Land Of The Victorious Buffalo

Treading carefully, **Laurie Birch** visits a fascinating land where tigers still roam occasionally, the women are in charge at all times, and the world's largest flower stinks of carrion

Onlookers at a wedding ceremony (top left) and the bride and family (above) anxiously await the groom

High in the equatorial mountains of West Sumatra, the dawn calls of siamang apes ring out across the placid surface of a crater lake that fills the caldera of a long-dead volcano. Soaring more than 400 metres above the lake, the jagged outer wall of the ancient caldera sports a thick cloak of dark jungle dissected by waterfalls. Sumatran Tigers, though rare, still stalk its green corridors and their spoor are sometimes found in the soft ground by the lake's edge.

As the sun rises above the crater wall, heralding another day of humid tropical heat, a drum beat starts up, and is quickly taken up by others. In the nearby village of Maninjau the preliminaries for a Minangkabau wedding have just begun.

West Sumatra is the cultural homeland of the Minangkabau people. Theirs is a matriarchal and matrilineal society whose influence once extended over much of northern and central Sumatra.

In the lyrically-named towns of its heartland—Bukittinggi, Padang Panjang and Padang—the Minangkabau tradition is still strong and the distinctive horned roofs of its architecture stab dramatically at the sky.

Although historians have dated the arrival of Minangkabau culture in Sumatra at somewhere between 1000 and 2000BC, the origins of the name "Minangkabau" remain obscure.

West Sumatrans have their own colourful story of how the name originated. They claim that around 600 years ago a Javanese King, who had ambitions of acquiring the land for himself, sent a messenger to inform the people of his intentions. Reluctant to give up their land, but eager to avoid bloodshed, the West Sumatrans suggested a compromise and requested that the dispute be settled by a bullfight. On the fateful day, the Javan bull was defeated by a bullock calf with metal spurs tied to its young horns. As the Javan bull dropped dead, the West Sumatrans rose up and shouted "Minang Kabau!" which literally means "Victorious Buffalo!"

Whatever the origins of the name, the horns of that victorious buffalo are everywhere; soaring over the roofs of Padang and the villages that straddle the equator or adorning the headdress of a woman in a marriage ceremony, waiting anxiously as the approaching drums herald the appearance of the groom and his entourage.

The waiting is over when the groom and his family appear suddenly, the celebrations reaching a fever pitch as male and female dancers fill the street, competing against one another in a colourful display of wealth and power. After the presentation of a dowry, the couple enter the house of the bride's family, where they

will spend the day sitting "in state".

In Minangkabau society it is the woman who holds the reins. Wealth and property is passed on through the female line from mother to daughter, the men only sharing a place in the homes of their mothers or wives.

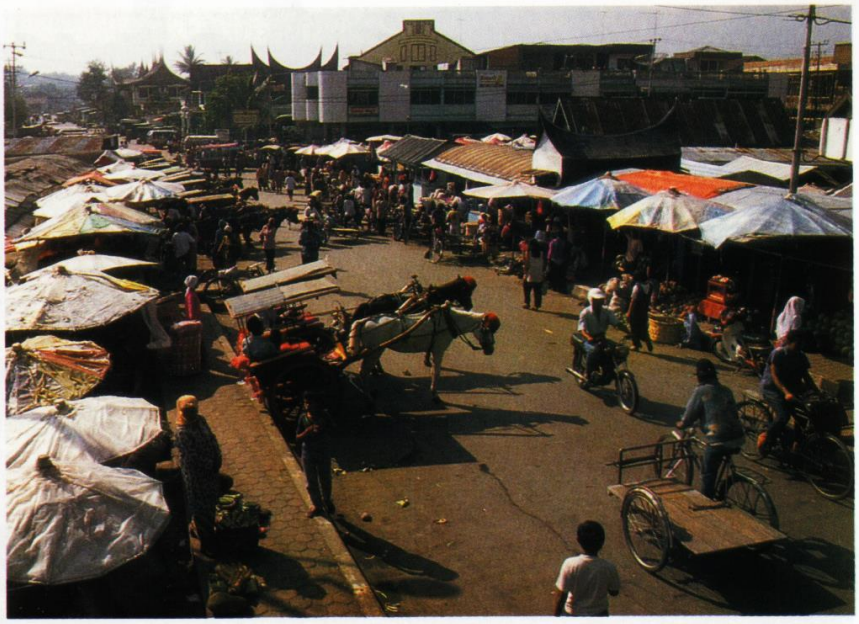
It has been said that the Minangkabau was the world's first matrilineal society. With an estimated population of four million, it is also the world's largest. Since the arrival of Islam in the 14th century, surprisingly little has changed. The old gods may have gone; roles are being reversed but the ancient traditions survive as an intriguing balance of the old and new.

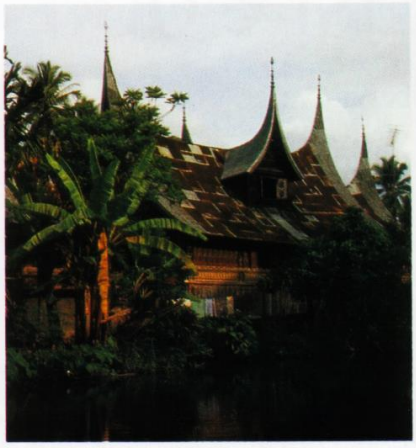
Perhaps nowhere is this curious mix of religion and culture more pronounced than in the town of Bukittinggi, situated 900m above sea level in the cool heights of the Bukit Barisan. Indonesians also know it as "Tri Arga" —the Town of Three Mountains—because of its position, ringed on three sides by the volcanic cones of Merapi, Singgalang and Sago. From its hilltop position in the centre of town, Fort de Kock looks down on a sea of saddle-roofed Minangkabau houses and the onion-shaped domes of mosques. In the busy market place, thronged with the gnarled faces of both hill and lowland people, traditional wood carvings share stalls with copies of Koranic verses.

Travelling south through wild mountains and dense rainforest, it is not hard to see why the early Minangkabau settlers revered the gods of trees and rivers. Nature, in all its abundant forms, dominates the landscape: from huge buttress-boled trees and colourful orchids to the world's largest flower—a carrion-scented root parasite named Rafflesia after its discoverer, Sir Stamford Raffles.

Little wonder, too, that they should choose to incorporate this extravagant beauty into their daily lives. The turreted wooden houses with their decorative rice barns, so much a feature of this region, are richly carved with the symbolic emblems of the people's traditional beliefs. Flowers, vines and leaves form interlacing patterns filled with life and meaning.

"This house have ghost," one woman told me as I was shown over her *adat* (traditional) home. "Ghost good, not bad," she added and I understood immediately what she meant, for these old houses seem possessed of a life and energy which goes far beyond their functional purpose.





Horse-drawn taxis called béndis wait for customers at Bukittinggi's weekly market; a woman with ducklings for sale; in the West Sumatran highlands the roof of a Minangkabau home resembles buffalo horns

What of the future? Having survived the onslaught of a Japanese invasion and colonial rule by a foreign empire, how will Western Sumatra fare against the newest threat to its culture—tourism?

Only time will tell. At present, Sumatra's tourist industry is still in its infancy but along with the rest of Indonesia it receives a growing number of visitors each year. While there are undoubted benefits to increased tourism, it is to be hoped that the region can survive the sort of cultural and environmental degradation which, in other parts of the world, threaten to destroy the very thing which visitors travel so far to experience. South of Padang's Muara River, the wild coastline with its scattered fishing communities disappears into Bengkulu Province. Beaches of volcanic sand, as yet undiscovered by tourists, look out upon the Indian Ocean and a scatter of small tropical islands with enticing names . . . Pisang Besar, Bintagur and Sakowai.

For the time being, it still belongs to the Minangkabau and the mynah birds that screech among palms. As the sun sinks into the ocean, there is still a sense of being present on the first and last day of creation. G

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