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Actualising history for binding the future: decentralisation in Minangkabau

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Introduction

One of the main themes running through the work of Norman Long is the differential ways in which policy statements and directions are being re-interpreted and transformed at the various levels of organisation and interaction on their way to 'the local people'. Much of his and his students' work (often illustrated with wonderfully detailed case studies), has been devoted to showing how local actors, in their own interaction or in interaction with development agents, have appropriated external policy messages and the resources that often accompany them. In this way, these actors have created or expanded their 'room to manoeuvre' and have thus been able to transform policy programmes and projects themselves.[1] The central issue concerns the question of how to conceptualise and analyse the ways in which the state operates and affects people's lives.

Norman Long has been exceptionally sensitive to the problem of avoiding simple dichotomies between state and civil society. His work on what he initially called the interface over time developed into a sophisticated analysis of the complex contexts in which what is conveniently summarised as 'the state' affects peoples lives, be they part of the state or not. It could also be characterised as an attempt to come to grips with what is known as the 'actor-structure' problematic, an attempt that combines micro and macro levels, devoting particular attention to variation in time and space. His interests have been largely similar to our own concerns, though clearly the emphasis is slightly different. What binds Norman Long and us perhaps the most is a strong focus on the historical dimensions of the issues we are interested in: issues such as the development of a time-oriented legal anthropology that combines a long-term historical perspective with the perspective of individually centred, short-term, choice making instrumental action and interaction (Moore, 1978: 256; F. von Benda-Beckmann, 1979: 6). One way of looking at institutionalisation is by studying how, why and to what extent actors are involved in trying to *'bind the future'* (Stinchcombe, 1997) through their actions, deliberations and struggles. History is treated not so much as a focus on the past, but as a dimension for understanding the present and as a

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[1] See Long (1983, 1989, 1992, 1997)

way for looking into the future. Legal rules and normative frameworks are viewed as condensed ways of binding the future. Treating law as one of the most important means and products of institutionalisation is particularly interesting, because law creates potentialities or opportunity sets, as Sen (1978) would call them. This paper, then, is an exercise in social science as characterised by Tilly (1997: 17) *'Social science is the systematic study of what could happen, what could have happened, what will possibly happen, in human social life, and why'*.

In this paper we shall focus on ongoing processes in which a multitude of actors in different arenas (Long, 1997: 6) of rule and decision are making attempts to institute new legal structures for local government in order to come to a new balance between state regulation and other forms of political legitimacy and economic rights. The historical setting for this is the current process of decentralisation in Indonesia, which was set in motion after the demise of the Suharto regime in 1998.[2] The greater political freedom that came with the fall of the Suharto regime and the decentralisation policy adopted in 1999 in many parts of Indonesia have led to a re-assessment of local, ethnically informed legal orders. In Indonesia, these legal orders are generally referred to as *adat* (*adat* laws and forms of *adat* based social organisation), and the new decentralisation policy has initiated a re-appraisal of *adat* by local people, local and regional government agencies, and national and international non-governmental agencies. As is often the case in periods of high political turmoil, the decentralisation policy has also triggered a re-assessment of local history, and in particular, forms of political organisation and economic rights based on *adat*. It has also initiated an acute concern of how and to what extent this history is to become relevant for the future. The Province of West Sumatra is of particular relevance because the process of decentralisation has been taken up to renegotiate the structure of local government in order to *'actualise'* (Giordano, 1996) earlier historical forms of local government and to change the relative significance of *adat* officials and rules.

We shall consider two aspects of these processes. One is the change within local government organisation, the newly emerging and partially established forms of legitimacy of political representation and decision making powers, and the role which elements of *adat* are given in these new forms. The other is the revitalisation of *adat* as the basis for economic claims to natural resources on the village territory. Many of these resources had earlier been appropriated and exploited by the state under legislation. Some had also been exploited by para-statal enterprises or 'privatised' through licences and concessions to national or transnational enterprises, which were usually closely connected with the inner circle of the Suharto clan. These processes are still in full swing. There are serious forces that would like to weaken and change decentralisation, leaving greater powers to the central government and the provinces. The most recent change, the demotion of President Wahid and the installation of Megawati Soekarnoputri as President may have far reaching consequences since Megawati is said to be much less attracted by decentralisation and to favour a strong central

state. She may also occupy a different position than her predecessors, Habibie and Wahid, towards the external pressure applied by donors. While there is still strong and unrelenting pressure for more regional autonomy from within the country, especially from the economically strong regions, the stage seems to be changing internationally. Development analysts seem to have lost some of their earlier enthusiasm for decentralisation in the light of the problematic evidence brought forward to date, and there have been voices calling for more restraint. It is very difficult to predict what the situation will be a year from now. Our findings are therefore very preliminary, all the more so because we are in the middle of a new research project on these issues ourselves (Benda-Beckmann, F. and K. von, 2001).

Decentralisation in West Sumatra: the general context

Indonesia has entered a dramatic political process since the fall of the Suharto regime. A wider range of political freedoms characterises it, with a completely new role for parliamentary politics. This, however, has also been accompanied by high political instability. In many of the outer islands, independence movements, civil and religious wars, and sometimes violent forms of ethnic cleansing are taking place. To redress political problems, the government initiated a process of decentralisation, which was officially inaugurated by the Decentralisation Laws of 1999. This process was the outcome of both internal and regional pressures aimed at rendering greater economic and political independence from the formerly strong political centre. Important donors such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and others have also applied pressure in the hope that decentralisation will enable a more democratic and economically responsible policy to be pursued. In fear of encouraging secessionist developments, the new decentralisation law did not opt for the provinces as the most important autonomous regions, but for the regencies (*kabupaten*).

In West Sumatra, decentralisation also brings an important change in the organisation of village government. Until the early 1980s, village government in Minangkabau region of West Sumatra had been based on the *nagari*, the name for the traditional, pre-colonial political units often referred to as village republics. These had largely been incorporated into the Dutch administrative system as the lowest form of indirect rule. During their rule, the Dutch government repeatedly intervened and changed the traditional political organisation of the *nagari*, a process that continued after Independence. When we were doing our research in West Sumatra in the 1970s, many *nagari* had a dualistic political organisation. One official hierarchy incorporated into the local government organisation of the state consisted of the Village Mayor and the Village Council,[3] in which traditional *adat* elders always played an important role. The other was the *adat* organisation in which leadership was legitimated in Minangkabau *adat* only. However, this *adat* was not an 'authentic',

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[3] This Village Council, which was composed of *adapt* leaders, religious leaders and intellectuals should be distinguished from the Village *Adat* Council, whose members are *adat* leaders only. The terminology is, however, not always consistent.

'uncontaminated' set of norms and institutions. It was deeply affected by the colonial experience and has continued to be affected by the wider national setting in which it has operated during the last 50 years of Independence (see K. von Benda-Beckmann, 1984).

When Indonesia attempted to homogenise the plurality of laws on its territory and to consolidate centralist rule in the 1970s, the then existing regional variations in local government were also standardised. The Javanese model of the village (*desa*) as the lowest local government unit became the standard model throughout Indonesia. In Minangkabau, this meant that the *nagari* were split into several *desa*. However, a provincial regulation of 1983[4] allowed the *nagari* to become the '*adat* law community' (*masyarakat hukum adat*) and the Village Adat Council to become the institution representing this community. A number of implementing regulations gave detailed instructions of how the Village Adat Council was to be constituted according to *adat* and on how it was to exercise its main tasks i.e. strengthening traditional values, maintaining the unity of the *nagari* population, managing its riches and settling disputes on *adat* matters. A circular letter of the West Sumatran Appeal Court made it clear that *adat* disputes would not be accepted unless the Village Adat Council had decided them upon. The *nagari* as *adat* law community and the Village Adat Council thus, paradoxically, were formally regulated as 'informal law and institution'.

With decentralisation or 'regional autonomy' coming into view, discussions on what this could mean for Minangkabau erupted in the provincial and regional political arenas, among engaged citizens and in the villages. Many local politicians and traditional village leaders claimed that local government should 'return to the *nagari*'. It was generally held that the *desa* system had not functioned well, that it destroyed *adat* and the unity of the *nagari* population, and eroded the authority of elders. Optimists hoped, somewhat naively, that going back to the *nagari* would solve these problems. More sceptical voices, among them many urban intellectuals and the acting *desa* heads, pointed out that a return to some nostalgic past would not remedy these evils. In their eyes, the unsatisfactory functioning of the *desa* was primarily due to the inadequate financial and personal resources provided to the *desa* administration, and to the fact that *adat* leaders did not co-operate with the *desa* administration. Moreover, if anyone had destroyed *adat* and *adat* authority, it was the *adat* leaders themselves who no longer really knew *adat*, had failed to develop the Village Adat Council into a functioning institution and had manipulated whatever control they had over *nagari* assets for their own personal advantage. Similar reproaches were also heard from many favouring *adat* and the return to the *nagari*, although in their view, the problems were the consequence of the *desa* system itself and that the situation would improve once village government was returned to the *nagari*. Others maintained that the expected changes would be minimal and that reform would be confined to simply changing the name of the local government unit. Those who were still vehemently opposed a year ago, had changed their position in March 2001, and not only because the political decisions had been made. By spring 2001, it had become generally accepted that West Sumatra was to revert to a *nagari* structure. The provincial regulation No. 9 of 2000, which

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[4] *Perda (Peraturan Daerah)* Regional Regulation 13 of 1983.

provided the framework for going back to the *nagari*, constitutes a point of no return in the eyes of most people. Now the debate is focused on what type of *nagari* should be reverted to (if at all) and to what extent and how general principles of democracy could be included into the new structure.

The provincial arena

Prior to the general elections in 1999, the 'back to the *nagari*' policy had been officially adopted by the governor and the West Sumatran provincial parliament. There were a number of critics in parliament, some because of their strong alliance to the centralist Suharto regime, others out of a deep concern for democratic structures. The decision-making arena reached beyond its members and the political parties. The influential provincial organisation of *adat* leaders, *Lembaga Kerapatan Adat Alam Minangkabau* (LKAAM), was a strong player as its most important members were former high officials in the provincial and regional administration. Some of these were members who had returned to a position in the regency after regional elections and some were academics who were also *adat* leaders in their own villages. Though the LKAAM claimed to be an organisation totally outside of the state structure, this is not how others perceived them. The establishment of the LKAAM had been supported by the government to contain political *adat* aspirations, and the organisation had been deeply involved in the state administration throughout the Suharto regime. Nevertheless, the LKAAM's position has become increasingly independent from the provincial government, advocating the most far-reaching form of a return to the *adat* structure of the *nagari*. They want to place control over village resources exclusively with the council of *adat* leaders, and are critical of those seeking a too easy compromise between *adat* principles and administrative structures of a democratic organisation. In addition to this, there are a number of influential consultants to the governor within Andalas University. The governor had committed himself to a return to the *nagari* before parliament had taken a decision. A research team, headed by a long time consultant from Andalas University and a strong protagonist of a return to the *nagari* structure, was sent out to poll the views of the village populations. The poll concluded that a large majority favoured a return to the *nagari*.[5] In contrast to the LKAAM, a number of these consultants showed considerable sensitivity towards the contradictory demands of *adat* and modern democracy. The findings of the team were a persuasive factor in the political decision but may not have tipped the balance without the disenchantment that existed towards the national political situation of the *reformasi*, something that reinforced the general tendency towards regionalism. *Adat* is a powerful resource for mobilizing and legitimising opposition to the Javanese political centre of the nation state. A return to the *nagari* structure is thus a symbolic act within the wider national political debate. This revitalisation of *adat* is not confined to West Sumatra. With the help of NGOs, an All Indonesian *Adat* Alliance has been formed that claims greater

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[5] It is not quite clear how these consultations were conducted. Our impression is that predominantly *adat* officials, local administrators and local religious and secular elites were consulted and that the ordinary village population were largely ignored.

legal recognition of *adat* and *adat* based rights to natural resources (see Acciaoli, 2000). Minangkabau seems to be taking the lead and other regions look with interest at the developments taking place there.

However, the most important political controversies were not yet resolved by the general decision to return to the *nagari*. Three major issues had to be debated:

- The territorial boundaries (including the possibility to separate away from a *nagari*)
- The composition and competence of village institutions, including the control over project funds from higher levels of the state administration
- Control over village resources.

After extensive discussions concerning approximately twenty draft regulations within and outside the provincial parliament, and consultations between non-governmental *adat,* Islamic organisations and influential Minangkabau migrants in Jakarta, the province enacted a provincial regulation[6] which became effective in January 2001. This regulation contained the framework for 'going back to the *nagari*' and a general framework for new local government was established. The language of the regulation is full of references to *adat*. The preamble states that West Sumatra goes back to *nagari* government, followed by the ritual formula that it is based on '*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah. Syarak mangato adat memakai alam tabang jadi guru*'. (*Adat* is based on Islam, Islam is based on the holy Koran; religious law orders, *adat* is used; nature is the teacher of mankind). The regulation provides for an initial return to the pre-1979 *nagari* territorial boundaries (par.2). Furthermore, it mentions the *nagari* resources: a market, village field, council hall, mosque and prayer houses, land, forest, rivers, ponds, lakes and part of the sea which used to be common *nagari* resources (*ulayat nagari*), public buildings and movables and other properties (par.7). This is indeed in line with classical *adat*. The village government consists of an elected mayor, an elected legislative body, and an advisory body consisting of representatives of four or more of categories, i.e. *adat* leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals and women. The *adat* council, consisting of *adat* leaders, is regulated in the Provincial regulation but does not form part of the official village government. This council is to mediate in disputes relating to family property and to protect *adat* in general. This structure resembles in many respects the mixture of *adat* and state principles that have characterised local government in West Sumatra since the late colonial period.

The regulation leaves the most important issues open. The crucial question as to how these resources are to be managed and by whom is a different matter. This is left to a separate provincial regulation, while more detailed regulations as to the precise form of the village institutions are to be made by regencies. So far, the Regulations of the Minister of the Interior and of Agrarian Affairs[7] states that the newly recognised rights cannot be exercised on land, which has been declared by the regional government as belonging to private individuals or legal entities holding a right under the Agrarian Basic Law. They also do not apply to land that has been 'freed' or otherwise obtained by governmental agencies, legal

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[6] Perda 9 of 2000.
[7] No. 5 of 1999, section 3.

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entities, individuals in accordance with governmental regulations. As we shall see below, this has not prevented land claims from being successful.

Regency arenas

The new regency heads and parliaments have (re)acted with marked variations in speed and enthusiasm to these developments. In two districts, 50 Koto and Solok, energetic regents, one of whom was a leading member of the LKAAM, have taken a number of initiatives to implement the new structure as soon as possible, revising their regency administrative structure and pushing forward the return to the *nagari* system. They were quick in promulgation of their own Regency Regulations and were ready to start at the moment the provincial regulation became effective. They have taken this new, more autonomous position seriously. This means more control over their resources, but less funding from the central government.[8] Both call for a far more intensive occupation with development potentials within their region. In line with the greater autonomy of villages, they have initiated collaborative economic activities with local governments. The same regents also promote the installation of new *adat* leaders, but not so out of a concern with *adat* itself. They argue instead that since the new structure of local government allows for a stronger and more substantial role for *adat* leaders, there is a need for well-educated *adat* leaders who understand the way the modern economy works. These regents also use the new legal structure to create links that would have been unthinkable under the hierarchical legal structures of old regime. During Suharto's New Order the only important links were hierarchical, if possible directly with the central government, from which all funding came and which had the final decision in all-important economic matters. Regents all over Indonesia have now started to organise themselves horizontally, in order to create a political platform strong enough to oppose those who want to revert to the old hierarchical structures. Moreover, they realise that they have new economic problems in common and hope to learn from the experiences of other regencies. Thus a new arena of debate and decision making is emerging that was not foreseen, let alone intended. It has resulted instead from the new potentialities created by a new legal framework.

Not all regents are as energetic. Many have remained relatively passive, waiting to see what other regents and higher political authorities are going to do. There is still much criticism of the new structure. What is perceived as a challenge for some regents is a reason for profound anxiety for others, especially about the economic future. Those who had always depended on a continuous flow of funding from the various departments at the central level, and who had successfully siphoned off parts of these funds, look with alarm to the drying up of central government funding. Moreover, those who had arranged themselves successfully in the centralist clientilist system and had carved out a private forest business backed by licences from the centre, now face strong controversy and

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[8] Some of the line departments, such as the Department of Social Affairs, have been dismantled. As these departments were the most important sources for funding, there is much confusion as to how the funding will be organised in the future. Generally substantial cuts are expected as part of the IMF policy to reduce state expenditures.

opposition from local communities who are already claiming back control over forest resources. Decentralisation thus has created substantial insecurity for those who occupy the new power positions. However, it would be wrong to conclude that reluctance grows out of private interest only. Some regents are genuinely concerned about a too powerful role for *adat* leaders. They have seen too many *adat* leaders who took private advantage of their position, who are poorly educated and know little of *adat*. They have no confidence in the capacities of these *adat* leaders and think that more autonomy can only harm economic development. These hope that by sitting it out, they will be able to survive until a more centralist policy comes into place.

Nagari *arenas*

The lowest arena in which these issues are being negotiated is the *nagari*. Here, too, the response to the new regulations and political debates is quite diverse, both in terms of pace and content. Some *nagari*-to-be have been quick in establishing the new *nagari* governmental structure and began designing regulations even before the regency regulations had been enacted. Others have remained passive, waiting for orders from higher up. The *desa* heads established an organisation, *Forum Komunikasi Kepala Desa*, which vehemently opposed the return to the *nagari* originally. They have, however, come to accept the decision that there will be a *nagari* structure, though they continue to point out that there are many controversial issues and the move back to the *nagari* is not in line with the aspirations of the people (Padang Ekspres 28 May, 2001). Draft regency regulations are being discussed, criticised and amended, and in the more advanced regencies the first new-style *nagari* with their new leaders are being formally installed. Debates are at times hot and nasty. The arena is, in the first place, constituted by the inhabitants of the *nagari*. Also, migrants from the village living in the regional or provincial capital or even in one of the large cities outside of West Sumatra often take a keen interest in the issues and participate in the debates, by phone, fax, e-mail and if necessary in person. It is in this arena that the composition and competence of each of the village institutions will reach its final form.

During the New Order, when hardly any decisions of political or economic consequence were left to the village government, having a position in the village government provided the possibility to gain access to project money. This time it may involve much more. In addition to control over funding flows, there is the issue of who will control village resources. Since the expectation is that less money will come from above, with more remaining within the village in the form of land, forest and market taxes, much (potential) economic and political power is at stake. Many, however, may have an unrealistic view of how high such revenues will be.

The re-construction of history is most actively pursued in the debates about the division of power positions. *Adat* leaders and their followers argue that originally (i.e. before the colonial period), they constituted the village government. As guardians of the village and family histories, they claim legitimacy as being responsible for the control the village resources. The *desa*-heads respond to these claims by arguing that *adat* leaders have long ceased to be interested in *adat*, that they don't know anything about *adat* anymore, and are in general a reactionary,

backward bunch of people who have been known to cheat their relatives. They go on to claim that the *desa*-heads, on the other hand, have proven to be much closer to the ordinary village people during the past years and therefore should keep their position. Derisory remarks by *Adat* leaders and supporters counter this by arguing that the only thing *desa* heads are interested in is keeping their motorbikes and other material goods acquired through their office. Issues such as these are prominently discussed in the newspapers.

The procedure for selecting the members of the village parliament is an important issue in *nagari* politics. Some are of the opinion that the new village parliament as highest authority should be a democratically elected body and not (in their view) an autocratic *adat* council. This is vehemently denied by the *adat* lobby, who claim to be the guardians of the true, Minangkabau type of democracy based on a consensual model, far superior to the 'western style 50+1 voting democracy'. The debate is interesting, because it revolves around different opinions of what constitutes democracy. Others have different interpretations of *adat* and opt for a structure in which the four or five basic categories are represented: *adat* leaders, religious leaders, intellectuals (people with a reasonable education and with a good position in business or otherwise), women and youth. General elections and party politics are associated with the Suharto regime and therefore widely rejected. According to this view, balanced representation can only be reached by means of *adat*, understood in this sense. Labelling this as *adat* is a powerful political act, for in public discourse, *adat* is 'below' and development from below means development based on *adat*, not on individual people. As far as we know, most *nagari* that have had general meetings over the composition of the village parliament have opted for the selection of members from such categories, whereby *adat* members are to be selected by consensus within *adat* clan units, and others at the level of the former *desa*. Donor agencies who are supporting the formation of new village governments, such as the German Agency for Development Co-operation (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit-GTZ*), uncritically adopt these principles.[9] There is a remarkable and widely shared lack of historical understanding. The same categories that are employed now figured in the various bodies of village government throughout the Suharto era, an era that is now generally interpreted as having been utterly undemocratic. What is more, the Golkar was originally established not as a political party, but as a body of representatives of 'functional groups'. The irony is that what is meant as a rejection of the undemocratic New Order of Suharto, is taking over precisely the principles upon which its main political support was founded.

Splitting nagari

Generally, the majority of people currently accept the policy of returning to the *nagari* as the local government organisation. In some former *nagari* however, some *desa* do not want to re-unite but wish to establish their own *nagari* instead. Here, the strong emphasis on *adat*, the historical roots of the *nagari* and *adat* leaders and the *adat* council also becomes important. Minangkabau villages

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[9] The GTZ in three *nagari* has sponsored and supported the meetings through which the Regency Regulation and the ways of selecting members of the village parliament were concretised.

often make a clear distinction between original settlers and newcomers, and this distinction has political and economic relevance in *adat*. Newcomers may be very recent settlers, such as traders, but they may also have lived there for over one hundred years and still don't have a status of full citizen in the *adat* sense (F. von Benda-Beckmann, 1979). Most of these settler groups are Minangkabau themselves, descendants from former slaves or traders, but there are also some Javanese trans-migrant and spontaneous settler communities as well. Some of these groups live in a more or less separate section of the old *nagari*, forming a *desa* of their own in the present structure. Such groups very much fear losing their independence with the reversion to the *nagari* structure and hope to establish their own *nagari*. The territory on which these communities live is usually part of the inherited property of certain clans or village property. Consequently, this is a source of much consternation for *adat* leaders who fear a loss of control over village and family property if trans-migrant communities and spontaneous settler groups succeed in establishing their own *nagari*. During the drafting of the provincial regulation an intensive lobby was launched, fiercely opposed by the *adat* lobby, to convince the governor that it should be possible to return to a *nagari* structure but to split the old territory right at the initiation of the new regulation. In this way, the new regulation could be used to get rid of the claims by original communities and their *adat* leaders who continued to insist that newcomers submit to such claims. The governor, who was aware of the political dynamite of this issue, decided that there was to be a return to the *nagari* boundaries of before 1979 first, and that negotiating a split-up would become a second step in the process. This was a great disappointment for those who had hoped to be freed from the dominating elite in the name of *adat*. No doubt it will be more difficult to negotiate a division of the *nagari*, if it happens at all. The new interest in village resources as a result of decentralisation, and as a result of the interest of migrant community members, has rendered *adat* leaders more reluctant to relinquish village control over their territories. However, *desa* who are pushing their claim towards independence in *nagari* in pursuit of a speedy recognition have a means to force the other *desa* and *adat* leaders into some compromises concerning their future position. They are placing their bets on reluctance from the regent to recognise a *nagari* facing internal difficulties. Not all *adat* leaders are opposed to such a split, but most would agree that a split could only be done under their guidance and with their consent. And this is precisely what these communities had hoped to avoid.

Actualising and reconstructing history

These processes have therefore elicited a renewed keen interest in village history and its reconstruction, but also of the history of individual clans and families. It has become very important to know the history of settlement of a *nagari*, the history of clan and lineage cleavages and the history of inheritance, because this knowledge is decisive for the procedure and pace of *nagari* foundation and potential division. The interest in history is also spawned by land claims. The demise of the Suharto regime and the ensuing new political freedom has been used up to claim back land and forest that was appropriated by the government. Fear of repression had previously kept the local population from complaining but

constraint is no longer necessary. As a result, numerous claims have been filed in court or lobbied for in political negotiations. The most controversial claims regard village property (*tanah ulayat*) that had first been placed under state control by the so-called *Domeindeclaraties*, in West Sumatra enacted in 1874. While the Basic Agrarian Law of 1960 recognised the *ulayat* rights of local communities in an ambiguous way, state legal and administrative practices did not really take these rights seriously. These acts have been contested throughout history, because village governments claimed entitlement on the basis of *adat*. Under the Dutch regime, but more so under the New Order, much land was taken away by the government and handed out in semi-public or private hands, usually to those close to the regime. Some land was simply taken without compensation, but handsome amounts of money are also known to have been given in exchange for other land. Moreover, some land undoubtedly had the status of village *ulayat*, but clan *ulayat* has also been appropriated. Thus it is not always clear who the legitimate claimants are: the village government, the *adat* council, the head of one particular clan, all lineage heads within the clan, or even one particular lineage and its head? And although many of the claims that the land was taken by force or coercion are probably correct, the chaos of the situation provides ample opportunity for energetic lineage heads to claim land that was transferred without coercion and properly compensated for or to claim land that did not belong to their lineage in the first place. The newspapers, for example, are full of reports of open conflicts and negotiations about forest areas, plantations, water resources and the land and materials used by a certain cement factory in Padang. The first successes have been booked. Some land has been placed back under village control and some clans have successfully reclaimed their land.

These successes also demonstrate how important the division of competence among the new bodies of village government is. More generally, there is a great urge to move forward and score successes. It is important to place one's claims on the various tables, be it a proposal for a village government structure or the claim for the paramount position in village government, the claim to split-off as an independent *nagari,* land and forest claims, etc. Moving forward quickly and energetically provides village leaders with the opportunity to shape the future village organisation according to their values and interests. It also means that funding flows will start flowing early. Speedy regulation and speedy land claims are both important devices to bind the future. They serve to establish a reputation of successful management in the village, which will be a strong legitimising factor in a situation that is subject to so many diverse interpretations. It could well be that these types of activities today have the same function as successful mediation in disputes among villagers or being present at important occasions such as land transactions (see K. von Benda-Beckmann, 1984). As in former times, village history and village *adat* have to be restated and re-invented. But the arena in which this is done is not only the village setting as such. It also includes negotiations with higher levels of state government, notably the regency and the province.

No reliable documents are available for most of these contested transfers. What remains is the oral history of village, clan and lineage. And it is in connection with these issues that the recreation of history is most acute. The problem with this oral history is that recent decades have been marked by a dramatic decline in interest in the function of the *adat* leader. Yet the *adat*

system was built on the legitimate knowledge of *adat* leaders who were required to hand down this official knowledge to their successors. Modern education and the oppressive regime have placed little value on *adat* and have made the position of *adat* leader unattractive. Certainly, it had become fashionable for high state officials in the armed and civil service in Jakarta to show off with an *adat* title, but this was mere folklore and was not paired with any knowledge of *adat* matters. Thus there has been a serious rupture in the chain of oral history. Today the office of *adat* leader has become attractive once more. Offices that had been vacant everywhere for many years are being filled again. Often, well-educated and well-connected men who live in the regional or provincial capital are installed. They are close enough to their village to be able to come when there is a problem, while being expected to mobilise their connections with the region and province when required from their position in the cities. But these men also have little or no knowledge of *adat* matters. Knowledge of Minangkabau *adat* as a cultural and legal system, with its innumerable *adat* sayings, rules and maxims, is increasingly available from books written by *adat* experts. However, *adat* knowledge in the sense of village, clan, lineage and property history is only orally transmitted. For this, urban *adat* officials have largely to rely on their elderly, often female, relatives. It is this knowledge in particular that is required to assert, and manipulate, claims to political position and economic rights under the *adat* constitution.

Conclusions

Decentralisation in West Sumatra is therefore a dynamic and complex process. A multitude of actors move in and across several and often overlapping '*semi-autonomous social fields*' (Moore, 1973), putting forward and negotiating their claims and proposals for instituting the structures for new local governance and resource rights. As far as 'going back to the *nagari*' is concerned, regents, parliamentarians, village leaders and ordinary villagers alike actualise history by intentionally 'mobilising' an earlier form of local government organisation into the present as structure for the future (Giordano, 1996). Once actualised, the past itself offers several different repertoires of *nagari* structure for concretising the future meaning of the past, or rather one of the pasts. When it comes to a more concrete normative interpretation of, for instance, whose positions in adat will be politically relevant in the new system or who has what claims to natural resources, then the history of the village, clan, lineage and village property is also reconstructed to fit the actor's political and economic ambitions.

The interfaces in which different (and opposed) actors present relatively homogenous views of how the political and economic village constitutions should be are not clear-cut. Most of the models proposed form a complex mixture of direct state regulation and *adat* elements within state regulation. Reconstructions of 'pure traditional *adat*' resort mainly to clarifying the nature and function of the *adat* elements within the complex new structures. The most radical mobilisation of *adat* that largely denies the political superiority of state rights can be found in claims asserting the fundamental village rights to village *ulayat* land: claims from which state legislation can only derive lesser rights.

Most actors are also 'Janus-faced' (F. von Benda-Beckmann *et. al*, 1989). They hold positions in varying relations of power and legitimisation. This goes for many *adat* leaders prominently involved in these discussions; they are *adat* leaders but also university lecturers or government officials or businessmen. They view the new structure from a variety of interests, trying to find structures sympathetic to their interests. The common village population is less involved, more passive and more frustrated about these processes. Not unjustifiably, they feel that most of the deliberation and decision making processes occur over their heads, and they have cynical views about the political rhetoric which is so strongly emphasising *adat* values and the 'bottom-up' character of the political process.

The different social processes that constitute the 'decentralisation', which take place in small-scale locales, have their own preliminary outcomes, that form the contexts for new social processes, are highly interdependent. Many actors move through and participate in different arenas. There is an intense interest in knowing what has been said or decided in other arenas, and information is sought and distributed at a high pace. This is facilitated by the widespread networks of which the main actors are a part of and by forms of communication such as mobile phones. The local newspapers (increased from two to seven in the past three years) are an important medium and constitute an arena themselves. Each day the papers are full of reports about meetings of *adat* elders with regency officials, the state of claims against plantation enterprises, the discussions of draft regency legislation in *nagari* A and B, the official recognition of the first *nagari* and the election of *nagari* heads etc. Prominent *adat* leaders, university professors and journalists regularly give their interpretation of the pros and cons for going back to the *nagari* and the conflicts over resource rights, adapting their ideas to the most recent state of affairs.

It is difficult, however, to obtain a good grasp on all deliberations, conclusions, and draft regulations being simultaneously debated in the innumerable meetings in the different arenas throughout Minangkabau. Clearly, a good overall picture at any given moment of what is summarised as 'the decentralisation process' would require a continuous aggregation of micro events, as demanded by Collins (see Collins, 1992). But even if such aggregation contained, for each micro situation, analyses of how macro-structures and representations (Knorr-Cetina, 1988) through interactions become involved and reproduced in these small-scale settings, it would not allow us to come to a full understanding of the effects of such interactions or for what might happen in later and different contexts. We would still have to 'trace the ripple effects', the intended and unintended consequences of such interactions for more distant arenas in time and space (Long, 1989: 230). Our research is at a stage in which hundreds of people each day throw a handful of pebbles into the water of decentralisation. We hope to be able to trace some of the ripples after the high waves of political turmoil have subdued.

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