


**FROM JAKON TO PUJAKESUMA : CULTURAL INDENTITY OF
JAVANESE IN NORT SUMATRA : PROF. DR. SJAFRI SAIRIN**

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15

FROM JAKON TO PUJAKESUMA Cultural Identity of Javanese in North Sumatra*

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 On Sunday, 5 August 2007, the Benteng field which is located in the heart of Medan city was crowded by thousands of people participating in a fun walk to celebrate the 27th anniversary of the Sumatra-Born Javanese (Pujakesuma) organization in North Sumatra. The event which was started at 6.30 am was participated by various groups of people, walking through the main street of the city. Enthusiastically, the participants who wore white shirt written with Fun Walk 27th Anniversary of Pujakesuma, walked leisurely accompanied by a group of marching band. The crowd happened to disturb the city traffic for a while. This ordinary event became attractive because it was attended by Sri Sultan Hamengkubuwono X, the king of Yogyakarta, accompanied by a number of key officials in North Sumatra Province, such as the Governor, the head of DPRD, Pematang Siantar Mayor, Langkat

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Regent, and several other officials (See Harian Sindo 6 August 2007). The presence of the Sultan had apparently drawn the public to participate in that social event. The fun walk was not the only event that was held by Pujakesuma to celebrate the anniversary of the organization. Other social activities, such as free circumcision and sports tournament, were also held (see <http://psmsmedan.multiply.com/review/item/72>).

What is the factor that has encouraged the descendants of the Javanese migrants that were born in that region to establish an organization with ethnicity background in North Sumatra? Why did the organization establish only in 1980s while the number of the Javanese in the region was quite big in 1930? This writing will try to answer those questions using the social history approach of the Javanese arrival in North Sumatra.

Migration of Javanese to North Sumatra

The arrival of the Javanese in North Sumatra (read East Sumatra) actually had been happening long before the great plantation was built in the region in 1863. In one of his visit to East Sumatra in 1823, Anderson found that several kampongs in the region were already inhabited by Javanese. They usually lived on the coastal area. Anderson stated that:

At Kota Jawa there are the remains of a Javanese (sic) fortification, which I had an opportunity of examining. The entrenchment of earth is about a mile, or a mile and a quarter in circumferences. Here there was formerly a colony of 5000 Javanese (sic) (Anderson 1971: 293).

However, history records that the big migration process of the Javanese to the region, especially to East Sumatra, was closely related to the vast growth of the commercial plantation in that region. They came to the region to work as plantation workers.

Every effort to build a commercial plantation always results in serious problem, related to the provision of a large number of plantation workers who are willing to be paid with low wage (Gordon, 1982, 174). The indigene of East Sumatra was seldom interested to work as plantation worker, especially because the land that they owned was already relative sufficient to support their life. They who then were willing to work as plantation workers usually had no choice but to do it. This condition was what then forced the plantation to find workers from outside the East Sumatra region. In the beginning, the plantation had Chinese workers who were recruited from the Malay Peninsula. When Nienhuys opened his first tobacco plantation in that region in 1863, 88 Chinese and 23 Malay were employed as workers in the plantation which he built (Reid, 1970:293).

Other plantations which were established after that used Nienhuys strategy in providing the workers, which was recruiting Chinese workers to work as their workers (Reid, 1970:293). When it was no longer possible to recruit Chinese workers, due to the Chinese government policy to limit the number of contract workers which were sent to Asia, plantations in East Sumatra then turned their eyes to Java. In the early 1870s, plantations started to recruit workers from Java (Broersma, 1922:246)¹.

Almost at the same time, plantations in East Sumatra also started to hire South Indian people which in the region were known as the *Keling* people. The recruited workers were bound by working contract for three working year's period. The transportation cost from their region to East Sumatra and to return to their region was paid by the plantation; the same was for the housing during their stay in the plantation. They were placed in a building called *Pondok*. After they

¹ Dootjes (1938:49) states that the recruitment of plantation workers from Java was started in 1872.

finished their working contract, they were allowed to choose whether to extend their working contract period for the next three years or to return to their region. A few numbers of Javanese workers chose to return to their homeland after finishing their contract. However, most of them did not return and decided to extend their working contract period and in the end settled in East Sumatra.

Javanese workers who were recruited after 1870 came to East Sumatra through the *Deli Planters Vereeniging* (Deli Plantation Company) agents. This company was headed by European people, but employed Javanese people as field recruiter, which was known as *werek*.² *Werek* used many ways to recruit workers from Java. Often they also used various tricks. For example, people were persuaded to watch shadow puppet show, but then they were kidnapped and sent to East Sumatra (Kloosterboer, 1960:49). An example of such cases found will describe how a female *werek* persuaded and tricked a man from East Java. Pairan, a retirement of plantation worker, told how he was persuaded by a female *werek* which was young and beautiful to work in plantation in East Sumatra. On an afternoon in 1937, Pairan, who was sitting on the side of a road which crossed over his village in Kediri, East Java, was approached by a young and beautiful woman. That introduction then continued into a discussion about life in the plantation in East Sumatra. The woman in the end managed to persuade Pairan to look for a job there. "Later, we can marry there. You can work as plantation worker and I can work as a maid in the Dutch house there. We will surely get a

² The work force recruitment agents owned offices in Semarang, Magelang, Purworejo, Yogyakarta (Middle Java) and Bandung (West Java). The workers were shipped via Batavia (Jakarta now), Semarang (Middle Java) and Surabaya (East Java) (Het Department van Binnenlandsch Bestuur, Werving en Emigratie van Inlanders, no 121 J. Weltvreden, Landsdrukkerij, 1919, 21-37).

large number of wages and we can save them and someday we can return to Java with the money. We can buy rice field and live in prosperity one day", Pairan said.

The young man was talked into it and left his family without a word, including his wife which then was newly wed, and followed the woman to the Surabaya harbor. As they reached the departure site for plantation workers in the city, they entered a waiting room before boarding into the ship that was about to depart. Not long after that, the young woman requested his permission to buy meal outside the room, but it turned that she never returned. Pairan was not in the condition to escape because the place was guarded strictly by the plantation agents. In the end, he had to work as plantation worker in East Sumatra and until he is 75 years old, he has never had the chance to visit his village in Java.

There is a strong suspicion that most of the Javanese workers recruited by those plantation agents did not have any intention to work in the plantation in East Sumatra willingly. They mostly went to East Sumatra because they were persuaded by the *werek* who worked very professionally. The *werek* was willing to do the job especially because the commission which they could earn from the recruitment agent that time, equal to wage for sixty days of work, was thirty cent per day in Java. The high commission encouraged the *werek* to use any means to gather as much as workers (Suparlan, 1976:109). In addition, most of Javanese that time were overwhelmed by their severe poverty as a result of the Dutch colonial government policy that applied the *Cultuurstelsel* (forced planting) regulation that they found that working as *werek* was the only way to climb out from their poverty.

Meanwhile, the Javanese willingly abandoned Java to work in the plantation in East Sumatra usually only to save their life from their wretched life in their village. Besides the pressure from

the people toward land, *Cultuurstelse*³ which was introduced by the Dutch colonial administration in Java (1830-1870) had also worsened the poverty and the destitution of village people in Java (Geertz, 1963 and Soetrisno, 1980). In their desperate attempt, they enrolled themselves to become plantation workers in East Sumatra holding a dream that one day they could return to their own village with a better life.

Meanwhile in Java, East Sumatra was more popular as Deli, a name which had a bad reputation. Older Javanese would certainly still remember how their neighbors or brothers were persuaded by *werek* (which was sometimes their own friend or neighbor), to go to Deli.

Besides the recruitment system via agents, in 1911 the Dutch Indies administration introduced the freelance worker Ordinance. With this system, *lao-keh*, which is in the Chinese language that was used in East Sumatra meant veteran or people who have an experience working in plantation (*an old hand*), was sent back to his own village so that he could return to East Sumatra with new workers and his relatives to work in the plantation (Department of Agriculture, Industry and Commerce, Handbook of the Netherlands East Indies, 1924:134).

With those various recruitment systems, the number of the workers in East Sumatra plantation was increasing gradually. On May 1884, there were 1,800 Javanese workers who worked in the region. In May 1900, the number increased to 3,619,233 and in May 1927 there were 62,498 Javanese in which 19,929 of them were female

³ Cultuurstelsel is a system that forces the people to collect export plants which was introduced in Indonesia by the Dutch administration in 1830. Poor farmers are obligated to provide work force to work in the company-owned lands, or to plant in their own land plants such as sugar cane and coffee in a certain amount.

workers (Modderman, 1929:85). In this period, the number of Chinese who worked in plantations decreased to about 21 percent, while the number of Javanese workers was increasing from time to time.

With the coming of these workers, the number of the East Sumatra population increased rapidly, including newcomers from Minangkabau, Mandailing, and regions around East Sumatra who left their hometown to East Sumatra to find a new life. They came to the region not to work as plantation workers, but to trade goods needed by the plantation people.

Dramatically, East Sumatra, which used to be inhabited by around half of million people in 1905, turned from a sparse region into a region inhabited by 1,693,200 people in 1930 (O'Malley, 1977:121). Based on the 1930 census, more than 42 percent of the total population of East Sumatra was Javanese (including some Sundanese and people from Jakarta). Ten percent of them were Chinese, and around 22 percent were consisted of people from other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Malay which were the indigenes were only 15 percent of the total population in 1930 (Pelzer, 1978:63).

During the Japanese colonization in 1940s, the recruitment of plantation workers was stopped because the World War Two was erupted; however, the migration from regions around East Sumatra still happened. The region, which that time was known as the Dollar Region, continuously welcomed migrants who came with the dream to have a better economic life. During this short colonization, Japanese colonial administration encouraged plantation workers to open new fields and rice fields on lands owned by the plantation. This policy was issued by the Japanese Colonial to solve the food scarcity problem in East Sumatra. For that purpose, the colonial administration acquired about 160,000 hectare of plantation land to be tilled by the workers to become agricultural area. Thousands of plantation workers who did not

own land abandoned the plantation to work as farmers (Pelzer, 1978:123-125). After the independence, farmers who planted the plantation land at the end were involved in a dispute with the plantation owner. They refused to give the land back to the previous owners.

After the independence, the recruitment of the workers from Java was once again started, through the Association of North Sumatra Plantation Businessman (GAPPERSU). However, in 1957, this activity was once again stopped when the Dutch plantation was nationalized by Indonesian Government (Thalib, 1962:54). Through the policy of nationalization all Dutch plantations in East Sumatra, new system of plantation management in East Sumatra was about to begin. Soon after the nationalization was performed, Indonesian government announced that all Dutch plantations were under the management of the New State Plantation Company (Waspada, 16 December 1957).

The Recruitment of the workers from Java then was done through a program which was called Work Force between Regions (AKAD-*Angkatan Kerja Antar Daerah*). As previously, in this recruitment program, workers were also given the right to choose at the end of the working contract period whether to sign a new contract for the next three years, or to return to their own region at the company's expense. It turned out that most of Javanese workers extended their working contract in the plantation and eventually decided to settle in the region after they retired.

According to record, in early 1920s, around 85 percent of male Javanese workers and 60 percent of female Javanese workers who worked in East Sumatra extended their working contract with the plantation company (Hotchkiss, 1924:158). Meanwhile, there were only few Chinese workers who chose to stay working in the plantation; most of them preferred to live independently by opening their own business in the urban area in East Sumatra. As

the result, in 1930s, from approximately 200,000 Chinese who lived in the region, there were only 27,000 people who worked in the plantation; the rest lived inside or near big or small city (O'Malley, 1977:120). On the contrary, from around 590,000 Javanese who lived there that time, 240,000 people (around 41 percent) worked in the plantation. The rest settled in the rural area in East Sumatra. Often they named the region that they occupied with Javanese names, such as Sidodadi, Sidoharjo and others. It was true that not all Javanese lived in plantation after the independence, but the largest portion of the plantation workers was still dominated by the Javanese. In 1980 at least a half of million Javanese people depended on the plantation activities, both directly and indirectly, to support their life (Ginting and Daroesman, 1982:5). Therefore, the plantation and the neighboring area were actually the residential area of the Javanese in East Sumatra.

Identity Construction: Culture and Religion

For the local inhabitants and the other non-Javanese migrants who worked outside the plantation sector, working as plantation workers was not something that they would like to do. They considered the job as not appropriate to their social life standard. They came to the region to conduct any economic activity outside plantation. As the result, Javanese workers who worked in the plantation were very often regarded as having a lower social status than the others. This was proved by the term *Jawa Kontrak* or *Jakon* which was often used to call the Javanese. This term brought various social implications which led to a form of stereotype which looked down on the social status of the Javanese. The harsh life of the plantation workers and the lack of fidelity toward the religious teaching (Islam) were the excuse for bringing down the social status of the Javanese. This

resulted, for example, in the unwillingness of some people to bind in a matrimonial bond with Javanese. This kind of view still existed until late of 1950s.

In spite of the view that underestimated the Javanese, actually there were also some non-Javanese people who held a positive view on the social status of Javanese. Javanese was considered as an ethnic group who has the characteristics such as patient, hard worker, and less aggressive than the other newcomers. However, social law seemed to be effective in life where negative stereotype always appeared more strongly than positive.

As a response to that negative view, Javanese in this region preferred to identify themselves as *Jawa Deli (Jadel)*. The word *Jadel* showed their social status. Even though their parents came from Ethnic Java, most of them were born in East Sumatra. To be called as Javanese, they had a problem because they did not know from which village their parents came from. The Javanese language which they used was also not as good as the one used by the Javanese in Java. Meanwhile, to identify themselves as East Sumatra people or Malay was also not possible because in their bodies ran the blood of Ethnic Java.

As Javanese descendants who came from the plantation, Javanese in the region were characterized by the use of the lower level of Javanese language called *ngoko* in their daily communication. If someone tried to communicate using the higher level of Javanese Language (*krama*) with them, he would fail⁴. However, the *Ngoko* used in Java was not the same with the

⁴ In the first days of staying in the reseach area in the plantation, I tried to communicate with the plantation people using Jawa krama language, considering that this would be the most appopriate for this kind of situation in Java. However, everytime I spoke in Jawa krama, the plantation people answered in Indonesian with North

one used in the plantation. In Java, this level of language is only used by people with the same social status or used to speak with other people with lower social status. Meanwhile, *Basa Jawa Krama* is used with people who have higher social class or with strangers from the same ethnic group. However, in East Sumatra, because most of them are not used to speak in *Basa Jawa Krama*, they speak in *Basa Jawa Ngoko*, regardless whether the person they spoke with is younger or has higher or lower social status than they. In Java, young people from the same social status would speak in *Basa Jawa Krama* with older people, although the older people would still speak in *Basa Jawa Ngoko*. Nonetheless, it is also interesting to note that when a Javanese plantation worker spoke to a foreman and an assistant or official with higher rank, he would prefer to use Indonesian, though the superior was actually a Javanese who was off course able to speak in *Basa Jawa Krama*. The plantation officials might use *Basa Jawa Ngoko*, but the workers would still speak in Indonesian. The writer often noticed that plantation workers spoke in *Basa Jawa Ngoko* among themselves, whether in the work place or in their house. However, when an assistance or stranger came, they would switch into Indonesian. This showed that assistant

Sumatra accent. Eventually I realised that the plantation people was not used to speak in Jawa Krama, though most of them, especially who are born and raised in Java, are able to use it. They prefer to speak in Indonesian with North Sumatra accent when speaking to strangers or to Javanese who have higher social status. Because of the communication problem, I changed my language and used Indonesian to speak with them, and our communication was improved. Several weeks later, I started to use Basa Jawa Ngoko which is usually used by the people, and the result was great, the plantation workers answered me also in Ngoko. It means that I was considered as "a part" of their people.

was considered as stranger, though he was also a Javanese, and unconsciously they had categorized him as outsider which was not part of their social community.

The use of language in idiosyncrasy way is closely related to the history of the migration of plantation workers to North Sumatra. Javanese workers who came to North Sumatra were originated from different districts in Java, such as Banyumas, Bagelen, or Kediri. During their journey to *tanah sabrang*, first they were placed in the same acceptance sites, and shipped using the same ship or train, and localized in the same plantation area. As other Javanese people when meeting people from different regions, they always tried to use *Basa Jawa Krama* as the standard in communication. This etiquette probably carried on until they realized that plantation life was not easy. Those contract workers were commonly treated badly by the foreman and the European assistant who became their superior (Said 1970, Pelzer 1978). They were actually no more than slaves, forced to work hard with low wage as their reward. Order was often given with verbal abuse and physical attack. In this condition, it was natural that then the etiquette in having relationship with people who had higher social status was lost because it was not supported by the local condition. Plantation environment had changed the behavior pattern of the society. As a revenge for the cruel treatment, plantation workers started to act "ill-mannerly" toward their superior, especially the Javanese Foreman. This ill-manner was showed by using *basa Jawa Ngoko*, a rude language, to speak with them. By using the language, they had put themselves equal to the other, including their superior. This was a symbol of resistance toward the injustice that they often experienced in the plantation. As the result, *Basa Jawa Krama* was getting rarely used and eventually *Basa Jawa Ngoko* became the only communication medium used in daily conversation in the plantation, which then spread to the Javanese communities outside the plantation.

The use of *Basa Jawa Ngoko* in daily life of the plantation workers was passed on to the next generation, who lived in the plantation or outside the plantation. *Bahasa Melayu* that had become their daily language to speak with other strangers had become increasingly important for the Javanese community in the East Sumatra region. The similarity of the use of *Basa Jawa Ngoko* in the region was an important cultural aspect that enhanced the identity awareness of the Javanese migrants who still worked in the plantation or lived in some settlements around the region. The language that they used was also reflected on the name given to their children who were born in North Sumatra. Names, such as Sutomo, Sunardi, Sri Setiawati, were the names that showed the Ethnic Java identity.

Besides language, other important identity aspect for the group was their identity as Moslem. For the Javanese in North Sumatra, the fidelity of a person in practicing the five pillar of Islam, such as *sholat* (praying) and *puasa* (fasting), was not considered important, but for *Jadel*, Moslem identity was an identity that was nonnegotiable. A *Jadel* is a Moslem. This is apparently rooted from the fact that generally the early generation of Javanese workers who came to East Sumatra came from the *kaum abangan* group which held the same life view.

An office clerk who was assigned to recruit new plantation workers for the plantation mentioned that the majority of plantation workers in North Sumatra were Moslem. Furthermore, he explained that what he meant by Moslem was that the majority of plantation workers was Javanese. For him, those two things are just the same: Javanese is a Moslem, though not all Moslem is Javanese. The statement indicates that Islam is the key identity for the Javanese in the region, whether he was a plantation worker or not.

The Assistant to the chief (Askep) in a plantation in the region was a Javanese Christian follower, who was born in Java and migrated

to North Sumatra to work in the plantation in 1973. He spoke about the ethnic identity of the Javanese people in North Sumatra:

“The strongest identity of Ethnic Java in North Sumatra is Islam. Although some of them did not practice *sholat* and *puasa*, they still declared themselves as Moslem. I am a Javanese, but I am a Javanese Christian. Since I am not a Moslem, I could not make a strong social relationship with the Javanese community in the plantation. The Javanese workers that I headed did not consider me as a Javanese because I have different religious affiliation from them. Although I am a Javanese, they considered me as Batak, because most of Batak, especially Batak Toba, are Christian.”

There are plenty information that support the statement that Islam is an important part of the identity of the Ethnic Java in North Sumatra. Non-Moslem Javanese was often expelled from the social intercourse of the Javanese. The Non-Moslem was generally not invited to *slametan* or other social meetings. If a non-Muslim invited Javanese Muslim to come to a social meeting, the Javanese Moslem usually would not come. One of the informants mentioned about an incident that is related to the social relationship.

“This happened several years ago in an *afdeling* next to this plantation. From a number of workers who just arrived from Java, three of them were Christian. Because they were not Moslem, their social interaction with the other Javanese people was limited. Nobody wanted to eat food that they had prepared in the *slametan* ceremony that they held, because people worried that the food was cooked with oil made from pig grease. After three months in the plantation, finally they embraced Islam, especially because they could not handle the social pressure”.

Social construction that relates identification of an ethnic group with religious affiliation as this one is quite strong in North Sumatra. Batak, especially Batak Toba, is identified as Christian,

and Javanese is identified as Moslem, though in the reality, there are some Javanese who are Christian and Batak Toba who are Moslem. For the Javanese in North Sumatra, a Christian Javanese would no longer be categorized as Javanese, but as Batak. On the contrary, Moslem Batak is often considered as Malay or Mandailing.

Because ethnic and religious affiliation cannot be separated from life, social relationship between the Javanese and the Batak becomes limited, especially in the area around the plantation. There are some belief systems and religious practices that caused problem between the Javanese and the Batak. In daily life, Javanese is usually reluctant to come to a social meeting related to the religious belief that is held by non-Moslem. That kind of ethnic and religious prejudice has made the social relationship between Moslem Javanese and Non-Moslem limited that both groups only relate in things concerning with works.

From *Jadel* to *Pujakesuma*

The term *Jakon* that was used by other ethnics to call the Javanese in North Sumatra has been left long behind. The term is almost extinct in the daily discourse. The same also happens with the term *jadel* that is a product of the Javanese in North Sumatra to name themselves. It is true that the majority of workers in the plantation in the region are still Javanese, but the number of Javanese who work outside the plantation sector increases time to time. Many descendants of the Javanese plantation workers have succeeded in improving their social status, whether by improving their education level, or having success in business outside plantation sector. The number of expert doctors and government officials in North Sumatra from Ethnic Java is increasing. This is added by other government and military officials that are assigned from other regions.

The improvement on the social status was increasingly faster during the New Order administration. With the wide opportunity in education sector and the development of sport activity, such as football, athletics, and others, the descendents of plantation workers were invited to improve their social status. In football, there were a number of Javanese descendants who became the team members of PSMS, such as Sunardi, Nobon, and so on. In Deli Serdang Football Association (PSDS), the number of the main players who were Javanese descendants is bigger. PSDS that is based in the capital of Deli Serdang Regency is an area surrounded by a plantation that owned an adequate sport facility that it is able to improve the skills in certain sports, especially football. Mardi lestari, a national runner which was once called as the fastest runner in Southeast Asia, is a Javanese descendant. One of the assistant to the North Sumatra Governor is the descendant of a plantation worker in the region.

The improved social status has resulted in increasing confidence of the Javanese in North Sumatra. The identity as *Jadel* is considered to be inadequate anymore. Therefore, they started to construct their identity by calling themselves *Pujakesuma* (Sumatra Born Javanese) This ethnic identity was strengthened by the establishment of Pujakesuma organization in 1987. Various social and cultural activities are held, such as performing arts show with Javanese characteristic in certain occasions. Many branches of the organization are established in many places.

Concluding Notes

The identity of a person can be determined by several factors, and one of them is related to ethnicity. In a country where ethnic plurality is one of its characteristics as Indonesia, everyone is demanded to have ethnic identity. Ethnicity is an *ascribed status*. As soon as a child is born, an ethnicity is ascribed to him. Ethnicity

is basically not an *achieved status*. It is true that in some cases there are people who have two or three ethnicities. A child who is born from mixed marriage between two different ethnics is increasing lately. Children who are born from a marriage between Batak man with a Javanese woman for example. These children are recognized as a part of the Ethnic Java and at the same time the Ethnic Batak. However, there is a problem for the children who are born from a mixed marriage between Minangkabau man who is matrilineal with Ambon woman who is patriarchy. Children from this marriage culturally cannot affiliate with the father or the mother's ethnic. In this kind of case, it is the child himself that will determine his ethnic affiliation through various social institutions, both formal and informal. It is also possible for someone to have a certain ethnic, to become a member of other ethnic, through adoption by going through certain traditional ceremony. However, most of the time this is done for social or political interest, such as the case when an official visits a region and is acknowledged to become an honorary member of certain ethnic.

The importance of ethnic affiliation in the life of Indonesian people can be noticed from the personals advertised in Kompas daily newspaper every Sunday. Almost all participants of the column mention their ethnic affiliation and wish to have marriage partner from a certain ethnic group. This shows that the status and the role of ethnic affiliation in Indonesia are still important.

There is a kind of social reconstruction that forces every person to must show his ethnic group. Therefore, it is understandable when everyone tries hard to utilize the ethnic affiliation for social interest, such as social solidarity enhancement, cultural values socialization, and other functions in the new region. In North Sumatra, not only Ethnic Java who needs organization, other migrant ethnics also needs it, such as Batak Toba,

Minangkabau and Mandailing (Bruner, 1970 and Pelly, 1983). The same situation can also be found in the other regions in Indonesia where people from other regions come to find a living. In Sydney, Australia, there is even *Minang Saiyo* organization which is an organization for the Minangkabau migrants in Australia.

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