

*Islamic Peasants and the State: The 1908 Anti-Tax Rebellion in West Sumatra.* By Ken Young. Monograph 40/Yale Southeast Asia Studies. New Haven: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1994. Pp. xviii, 361.

What motivated Minangkabau peasants to risk their lives when they rebelled in 1908 against the introduction of a new system of colonial taxation? This is one of the questions Ken Young tries to answer in his study of the social formation of west Sumatra between the middle of the nineteenth century and the late 1920s.

After an introduction to the region and the complexities of Minangkabau social organization, the author presents the key elements of his analysis. These are the displaced élite, the role of Islam, and more in particular the mystical brotherhoods or *tarekat*, and the structure of households in their relationship with the colonial state and the world market. Chapter 2 describes the efforts of the colonial government to replace the forced delivery system with a taxation in cash, a system which was previously introduced in 1897 but failed. The government effort was met initially with non-violent protests by clan leaders, but soon was followed by open rebellion under the leadership of *ulama* from the Syattariyah brotherhood. Chapter 3 explains the role of the Syattariyah brotherhood by emphasizing the development of Sufi mysticism in west Sumatra. Young shows that from the middle of the nineteenth century mystical Islam gained considerable ground in the Minangkabau area. The emerging Naqsyabandiah *tarekat* in particular threatened the authority of both *adat* leaders and the leading *ulama* of the Syattariyah *tarekat* who, as displaced élite, eventually took the lead in the revolt.

However, neither the Syattariyah *tarekat* leadership nor the extremely biased colonial reports on the revolt explains satisfactorily the motivation of Minangkabau peasants in risking their lives in the revolt. In order to understand the social origins of the revolt, Young attempts to construct an abstract model of the peasant household which aims to explain the constraints and discontent of those who took part in the 1908 revolt. In 1926 the colonial government conducted a detailed research on

the socio-economic conditions in west Sumatra. In chapter 4, Young takes the results of this survey as a point of departure for his analysis of the Minangkabau household. Based on many statistical data, he outlines the economic variations in the area. Calculating backwards, Young concludes that in 1908 there was on the whole no serious shortage of subsistence land, hence grievances of this kind could not have pushed the peasants into revolt.

At the same time, the Minangkabau economy was only partially controlled by the colonial state as peasant households were able to maintain a substantial degree of subsistence autonomy. This autonomy, Young argues, must not be seen as a remnant of a static traditional past not (yet) captured by external capitalist penetration, but as an articulation of different modes of production. In short, the 1908 revolt did not mark a watershed in west Sumatran history characterized by an accelerated process of capitalist modernization. In this respect, Young criticizes the approach of scholars such as B. Schrieke, who had applied the *Geimeinschaft-Gesellschaft* distinction to the explanation of the transformation of the Minangkabau society.

As a way of showing Minangkabau households' participation in external trade in the nineteenth century, chapter 5 is devoted to a review of the so-called Forced Delivery System. Under this system, households were obliged to deliver to the state a certain amount of coffee while they faced colonial monopolies on imported goods such as salt and textiles. Eventually, this system undermined itself. Due to a combination of declining export prices, plant diseases, the loss of legitimacy of *adat* leaders, and, most importantly, the colonial authorities' failure to control the subsistence sector, government income had declined. Minangkabau households too were faced with a serious shortage of cash. And this shortage — Young does not fail to repeat this — might have been one of the reasons why the peasants revolted against the introduction of a taxation in cash.

Before returning to the revolt, Young elaborates in chapter 6 his argument about the resilience of the Minangkabau household structure. Thus far, his analysis of the Minangkabau households structure (pp.

135–249) does not say much about the reasons for the peasant revolt in 1908, because there “may not have been predominantly economic motivations” (p. 243).

In the final chapter Young brings us back to the rebellion. After repeating his argument on such an issue as the false distinction between a closed and a relatively dynamic Minangkabau society before and after 1908, Young adds three elements to his analysis. First, he takes a closer look at the leadership of the revolt and emphasizes the close connections between Syattariah *ulama* and *adat* leaders. Secondly, he refers to the conclusion of Dr Hazeu — the Adviser of Native Affairs — that there was significant popular discontent about the tax reforms which could have prompted the *ulama* into action. Finally, after an evaluation of developments after 1908, when the abolition of the Forced Delivery System and the expansion of the rice trade resulted in considerable economic prosperity, Young concludes that the revolt was based on a misconception. In other words, Minangkabau peasants had, according to the argument, the wrong motivations when they revolted. Young writes:

We should not demand too much from the aims of those involved, as their immediate purposes may seem poorly judged when viewed with the benefit of hindsight and from a quite different set of social and political values. (p. 281)

And here the lengthy exercise of discovering the underlying motivations of the peasant rebels ends.

There are some minor points of criticism: Van Heutz should be Van Heutsz; most of the addresses of Dutch archives and libraries (pp. 327–28) are outdated; it was not professor P.J. Veth who took part in the Sumatra expedition of 1877 (p. 315), but his son David Daniël. Young says that he did not find any interesting material in the archives in Jakarta (p. 329). Apparently he did not consult the Residency archive of Westkust Sumatra, which holds interesting material on the nineteenth century.

Regarding mystical Islam, some questions remained unanswered. Why, for instance, did the Naqsiyabandiah movement become more popular than the Syattariah? And did the Syattariah leaders have closer

connections with the *adat* leaders whereas the rival *tarakat* opposed these leaders? There is also need to discuss the role of these (pseudo) traditional leaders in the implementation of the Forced Delivery System. Young also fails to substantiate his conclusion in chapter 5 that these leaders lost their legitimacy during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Another point concerns the way Young uses statistical data of 1926 in order to prove that there was neither population pressure nor a shortage of subsistence land before 1908. How reliable are these calculations if one takes into account the considerable expansion of rice cultivation after 1908, as mentioned in chapter 7?

The main problem I have with this book is threefold. First, it claims to be a study on the revolt of 1908, but turns out to be an abstract analysis of long-term social continuity; these two subjects are, in the end, analytically not well connected. Secondly, throughout the book the main argument is presented in such a repetitive way that hypotheses tend to transform themselves into conclusions. Finally there is much emphasis on models rather than human agency. To borrow the wisdom of Eric Wolf, models are useful as long as names are not turned into things. Young has made the anxieties of the Minagkabau world at the turn of the century prisoners of his models; and these models ultimately fail to explain why and how these anxieties motivated rebels to do what they did.

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