced by the call to prayer, various recordings of which are broadcast from every mosque and surau (prayer house) in the city at the specified time, creating a disorganized chorus of echoing male voices. Obligatory prayers take place early in the morning before sunrise, around noon, in the mid-afternoon, at sunset, and in the evening.²⁰ For the noon prayer on Fridays every man is supposed to gather with other men at a mosque in order to pray together (sermons are also offered at this time), but at all other times (and always, in the case of women), the prayers may be carried out in any location, and most people pray wherever it is most convenient, such as at home. It is said that it is better to pray at the mosque or the surau, as it demonstrates extra effort and dedication to the process. Some people – generally older members of the community – do make this effort, especially for morning prayers. Before the prayer can begin, each person must purify him or herself by washing certain parts of the body

²⁰ Aside from the obligatory five times a day, there are also optional prayer times. There are also other kinds of prayers that are used for other occasions of worship, and these, along with any kinds of spontaneous communication a person might direct towards God, fall under the category of *doa*.

(parts of the arms, legs, head and face), and generally making sure that their bodies are otherwise clean, their clothing is clean, and their immediate surroundings are clean.

Women, who often don white robes over their regular clothing during prayer, must not pray during menstruation. When possible, small prayer mats are placed on the floor.

The worshipper then faces Mecca and begins the prayer.

The prayers consist of a series of prescribed movements of the body, including the symbolically crucial prostrations in subjugation to God's will. These movements are carried out in concert with the recitation of the first *surah* (chapter) of the Koran, praising and declaring one's faith in and submission to God, followed by the recitation of another *surah* of the worshipper's choosing. When a person has completed the standard prayer ritual, he or she may also elect to ask God for more specific forgiveness or guidance in facing personal problems, but this is not considered a necessary part of the *shalat* itself. Each act of *shalat* takes a person through a series of these movements and recitations, varying according which prayer is being performed (that is, which of the five times of day). If not completed in the proper manner, in the proper state of purity, or in the proper state of mind, an act of *shalat* is not valid and the obligation to God is not fulfilled.

In the remainder of this section, I will offer some more ethnographic detail to flesh out what is involved in all of this, both ideologically and practically. In particular, I want to highlight two conflicting, and yet inseparable thrusts of *shalat*. I want to suggest that one of the reasons that participation in *or* avoidance of this ritual may become compelling is that the ritual serves to crystallize tensions that are

problematic in other domains of life. It makes those tensions “more thinkable” (Jackson 2005: 95), offering the possibility of experiencing, momentarily, their resolution, or of being faced with their stubborn endurance.

First, shalat is an act of complete submission of the individual to a larger power, and complete integration of the individual into the collective. In its performance, people must turn their bodies over completely to the prescribed motions and turn their thoughts over completely to God. They must do, and think, exactly as they are commanded to do and think, and they must do these things in a way that is the same as the way everyone else is doing them (with the exception that each individual must choose the second surah used in their prayer). They must do all of this at the same time that everyone else is doing it, five times a day, every day.

At the same time, shalat is an act of pure will and an experience of individual communication with God. The submission involved is not a passive submission, but an active one. The connection made with God during prayer is not (only) a communal one, but a personal one that takes place only in the batin (soul) or hati (heart) of the individual, and must be achieved by actively removing oneself from the corrupting nature of the everyday world, including other people. Every individual must work to transform him or herself from an everyday state into one in which he or she connects completely with God. The most powerful acts of prayer are in fact said to be those prayers carried out at the additional, optional prayer times (especially the midnight prayer) rather than the obligatory prayer times. In these cases, the basic form of the prayer is the same as the obligatory prayers, but a person must make a special choice

to engage in the prayer, and will almost always follow the standard ritual with an extended and individualized appeal to God for guidance in overcoming some problem. Prayer promises a transformation in self and a transformation in one's experience of everyday life; prayer also requires that each individual effect that transformation.

Shalat thus has the potential to bring together and celebrate several, perhaps contradictory, ideas about the proper nature of the self: a self achieving a pure moral state by becoming integrated with, and submitting and conforming to something greater than itself (God, the entire Islamic community); and an autonomous self that contains within it a pure moral state that can only be realized by shutting out the corrupting influences of the rest of the world. Through its socially shared, formal elements, shalat emphasizes the equality, before God, of all human beings, and the conformity of the individual to the egalitarian, Islamic community. Through its emphasis too on complete submission to God, shalat works to realize a self that is made up completely of outside forces. Yet it does so by traveling a pathway through each individual heart, protected from the rest of the world. God resolves the tension between the moral demand to integrate and the corrupting dangers of such integration, explored earlier in this dissertation. God is the perfect influence, and in God everyone can unite perfectly – as long as this is done through acts of individual will carried out in individual hearts in direct and sincere communication with God.

Even limiting our vision to Islamic Indonesia, it is clear that the push and pull of these thrusts has shifted in different times and places. Addressing Aceh (at the northern tip of Sumatra) of the 1930's, Siegel (1969) states that prayer was understood

to be triumph of akal (reason) over nafsu (appetites, desires),²¹ as the worshipper suppressed spontaneous, inner states through the imposition of reason, exemplified in the discipline involved in carrying out God's commands precisely. Explaining the Acehnese view of time, he writes, "Prayer is not an outpouring of inner feeling but the believer's conformation of himself to God's commands" (114).

Bowen (1989), addressing this same time and place, notes that the Islamic reform movement active at the time stressed the importance of an egalitarian, cohesive community uniting through prayer. He writes, "They played down other possible interpretations of the ritual, such as its power to place the worshipper in a direct relation with God" (602), and they opposed the efforts of some Muslim leaders (especially those influenced by Sufism) to emphasize the deeper importance of inner states of prayer over prayer's formal and mechanical elements of conformity and discipline. It was these latter elements that were able to celebrate "the egalitarian character of the congregation and the everyday discipline that worship imposed on the individual" (609), and thus could be used in promoting a sense of a completely united community. Bowen explains that, in contrast, he found in his own fieldwork in Gayo society, in the Acehnese highlands, that prayer was most often understood "as an act of communication between the worshippers and God" (604) similar in form to communications that took place between people and spirits, or ancestors. Such a view sometimes created conflicts between villagers and reformers from the local towns who

²¹ See Chapter 4 for an account of these concepts and their relationship to each other.

saw such this emphasis on the personal connection between the individual and God as improper.

The thrust of much Islamic reform in recent decades does indeed seem to be in legitimizing prayer as a demonstration of conformity to larger moral powers while delegitimizing prayer as a form of personal expression of self in communication with God. Wilce (2002) writes of just such a shift in Bangladesh, where “tuneful” prayers are now regularly condemned as a personalized, and thus “narcissistic,” form of expression inappropriate to the worship of God. Similarly, in West Sumatra today, it is certainly the case that prayers are carried out in such a way that conformity to God’s commands, integration of the Islamic community, and the disciplining of the self over the expression of the self are all emphasized. There is widely thought to be only one, single way to pray – any other forms of worship of or communication with God are said to be invalid, wrong, and ultimately blasphemous. They are expressions of the individual rather than submission to God.

Wilce writes that people in Bangladesh explained to him that individualized expression in prayer was “shameful” (2002: 294) because it seemed to be designed to draw attention to the individual self rather than to be geared toward God. We might think back here of Ni Saia’s poem (Chapter 5). The poem is addressed to God, and is a form of communication with God carried out in a highly personal way: the form of the poem is not conventional, and certainly does not represent a conventional method of appealing to God, and the words of poem literally spells out Ni Saia’s personal identity. Of course, the poem is also something that Ni Saia does not share with other

people, saying she would be ashamed to have it revealed. It is a form of communication with God that must be kept completely private.

Yet, as Wilce points out, prayer always exists at the intersection of the corporate and the personal: “[W]hatever corporate realities it invokes, it also allows for the emergence of individuated voices” (2002: 290). The fact that it exists at this intersection allows for the kind of battles over its meaning and practice as described above. In West Sumatra, communication with God is treated like many other forms of personal (*pribadi*) expression (Chapter 5). It is carefully packaged into a form that outwardly expresses conformity and submission of the individual. The main reason people should pray, and pray in a particular way, is that God commands it. There need be no reason beyond this. Not surprisingly, however, people also have more complex ideas about prayer, what happens during prayer, and why prayer is important. Prayer’s central place in moral and religious discourse means that it holds the promise of something more than merely a requirement fulfilled – perhaps even a transformation of self. The following ethnographic exploration of prayer will try to reveal the nature of that promise, and how it become entangled in competing thrusts as to the nature of the moral self.

Prayer as Mechanical Discipline

Although the ideas people have about the way prayer transforms the self are generally moral in flavor, they are not necessarily always religious – at least not in the sense of being spiritual. If the obligatory repetition and precisely defined times and

procedures for prayer sound rather mechanical, it should be noted that many people find value in precisely in these aspects of prayer. Following these routines, people explained to me, leads to cleanliness, health, and disciplined use of time. Take, for example, the comments of Da Palo. Da Palo – the underemployed man in his mid-fifties who was discussed at length in Chapter 4 – talks about prayer from a very pragmatic perspective, without even a mention of God:

Da Palo: The benefit of prayer, Greg, is so great. The benefit is so great. First, the benefit of prayer.... Muslims are obligated to pray five times, right? In terms of the face alone, it gets washed every day, five times. Just to pick an example, if the face is washed all the time, it's going to be clean, Greg. That's the first benefit. Five times. And then, in prayer, we have to be clean all the time. We have to be clean.

After expounding for a while longer on the ways praying causes a person to be clean, he turns to further practical advantages of prayer, focusing on how praying promotes good health and how it regulates a person's daily routine:

Da Palo: In terms of – in terms of health, first getting up in the morning is – for health. Like the way I got up earlier, that's unhealthy, right?²² Meanwhile the air – the morning air is the good air, right? We are ordered to pray – if you bring prayer into being – it actually really trains human beings. I think this is what is behind prayer. Get up in the morning, in the morning you already pray at four thirty. We pray, sometimes bathe, right? For example, praying at the mosque. Praying – whenever we've had marital relations at night, in the morning we're obligated – we have to bathe. If not, the prayer isn't valid. [Prayer] educates, right? That's a good thing. After we bathe, we pray. After we pray, we drink coffee. We drink coffee, and then we go to work again. Like that, right? At work time, it's time for the noon prayers [...] At twelve noon, take a break. Take a break, eat, right? [...] After taking a break...you go to work again. At one o'clock you start again. Later at four o'clock we stop working, right? And there's one more time – afternoon prayers. It trains us.

²² He had gotten out of bed just in time for our late morning interview that day.

He continues in a similar fashion, through the sunset and evening prayers, finally concluding:

Da Palo: We pray, right, and after praying we eat. At eight o'clock we rest, sleep, and tomorrow morning go to work again, at full strength, right? If you sleep at the appropriate time, the next morning your body will be fresh when you wake up. And that's how prayer educates human beings. That's how in Islam, it's the pillar – really the pillar, like in a house there's a pillar, prayer really is like that. The pillar – the key.

This description of the benefits of prayer leaves aside completely the content or meaning of the prayer itself. Prayer appears as an entirely mundane disciplining practice. Da Palo tells us that it “educates” and “trains” people to be clean and to be disciplined in their use of time, but we can see that it does so because a person carrying out the required process of washing and praying at specified times is automatically cleaner and more disciplined than they would otherwise be. The process works directly on that person's body, creating a better person regardless of that person's emotional or spiritual state.

It was not uncommon for people to talk to me about prayer in these mechanical terms, to focus on the cleanliness and discipline created by prayer. Of course, this is not the only way people talk about or experience prayer. It should also not be ignored that Da Palo's comments above (when he notes that he had gotten up late that morning) clue us into the fact that he does not follow the routines the he is describing. Da Palo prays only occasionally, even though he believes that the benefits of prayer are “so great,” and has at times been more observant in the past. His lack of prayer is

despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that he sees something far more in prayer than his initial comments let on.

Faith, Moral Consciousness, and Tranquility

Prayer is also a matter of creating a moral self. Prayer does not simply work on the body, but works through the *hati*, the heart, to transform human consciousness. We can recall from Chapter 4 the way Da Palo described the corrupting world as working directly on his body and his everyday consciousness to make him do bad things that did not truly represent his true self. After first talking at length about the mundane disciplining involved in prayer, Da Palo later points out that proper prayer actually works to create a different state of self where such corruption is kept at bay.

He points out that in order for this to happen, prayer cannot be merely “bobbing up and down.” Instead, he insists repeatedly, we must not simply pray, but we must rather “*mandirikan*” prayer. This term literally means “to establish” something, but the connotations run deep. The root of the word, *diri*, means “self,” but many forms of the word take on the meaning of “standing” or various literal and metaphorical extensions of the idea of standing. To be “*mandiri*” is to be “autonomous” – that is, to be as a freestanding self. The idea Da Palo is expressing with the use of the term is that true praying involves realizing prayer as an autonomous act of the self. The self must not just *do* prayer, but *become* a state of prayer, a state of moral consciousness that is then carried out into the everyday world:

Da Palo: If we persistently mandirikan prayer, we won't want to make mischief. But that's if we mandirikan it. [...] To do it and to mandirikan it are different. If you mandirikan it, because you

pray, mandirikan prayer, right? Some money is sitting there, a few million. But because you mandirikan prayer, you won't want to grab for it. That's what we're ordered to do, wherever we go, in the state of mandirikan prayer, in a place of immoral activities – we won't want to. That's what we're ordered to do, not “do” prayer.

Da Palo, however, did not seem very convinced this is what most people did – and, of course, he usually did not pray at all. In fact, he complained bitterly that people primarily prayed as a “mask” to cover up what was actually inside their hearts. This was why, he claimed, he would not even tell people that he was going to pray when this was in fact what he was doing: he did not want to risk (ab)using prayer in this way.

Praying is at the center of so much of moral and religious discourse in West Sumatra not because of its more mundane benefits, but because it is so widely seen as the pathway through which moral personhood can be realized (or its failure can be realized). We can turn to Da Lis for further elaboration. We have met Da Lis several times before as well. In Chapter 4, he described the central role of opportunity in creating immoral acts. He, like Da Palo, is underemployed, but he has a great deal more formal education (including religious education) in his background. Da Lis is also more observant than Da Palo, regularly praying five times a day. His statements below about the way that prayer disciplines a person and organizes time echo the earlier comments by Da Palo, but he adds in an additional element by discussing the prayer itself and its purpose, after I directed him more narrowly to discuss the “goal” (*tujuan*) of praying.

Da Lis: Prayer will automatically make us disciplined, right?

GS: Disciplined?

Da Lis: Disciplined in the use of time. It teaches us to be disciplined in the use of time. And one of its wise lessons [*hikmah*] is to teach us to be disciplined in the use of time. At dawn: get up, pray. At mid-day, after work: rest, pray. And then the afternoon prayer is like that, too, right? Right on time.

GS: What is the goal of carrying out prayers?

Da Lis: Carrying out prayers?

GS: Yes.

Da Lis: The goal of praying is to worship Allah, to do the ritual prayer to Allah. Because at that moment, at the moment of prayer, we can be more focused on remembering Allah and asking for mercy. Because prayer – at the moment of prayer we can ask for mercy, right? We can be more focused on remembering Allah. So, the goal is to remember Allah, actually. In a more focused way, at that moment we ask God for mercy, right? Because our sins are – we committed sins at various times in the past. And then we pray, and then we work again, right? And one reason is that it makes us disciplined. God’s messenger said [recites in Arabic]. “When you have done your prayers, then disperse over the face of the earth.”

Disperse, meaning to go make an effort, right?

GS: Yes.

Da Lis: Go make an effort to get money to provide for your children – your wife and family, right? So, at the moment of prayer we can meet with God in a focused manner – that’s it. Ask for mercy, cleanse ourselves of all kinds of things. So prayer really is the pillar of religion, right?

In these comments we see more than a mundane way to organize behavior in everyday life, but a movement between everyday life and the sacred. Each prayer is a time to remove oneself from everyday life (the corrupted and corrupting world where a person has surely sinned) and focus completely upon God, before moving back to everyday life once again. The two realms are separate here, but interconnected — unlike in the examples of Da Palo, where the sacred does not make an appearance. For Da Lis, the connection to God created through prayer effects a moral transformation in the person that goes beyond the body:

Da Lis: With prayer...we avoid bad deeds, immoral deeds. Because with prayer, with the motivation of prayer, we always are cognizant of what we do. Meaning whether it's right or not, whether this is something we can or can't do, whether this is something we may or may not do, like that. So with prayer, we can sort them out [un].

GS: Because they're thought about when praying?

Da Lis: They're not thought about when praying. At the moment of prayer we only think of God, we're only focused on God, right? With prayer, it means that our faith is strengthened. And we can differentiate whether this is bad, whether this is evil. So by cultivating faith with prayer, we can differentiate.

GS: You're better able to, if—

Da Lis: Better able to.

GS: Yes? Is it that – the effect from doing the—

Da Lis: Prayer.

GS: —prayer?

Da Lis: Yes.

GS: The effect from – from what? From that discipline, or from what?

Da Lis: Oh, the effect from...our faith. So with faith – we steal, and we know that it's a sin, right? We're not allowed to do it. For instance, gambling, that's a sin. We're not allowed to do it. And one more thing, there's a Koranic verse: [he recites in Arabic here], meaning, "Prayer...prevents us from disavowing." That is, [it prevents us from doing] bad deeds. Because at the moment of prayer, we cultivate our sense of faith.

GS: Mmm – but that's what – how does that happen?

Da Lis: Well, because we worship God continuously. Supposing we do it continuously and we cultivate our faith, and certainly this faith in our hearts will get stronger, Greg, in that way. Now, with that faith...we can differentiate and prevent bad deeds.

GS: So, maybe – actually, what is the definition of "faith" ["*keimanan*"]?

Da Lis: Faith is the belief that – belief – the essential principle of faith is believing in Allah. Believing in the final day, believing in angels and then in the divine decree and fate, right? In the supernatural.

In this vision, prayer creates a moral person. By continually returning to focus on God, the effect of prayer spills over into all moments of life. The person who prays now carries God with them into daily life. This transformed subjectivity is faith

[*iman, keimanan*], the state of “believing” in God and thus being a moral agent who can distinguish good from bad. This is quite different from the cleanliness and ordered time that result automatically from the prayer routine because a person, Da Lis tells us, does not (should not) think about moral issues while praying. Instead, a person’s thoughts must be focused completely on God during prayer. That focus, if repeated “continuously,” transforms the self.

This notion of transformation is not simply the idea that praying allows a person to clearly differentiate right from wrong, and thus to do good. As I indicated in Chapter 4, invoking Taylor (1989), there is a sense of being moral that goes far beyond this: it means being a self that fully realizes the positive significance of its own existence. Ni Galeh, a middle-aged widow and businesswoman, describes the difference in moral constitution between a person who prays and a person who does not pray as the difference between a state of contentment and a state of chaos or anxiety, which she considers a kind of punishment. Doing bad is product of being bad.

Ni Galeh: For us, if we neglect our prayers there’s a sanction, right?

GS: A sanction.

Ni Galeh: Well, yes, because they punish themselves. Their lives are aimless. It’s senseless, their talk is senseless, they can’t do this or that. Yes...their thoughts are chaotic. Their souls aren’t calm – their spirits aren’t calm.

GS: That’s the sanction?

Ni Galeh: Yes, automatically. They get punished. If we don’t pray, right – we’ll disturb people, we’ll steal other people’s things. If we pray properly – well, essentially carry out Allah’s command – we won’t feel like getting angry, won’t want to steal, won’t want to disturb people – those are sins. In this world, too, we’re given punishment – there are a lot of examples.

GS: How come people who don't pray want to disturb other people?
What makes people want to bother—?

Ni Galeh: Most people – if a person truly prays, she won't want to disturb other people.

A few moments later, I ask her if a lack of calmness “pushes” people to disturb others.

She replies:

Ni Galeh: No. They do it, and it seems right. But it's still wrong. They don't get any guidance. Their spirits aren't calm.

GS: So maybe it's not intentional, but—?

Ni Galeh: It's out of their consciousness.

Ni Galeh's comments here echo some of the ideas about the nature of immoral behavior discussed in Chapter 4. Immoral behavior is seen as a lack of consciousness that occurs when person exists only in the everyday world and not in the more real realm of the spirit or heart. Prayer is imagined as the practice that cultivates consciousness – and, in doing so, creates not only a good person, but a person freed from the tortures of daily life.

Virtually everyone I spoke with about prayer told me that praying resulted in a feeling of *tanang* (*tenang*, I), calm, or a state of *katanangan* (*ketenangan*, I), tranquility. As Lindholm (1996) suggests, it is not surprising that the process of prayer would be associated with this kind of mental state, which “is a spiritual state, but also at least partially a purely physical consequence of the prescribed regulated breathing, chanting, and rhythmic prostrations of the supplicants, which have a potent physiological effect” (143). The unanimity with which people referred to the state induced by prayer as one of “*tanang*” underlines that fact that this description of the experience is learned. This is not to imply, however, that it is merely a cliché. The

sincerity with which people described this state, their enthusiasm in claiming that they had personally experienced it when praying, and their apparent interest in my understanding that prayer led to being *tanang* led me to believe that most people I talked to had indeed experienced prayer creating a feeling of *tanang*.

Da Lis: Calm...calm – how can I say it? Yeah, really...calm. You know, there’s no feeling of – there’s no anxiety [*galisah*], like that. It’s difficult to say what takes shape in the word “*tanang*” when we perform devotions to God. When we feel close to God.

GS: When you used to pray – when you were diligent, did you feel its influence on...

Da Palo: My body?

GS: Yes, on your body, or on your thoughts, or on what?

Da Palo: I did.

GS: You did. How?

Da Palo: I felt calm.

GS: You felt it?

Da Palo: I felt it. My life was pleasant.

GS: If you pray, does it have an effect?

Ni Gan: It does.

GS: Do you feel it?

Ni Gan: I feel it.

GS: What’s the effect?

Ni Gan: My spirit is calm. I’m calm inside, Greg, my heart is happy.

GS: What’s the reason?

Ni Gan: The reason?

GS: Yes, what?

Ni Gan: Well, that is—that is the wonder of prayer – that’s it. As tangled up as my heart is, eh, I go pray – God willing my spirit will be calm.

A Matter of Will

People in West Sumatra frequently talk about prayer in ways that make it sound magical. The closeness with God realized in prayer is said to achieve a

complete transformation in a person's life. I was often told that if a person prayed with complete dedication five times a day, every day, that person would experience no problems at all. Not only would they be unwilling or unable to sin, but *all* of their problems would vanish. Whether the problems would vanish in a pragmatic sense or merely be revealed as inconsequential to the person (due to a heightened sense of consciousness of the transitory nature of mortal life) is not always clear: both kinds of claims were made to me.

The sticky point for people is that prayer can only effect such a transformation when done with such complete dedication. This means not only that prayers must be carried out five times every day. It also means that during the prayer, a person's consciousness must be focused completely on God, and thus removed from the events of daily life in which those problems exist. Performing prayer is more than moving the body and reciting the words. It is also an act of will, of transforming one's own consciousness. During prayer, worshippers are expected to achieve the state of *khusuak* (*khusuk*, I), total concentration on God and one's submission to God.

The significance of *khusuak* becomes apparent when we consider that a prayer is only considered valid when the person praying achieves this state. Someone who goes through the motions of prayer in the wrong mental state will not merely fail to realize the benefits of prayer, but will fail to fulfill their religious obligations as well. They are not connecting with God at all. Da Eri – the relatively pious man who refuses to “believe” in the powers of harmful spirits and the talisman that protect from

them – explains why there is no necessary connection between (apparently) being diligent in prayer and being a moral person:

Da Eri: So, I say – you can say, Greg, the greater the level of religion – the greater our religiousness, the more excellent our behavior. But for those who aren't strong, well their behavior is just like normal. So I could say that praying—praying does not convey influence to their spirits. It doesn't convey influence to their spirits.

GS: Is this because the way they pray is wrong or is it—

Da Eri: No.

GS: — if their behavior aside from that isn't religiously proper, it's not possible that they pray—?

Da Eri: Oh, no.

GS: No.

Da Eri: Prayer is a matter of the heart. It's a matter of the heart, not – sometimes people do the daily prayers just great, but in fact their heart isn't khusuak. [...] Concentration. A direct connection with God. So, even though their movements are good, you don't know if their prayer is good. The receiver of the prayer – God – knows. Measuring what its parameters are, this is something God knows, whether it measures up or not. But our soul can tell, Greg, whether we are khusuak to God or not. Because our heart of hearts cannot lie, right? So it's not just through the movements, but through the heart.

GS: Which is the cause and which is the effect? For instance, their behavior, there's something wrong with it, and then when they pray they cannot be khusuak...

Da Eri: Yes.

GS: ...or because they can't be khusuak when they pray, their behavior aside from that isn't—?

Da Eri: I think that first the person – if they are accustomed to prayer first...if they pray, really truly pray, their [bad] behavior would not be possible.

GS: There's an effect.

Da Eri: There's an effect on their behavior from prayer. Not their behavior having an effect on their prayer. It doesn't go both ways. It's just prayer that affects behavior. But I'm speaking in terms of Islam here, Greg.

The burden of the process falls squarely on the individual and the individual's ability to achieve the proper state of consciousness. Moral transformation through prayer is, in the end, a matter of the individual's will.

Troubles with Prayer

Ni Yas is the relatively poor, middle-aged woman who (in Chapter 4) imagined herself becoming sombong (arrogant) were she to become rich. During one of our interviews, we were sitting in her small, thinly built, rented house, where she made snacks to “supplement” her husband's unreliable contributions to the household income. I had asked her if she prayed five times a day, and she said had said yes. However, shortly after this she made it clear that praying five times a day was her ideal, but not her practice. Her actual praying was somewhat sporadic, she said, explaining in her usual direct manner that her “faith is not yet strong.”

Ni Yas: After receiving good fortune, and I'm still too maleh [unwilling to act, or “lazy”] to bow down in submission. Actually God gets angry, if you study on it. I know it, but I don't do it. It's a sin actually. [laughs] If you study it there are a lot of sins. There are a lot of kinds of sins.

GS: Do you pray more – for example, if you are feeling good or if you're in a fix, for example?

Ni Yas: Well, I – when my heart wants to do it. If I'm troubled – if I'm troubled in fact I'm prone to neglect my prayers. Other people aren't like that. People are troubled and they're diligent in their prayers. But as for me, I am like that. If I'm troubled I don't concentrate when I pray.

GS: Don't concentrate.

Ni Yas: For example if I have a lot of thoughts, sometimes I'm praying and my mind is over there. That's like not doing it at all: praying without khusuak, right? Because my thoughts are, for example, I'm thinking – I'm thinking about for example, “How am I going to find” – for example, there's no rice. I think, “Where am

I going to get money later to buy rice?" I'm praying [un] over there, how am I going to be khusuak while I pray?

Ni Yas blames her lack of prayer on being, "maleh." As described in Chapter 4, this term does not necessarily imply a deficit of energy in the way that "lazy" usually does. A person who is maleh may be reluctant or unwilling to do something for any number of reasons. In her case, being troubled actually makes her maleh in the matter of prayer. She finds her own behavior a bit remarkable, as she knows that it is sinning by not praying, and yet still does not pray. This is odd enough to make her laugh while discussing it. Ni Yas finds herself in a no-win situation because, although she knows that she *must* pray, she finds that when she is in this troubled state of mind, her prayers are not valid. Prayers – as she, like others, had already explained to me – make a person tranquil, and result in solutions to her problems. At the same time, she finds that in order to carry out the prayers, she must first forget these problems and achieve a more tranquil state.

Despite what she says, Ni Yas is certainly not the only person who describes exactly this predicament. A number of my respondents told very similar stories, and all of them expressed a degree of confusion over their own behavior. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Ni Gan expresses similar troubles. In that chapter, I explained that she had told me that she often did not pray, as if she were angry at God. I then quoted her response to my later inquiry about that comment in which she claimed to only be "annoyed" (kesal) at God and discussed the way that her "little brain" – which she equated with her heart of hearts, her true self – prevented her from letting go of her

problems. Here, I want to go back to our original discussion of prayer that prompted her comment about being angry at God.

Ni Gan is also the woman who is quoted above, describing prayer as a “wonder.” When we discussed this, she was – as usual – less interested in my questions than in talking to me about her problems, and she had been explaining some recent family troubles and worries to me in between talking about other matters, such as religion and faith. At one point, I asked her if she prayed five times a day. Like Ni Yas, she did not hesitate to say “yes,” but she too, even more immediately than Ni Yas, began explaining why she did *not* always pray. Here, she explains how feeling troubled drives her away from making contact with God, even though she understands that it should drive her closer, in a search for relief from her problems. At the end of this passage, she makes a reference to previous conversations in which she had described her tendency to laugh out loud rather than directly express her troubled state of mind to others.

Ni Gan: I should get close to God, huh Greg? I don't, Greg, I keep my distance, Greg. Me saying – how is it? – my faith is stronger than other people's? I don't do that, Greg. It's not even strong. It's decent. I do believe – I have conviction, I do believe – it's like that. But I have a lot of problems to think about. To the point that I don't pray, I forget about it, Greg. For Ramadan supplies, how much does all that cost, Greg? You know I think about that. That's the problem. Imagine, Greg, I paid for [installing] the telephone – you know, last month, Greg – forty [thousand rupiah], Greg. Where can I get money? That's it.

GS: But if you're thinking a lot—

Ni Gan: I—

GS: —you're less—?

Ni Gan: [un] less observant.

GS: Yes. What's the reason?

Ni Gan: Greg, I just have maleh well up. It's as if I'm angry at God, I feel. Because, why is it that it comes down on me only – I have so many problems, Greg. I should, Greg, I should draw myself nearer to God, right, so that God relieves it – offers a path. But it's not like this, Greg. To the contrary, I don't draw closer. Yes, it's wrong – I know it's wrong. I'm certain I'm [un], I'm wrong, but what can I do, Greg? This heart in here truly isn't – Greg, it isn't calm. Yes, you say that, Greg, laughing, just laughing, people say. But it's a different laugh.

Ni Gan continues on for several minutes, complaining about her troubles, especially her financial troubles. If they were solved, she says she would be relieved of these obstacles and, “I wouldn't be sombong [arrogant], I wouldn't forget God. I would be the most diligent person at prayer, Greg.” I ask her if she needs that state of clam or tranquility in her heart in order to pray.

GS: To pray do you need that tranquility?

Ni Gan: Oh, yes, tranquility in the spirit, that's it.

GS: You need it?

Ni Gan: Yes, tranquility in our spirit, and only then can we get khusuak. That's apparent. Imagine, Greg, it's like this, no? Think about it, Greg. [I'm dealing with this family issue], my child is in school. My house is like this. [She gestures to the sparsely furnished, somewhat disorderly space around us.] My husband comes home at ten at night. Ask him, his motorcycle is broken, he says, doesn't know how, doesn't know why. It means I have a lot of problems, Greg. But what was it earlier? I laugh, Greg. After that, laughing, I just go insane, huh Greg? Huh, Greg? [laughs] I'm insane. I laugh, and I have a lot of problems. I'm really in a fix, huh, Greg?

A moment later, she makes her previously cited comments about the wonder of prayer. Following these comments a bit longer, however, reveals that the wonder is not easy for her to achieve:

GS: If you do pray, does it have an effect?

Ni Gan: It does.

GS: Do you feel it?

Ni Gan: I feel it.

GS: What's the effect?

Ni Gan: My spirit is calm. I'm calm inside, Greg, my heart is happy.

GS: What's the reason?

Ni Gan: The reason?

GS: Yes, what?

Ni Gan: Well, that is—that is the wonder [*keajaiban*] of prayer – that's it. As tangled up as my heart is, eh, I go pray – God willing my spirit will be calm. But that's what I get lazy about, Greg. My spirit is all messed up, I'm going to pray. I think I'm going to pray. Then I think of things again. So it feels like it's a waste to pray. I'm praying but my mind isn't on praying. I'm just wearing myself out bobbing up and down.

GS: Mmm. It has no effect because you're not calm – not—?

Ni Gan: I'm not calm, I'm not khusuak.

Like Ni Yas, Ni Gan finds herself in an impossible situation. She needs to pray because it is obligatory, and because it will carry her into a state of tranquility and relief from problems and anxiety. However, she is not tranquil and faces many problems, and therefore finds it impossible to pray in an effective manner. Her troubles multiply because her inability to pray means that she is sinning.

Why do some people (like Ni Gan and Ni Yas) find that their troubles prevent them from successfully praying, while others (like Da Eri) do not report this same difficulty? (Of course Da Eri, like many others who pray diligently, faces his own troubles in life – financial and otherwise.) Following Spiro (1987), we can say that this reflects a difference in the level of internalization of the idea that one must pray. All of my respondents displayed *some* emotional investment in the idea that praying was beneficial and right while not praying was harmful and wrong. That is, all of them could be said to have internalized these beliefs about prayer. According to Spiro's framework, however, it is only with an added fuel of real emotional saliency

that a person's motivations will be driven by such belief. Some of my respondents, seemed mostly uninterested in discussing prayer, and would only talk about it at my direct prompting. Da Luko would be an example of someone whose struggles and sense of self did not seem to significantly intersect with the issue of Islamic prayer. For Da Luko, whatever his ideas about prayer, these ideas seem to be organized cognitively so that they are "compartmentalized," relatively isolated and not forming rich connections to those things that frame his understanding of his daily life (1992). Emotional saliency was clearly lacking in cases like that of Da Luko.

Some of my respondents – like Ni Gan, for example – seem troubled enough by their own failures to pray that it is difficult to believe that the overall level of emotional saliency tied to prayer is lacking for them. Instead, it seems more likely that, for Ni Gan and some others, the kinds of emotional experiences attached to prayer are simply troubling. The things they "believe" do not necessarily match the things they experience. The result is that they find themselves unable to do what even they feel, at a significantly "deep" level, is necessary to do. This is somewhat different from the kind of "compartmentalization" discussed by Strauss (1992) because to understand it we need to look at the fact that the path from motivational force to actual behavior is not automatic. Tension and conflict between motivation and experience can intervene.²³

²³ In Strauss's (1992) example concerning working class men in Rhode Island who are apparently motivated by "breadwinner" model rather than the "success" model that they claim to believe in, sociological factors might provide one source of such a conflict between motivation and experience. That is, we could ask to what degree is the "success" model actually not motivating, and to what degree does it come into conflict with the realities of

I want to explore this suggestion further, although it must be made clear I will not attempt anything like a thorough explanation for why certain people pray and others do not. There are likely in any case to be multiple reasons for these differences in depth of internalization and in the openness of the path from motivation to practice. (One probable factor is the relative length and depth of the religious instruction a person has received.) I merely want to venture the suggestion that one piece of the puzzle here concerns the inherent tensions in the conceptualization of prayer as, on the one hand, a matter of prayer as a way to remove the self from its normal state and enter into something apart from the self that is perfect (“Islam”), and on the other hand a matter of a willful act of self transformation for which an individual must be completely responsible. Prayer promises that one can be removed from a false state of consciousness involving the suffering of the everyday world into a genuine state of tranquility, moral clarity, and perfection brought on by the presence of God; yet prayer also seems to require such states of tranquility and moral clarity to come from within the self and be genuine expressions of the individual heart. What can become troubling is the “genuine” nature of the state in question. It must be genuine; is it? Is one still troubled? Is one still in pain or does one still have immoral desires? For Ni Gan (as quoted in Chapter 4), responding to my inquires regarding her anger/annoyance at God, no matter what she does, her suffering still seems genuine to her:

being a working class man in Rhode Island? To what degree might defense mechanisms be involved in keeping the model cognitively isolated?

Ni Gan: According to the whole universe, well, I shouldn't think about it, Greg. "It's not a problem. Just forget about it. Let it be. The main thing is, I don't bother other people." Ah, but inside my heart of hearts, oh Greg, what is it? My brain, Greg, it thinks, "What is it that I've done? Why are things like this – people, going so far as lots of people being jealous of me, suspicious of me?" and all that. That is what I think. That's the little brain.

To illustrate further how this tension manifests itself in some people's experience of prayer, we can examine one last case, that of Da Dan. We've met him several times before. Da Dan is about thirty-five, and he supports his family by buying and selling common household goods from his home now that previous his business ventures have failed. In Chapter 2, I recounted what he had to say about becoming a petty thief when he was younger. As we have seen several times, Da Dan's ideas are somewhat unorthodox. For example, he believes that hell consists merely of the pain human being suffer by not following God's prescription for living properly. God does not command people to do anything, he says. Instead, he believes that people who do not live piously end up torturing themselves in this life and in the afterlife, where they will yearn for integration with the divine but be unable to achieve it if they have not already oriented themselves in God's direction during their time in the world.

I interviewed Da Dan in his home, a small but newly build structure composed largely of used materials, such as the thin wooden boards that make up the walls. We would sit on the sofa in the main room, drinking tea. Da Dan's opinions about prayer were, like most of his opinions, quite strong, though delivered in his usual relaxed and emotionally understated manner. Yet he was as adamant as anyone I spoke with

regarding the effects of praying. “When Muslims pray, pray the right way, understanding what is said – understanding prayer...after praying they feel strong, Greg. Very strong. Without any problems. All problems disappear,” he told me. He elaborated on this in several ways. For example, such prayer would eliminate all illness:

Da Dan: People who pray are never sick.

GS: If they pray.

Da Dan: If we pray we won't ever be sick. Never any kind of illness at all. Whether you're a farmer, a businessperson – if you pray properly, you'll never be sick. [un] any kind of illness. [Prayer] is not something onerous, it's just, “Thank God.” It's received by God – the pain disappears. Because – why? The soul is freed of cares [plong].

After hearing a number of such claims from Da Dan, I was thus somewhat surprised at his response when I shifted the conversation from the topic of prayer to that of his personal practice of prayer.

GS: In a normal day, or for example from – in a week, usually how many times do you pray?

Da Dan: Right now I'm prayer free.

GS: Mmm – free?

Da Dan: Free. It's been four months – it's been five months. For reasons that aren't clear. I don't understand. There's no reason.

GS: There's no reason?

Da Dan: No – it's just human stupidity, including mine. I know what the advantages of prayer are. It's our good deed – and I don't pray. That's what's confusing to me. I don't understand it myself, how can I be that way? Why must I [be this way]? Whereas I myself know what the advantages of prayer are. What's more, in economic circumstances like this, with lots of problems, [I know] what the advantages of prayer are. I know, but I just don't do it. This is what surprises me. I don't even understand it.

GS: Did you used to pray diligently or not?

Da Dan: Just the usual. The usual.

GS: Mmm – but these past seven – these past five months, you don't anymore?

Da Dan: Almost a year.

GS: Almost a year.

Da Dan: More than a year, maybe ... that's it – it's nothing, a stupid thing. That's all.

GS: But the reason isn't – it's not clear?

Da Dan: It's not clear. Sometimes it does emerge, if it's nighttime there emerges a desire to pray again. Suddenly, later it's daytime and I forget about it. That's what I do routinely. I promise to pray again tomorrow, pray again tomorrow – always the same old thing.

GS: When you pray is there an impact on, uh – your thoughts?

Da Dan: Uh...

GS: Or your emotions?

Da Dan: If it's real prayer, Greg. That's probably – now I don't pray. If I pray, if I truly pray, if it's like climbing a ladder – that is me at the very top. There is no – it's released – gone. All problems are gone. There are no – in a human's life, if he truly prays, he has no problems. His thoughts are clear, his soul is healthy. But if it isn't done – this is what surprises me. That is what I don't understand about myself.

GS: You often think about it, ask how come you don't, or no?

Da Dan: Often – very often. It's just that no answer – I can't answer.

GS: None?

Da Dan: Yes.

GS: Yes.

Da Dan: Yes, and yet I've experienced it myself. Praying – if it's real prayer, I've been released from every problem, and achieved happiness – I have.

GS: Yes, you've felt it?

Da Dan: I have – I have – but to repeat it again, maybe it's a devil, maybe. I don't mean that I'm blaming a devil, clearly I'm blaming myself. I have no idea what it is, right? But it's not – I myself don't understand it.

Da Dan describes himself as being “free” of prayer for a number of months at least (the length of time keeps growing the more he discusses it).²⁴ Throughout all of

²⁴ Margaret Rance (personal communication) points out that Da Dan's language here sounds like that of an addict discussing how long they have refrained from indulging their addiction. The idea of being “free” (*perai*) of prayer does strike me as unusual. It is not something I heard from anyone else in West Sumatra. I am uncertain if Da Dan's language draws from

our conversations, no matter how many times or how many different ways I approached the issue, Da Dan expressed complete mystification at his own behavior. He expressed no doubt whatsoever regarding the efficacy of prayer, and claimed that he had experienced its power for himself – when the prayer was “real.” A simple, and in some ways undoubtedly correct conclusion, would be that Da Dan simply has not internalized his ideas about prayer to the extent that they motivate his actions. Yet what exactly is missing from Da Dan’s engagement with prayer that leads to this disconnect between his beliefs and his motivation, and leaves him so puzzled?

I merely want to suggest that part of the answer may lie in the way Da Dan has framed his understanding of the nature of prayer. As I have already indicated, Da Dan places great emphasis on the active role that individuals play in creating their own punishments and rewards. Somewhat idiosyncratically, he insists on the idea that God does not actively punish human beings for their sins, but instead merely informs human beings (in the form of “Islam”) how they can realize their full value and live without suffering. Such notions are a logical extension of ideas that are more widely shared in West Sumatra: to realize moral personhood, each individual must work to transform their own consciousness by connecting with, and submitting to, God. This is paradoxical (can it be both God and the will of the individual self that effect a transformation?). Da Dan resolves the paradox by insisting that *really* the entire

Indonesian discourses of addiction, however. If it does, I remain puzzled as to the significance.

process takes place within the individual self. The miraculous influence of God, as something from outside of the self, disappears completely.²⁵

This becomes clear when Da Dan elaborates further on his understanding of prayer. For example, in the following passage, he offers a psychological interpretation of prayer, explaining that the transformations involved in praying (as miraculous as they may be) do not result from any influence from or integration with a power greater than the self, but rather from a process of “suggestion” that takes place entirely within the individual.²⁶

Da Dan: Because in praying there is a suggestion. It’s like people studying magic. It’s like people studying magic, it’s a suggestion to our own selves. We – because in our everyday misdeeds, that’s already a lot of misdeeds. In prayer, they are spoken, discussed with God. I admit my guilt, I face You. I admit my guilt, You the omnipotent forgive it. Please give me guidance, please give me strength. That is – that’s the substance of prayer. Praise, ask for help, praise, ask for help. If we have prayed, finally we’ve asked for help, there’s that suggestion that we are strong. [...] It’s done as if when we pray it is received, heard – we’re speaking with someone else. This is a suggestion to ourselves. Very strong. If someone prays he is truly very strong. Strong, not meaning macho, not like all that, just mentally–

GS: Mentally.

Da Dan: –very strong. Because there’s no burden – there isn’t any burden. In our daily lives there are burdens, right? What about tomorrow, what about the day after, what about [un] – what about this, what about that? But if a person prays properly, after praying, it’s gone. Up until the afternoon prayer – midday prayer – gone. Up until the sunset prayer – gone. The evening prayer, gone, and we sleep again. Midnight, pray again. Gone – this is

²⁵ At another point, Da Dan suggests that prayer is basically the same thing as Christian confession, explaining that it involves the person engaged in prayer expressing their moral state to God.

²⁶ Ni Tasi also pointed out to me that prayer might be a matter of “suggestion.” She was much less certain about this than Da Dan. We have seen above that Ni Tasi struggles with her own difficulties in being properly pious. She does, however, pray regularly.

suggestion. But a person has to pray like this, while if the prayer isn't proper [*betul*] – this is just wasted praying. He thinks praying is for God's benefit, but it's not. It's for our own benefit. That's why a lot of people who pray are still thieves. People who pray still lie. That's because they don't know what's being conveyed.

GS: No – right.

Da Dan: The essence of prayer is suggestion – that's all. We – “I turn my face towards You, Allah, please help, I beg Your forgiveness for all of my wrongs, please help me here, help me there, You are where I make my request” – that's it. “You are the Holiest” – that's it – nothing else. So it's no more than suggestion. I saw there was a book. Who wrote it? It was a white person, right? A French person. I saw that for health, it's suggestion too. Mantras that are like that, too. For instance, now I have a stomachache – ahh, “I don't have a stomach ache” – that's what I think about – a stomachache – “don't have a stomach ache.” That's it, right?

Like Da Eri, quoted earlier in this chapter, Da Dan refers to the idea of “magic” to explain how a person can come to believe in something. (Like Da Eri, too, he is not referring to supernatural phenomena, but rather to a magic show, or sleight of hand. He uses the word “magic.”) However, whereas Da Eri had compared elements of everyday subjectivity that are in conflict with Islam – such as witnessing the power of an evil spirit – to the kind of shallow “belief” a person has in a magic trick, Da Dan reverses the comparison entirely. To him, faith in the power of God to transform the self is what is comparable to belief in a magic trick. The metaphor is the same, but the way Da Dan uses it suggests that the power of prayer is in fact only an illusion. It is one thing to *dismiss* as unreal something that one has determined is an illusion,

but how is a person like Da Dan supposed to truly *believe* in something he has determined is an illusion? Da Dan asks the impossible of himself.²⁷

Ritual Prayer and the Genuine Self

In a recent article, Saba Mahmood (2001) has used an ethnographic study of Islamic prayer as practiced in Egypt to examine the relationship between “spontaneity” and “conventionality” in the performance of ritual, and particularly in the role of emotion in ritual. Her insights are helpful in bringing into relief some of the material I have presented here, and to serve as a foil for the perspective I am offering. Mahmood focuses on a women’s piety movement in Cairo, and argues that their conceptions of prayer call into question the nature of the oppositions assumed by some theories of ritual. One approach to ritual, for which Mahmood cites Turner (e.g., 1969) as a representative, argues that ritual orders and channels emotional experiences that arise spontaneously in everyday life but cannot be expressed in everyday interaction. Another approach to ritual, for which Mahmood primarily uses Tambiah

²⁷ Of course it may just as well be impossible to expect God to relieve all of one’s suffering and extinguish all of one’s immoral desires as well. Like Ni Gan, Da Dan mentions the idea of blaming God, although he does so defensively. We had discussed the concept of “disappointment” (*kecewa* – which as explained in Chapter 5 bears a close relationship with words for “anger”) earlier in our interview, but it still seemed rather abrupt when Da Dan brought it up again in the middle of our discussion over his lack of prayer: “Basically, after praying, and later after only missing once, after that you already get lazy. Then you miss twice, miss three times, and then you’re just lazy. It’s not – that disappointment [we talked about] earlier – there wasn’t any. Because all human beings have no reason to be disappointed in God. None. Supposing a human being says that he is disappointed in God, it means that he’s crazy. Yes, according to my way of thinking, there is nothing God does that is disappointing. Because, after all, it’s humans that waste it – that’s it. Me, for example. Not another person as an example. Take me as an example: too much wasting stuff like that. But with a reason I – just because of a reason that isn’t certain. That’s what is hard.”

(e.g., 1985) to illustrate, instead argues that ritual imposes orderly states of performance to substitute for the chaotic and disorderly emotions that arise spontaneously in everyday life. Both of these approaches, she writes, assume an opposition between what is everyday, pragmatic, and spontaneous, and what is formal, prescribed, and conventional. That is, they both depend on an opposition between what arises genuinely from within the self and what is imposed upon the self from outside.

In contrast, Mahmood argues that the women in the piety movement understand the daily prayers to be “a key site for purposefully molding their intentions, emotions, and desires in accord with orthodox standards of Islamic piety” (828), thus blurring the distinction between any kind of spontaneous or genuine states of self and any imposed or conventional states. The ritual of prayer, she says, is seen by these women as a way to actually create new kinds of everyday, spontaneous states of self that conform to the requirements of convention. This, she writes, “problematizes the ‘naturalness’ of emotions as well as the ‘conventionality’ of ritual action, calling into question any a priori distinction between formal (conventional) behavior and spontaneous (intentional) conduct” (828).

The women discussed by Mahmood reject what they see as the empty performance of Islamic identity involved in the approach to prayer practiced by many Egyptians. Instead, they place a great emphasis on the moral state of the heart, echoing the concerns of many of my respondents. Like my respondents, too, they therefore see the subjective state in which prayer is offered as central to the act of

prayer: prayer should be performed out of a spontaneous desire to pray, and should be done in a whole-hearted and completely focused manner. A state of prayer should be the genuine (spontaneous) state of the self.

Like people in West Sumatra, too, these women see the state of prayer as the ideal moral state, and see that ideal state as an Islamic one – that is, one of complete submission to God. It is a state in which God fills one's consciousness completely, so that everything else that otherwise appears (but is not truly) real in everyday life is crowded out, becoming less than real. This does not only mean that prayer is seen as a site for shaping everyday subjectivity in this way (as Mahmood initially implies), but also as a site of reflection of that subjectivity (a point less often made by people I spoke with in West Sumatra). Mahmood lingers over an extended ethnographic example in which women from the piety movement instruct a young woman who complains that she has trouble getting herself to pray. The advice they give to her is that because prayer is a matter of the heart, she must *want* to pray, and that in order to cultivate the spontaneous desire to pray, she must endeavor at every moment of her everyday life to think and act in terms of God and piety. Her every thought and reaction, she is told, should be oriented to God. In other words, they suggest that in order for her to solve her reluctance to pray, any gap between the everyday and the state of prayer should be completely collapsed, and that this can only be achieved by a continual effort to place oneself in a pious state. Once that occurs, she will spontaneously and genuinely want to pray. For these women, the crux of the matter is

less that prayer shapes everyday subjectivity and more precisely that prayer should grow out of, and ultimately be fused with, everyday subjectivity.

Mahmood tempers the conclusions to be drawn from this by stating that she does not wish to dismiss all oppositions between the spontaneous and the conventional, but rather to suggest that the conceptual relationship between what is spontaneous in the self and what is imposed on the self may vary, and that this in turn may have political implications for the meaning of concepts like “freedom.” She contrasts the conception of prayer offered by the women in her study with other conceptions of prayer that circulate in Egypt, such as the suggestion that prayer can help an individual to realize the ability to become the kind of critical thinker that one needs to be as a modern citizen. Thus, she concludes, we must attend to “the variable relationships that formal conventionalized behavior (such as ritual) articulate with different conceptions of the self under particular regimes of truth, power, and authority” (845).

In trying to understand practices of Islamic prayer in West Sumatra, my concerns are somewhat different, but it is useful for me to follow Mahmood to a point. As the ethnography I have already presented makes clear, in West Sumatra prayer is indeed understood as a site at which what genuinely arises from the self and what is imposed on the self are supposed to meet: a state of prayer must be *both* completely genuine and spontaneous, and also constituted entirely by the conventions of bodily and emotional submission to God. It is this point of intersection between these two dimensions of self – self as an autonomous actor, and self as constituted by its

relationships with something larger – that I find most compelling about prayer.

Mahmood shows us that elements of these two are entangled in prayer and are not easily separable. What is “spontaneously” generated from within the self need not be in opposition to what is conventional. This is a key point.

For Mahmood, the idea that a person’s genuine self is not necessarily in opposition to conventionality or something imposed from outside will, calls into questions liberal notions of individual freedom.

How might the notion of freedom be recast in such a context where the distinction between a subject's true desires and social conventions cannot be so easily assumed, where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for a subject achieving its potentiality? What kind of politics would be deemed desirable and viable in a discursive tradition that regards conventions (socially prescribed performances) as necessary to the self's realization? (845)

The questions are valid, but perhaps the implied dichotomy between an autonomous individual self and a self constituted by its submission to something external is offered too starkly. After all, as Mahmood’s own ethnography shows, such oppositions are not absolute. Even the discursive tradition explored by Mahmood (that of the Cairo women’s piety movement) suggests that while submission to convention is necessary for the self’s realization, it is not sufficient: it must be accomplished through individual agency. A conception of self that suggests that submission to convention is both necessary and sufficient would invite a sort of fundamentalism that seems directly at odds with the goals of the women. That is, it suggests that people should be forced to submit, forced to transform themselves into moral persons. This would

invite the kind of empty rituals of identity, absent any “genuine” feeling, of which they were so critical.

Rather than suggest the possibility of radically different conceptions of freedom, it may be more fruitful to take Mahmood’s insights and conclude that all such notions of freedom – and, more than this, conceptions of self – must try to reconcile the fact that autonomy and integration necessarily intermingle. Except perhaps at the most extreme margins, is it not true that all politics regard both of these things as necessary to the self’s realization? It is only the ways that this intermingling is expressed, celebrated, or – at times – denied, that differs.

In the last few years (mostly since the completion of my fieldwork), there has been a slow push in West Sumatran government to legally mandate certain forms of Islamic piety. A number of districts and cities within the province have passed laws requiring children entering a certain level of schooling (or, in some cases, people entering higher education) to prove their ability to read the Koran, or in some cases to demonstrate that they know how to pray. Similar laws have been passed deeming these things to be prerequisites for marriage. Girls and women in school, or working in government offices have been told, under similar laws, that they must wear headscarves.²⁸ In February 2007, it was announced that provincial law encouraging

²⁸ Discussions about veiling in West Sumatra follow some of the same patterns as discussions of prayer. It is generally considered morally proper for women to cover their heads. However, only something like half of the women in Bukittinggi do so on an everyday basis, and this represents a far greater portion of the population than that which veiled as recently as ten or fifteen years ago. Despite the laws mentioned above, there is widespread sentiment that veiling or not veiling must be made as an individual choice, and cannot be forced (cf. Brenner 1996). Some people even told me that they were offended by young women who veiled despite behaving improperly in other ways or wearing inappropriately revealing clothing along

similar requirements throughout all of West Sumatra (with the possible exceptions of the mostly non-Islamic islands off the Sumatran coast) will take effect in 2008.

Such attempts to create moral persons by directly forcing piety are still rather restrained, laxly enforced, and ambivalently received in West Sumatra. As I have made clear, there is a very strong countering pressure to keep religious practice “genuine” by ensuring that it is a matter of the individual heart. Compelling individuals to be pious risks undermining piety altogether by making pious practices the kind of empty rituals of identity that bothered the women Mahmood studied in Cairo. It also bothered so many of the people I talked to in Bukittinggi, who constantly complained that so much of public religious life was hypocritical. For example, recall from Chapter 4 Da Palo’s bitter criticism of his wife for haranguing him into being more morally upright: she was just like the violent Islamic fundamentalist organization Jemaah Islamiyah, trying to coerce him into something that is only worthwhile if it is chosen freely.

Mahmood is able to pose the question of politics starkly because she is concerned with how a political position might be supported by a particular “discursive tradition,” as indicated in the quotation above. This sort of question sits uncomfortably inside the frame of self, emotion, and ritual that she has imposed on her material. Mahmood’s discussion ultimately veers away from an attempt at understanding the relationship between self, emotion and the ritual performance of

with the veil. This was thought to indicate hypocrisy, something worse than failing to veil. Ni Yas, for example, argued to me that a women should wear a veil only because her heart is clean: they should “veil inside” before putting a veil on the outside, she said.

prayer.²⁹ It instead compares anthropological theories of ritual with a religious ideology expressed by the women in the piety movement. The “different conceptions of self” that Mahmood sees as implicated in the way that conventional and spontaneous dimensions of prayer are articulated under various regimes of truth and power, are artifacts of such ideologies. The rhetorical (and political) power of such ideology may be very real, but it also tends to mask certain tensions and draw our attention away from the actual practice of ritual itself. It draws our attention away from the very entanglement I find so compelling, focusing instead on a too-neat resolution to the tensions involved in that entanglement.

While the goal of the women in the piety movement is to achieve a perpetual state of prayer, uniting conventional and spontaneous subjectivity, it seems unlikely that this goal can ever be adequately achieved. If we turn our attention away from this ideological goal we may instead see the larger problem with which the women are engaged. This, I would suggest, is the persistent tension between the spontaneous and the conventional, the impossibility of ever fully integrating these two dimensions of self no matter, despite their constant entanglement. This is the same struggle that is apparent in West Sumatran conversations regarding prayer.

Mahmood writes:

In other words, repeated bodily behavior, with the appropriate intention (however simulated in the beginning), leads to the reorientation of one’s motivations, desires, and emotions until they become a part of one’s ‘natural’ disposition. Notably, in this economy of discipline, disparity between one’s intention and bodily gestures is not interpreted as a disjunction between outward social performance and one’s

²⁹ In this vein, Mahmood acknowledges that she is not offering a new theory of ritual.

‘genuine’ inner feeling—rather, it is considered to be a sign of an inadequately formed self that requires further discipline and training to bring the two into harmony in accord with a teleological model of self-formation. (2001: 843)

It seems reasonable that, given this scheme, the self must always be inadequately formed. Recall the advice to the young woman who had trouble praying: she must put herself in a state of piety *at every single moment of her life*. Mahmood does not recount the woman’s reaction to this impossible advice, nor does she address whether the women in the piety movement find themselves able to realize it. Rather than just reading the ideology of the women in the Egyptian piety movement as a challenge to the notion that “spontaneity” and “conventionality” exist in opposition, we may also profitably read it as *predicated* on the problematic existence of the tension that remains between them, and the struggle to make sense of it. In West Sumatra, at the very least, such tension is crystallized around the ritual of prayer.

As I argued in Chapter 3, it is a mistake to move too quickly from culturally dominant conceptions of self, or of what the self should be, to conclusions about subjectivity. The different selves that Mahmood is addressing are selves that are represented in rather tidy narratives, ones that on the surface deny the existence of the very tensions they appear created to address. Wikan (1995) has offered one of the more powerful rejections of such a theoretical approach, arguing that “it is through acts, primarily, rather than narrative that people fashion themselves” (266), and that such acts are oriented toward the immediately experienced challenges that people face in the course of living. Selves cannot be contained by narratives of the self, she argues.

Though initially aiming her critique toward theories that conflate “narrative” with self,³⁰ Wikan makes it clear that she has in mind any anthropological interest in self that focuses primarily on the way self is represented rather than lived. She writes, “Whether by prostituting ourselves, or giving a party, or the plethora of humdrum acts through which we engage the world, it is through such engagement, not by means of *representation* or narration, that we construct the parameters of ourselves and our world” (266; emphasis added). Her arguments suggests that we will in fact understand more about self by not talking about “self” at all – and thus not being tempted to fall into a discussion of narratives – and instead attend to “lived predicaments” (277).

To a certain point, my critique of Mahmood follows a path cleared by Wikan’s theoretical broadside. Certainly I mean to suggest that we must look past the representations of self packaged in discourses on prayer and ask why those representations are produced at all: to what kinds of lived predicaments do they speak? At the same time, in my own analysis of Islamic prayer in Bukittinggi, representations play a crucial role. I am not convinced that engagement with the world can be so easily disentangled from such representations. After all, the shape of our “lived predicaments” does not spring, fully formed, from practice. Some predicaments – and certainly this seems to be true for those predicaments managed through ritual practices, such as Islamic prayer – are predicaments of meaning. What would

³⁰ As I have also noted in Chapter 5, Wikan defines “narrative” as speech acts that incorporate “a sense of *plight* into which *characters* have fallen on account of *intentions* gone awry” (1995: 264; emphasis in original). This allows her to sharply define a term that is often, as she notes, used without adequate clarity. However, it is somewhat odd that she goes through the trouble of defining the term so narrowly considering that the scope of her critique is in fact quite broad, and even goes beyond attention to “narrative.”

“engaging” (or self-consciously not engaging) in ritual prayer be if it did not involve forms of representation, attempts by people to communicate to themselves and others?

Such representation need not be neat or settled, and I have suggested here that in the case of the practice of Islamic prayer they may even be unsettling and conflictual. They may also be inadequate. In Jackson’s (2005: xxvii) terms, there are times when experience defies our ability to organize it into something of “significance” (narratives, representations) leaving us with a “sense” of that experience that is meaningful but cannot be contained in logical explanations and communications. As he points out, this is the case when disturbing experiences are said not make sense – much as Da Dan claims that his inability to pray has “no reason.” Yet none of this is to say that significations or representations are *only* the kinds of after-the-fact retellings that are used to paper over the immediacy of direct experience, and that form the central target of Wikan’s attack. Representations too can be part of the constitution of experience, including the experience of self. Certainly in her own ethnographic work (e.g., 1990) Wikan attends not only to engagement with the world as practice and direct experience, but also with engagement through the construction of meaning, through representations that people make to themselves and others. We must attend to both the “sense” and “signification” of experience.

There is more to say about this. By this point, however, we have already traveled significantly beyond the topic of Islamic prayer. This discussion invites us consider more broadly the ethnographic material I have offered throughout this

dissertation. So, before continuing with our eyes pointed at this larger landscape, we need to leave this chapter behind and move on to the dissertation's conclusion.

CONCLUSION to the DISSERTATION

In the opening remarks of this dissertation, I set myself the task of providing an ethnography of moral personhood among Minangkabau people in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, Indonesia. In the intervening pages, I have worked to communicate something about life there in the early 21st century, and especially to say something about the ways that people there tend to imagine what it means to be human and to be faced with trying to make sense of, and produce value out of, the human condition. In examining the lives and worlds of others, ethnography has the potential to act as a particularly rich contribution to a larger conversation between human beings interested in understanding something about each other and themselves. It seems particularly important at this moment for that conversation to include exchanges between people in Muslim societies and people in non-Muslim societies. My hope is that the preceding ethnography, if only refracting glimpses of life in Bukittinggi, offers more than the conclusions I present here can encapsulate.

My first objective in this conclusion will be to review some of the psychocultural generalizations that I think can be taken from reading this ethnography, linking together some of the pieces of the dissertation. I have spent much of this dissertation describing cultural patterns, and I summarize some of these here. However, as I cautioned in those remarks of the dissertation, my discussion has not yielded a description of a fully integrated and internally coherent “Minangkabau” cultural system for defining the nature of persons and finding value in them. I see

these patterns less as texts (Geertz 1973b) than as a language used to produce such texts. They provide a certain kind of structure, a lexicon and a grammar, and as speakers learn the language they also become comfortable with well-worn turns of phrase. Still, the language never provides the actual sentences that are spoken or the specific stories that they string together. A language requires speakers, and ultimately it exists only in the particular instances of its use by those speakers. Speakers no doubt rely on and come up against the limitations of the pre-existing elements of a language, yet they may always come up with new combinations and innovations.

This leads me to my second objective in this conclusion, which is to provide some insight into the relationship I have asserted – sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly – between cultural patterns and selves. This latter, more theoretically oriented objective is important because if we leave out either culture or selves from this larger conversation, we risk fundamentally misunderstanding what the lives and worlds of others are telling us about being human. What I offer here will not be a complete theory of self (or of culture), but it will serve to suggest the theoretical directions in which this ethnography helps to push us. I make the case for seeing selves as formed by processes that pull together multiple kinds of experience and integrate them into the living of a particular life. I argue that cultural representations play a powerful role in this process of integration by providing resources through which enduring contradictions of selfhood can be expressed and managed. In this way I try to situate a focus on public expressions of personhood, such as that pursued by

Mauss (1985), within a broader approach to self and experience, such as that suggest by Hallowell (1955).

Minangkabau Moral Personhood

We should keep in mind how people in Bukittinggi fulfill their basic needs. For most of the population in Bukittinggi, survival involves a mixture of individual endeavor in a competitive marketplace and reliance on kinship relations and the resources controlled through them. Men are generally expected to move away from their natal homes, and often are not able to rely directly on pusako (lineage-controlled) property for an income or a place to live. Moving into their wives' pusako homes, or establishing a new home for their nuclear family after marriage, demands finding sources of income, and so men have a particular motivation to become involved in the marketplace. Higher education is not available for most people, and the kinds of work available in Bukittinggi are limited. Most men and many women seek to earn a living through developing a skill (such as driving or sewing clothing) and competing with others for jobs or clients, or through engaging in petty trade and competing with others for customers. Another option is to migrate to another part of Indonesia (or abroad). Nevertheless, much of the population remains tied to Bukittinggi, relying on pusako property (their "own" or their wives') for a place to live, or in some cases for income through farming, pawning, or selling land. Since pusako property is controlled by lineages, the village (or neighborhood) based kinship system remains a vital part of life for many people.

Public interactions tend to involve symbolic expressions, and often pragmatic realizations, of social integration. This includes the practice of ritualized norms of social interaction, the avoidance of overt conflict with or difference from others, and the avoidance of expression of strong emotions or desires that might direct attention toward an individual. Most overt expressions of superiority over others are especially avoided – or, when they occur, draw particular scrutiny. The commitment to integration is often deeply felt. Violations of these norms often result emotional reactions that motivate attempts to repair or disengaging from the improper interaction. Such reactions may take the form of shame or more vaguely defined feelings of uneasiness; they may also take the form of feelings of contempt or disgust when others commit the violations. This depth of feeling reflects a sense that something significant – some authentic part of the self – is at stake in these attempts to integrate with others.

This is true despite the existence of a widespread consciousness about the limited nature of social integration. Much of social interaction is even understood to be something of a self-conscious performance, and there is a great sensitivity to the idea that such performances may serve to mask deeper truths about a person's commitments and intentions. While the performance of social integration is thus understood and experienced as an authentic arena for the realization of moral personhood, it is also only a partial one. People engage in a great deal of effort to manage their interactions with others so that they can adequately meet the demands for social integration, and imagine that others engage in this effort as well.

The interest in integration with others is matched by an equally compelling interest in autonomy. Self-consciousness and careful manipulation of social interactions is motivated in part by the sense that such integration, despite its essential importance, is dangerous and needs to be highly regulated. Deep connections to others involve risks: that one will lose control of oneself as those connections work their way deeper into one's life, and also that one will violate the boundaries of another and damage relationships with them. Such anxieties are sometimes expressed in supernatural beliefs about being influenced by the devil or attacked by evil spirits (especially if one has violated their boundaries), or about being attacked supernaturally by a person with mystical powers, but most often these anxieties are directed toward daily interactions with other people. Efforts to maintain boundaries and protect oneself from danger create a rich sphere of "personal" thoughts and experiences that are kept out of direct interaction with others, and may be understood as an alternate authentic locus of the self.

The idea that public social interaction is self-consciously limited and controlled combined with the concerns over the possibilities of negative influence, not surprisingly result in a great deal of anxiety about the intentions of others. There is a great deal of effort put into reading indirect signs that might reveal those intentions. It is assumed that others are engaging in this same effort, and people send messages to others through indirect means as well. The result is that communication often involves a great deal of interpretive work on the part of "listeners." The personal sphere thus becomes an arena in which individuals can perform a great deal of creative

work in understanding and manipulating their identities. This cuts in more than one way, depending on how an individual fills in the ambiguities inherent in communications from others. Individuals may find evidence that they are under constant scrutiny, being criticized or attacked; but they may also find evidence that they are more powerful and more valuable than is readily apparent in daily life.

In thinking through the push and pull of these interactions between persons and the world, Minangkabau people employ a range of conceptual tools. These concepts speak to a range of bodily, emotional, and cognitive states, and to the ways that these link individuals to the world – that is, to other individuals, to the community, to God. These states may arise or be altered by interaction with the world and they may motivate action in the world. The variety of these concepts, the contradictions between them, and the flexibility with which they are used do not point to a static cultural conception of persons, but instead to a dynamic and active use of concepts by people trying to understand and sometimes rework their experiences of living. Much of this is motivated by moral concerns: faced with this push and pull of forces, what should (and what can) a person do? Individuals pay particular attention to trying to understand the nature of moral failings, reconciling these with a desire to see themselves as inherently valuable. Evil and immorality are often interpreted as the failure of the links and borders between the self and the world to be properly managed.

Many of these conceptual tools are derived from Islamic discourses and practices. I have argued that the tensions between integration and autonomy, and attempts to reconcile them, are crystallized in Minangkabau society in the arena of

Islam, and particularly in its most notable practice, prayer. This is perhaps not surprising considering Islam's development in the context of tension between autonomy and structures of authority in the Middle East (Lindholm 1996).

Ideologically, Islam offers people ways to imagine that these tensions are reconciled through the transcendence of God, reaching past the everyday experience of living. In practice, however, such transcendence is often elusive. Islamic ideologies and practices can cause pain just as they can offer the comfort of possible resolutions.

Many of the cultural patterns I have described above have close parallels in other Indonesian and Malay societies. Of particular note are the similarities between these patterns and those found by other ethnographers who have examined Indonesian cultures from the perspective of individuals and their experiences in living, carrying out some form of person-centered ethnography. For example, the careful management of emotions, anxiety about the influence of outside forces and the intentions of others, and an overtly expressed concern for integration with others tempered by a (sometimes) more subtle push to defend one's autonomy are all cultural patterns that resemble those discussed by Hollan and Wellenkamp (1994) based on their research among Torajan villagers on the eastern Indonesian island of Sulawesi. Wikan's (1990) examination of Balinese people's careful management of emotions and social surfaces, and anxieties regarding the intentions of others and the vulnerabilities of the self offers an example from central Indonesia that resonates with the ethnography presented here as well. Torajans are primarily animists and, relatively recently, Christians; Balinese society is powerfully shaped by its particular brand of Hinduism,

although Wikan did spend a significant amount of time among Balinese minority Muslims. There is no doubt that Minangkabau psychocultural patterns have become enmeshed in Islamic conceptual tools, but they clearly have a foundation in more widespread regional patterns that predate Islam's influence. This opens up a wider issue about the scope of relevance of my ethnographic data, and one which I would like to address before moving on to the more theoretically oriented section of this conclusion.

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I described the conceptual division in West Sumatra between the *kampung* (the village, the neighborhood) and the *pasa* (the city, the marketplace). People in Bukittinggi use this distinction as a geographic one, but also to identify a contrast between different ways of life that entail different kinds of moral orientations: traditional vs. modern, sociocentric vs. individualistic, social integration vs. autonomy. Ideologically, *kampung* life is more tightly connected to Minangkabau adat and ethnic identity, and references a world dominated by the obligations and rights associated with kinship, and by daily interactions in a small, relatively egalitarian, face-to-face community. The *pasa* is seen as the site where those traditional Minangkabau ways of life become corrupted by the forces of the outside world, fueling the individualist pursuit of wealth and status.

From the perspective of the population of most of West Sumatra, people living in Bukittinggi (even in its *kampung* neighborhoods) live in the *pasa*. I mention this here because it raises questions about whether what I have presented here is really an ethnography of Minangkabau society at all or rather whether the object of my study

has been something corrupted, hollowed out by years of colonialism, integration with the Indonesian state, the forces of the marketplace, the growth of urbanism and expansion of transportation, communication and other phenomena associated with the journey into modernity. Such a challenge is particularly relevant to those points in my dissertation in which I have contrasted my own understanding of selves and morality in Bukittinggi with that of other ethnographers of Minangkabau (e.g., Errington 1984) who have conducted fieldwork in more rural settings and during earlier (though still modern) eras. Where I have resisted the idea that Minangkabau selves are essentially relational or sociocentric or Minangkabau styles of interpretation are fundamentally aesthetic, a reader might wonder if this is because Minangkabau culture has already changed, or become fused with something else from the outside. Is the *pasa*, and its related celebration of autonomy as a good to be realized, simply a symptom of the spread of modernity?

There are two responses. The first is that I do not claim that what I have offered applies equally well to all of Minangkabau society across time and space, and the particular ethnographic setting should of course be kept in mind in trying to understand it. The second response is that we should nevertheless avoid the unfortunate reification of the divisions represented in conceptual splits between *kampung* and *pasa*, or tradition and modernity. This assumes that the latter categories are new, foreign invaders on a pure body: where there was once only *kampung* there is now *pasa* as well. As I have discussed above, traditional Minangkabau society, to the extent that we can identify it at all, is itself very much a

product of these same “corrupting” forces (Kahn 1993). It is really only in imagining a mythical, pure past that the elements of life associated with the *pasa* get pushed outside of “Minangkabau” life. It is in imagining this past that people thought it important to tell me that the word “*pasa*” was itself a foreign import.

There is no pure Minang culture with which today’s Bukittinggi can be contrasted, no pure *kampung*, no original time of origin. As far back as the historical record takes us, West Sumatra has always been in the process of change, and trade, marketplaces, and migration that brought individuals (especially men) outside the village have always mixed with village life in the experiences of Minangkabau people (Abdullah 1985, Benda-Beckmann 1979, Dobbin 1983, Kahn 1980 and 1993, Kato 1982). Competition and individualistic economic endeavors have characterized West Sumatran village life as well as life in its more urban centers (Kahn 1980, 1993). This does not mean that there have not been changes to the moral orientations, conceptions of personhood, and styles of interpretation prevalent in West Sumatra. It does suggest that there is no reason to believe that the elements categorized as “*pasa*” are ones that developed only in contrast to a Minang past in which only “*kampung*” elements had existed.

The position and importance of Islam in West Sumatra undermines any easy divide between modern and traditional Minangkabau society as well. Islam is neither *kampung* nor *pasa*. It disturbs the easy divisions between the two, having arrived through the *pasa* in historical memory and become firmly implanted in the *kampung*. We have seen that it is conceptualized as set against *kampung adat*, and yet at the

same time as being at adat's foundations. Islam became central in Minangkabau society when it offered a way to reorder a society in which structures of authority were becoming uncertain and new economic opportunities were emerging. Islam's framework for imagining equal and autonomous actors coming together in the marketplace took hold. We have seen that society was not entirely reordered by these convulsions. The Padri Wars ended with both Islam's firm implantation in West Sumatran society but also with the defeat of its more radical and revolutionary possibilities. There was nevertheless a reordered conceptualization of society using the terms of Islam (Abdullah 1985), one that has also made its way into the consciousness of moral personhood as well.

We have seen that the *pasa* ultimately gets smuggled back into Minangkabau identity as well, albeit under the guise of character rather than culture. (The metaphor that they are "smuggled," as if they are something valuable that also requires concealment, is apt: these are the elements of Minangkabau identity that refer to what goes on outside of direct public observation.) As I have tried to demonstrate, ideas about what it is like to live within Minangkabau society are more complex and ambiguous than are conceptions of ideal Minangkabau society itself. These ideas about character present us with a sense that what is most immediate for people living in Bukittinggi is not the shape of Minangkabau traditional society as an abstract entity, but rather the challenge of navigating between conflicting demands in all kinds of interactions. These are demands that speak, as I have claimed, directly to making a living, but also more broadly to making a life.

I have explored all of this material in the process of providing an ethnography of moral personhood among people in Bukittinggi. This has involved examining the intersections between concepts and experiences of human capacities, and concepts and experiences of human value. I have argued, following Taylor (1989), that this intersection is inextricable. My discussion has often come back to some version of the tension between social integration and autonomy as realizations of the good. These two terms actually reach out to a number of interrelated concerns, such as, “Where are the borders of the self?”, “How and to what consequences are they crossed?”, “What role does choice play in the behavior of a person, and to what extent is behavior a result of outside influences?”, “Where is moral responsibility situated?” and, “What are an individual’s responsibilities to others?” While these kinds of questions are all analytically distinct, they appeared to me to be intertwined in the concerns of people in Bukittinggi. They all involved questions over how the self can be so obviously a distinct entity and at the same time so obviously part of the world around it, and what to make of this paradox. If, as I will argue below, this grows out of existential contradictions that are fundamental to being human, it is also clear to me that culture provides people in Minangkabau society with particular ways to think through, manage, and express them.

Cultural Representations, Morality, and Multidimensional Selves

In Minangkabau society, the push toward social integration as well as the push toward autonomy are realized in the experience of individuals, and they are also

realized in robust cultural representations. Minangkabau culture and Minangkabau people do not value only one of these moral orientations at the expense of the other, and to imagine that they must is to make the false assumption that set hierarchies of abstract values reside in cultures, or in the particular nature of the selves created out of a particular culture, rather than values existing in the way that people learn to approach particular social interactions for particular purposes (D'Andrade, n.d.; cf. Gregg 2005: 336-339 for some relevant remarks on integration and autonomy in the context of an examination of Middle Eastern cultural psychology). The patterns of moral personhood I have identified in Minangkabau speak to the ways that people try to realize their autonomy as something real and valuable, and also to the ways they try to realize their integration with others and with the world as something also real and valuable. The culture of moral personhood in Minangkabau society reflects a range of tools that people use in these endeavors, often leading them to realize and express these different dimensions of human existence in particular ways. Sometimes this means favoring one and pushing the other aside for particular purposes, but it never means pushing one permanently to the margins.

A central argument about the cultural construction of moral personhood in West Sumatra made in this ethnography is that this culture should not be understood as an integrated ideology that marches those who become caught up in it on a narrow path to an inevitable destination. Culture can sometimes appear to have this quality, and certainly powerful ideologies may push people from easily categorizing and representing some dimensions of experience (Levy 1973, Hollan 1992). Even the

most hegemonic cultural systems, in complex societies as the very least, still engender their own forms of ambivalence and even conscious resistance, such as Parish (1996) has shown for caste in Nepal. Further, such hegemony, even as partial as it is, represents only one possible way that cultural patterns can be organized. This dissertation makes the case that the push and pull of integration and autonomy within the culture of Minangkabau moral personhood does not take this form. It does not represent an ideology in which one of these poles is valued and the other is therefore suppressed, or hypocognized.

Seeing that cultural representations are not synonymous with systematic ideologies is important. Otherwise we risk taking Wikan's (1995) suspicion of representations too far and imagining the self – or the actual shape of people's experiences of living – as something that can only be seen if we push culture out of our vision entirely. As I noted in Chapter 6, Wikan argues that we can best understand human beings by focusing on the way people engage with the world directly, not on how they represent that engagement: "Whether by prostituting ourselves, or giving a party, or the plethora of humdrum acts through which we engage the world, it is through such engagement, not by means of representation or narration, that we construct the parameters of ourselves and our world" (1995:266). Wikan's fear is we will look past people's experiences and see only the neat and organized representations of culture, ignoring what is actually going on in people's lives and what is important to them. She draws from Bourdieu (1990) here in trying to look past

objectified representations of social life and toward the experiences of “urgency and necessity” (Wikan 1995:266) that constitute living, and that thus constitute self.

This assumes too rigid a divide between experience and representation, as if representations were extraneous, or as if they are *only* constructions of anthropologists that had no relevance to people’s actual experience. It assumes that cultural representations are always neat, systematic, integrated – and that they are *only* lies. I have tried to show that culture is not always so tidy, and that representations are taken up and used by people because they help to make sense out of the experiences of living – not necessarily by offering set conclusions, but by offering ways to think about and manage the process of living with contradiction. If experience has a certain shape for people, we should expect something of it to come out in cultural representation as well – otherwise, what produces such representations, why are people drawn into using them, and how is it that they seem to have such power for people? Pushed too far, Wikan’s argument would lead us to see the direct experience of living and the conceptions people use to make sense of those experiences as somehow disconnected.

We have seen that representations have real power to direct the ways that people experience themselves. They may shape motivations and they may cause pain – they are sources, not just denials, of urgency and necessity. Anxiety over the failures of prayer, unspoken triumph over a spiritual foe, or melancholy pride at keeping one’s accomplishments publicly unadvertised involve reflexive engagement with conceptions of the self’s capacities. If people come to use, creatively rework, and

understand themselves in relation to representations, we cannot leave them out of any “best account” (Taylor 1989) of people’s experience of living. They are part of what constitutes the living of a life as a particular individual – what I would call a “self.”

I do not think that abandoning the power of cultural meanings is at all what Wikan ultimately has in mind. Although I think her arrow flies too far, it hits its main target along the way: self must be more than whatever its representation is at any given moment. I would argue that in understanding culture not to offer people set answers, it becomes clear that this is the case. Culture cannot do all of the work in making sense of the experience of living for people, and the contradictions that experience entails (cf. Sökefeld 1999). It offers multiple possibilities and tools for management, but it never offers ultimate solutions. There must be selves that take up these tools and use them. If culture helps people to make sense of experience, such an endeavor is always a continual process, and it takes work. Such work (re)produces cultural patterns – although, as we have seen in cases such as those of Da Luko and Ni Saia, it may do so in creative and altered ways.

In arguing that public expressions of personhood created through cultural representations have real power in people’s experience of living, but that they must be understood in relation to broader processes of self formation, my ethnography follows the agenda proposed by Mauss (1985 [1938]) and at the same time disturbs its assumptions. Mauss was grappling with the particular conceptions of personhood that had come to be celebrated and publicly elaborated in different societies. As I described in Chapter 3 (following Carrithers 1985), he first implies that conceptions of

personhood are analytically distinct from the experience of being an individual self, and yet nevertheless goes on to assert that the self only emerged as a consequence of a particular (modern, western) conception of personhood. To understand the ethnography I have presented here, we need to reframe the lessons from Mauss. I would suggest that cultural conceptions of personhood do not create selves, but rather make particular moral arguments about what parts of self should be expressed and elaborated, and how this should be done. These arguments are taken up by people precisely because the experience of self is multidimensional and contradictory – drawing in, as Hallowell (1955) helped us to see, multiple kinds of experience into its constitution.

This of course means that we cannot let any particular cultural conception of persons – even ones that powerfully shape the consciousness of people in a particular society – do our theorizing for us, suggesting to us what dimensions of self do or do not exist for people. Such conceptions or theories of self appear to be invoked in the process of taking moral positions on what the self should be. They are therefore designed to deny part of self, to set them aside, or devalue them to the point of claiming their irrelevance (Parish n.d.). This makes for a clearer moral claim, but not necessarily a satisfying ontological one. We see this, for example, in conceptions of persons or selves as located solely within social relationships, such as those invoked by the use of “sombong” (arrogance). In making clear moral judgments of others as bad for failing to fulfill important moral demands, only a particular dimension of self –

as essentially integrated with others – is posited as being real, as needing to be taken into consideration.

In this vein, Seigel (2005) has recently suggested that any theory of self will ultimately collapse on itself unless it is “multi-dimensional,” accounting for bodily, relational, and reflective dimensions of the human condition – the “reflective” referring to the self as a center of self-consciousness and agency. He argues that “one-dimensional” theories of the self, such as those that leave no room for agency, that see the self as entirely constituted by the world (or culture), tend to paradoxically suggest that the true self in fact consists of nothing but agency. That is, offered from a critical position located outside the constituting world of relations that are ostensibly all-encompassing, such theories seem to celebrate the possibility of freedom from the very trap they claim is absolute. Reflective agency, theorized out of the realm of the self nevertheless refuses to disappear, reemerging as an ideal self of pure autonomy: “[A]nyone who pictures the self as tightly wrapped up in the cocoon of its social or cultural relations necessarily locates the consciousness that can theorize such containment outside it, thus simultaneously calling forth a different kind of self, ready to take free flight on wings whose anatomy descends from pure reflectivity...” (2005: 649-650).

Seigel has in mind certain strains of philosophy (the quotation above is most directly directed at Foucault and Derrida, but he also connects such ideas to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Duchamp, and Barthes), and in this regard he echoes Taylor (1989), who also argues that a longing to celebrate the value of freedom appears to motivate such

“post-modern” theories of self, belying their claims to moral neutrality. But I think these insights can be applied to the processes involved in everyday moral thinking as well, in the way people use cultural conceptions of personhood to deal with the contradictions of the multi-dimensional self. The desire to imagine a kind of pure moral state can fuel the division of the dimensions of self into what is real and what can be disregarded, or treated as a mere illusion. This makes it much easier to judge the self as good or bad, as fulfilling its purpose or failing to, leaving out the possibility that different dimensions of the self – intentions, social embedment, drives – are always interacting in a more complex moral struggle. Da Palo, for example, tried, though never fully succeeded, in imagining that his actions in the world were so completely determined by outside forces that they did not really represent him at all. His true self remained completely pure.

Seigel writes, “Questions about the self are...about the ways people seek and find to establish operative and meaningful relations between the various constituents of their lives. Concern about the self is concern about how we put the diverse parts of our personal being together into some kind of whole” (2005:16-17). I think this is true for those complex struggles toward morality, and should be true for our ethnographic accounts of those struggles. I have shown how in an effort to deal with such diverse parts, individuals may draw on cultural concepts to reassign some of those parts to something outside of the self, paradoxically making the self “whole” by focusing attention on only a part of it. A concern with making clear moral judgments – blaming and seeking to be relieved of blame, fulfilling the demands of piety – can in fact lead

people to treat questions of self as ones that require division and denial of dimensions of self rather than their integration. Like anthropologists and philosophers, people in their everyday lives must deal somehow with the multiple dimensions that make up self; in the process, they too face the temptation to simplify in the pursuit of moral clarity.

Unlike engaging in anthropological or philosophical theorizing, however, the process of living forbids any of us from simply settling comfortably into imaging the world according to such a neat vision. We experience ourselves to exist as individuals in multiple ways. Neisser (1988) has suggested that these include at least five kinds of “self-knowledge”: an “ecological self” as a physical objects in the world, an “interpersonal self” as a socially engaged actor, an “extended self” extension of a remembered past, a “private self” as a center of contained consciousness and reflection, and a “conceptual self” as defined by the categories contained in language and other cultural representations (Neisser 1988). Our knowledge of neurology also supports a theory of self as including a number of different kinds of systems that process information and then work to find ways to more or less integrate it into the living of a particular life (Quinn 2006).

The “conceptual self” is of course what anthropologists are usually best at exploring, and most of my discussion has revolved around this kind of self-knowledge. My argument has been that we must see these concepts in relation to broader processes of self. I have tried to examine the role of culture here in a way that connects back to some of these processes and would not cut us off from further work

to link culture to other processes that I have spent less time examining, including conflicts of the unconscious mind. Neisser notes that the conceptual self is the most integrative of all of the dimensions of self-knowledge, forming “self-theories” that feed off of all of the others:

Self-theories are distinguished from the other four aspects of the self by being based primarily on socially established and verbally communicated ideas. As we elaborate our own conceptual selves, however, we often try to take other kinds of experience into account. Thus our self-concepts typically include ideas about our physical bodies, about interpersonal communication, about what kinds of things we have done in the past and are likely to do in the future, and especially about the meaning of our own thoughts and feelings. The result is that each of the other four kinds of self-knowledge is also represented in the conceptual self. (1988: 54)

If the conceptual self is only one piece of the larger story of the self, it is an important one. I would go even further than Neisser to suggest that cultural conceptions of self are formed in relation to other kinds of experience, and constantly challenged to account for them.

Maintaining an awareness of self while examining cultural worlds is not easy. Such an endeavor asks us to appreciate the power of cultural representations without losing sight of the processes of self, of living a particular life, that lay behind them. It may be easy to become trapped within the representations themselves. It is not altogether different from what Minangkabau people do as they try to make lives for themselves that fit into the particular demands of their society. It is not unusual for endeavors worth pursuing to require us to remain on the outside even as we are caged in.

GLOSSARY

All entries reflect Minangkabau usage, although some terms are understood to be taken from standard Indonesian. In some cases I have indicated both Minangkabau and Indonesian versions of a term. Where both versions are given, or when it is otherwise useful to make a distinction, specifically Minangkabau words and pronunciations are marked “(M)” while specifically Indonesian words and pronunciations are marked “(I).” I have not included every Indonesian and Minang term that appears in the dissertation. I have excluded many terms that are defined where they appear in the text and are not subsequently repeated without translation.

adat (I), **adaik** (M): culture, customs, and practices conceived as traditional
Adat Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah (ABS SBK): “Adat is based on Islamic law, Islamic law is based on the Koran”
adat-istiadat: another term for adat, often used to indicate all of the common practices of social interaction that are part of adat, but not necessarily codified; the good manners of baso-basi is an example of adat-istiadat

aib: shameful, disgraceful

akal (I), **aka** (M): powers of reason, rationality

alek: feast, party

baralek: to have or attend a feast or party, especially a wedding celebration

aliran: current, stream; sect

anak pisang: children of male members of one’s lineage

ati: see “hati”

awak (M): we/us together; one’s own body, our own body; I/me, you, him/her, he/she; Minangkabau

babaso: to behave in a self-consciously polite manner

badan: body

bagaua (M), bergaul (I): to socialize or mix with other people

bako: members of one's father's lineage

banak: the brain

bangih: anger, angry

baralek: see "alek"

baso-basi: good manners, etiquette

batin: the metaphysical realm of existence as it relates to human experience; the spiritual dimension of a person

berang: angry, anger

biaso: normal, undistinguished; not rich

kebiasaan: a habit or informal custom

Budi-Caniago: one of two Minangkabau laleh, used to classify forms of adat that put relatively more emphasis on egalitarian relations between male leaders

bundo kanduang: the most senior woman of a lineage; any respected older woman; the conception of women as fulfilling traditional Minangkabau roles

cinto: love; forms of love and attachment including romantic and sexual love

da: see "uda"

darek: the highland valleys of West Sumatra that form the traditional heart of the Minangkabau world

datuak: a high lineage title; a man who holds such a title and has the responsibility to help manage lineage affairs

desa (I): a village; rural areas

diri: self

dukun: a traditional healer; any person with supernatural knowledge or powers

gala: a person's title, e.g., a man's lineage title received upon marriage

harato: property

harato pancarian: property that is obtained through individual effort and owned by that individual

harato pusako: property the rights to which adhere to a lineage, most significantly land and houses

hati (I), **ati** (M): the "heart"; the liver, especially as the locus of feeling and experience

ati ketek (M), **hati kecil** (I): the heart of hearts (literally, the "little liver"); a person's conscience and the reservoir of their deepest, most genuine thoughts and feelings; also synonymous with the "*hati nurani*" or "*hati sanubari*" in Indonesian

Iblis (I), **Iblis** (M): the Devil or Satan, the fallen angel that tempts human beings into evil; in non-capitalized form (**iblis**, **iblis**), any evil spirit, but especially one that performs this same function or otherwise causes human beings to suffer

ibo: compassion, pity

ilmu (I), **ilmu** (M): knowledge, especially powerful scientific or supernatural knowledge

iman: faith

jaek (M), **jahat** (I): bad, evil

jihin: non-human spirits

jilbab: a woman's veil that reveals the oval of the face but completely obscures the hair, ears, neck and throat

jiwa (I), **jio** (M): spirit; the soul, character, or temperament of a person

kebiasaan: see "biaso"

kamanakan: the child of a man's sister; anyone in a man's lineage to whom he acts as a mamak

kampung: neighborhood, village; rural areas or primarily residential areas of a city

karupuak: fried chips, usually made from cassava

karupuak sanjai: fried cassava chips made in the style associated with the Bukittinggi area

kasiah: love, pity

kato malereng: “sloping words”; communication using aphorisms or other indirect methods of speaking, used when addressing a social superior, for dealing with sensitive subjects, in strained relationships, or during ceremonial speeches

khusuak: total concentration on God and one’s submission to God during prayer

kieh (M), kiasan (I): any form of communication, such as a metaphor, analogy, allusion, figure of speech, or moral to a story, in which meaning is communicated indirectly

Koto-Piliang: one of two Minangkabau lareh, used to classify forms of adat that put relatively more emphasis on hierarchy among male leaders

Kurai: people from the lineages native to the area of Bukittinggi; a Minangkabau ethnic sub-group

laia (M), lahir (I): the visible, physical realm of human existence and behavior

lapau: a small shop, especially one that sells food or drink

lapau kopi: a small coffee house, usually used as a gathering place for men

lareh: literally, a district; one of either of the two main classifications of Minangkabau adat, Koto-Piliang and Bodi-Caniago

maleh (M), malas (I): unwilling to act

malu: shame, ashamed; embarrassed; shy

mamak: mother’s brother; any man from one’s own lineage who is of a generation senior to one’s own

marah (I): angry

marantau: to live in the rantau, either temporarily or permanently, especially for the purpose of seeking experience and financial fortune

mufakat: consensus

munafik: a hypocrite, especially a person who acts publicly as a Muslim while actually being a non-believer

musyawarah: deliberation and discussion

nafsu (I), napasu (M): appetities, desires; affective engagement with the world

nagari: a collection of Minangkabau villages conceived of as an autonomous polity following its own version of adat

ni: see “uni”

nyao (M), nyawa (I): spirit, life force

orang ketiga: a “third person”; an outsider who interferes with and undermines a relationship between others

palasik: a blood-sucking spirit that usually attacks babies; a woman whose gaze brings about this phenomenon

pancarian: see “harato”

pangana: the mind, memory

pangulu: a man who is the highest title holder in a lineage or group of related lineages, and who represents that lineage in dealings with other lineages

papatah: traditional sayings, aphorisms

pasa (M) / pasar (I): a marketplace; in Minangkabau usage, by extension, “the city” and its relatively urban districts in contrast to its more village-like neighborhoods and to rural areas outside of the city

perasaan: see “raso”

petrus: short for “*penembak misterious*,” or “mysterious gunmen”; used to refer to a rash of very public murders of several thousand men in Indonesia in the 1980’s as part of an anti-crime movement undertaken by the national government

picayo (M), percaya (I): belief, to believe
kepercayaan (I): belief; a system of beliefs

pikiran: thoughts

pitih: money

pitih haram: “forbidden money”; money obtained through immoral methods

pitih rokok: “cigarette money”; money paid to a man in exchange for a favor

pribadi: personal; anything (property, personality, social roles, secrets) that does or should adhere to the individual person

pusako: see “harato”

rantau: those areas, such as the West Sumatran coast, on the edges of the traditional Minangkabau world, or darek; by further extension, anyplace outside of West Sumatra

raso: feeling; a feeling; to feel

perasaan (I): feelings; a feeling

raso jo pareso: “feeling and inspection”; the ability to empathize with others through intuition and careful contemplation, and to use such empathy to guide one’s own behavior

roh: a person’s spirit; a ghost

rumah gadang: “large house”; a house built in the traditional Minangkabau style

sadiah: sad, sadness

sagan: respectfully hesitant

sanang: happy; healthy; having adequate material resources

sayang: love, pity

setan: evil spirits

shalat: Islamic prayer, particularly the five mandatory daily prayers

sindia (M), sindiran (I): indirect forms of criticism or insult

sombong: arrogant, arrogance; being different or separate from others as if superior to them

suku: a matrilineal clan; a lineage; an ethnic group

sumando: a man related to members of a lineage by marriage

surau: a village or neighborhood prayer house

takuik (M), **takut** (I): frightened, fear

tanang: calm, tranquil

tasingguang: “touched”; insulted

uda: older brother; often shortened to “da” and used in address to a man slightly older than oneself

ulama: Islamic scholars

umat: society of believers, e.g., Muslims

uni: older sister; often shortened to “ni” and used in address to a woman slightly older than oneself

yakin: certain, convinced

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