

Gongs and Pop Songs

*Sounding Minangkabau
in Indonesia*

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OHIO UNIVERSITY RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
SOUTHEAST ASIA SERIES NO. 127
OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS
ATHENS

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Chapter 1

ETHNICITY, GONGS, AND POP SONGS

On a Thursday afternoon in October, I found myself in the relative luxury of an air-conditioned taxi for forty-five minutes, enduring Jakarta's notoriously congested roadways in order to attend the opening ceremony of the 2003 Dazzling Exhibition of Indonesian Tourism. The advertisement in *Kompas*, Indonesia's largest national newspaper, had promised the event would be "celebrated with various regional *kesenian* [I, arts]." A call to the event's organizers revealed that the group selected to perform at the opening ceremony—attended and officiated by Indonesia's tourism minister—was from the province of West Sumatra. It seemed a perfect event for my research project on the celebration of ethnicity through music.

Walking into the exhibition hall, I passed rows of booths where government offices and private businesses from around the archipelago were advertising eco-, maritime, religious, or cultural tourism. They competed for the attention of domestic tourists, potential investors, and tourist agencies. In 2003 the central government of Indonesia was promoting the stimulation of the tourism sector—particularly domestic tourism—as a way to overcome the impact of the 1998 Asian economic crisis. To the obvious disappointment of booth operators, I walked straight past them, heading for the end of the hall, where I heard a musical group warming up. The eight young men playing were part of a performance troupe called Lansano Entertaint, which

was representing the Office for Tourism and Culture in Padang, the capital of West Sumatra. The program they presented fused music, dance, and cultural practices together, including one piece incorporating a ritualistic welcome where three women dressed in elaborate ceremonial clothes offered the attending dignitaries betel leaves. I was particularly interested in the music because my research was focused on the sonic representations of the Minangkabau, one of the hundreds of recognized ethnic groups in Indonesia and the dominant one in West Sumatra.

The physical, visual, and sonic focus of the ensemble was clearly the *talempong* (M, small bronze or brass kettle gongs approximately seven inches in diameter). The sixty gongs were arranged on three racks that stood waist high. One musician played melodies on the central rack of thirty tuned gongs arranged in three rows, while the two musicians flanking him accompanied the melody on sets of fifteen gongs each. The sets of gongs were tuned chromatically, a system that accommodates both major and minor scales, the occasional modulation within a tune, and harmonic accompaniment of the melody using basic chord progressions derived from “Western”¹ tonal theory. A fourth musician enhanced the melodic line, alternating between different Minangkabau wind instruments—depending on the tune and section of the piece—including the *saluang* (M, an oblique bamboo flute), the *bansi* (M, a small end-blown bamboo block flute), and the *sarunai* (M, single-reed bamboo pipe). The lineup also included bass guitar and percussion, including local drums, djembe (an instrument now made in Indonesia), and tambourine. In addition to accompanying choreographed dances, the group played instrumental arrangements of nostalgic *pop Minang* (I, pop songs in the Minangkabau language) (video 1.1). The compositions, designed to align with the dance movements, were careful arrangements highlighting textural and timbral contrasts between sections. This style of music was *talempong kreasi baru* (I, new-creation talempong), more commonly called simply *talempong kreasi*. Over the next fourteen months, I ran into talempong kreasi ensembles playing in contexts ranging from tourist shows, arts festivals, theme parks, and government functions to cultural missions abroad

and elite weddings. Talempong kreasi is the musical and talempong style that most frequently represented and continues to represent the Minangkabau. But how did a style of talempong that has its origins in the late 1960s come to do this, and what has happened to the older talempong practices in the meantime?

The Scope of the Project

Gongs and Pop Songs tells a story about the transformation of music in West Sumatra since the 1960s through different musical styles involving the same medium, talempong. The book is particularly concerned with the transformation of talempong from a musical practice that expresses and sustains identities of tight-knit, small communities where people know each other on a face-to-face basis (the criterion I use to define community in this text) into one that also became capable of articulating an ethnic identity where members rarely know each other so closely. The book asks how the sounds and meanings of this Minangkabau musical practice were shaped and reshaped in response to specific social, political, and economic forces, including a regional rebellion that failed (1958–61); the institutionalization of the arts, starting in 1965; the related professionalization of the artistic workforce; and the pressures of a free-market economy. Note that when I invoke the phrase *the arts* I use it as a gloss for the Indonesian terms *seni* or *kesenian*, both of which refer to the performing, literary, and plastic arts. It is significant that this terminology is Indonesian, not Minangkabau, as the project of institutionalizing the arts is very much a national one. These terms, moreover, have been adopted widely in Minangkabau contexts, replacing indigenous concepts.²

In short, the book presents a history of talempong styles that seeks to make sense of the various Minangkabau combinations of gongs and pop songs found in Indonesia in the twenty-first century. The journey moves from the villages of West Sumatra to metropolitan Jakarta as I explore talempong played in contexts ranging from classrooms to weddings and tourist performances. In each context, I ask how people

understand themselves as Minangkabau in the world through their engagements with *talempong* or how these musical practices help people sound Minangkabau.

Gongs and Pop Songs provides a study of how expressive arts—in this case musical practices—can function as expressions of ethnicity. I take a cognitive approach to ethnicity in the book, asking how musical practices help create, produce, and represent ethnic sensibilities. The book also investigates how social, economic, and political processes help facilitate the constitution of ethnicities and artistic practices linked with them. I suggest, for example, that the emergence of the style called *orkes talempong* (I, *talempong orchestra*) is very much connected with the politics and cultural politics of the time in which it emerged, including a shift in national government and, as a handful of interlocutors strongly asserted, the failure of a regional rebellion, the Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia (PRRI) I, the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia). According to this perspective, this musical practice helped Minangkabau intellectuals and artists negotiate a place in the new political order. The changes to *talempong* that I chronicle here are also set against a diversifying economy and the increasing entrenchment of middle-class values manifest in the processes of institutionalization and the subsequent professionalization of music where academic credentials are necessary for access to many performance opportunities, processes that were happening in West Sumatra, as they were elsewhere in Indonesia.

The founding of an educational institution dedicated to Minangkabau arts in 1965 contributed to unequivocal and irrevocable transformations in the contours of the Minangkabau musical landscape. When the institution was first established, there was a secondary division and a tertiary one; both were initially called KOKAR (I, *Konservatori Karawitan*, which will be glossed for now as *Conservatory of Traditional Music*). However, both divisions have gone through subsequent name changes. The tertiary division became ASKI (I, *Akademi Seni Karawitan Indonesia, Academy of Indonesian Traditional Music*) in 1966, STSI (I, *Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia, Higher Institute of Indonesian Arts*) in 1999, and ISI (I, *Institut Seni Indonesia,*

Institute of Indonesian Arts) in 2010, the title it currently holds. The secondary division changed to SMKI (I, Sekolah Menengah Karawitan Indonesia, High School of Indonesian Traditional Music) in 1982, when it also moved its campus to Padang, and to SMKN 7 Padang (I, Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan Negeri 7, State Vocational High School no. 7 in Padang) in the 1990s. In chapter 3, I unpack these nomenclatural politics. In the text that follows, if the events I am discussing are located in a specific year that correlates to a particular title for either the secondary- or tertiary-level institution, I will use that name. If the time referent is vague or broad, I will use *institution* for the period when the secondary and tertiary divisions shared a campus, *institute* for the tertiary level, and *high school* for the secondary level.

Two shifts resulting from the institutionalization of the arts key in this book include the creation and bolstering of new styles of talempong and the production of hundreds of graduates, a cadre of academically trained artists who seek full-time employment in fields related to the arts. The emergence of this kind of artist is significant because their academic training sets them apart from artists in indigenous contexts, even in the rare cases in which the students enter the institute with extensive exposure to indigenous styles. These graduates, who operate as bureaucrats, composers, musicians, and troupe directors, engage with and promote the new talempong styles; that is, they are directly involved with the performance of ethnicity. The pressures of a free-market economy have encouraged further developments in talempong style as graduates look for work and respond to demands for the popularization of talempong and other musical practices. Consumers of the newest talempong style, *talempong goyang* (I, a mix of talempong with rock instruments), considered it a more authentic Minangkabau music than other forms of Minangkabau popular music, including pop Minang played on a synthesizer. Thus, the book traces the way talempong has been shaped and reshaped as an expression of Minangkabau ethnicity and the involvement of the arts institutions and people affiliated with them in that process.

Collectively these social, political, and economic changes over the last sixty years have transformed the practice of music in West

Sumatra: they have resulted in a qualitative difference in the way Minangkabau musics are produced, aesthetically shaped, ideologically framed, circulated, and ultimately consumed. In short, they have caused a paradigm shift within the Minangkabau musical world. But, this shift has not entailed the complete replacement of the old paradigm with the new one. Rather, there has been an expansion and diversification of practices leading to more paths through which to negotiate one's place in the world as Minangkabau. The story told here does not just detail the expansion of talempong styles but also the diversification of the kinds of musicians who operate in West Sumatra today, including the difference between skilled musicians who have accumulated their musical knowledge in villages and those who are trained at formalized educational institutions for the arts. In short, the book seeks to understand how there are different ways of thinking about, playing, and valuing music in contexts where most of the people involved think of themselves as Minangkabau at some level. People's engagements with ethnicity, however, are not uniform. The cognitive view of ethnicity provides analytical tools to make sense of this diversity.

The Cognitive View of Ethnicity

The Minangkabau are commonly recognized as one of the hundreds of ethnic groups in Indonesia. But what *is* ethnicity? What does it *mean* to be Minangkabau? Many people—lay persons and scholars alike—take ethnicity for granted, as Timothy Rice insists, “as a category of social life and of social analysis” (2007, 20; 2010): they assume ethnic identities are solid, bounded, concrete things in the world, rather than asking how and why people come to identify with a particular ethnic category and how those identifications might diverge. Until recently the study of ethnicity has largely been approached from one of two perspectives (Levine 1999). The first of these is the primordialist view that “situates ethnicity in the psyche so deeply that society and culture are bent to its will.” The second, the instrumentalist or situationalist

view, argues that ethnicity is entirely constructed but fails to show “how particular ethnic categories arise and become salient in social action.” One alternative to this polarized argument has been a reactionary postmodern stance arguing for the “demolition of ethnicity” altogether (Levine 1999, 166–67), yet this approach fails to account for the way my collaborators and interlocutors in the field have become invested in their expressions of it.

A more productive alternative to emerge in the last decade or so—and the one I use in this book—has been the “cognitive turn” that shifts the emphasis onto how and when an ethnic-based category such as Minangkabau is created and invoked (Brubaker 2002, 2009; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004). This approach emphasizes that ethnicity is “not a thing *in* the world, but a perspective *on*” it (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004, 33; cf. Brubaker 2002). The cognitive approach urges an exploration of the “culturally specific ways in which persons, institutions, organizations, and discourses make sense of experience and interpret the social world.” In other words, I am interested in the variety of mechanisms—discourses, institutional forms, private interactions, and so on—through and in which Minangkabau ethnicity works (Brubaker 2009, 32, 20), along with the variety of ways people engage with and experience the category of Minangkabau. Not all people are equally invested.

In Indonesia, claiming an ethnic identity is often—but not necessarily always—tied up with language. One way that some people engage with the category of Minangkabau, asserting and claiming Minangkabau ethnicity, is through language choice. Many people who identify as Minangkabau understand and speak a language known as Minangkabau. For example, some individuals I met used a phrase in the Minangkabau language *urang awak* (M, one of my/our people) in personal interactions to determine ethnic belonging. In other words, they were using a language-based category to ally themselves with those people who understand the term and differentiate themselves from other individuals who did not. However, there is considerable debate about what constitutes the language, or rather which particular regional variant is taken as the standard. For example, there are

differences in vowel sounds or in word choices between the regional dialects that mark a speaker as from Pariaman, Sawahlunto, or Bukittinggi. Despite these differences, these variants share grammatical and lexical similarities that structure and categorize experiences in and perspectives on the world that may differ from the way a Batak or Javanese speaker might categorize her experiences, in this respect bolstering the relevance of the Minangkabau language to Minangkabau ethnicity.

However, it is important to note that there are also people who identify as Minangkabau even though Minangkabau is not their primary language and some who speak very little, if any, of the language. In the 2010 census, of the people who identified their ethnicity as Minangkabau, only 71.19 percent claimed Minangkabau was the primary language they spoke at home; 23.87 percent claimed they spoke Indonesian primarily; and the remaining 4.94 percent claimed another primary language (Ananta et al. 2013, 25).³ While most of the respondents speak both Minangkabau and Indonesian, there is no data on what percentage speak both daily at home.

In my experience, Minangkabau is the predominant language in village contexts. I have encountered some people who do not speak Indonesian at all: they are generally older and have little formal education. Younger people in the villages tend to have more Indonesian because they have attended school longer. I also found that people who had migrated elsewhere in the archipelago and moved back had greater fluency in Indonesian. In the cities, the opposite is often true: people had greater fluency in Indonesian, and for some, the use of Indonesian equals or even dominates Minangkabau in their daily lives. The choice to speak primarily Indonesian has to do with educational and social capital, including an individual or familial sense of cosmopolitan identity. As Aris Ananta and colleagues state, Indonesian is both “the language of national identity and the language of education, literacy, modernization and social mobility” (2013, 23). For example, the primary language used in the household of my host family, which strongly identified as ethnically Minangkabau, was Indonesian. My host mother once explained that she wanted her children to be able to converse with cousins who identified as Minangkabau but lived in

the multiethnic and multilingual environments of cities in Java, such as Jakarta and Bandung. She expected her children would pick up Minangkabau language from peers at school. Minangkabau people who live outside West Sumatra often prioritize Indonesian or the language of the region where they live. In families with mixed cultural backgrounds, people are likely to speak Indonesian and both parents' regional languages. Therefore, while language can be important as a way of articulating ethnicity and for many people is a strong marker, one's primary language alone does not necessarily determine ethnic affiliation. There are people who might identify as Minangkabau but for whom it is not the primary language and there are people for whom it is a language used daily at home but who do not identify as ethnically Minangkabau.

The cognitive view of ethnicity also takes into account both contemporary and historical factors. For example, the category of Minangkabau is invoked in the *tambo*, the mythic history of the Minangkabau that traces the origins of the Minangkabau back to Iskandar Zulkarnin (Alexander the Great) and claims the etymology of the name Minangkabau lies in a legendary water buffalo fight (Kahin 1999). Historian Leonard Andaya (2008) suggests that in the precolonial period Minangkabau ethnicity was an artifact of politics and economic power: for example, in the late fifteenth century individuals and communities became interested in the economic advantages and protection that membership in the "group" afforded. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as will become apparent later in the book, a sense of Minangkabau is invoked through performances for tourists and state-regulated celebrations of regional diversity.

In this book, the investigation into the cognitive view is primarily concerned with the different ways people engage with and experience the same category, the political moments that animate identification along ethnic lines, the way ethnicity is tied up and encoded in music, and the contexts in which performative expressions of Minangkabau ethnicity occur—for example, at the tourism expo in the opening vignette. I investigate how the selection of particular *talempong* styles, ensembles, and repertoire—selections that exclude other possibilities—at the

institutions, weddings, tourist performances, and government functions is tied up with individual and collective engagements of what it means to be Minangkabau. In chapter 4, for example, I show how orkes talempong was crafted in the late 1960s to sonically represent an emergent sense of Minangkabau ethnicity, combining references to local instruments and songs with diatonic tuning and functional harmony. Derived from the Greek for “two tones,” *diatonic* refers to scales and systems of tuning based on a series of whole- and half-step intervals. Major and minor scales, for example, are diatonic. A chromatic scale is not, as it incorporates only half steps. In other words, in a diatonic scale, the space between any two notes—an interval—is one of two sizes. A listener will notice that there are larger and smaller intervals, thus it sounds uneven or gapped. In a chromatic scale, the space between any two notes is precisely the same. When hearing the notes in sequence, it sounds even. In West Sumatra, people at the institutions often used the word *diatonis* (I, diatonic) to refer to both diatonic and chromatic scales as a shorthand for differentiating these tunings from indigenous preferences, where interval sizes are not standard and rarely adhere to whole and half steps. More often than not, the particular sequence of intervals that results in a major scale was implied. *Functional harmony* means chord progressions based on harmonic function, where the tonic (I), subdominant (IV), and dominant (V) chords are central.

It is important to recognize, however, that the musical practices I discuss here do not just passively reflect ethnic identity but can also help actively foster and create ethnic sensibilities. The capacity of music and other forms of expressive culture to function in this way has been largely overlooked in the work on the cognitive view of ethnicity. This study is an effort to remedy that.

Who Understand Themselves to Be Minangkabau?

People identifying themselves as Minangkabau populate the contemporary Indonesian province of West Sumatra and are found in

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