

CHAPTER 35

The Structural Vulnerability of Older People in Matrilineal Society: The Minangkabau of West Sumatra, Indonesia

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Some years ago, anthropologists speculated that matrilineal principles of social organization had no future. The possibility that matriliney was “doomed,” at least in Africa (Douglas 1969), owed to seemingly inevitable conflicts that arise in systems in which inheritance, personal identity, social position and various rights are determined according to female lines of descent. From an Indonesian perspective, this proposition sounds distinctly odd. The country is home to some 4.8 million Minangkabau, probably the second largest matrilineal population in the world. Matriliney has not kept the Minangkabau from actively integrating themselves into the expanding economy of Southeast Asia. To the contrary, family reputation requires young people to engage in labor migration (*rantau*), usually as independent traders. Although ever-wider involvement in the regional economy has of course brought changes, family relations continue to be interpreted within a matrilineal idiom. Migration, in other words, means that many more young couples live on their own, rather than in proximity to the presiding female head of the family, but that need not keep them from participating in important exchanges within the female-linked family networks (Benda-Beckmann 1979; Kato 1982; van Reenen 1996; Blackwood 2000; Sunday 2002).

One way of considering the viability of social systems is to examine how they cope with basic life course transitions that occur in most cultures. This chapter views Minangkabau society with respect to three potential sources of vulnerability in old age, namely childlessness, de facto childlessness, and being an elderly man without a wife. As we shall see, the logic of matriliney recognizes the reality of these problems, but defines and deals with them in ways that confound what would be expected in more familiar nuclear and patrilineal family systems. The material is drawn from anthropological and demographic research in Koto Kayo, a Minangkabau community in West Sumatra that was

part of the comparative longitudinal study *Ageing in Indonesia*.¹ Examples are drawn from one of the three hamlets making up the community, which represents approximately one-third of the total population of 2,300.

MATRILINY AND THE POSITION OF OLDER PEOPLE

In matrilineal societies, the succession of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters defines who inherits communally held family property and guarantees the continuity of the female line. As in most complex lineage systems, the organization of descent groups is conventionally expressed as a gradation of units: the smallest unit is made up of a woman and her children and grandchildren; several such units compose the main unit owning family property and ideally occupying a *rumah gadang*, or ancestral house. The next unit up, consisting of members of several related *rumah gadang*, maintains common agricultural land and burial grounds, whereas marriages are preferably conducted among members of the matrilineal network at the next level of aggregation. This structure expresses the solidarity of the matriline, which at each level shares in one honor, one line of inheritance and one body of communal wealth.

As a political and moral structure, this collective organization has proven well-suited to communities like Koto Kayo, in which upwards of two-thirds of young people migrate, often at great distances, to Bandung, Jakarta, Surabaya, and other cities on different islands in the archipelago (Kreager 2006). As a Minangkabau proverb puts it, “a young man is of no use until he has gone on *rantau* (labor migration).” Collective solidarity ensures great pressure on young men, and increasingly also on women, to prove themselves and their family’s reputation by sustained and economically successful periods away from the village. The system does more than push: it provides links for young people to communities around the archipelago, structures these communities along traditional lines that ensure a steady flow of remittances and visits home, and organizes these flows to fund social welfare in the village. In time, migrant communities tend to become permanent satellites, with many children living all or most of their lives away from the village while maintaining major personal and economic ties to it. As a mechanism for organizing human capital, this system thus continues to exercise effective influence over distant members and to arrange key marriages that secure relations between lineages.

Matriliny nonetheless gives rise to important asymmetries. Although customary law, called *adat*, is commonly regarded by the Minangkabau as consistent with, and supportive of, Islamic practice, the Indonesian legal system accepts, for example, that inheritance of ancestral property passes to a sister’s sons, while nonancestral property may be divided at death in a way that includes inheritance by children (Bowen 2003:142–50). A major potential source of conflict lies in the fact that husbands and wives in a matrilineal system have differing interests in their children. Both normally contribute to their material support and socialization, but only for the wife do these children represent the material and spiritual continuity of her lineage. The husband looks, rather, to

his sisters' children, and as her brother carries major responsibilities to nieces and nephews who constitute the continuation of his primary group. Men thus experience a divided loyalty, their roles as fathers and brothers giving them interests in two sets of children. This tension also finds expression in the potential for conflict that arises between a husband and his wife's brother over her children and property. The Minangkabau carefully ritualize this relationship: the husband is only "an honored guest" in the household in which his wife lives and where his children grow up; the wife, in conjunction with one of her brothers, exercises primary authority in that household. The successful grandmother looks forward in later life to living in the ancestral home with one or several of her daughters, who will eventually take over household leadership from her. Successful aging for a man assumes that he has been able to balance his twin roles nicely. As the example of Nurman will show in the following discussion, he may then look forward to potential material and emotional support from two families.

As may be apparent, however, the asymmetry of male and female identities under matriliney can complicate "successful aging." What can a woman and her brothers do if no daughter is prepared to return from *rantau* to manage the family property and to live in and care for the *rumah gadang*? A man with sons and daughters, but no nieces, has no heirs. A matriline without daughters faces extinction, no matter how many sons it has. What if the man's balancing act fails, and he alienates his children and his heirs? Should a wife die before her husband, where is he to live? Minangkabau norms specify that the husband should no longer stay in the household with his daughter, but return to his own ancestral home to live with his sister's children. Yet he may feel stronger personal attachment to his own children. Vulnerabilities in later life are problems that arise from matters only partly under people's control. The question that needs to be examined is what alternative courses of action a social system makes available, and whether they are realizable.

THE PROBLEM OF CHILDLESSNESS AMONG THE MINANGKABAU

Emblematic of the Indonesian population program is a well-known motto, which may be translated as, "A small family is a happy family! Two children are enough, boy or girl—it makes no difference!" There can be little doubt that the advantages of smaller family sizes have been embraced by Indonesians over the past thirty years (Niehof and Lubis 2003). Fertility has declined from an average of more than five children per woman in the 1960s, to around 2.5 children today. Yet equally beyond any doubt is the fact that children remain highly valued. A marriage without offspring is considered incomplete, and the practical importance of children increases with age. Given the absence of far-reaching state support for older people, children are expected to provide financial and social support to their elderly parents. There is even a Minangkabau saying, "No matter how kind other people are, in old age it is your children

who will make you more comfortable!” Elderly people with few or no children are widely looked upon as suffering a most unfortunate fate, facing loneliness and fearing social and physical vulnerability.

Yet how significant, one might ask, is the phenomenon of elders without children? After all, current cohorts of older Indonesians had their children well before the onset of fertility decline and the spread of family planning. On average, they have therefore been blessed with family sizes in excess of five children, making a lack of offspring seem unlikely. However, closer inspection quickly reveals that the five-child average hides considerable variation between regions and individuals. This is hardly surprising: mortality remained high in Indonesia until quite recently, and many children thus died before their parents reached old age. Migration and divorce were common and contributed to long periods spent outside of sexual union, with obvious consequences for fertility. In parts of Java, where extreme hardship during the 1940s exacerbated mortality and facilitated the spread of sexually transmitted disease, a quarter of current generations of older people were left without any surviving children (Schröder-Butterfill 2004; Schröder-Butterfill and Kreager 2005).

In Koto Kayo, the Minangkabau community studied here, levels of childlessness are more modest, but by no means negligible. Here 7 percent of older people have no surviving children, and a further 5 percent have only one child. Moreover, these figures need to be placed within their specific matrilineal context, in which not having *daughters* is tantamount to being childless. On that count, a further 17 percent of older Minangkabau perceive themselves as childless because they lack surviving female offspring. In total, almost one quarter of elders appear vulnerable, at least at first glance, because they have no daughters or no children at all.

However, vulnerability does not directly arise from a lack of children or daughters. According to the logic of the matrilineal system, one's sister's children are equivalent to one's own offspring, as they belong to the same matriline. Indeed, no terminological distinction is made between a person's own children and the children of her or his sister, both being referred to simply as *anak* (child). Children will refer to their matrilineal aunts as *mandeh ketek* (“small mother,” if the aunt is junior to the mother) or *mandeh gadang* (“big mother,” if the aunt is senior). A woman without children can thus take a positive and respected place in the family as classificatory mother of her sister's children (van Reenen 1996:214). It is to these children that she will look for assistance should she need it. The example of Dahlia, an elderly divorcée, illustrates the options for reputable support and well-being in old age that the matrilineal social system provides where children are lacking.

Dahlia, aged seventy, is a childless elderly woman who lives alone. She has one surviving older sister. Her husband left on labor migration immediately after their wedding, leaving Dahlia behind with her family. For ten years he rarely visited or sent news or money. When eventually he returned with a second wife, Dahlia was indignant and asked for a divorce. She never remarried and lived with her mother until the mother died. Nowadays she is the single

occupant of the family's ancestral home (*rumah gadang*). She still manages to cook, shop, clean, and wash her own clothes. She does not wish to be a burden on others and feels most comfortable in her own surroundings. For these reasons, she has so far declined the invitation by her older sister's daughters to join them and her sister in North Sumatra.

Although she has no children of her own, Dahlia is not worried about old-age security. She knows that her sister's children care deeply about her. One nephew, for example, visits every two weeks and gives her some money. Another nephew comes every couple of months and brings money and items for her daily needs, such as soap, sugar, and cloth. Meanwhile, a niece routinely sends a generous sum every three months. Most nephews and nieces visit at least once a year, during the Muslim holiday of *Idul Fitri*, when it is customary to return to the village and pay respects to relatives, especially those who are elderly. Dahlia also harvests the fruit and vegetable crops grown on the land communally owned by her matrilineal kin group. She is also given financial support from rich villagers and successful migrants, which is distributed via the mosque.

In Dahlia's case, her matrilineal network is able to provide material and emotional support in a manner that is reliable, generous, and socially acceptable. In terms of security in later life, her situation differs little from that of her peers with children. To be sure, her lack of a younger relative permanently in the vicinity entails some loneliness, but as the following example of Asnima will show, this is a fate not uncommon to Minangkabau elders, given the high levels of migration among the younger generations. At least she rests assured that her sister's daughters will on her death be able to inherit the property of the matriline—an issue that greatly troubles other childless old people in the community.

Problems arise chiefly where sisters also lack children, both in terms of support and the overriding practical and ideological issue of the absence of female heirs to inherit family property and continue the descent line. As the example of Jamain shows, elders without children, whose lineage faces extinction and who have failed to create strong bonds with more distant matrilineal kin, experience severe insecurity and loss of status in old age. They remain without the safety net of support that the Minangkabau family system normally provides.

Jamain is a man in his seventies who lives alone. Atypically for men from Koto Kayo, Jamain only briefly took part in labor migration and returned unsuccessful, settling in a small shack on the edge of the village. Both his marriages were childless and ended in divorce. The second marriage, to a woman from outside the village, earned him disapproval from fellow villagers for marrying an outsider. Jamain's older brother has four children, but their first loyalties lie with their mother's matriline. According to the structure of Minangkabau society, it is to his sister and her offspring that Jamain should turn for support. Unfortunately, the sister also remained childless and poor, and recently died. Jamain lives out his life reliant on support from a sympathetic neighbor, who gives him food, and from unsympathetic fellow villagers, who

only occasionally and unwillingly give him money when he begs. By begging Jamain lowers his status and dignity and deviates from what is considered characteristic of the enterprising, successful Minangkabau.

The lack of female matrilineal descendants in the extended family network of Jamain means that his matriline is doomed to extinction. Since his sister died, Jamain can at least live in his ancestral house and benefit from the fruits of its associated rice lands. Eventually, the house with its land will fall to a distant, collateral line.²

Given the logic of lineal kinship organization, with its systems of ever more distant and inclusive units, relatives can usually be traced by going back several generations. In the eyes of other villagers, had Jamain conducted himself in a manner more in keeping with the ethos of the Minangkabau people, someone from such a collateral line might well have stepped in to help. Equally, money sent back to the village by successful migrants, distributed by the mosque, would have been more forthcoming.

Neither Dahlia nor Jamain started from a position of material advantage; both are childless, and both have matrilineal relatives who might be expected to help out. Yet their outcomes are very different. The contrast arises primarily from the fact that Dahlia has remained within the moral norms of her network, while Jamain has not. None of Dahlia's closest matrilineal kin reside in the village, yet the support they provide is ample. Jamain is without doubt at a comparative disadvantage because his only sister is childless, too. Yet it is chiefly his behavior that has left him without recourse to the collateral kin and community institutions that would normally, in Minangkabau society, come to his rescue.

DE FACTO CHILDLESSNESS

As already noted, a lack of children need not be the result of sterility or the death of children, but may also be the outcome of lacking the "right kind" of child (in the case of the Minangkabau, daughters), or lacking access to normative support from children that exist (Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill 2004). The latter point is particularly relevant in the context of widespread outmigration of the younger generation, as is famously the case among the Minangkabau. As many as three-quarters of elderly villagers' children in Koto Kayo have moved away. Among better-off families, which can draw on strong social and material capital to assist their children in migrating, the proportion is as high as 90 percent (Kreager 2006). While regular remittances and return visits to the village ensure adequate levels of material support for most elders, the psychological insecurity arising from an absence of children locally cannot be underestimated. This is particularly felt by elderly women whose daughters are all away, as it is daughters who are expected to take over from their mothers the management and continuity of ancestral houses and property. The case of Asnima exemplifies the paradox of, on the one hand, having many successful children and on the other hand, feeling lonely, vulnerable and "childless" because none are locally available.

Asnima, aged seventy-five, is the youngest of eight siblings and the last surviving among her sisters. She is a descendant of a line of clan headmen, and one of her sons currently holds this position. She has nine children, seven sons and two daughters. All of Asnima's children are married and living in their respective migration sites. The closest child, a son, lives about ten kilometers away. Both her daughters married men who are not Minangkabau. Her elder daughter, who married a Javanese, has a successful permanent job in Jakarta. The other, married to a man from Aceh (northern Sumatra), recently moved to Padang, which is still a good three hours away.

Asnima is worried that there will be no female heir living in the village to take care of the family inheritance and burial grounds and to ensure the continuity of the *rumah gadang* as the focal point of her lineage. For the time being, it is Asnima who looks after the property. She is financially secure, because her children regularly support her and she has income from the lineage rice fields. None of this, however, can allay her fears about the long-term future representation of her lineage in the village. Although Asnima frequently visits her various children, she has never considered settling permanently with one of her children. As she puts it, "Living in our own homeland, in our own house, is much better than living elsewhere, even if it is in our own child's house." In any case, living with a son is not an option, as this would violate Minangkabau tradition and reflect badly on the daughters. If she had her own way, Asnima would raise the only granddaughter she has via her daughters, because it will ultimately be that granddaughter's responsibility to continue the matriline. Asnima nowadays occupies the ancestral home on her own, although sometimes a young, unrelated woman keeps her company at night, helps her with cooking, and takes care of her when she is ill.

A number of observations arise from this case study. One is that the impact of migration works in contrary ways in matrilineal societies like the Minangkabau. On the one hand, the tradition of migration continues to function as a major social guarantee of material support for elderly people in the village. The continuity of migration traditions has not caused elderly who live in the village to lose their fundamental family networks. If anything, the development of modern transport and communication infrastructure makes the maintenance of relationships much simpler. The continuity of migration traditions has not caused elderly who live in the village to lose their fundamental family networks. That said, levels of moral and material support received by elderly parents have always varied from case to case. Some young men who leave do not maintain any communication with their families in their natal villages. Among children there will be those who give support routinely, and those who provide very little support. A common aphorism is that "Of all the children, one or maybe two will usually be *hampa*," that is, unsuccessful or not inclined to offer support.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that the central importance of daughters to the continuity of descent lines and inheritance now poses problems that some families are finding almost impossible to resolve. Asnima's

concern that her granddaughter will actually fulfill her responsibility and return to the *rumah gadang* in Koto Kayo is clearly genuine, and reflects practical as well as psychological vulnerabilities experienced by the elderly in Minangkabau culture. Asnima is not alone in this problem: one-third of elders do not have a child in the village, and it is increasingly uncertain whether many daughters living in migration sites will eventually return. In Koto Kayo, at least, most traditional ancestral homes continue to be occupied, although some, like Asnima's, at present are rather quiet. In less prosperous communities, many *rumah gadang*, with their characteristically shaped roofs, are being abandoned and falling into disrepair. The conventional Minangkabau term *keluarga punah*, or "lost kinship," acknowledges that the lack of a daughter to carry on the matriline in the village is not an entirely new problem.

Older people whose children have all left the village may spend some time visiting them in their migration sites, although the preference for their ancestral home almost always leads them to return. Once frailty or ill health makes some form of practical assistance necessary, the choice may be between two less than perfect solutions: accepting help from a nonrelative, as in the case of Asnima, or leaving the ancestral home to be with a daughter who has moved away.

THE STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY OF ELDERLY MINANGKABAU MEN

Most writing on aging and later life portrays older women as being in a weaker position, due to their poorer access to material resources and power. If men are portrayed as vulnerable at all, their vulnerability tends to be attributed to problems of adjustment to changes in status, dependence on women for practical tasks, or smaller social networks due to poorer interpersonal investment (Rubinstein 1986; Hearn 1995; Knodel and Ofstedal 2003). The case of the Minangkabau reminds us of the fact that vulnerability can be the result of a systematic patterning of social relationships, and that this patterning can on occasion work against older men. As already noted, in the Minangkabau matrilineal system property is held by and passed down through women. While men play an important role of authority as sisters' brother, having for example the responsibility of resolving lineage conflict and brokering marriages, the ancestral house is primarily occupied by related women and their daughters. Men, therefore, are rather impermanent and marginal occupants of the domestic sphere. From an early age, boys are encouraged to spend as much time as possible away from the house, and in adolescence they often sleep in neighborhood prayer houses. Their spatial marginality is then epitomized and reinforced by long absences due to labor migration. Men's spatial position after marriage is no less tenuous. Marriage is matrilocal, thus men move in with their wife's family. As husbands, they are incessantly reminded of their status as "honored guests" in the houses of their wives, and are subject to avoidance prescriptions with respect to their wife's brothers. For example, a man arriving

in a coffeehouse in which his brother-in-law is already present will quickly make an excuse to leave.

None of this looms particularly large as a concern in the passage from early adulthood to late middle age, during which the vast majority of Minangkabau men are away on *rantau*, making only occasional visits back home. Problems arise once men settle back in the village for good. Their preference is then to live with their wives, although most will spend the daylight hours chatting to other men in the prayer houses or food stalls dotted around the marketplace. Structural constraints truly begin to bite if the wife dies or the couple divorce, for the options men then face are limited and strongly shaped by their past conduct and reputation. The choices comprise remaining in the house of their daughter or daughters, living alone, returning to their own ancestral home, or setting up with a new wife. As will become clear, none of these are without potential drawbacks.

Most widowed men with a daughter will initially opt to live with their daughter, especially if this is the arrangement they were already in before their wife died. Children generally feel a strong obligation to care for their elderly parents, although the bonds to fathers may sometimes be weakened by their long absences. However, it is a recognized phenomenon that widowers often begin manifesting symptoms of stress, hypertension, and ill-temper when living with their daughters. This is attributed to their staying in the house of “strangers.” As a man’s children belong to his wife’s lineage, rather than his own, it is normal for men to feel as outsiders in his children’s home. The presence of a son-in-law further adds to their discomfort.

Amir, in his early seventies, was a poor farmer with several children, some of whom were away on migration. When he was younger, he had built a small house for his daughter near the house he was occupying with his wife. Once his wife died, it was an obvious step for his daughter to move into her mother’s house, and she urged her father to stay with her. Amir, however, insisted on moving into a small hut on his own. He felt uncomfortable living with his son-in-law. As Amir was not able to manage his daily domestic affairs by himself, his daughter sent cooked food over to his home every day. She also made sure his house was in order and that he didn’t suffer from loneliness.

Amir’s resolution of the structural bind he found himself in appears contrived to a non-Minangkabau observer: here is an elderly man of limited means, who has helped his daughter in the past and in exchange is invited to share his dying days with her. Instead he opts to live alone and be cared for at arm’s length, a much less convenient arrangement. Yet within the logic of the matrilineal system, men are assigned to their sisters’ rather than children’s lineage. In this context it is perfectly understandable that older men lack a sense of belonging in their children’s domestic spaces. Reorientation towards their own lineage and ancestral home is considered a most natural response. In this respect, men lacking children are not at any particular disadvantage, as the following example of Nurman shows.

Nurman is a well-respected elderly man from Koto Kayo. For several decades he held the important position of mosque elder. He married a woman from

a reputable and wealthy local family, but the marriage sadly remained childless. Nurman does, however, have several nephews and nieces via his older half-sister Fatimah, all of whom are successful. After his wife died, he maintained cordial relations with his wife's family and, quite unusually, was encouraged to remain living in the wife's house. Nurman nevertheless opted for the more customary solution of returning to his ancestral home occupied by his sister and nieces, as according to Minangkabau culture they are now responsible for him. Thanks to the high regard in which Nurman is held in the community, he continues to receive some support from his wife's relatives.

Elders like Nurman or Dahlia, who have conducted themselves in exemplary manner throughout their lives, are assured of generous support from their lineage, even if they lack children. Additionally, they have access to assistance from the wider Koto Kayo community, which controls access to charitable assistance. Conversely, people like Jamain, who lose the respect of their peers, find themselves with very little maneuvering room within the strict logic of the Minangkabau system.

THE ROLE OF VILLAGE INSTITUTIONS IN OLD-AGE SUPPORT

This chapter thus far may have created the impression that welfare and security in old age in Koto Kayo are almost exclusively in the hands of children and matrilineal kin. Quite the contrary. More so than among other ethnic groups in Indonesia, the Minangkabau possess well-developed and institutionalized systems of community charity and welfare. These draw on the three most important elements of Minangkabau society, namely Islam, matriliney, and migration.

Throughout the Islamic world, believers of sufficient means are expected to make regular charitable donations for the benefit of the poor and unfortunate. The most important of these donations occur during the fasting month of Ramadan and involve payments in rice or money to the local mosque. Mosque elders then distribute the donations, referred to as *zakat*, among the community's needy, including the poor, widows, orphans, and the elderly. In Koto Kayo, the sums available for distribution are boosted considerably by charitable remittances from successful migrants during Ramadan. Moreover, migrants' generosity is not confined to the fasting month, and it is the combined influences of religion and lineage organization that ensure this. Proactive and well-respected mosque elders, of the kind epitomized by Nurman in the previous case study, make regular visits to the main migration destinations throughout Indonesia to see migrants from Koto Kayo. During such visits, recent misfortunes that have befallen villagers may be retold, or projects in need of funding described. When, for example, on one occasion a villager's house burned down, the money the mosque elder succeeded in raising was enough to rebuild the house in its entirety. Many Minangkabau communities similarly succeed in funding the construction and upkeep of impressive religious buildings, schools and health centers by drawing on migrant wealth channeled through the mosque.

The initiative for charity comes not only from the village, but also from migrants themselves. Minangkabau migration networks are so well-developed that they have resulted in the formation of migrants' associations in all of Indonesia's major cities with significant Minangkabau representation. These associations are organized by community of origin and so facilitate the flow of information, money and practical assistance between place of origin and place of settlement. A newly departed migrant will be entrusted to the care of the relevant migrants' association in his destination, which will organize his accommodation, access to work, and start-up help. Likewise, travel assistance to the village, be it during the fasting month of Ramadan or in response to a personal or community crisis, is quickly and effectively organized through migrant associations and channeled back to the village through association members.

Although the economic success of many Minangkabau migrants and the high level of organization and generosity among them mean that charitable support in the villages is plentiful, its distribution is not uniform. Access to charity depends on social and moral status and a person's position within the lineage hierarchy of the village. For example, unless they have been "adopted" by an established village family, newcomers to Koto Kayo and their descendants are not members of the village's four dominant lineages and thus tend to be excluded from remittances channeled via these lineages. Additionally, immigrants to Koto Kayo tend to cluster in a poorer hamlet of the village, near the rice fields, because most of them work as agricultural laborers. This hamlet has its own mosque, with the result that worshippers at that mosque fail to benefit from the more generous donations sent by successful migrants to Koto Kayo's main mosque.

Among the original population, it is above all moral standing, reputation and past behavior that determine an older person's access to community charity. Elders like Dahlia, who experienced misfortune such as childlessness and divorce in their lives, but have conformed with expectations of proper conduct, are assured of generous assistance from the mosque and wealthy migrants on visits to the village. By contrast, those with moral failings and those who have violated customary norms of Minangkabau society, are not looked upon kindly. While Jamain is not excluded altogether from community beneficence, the support he receives is sparse and grudgingly given. The link between appropriate conduct and access to charity is made explicit by a village elder commenting on an elderly divorcé called Abdul. To secure support in old age, Abdul had decided to remarry, sell the land belonging to his matriline and join his new wife in her village. Yet despite being the only surviving heir, he has no right to dispose of lineage land: his decision transgresses Minangkabau customary law.

"If only Abdul had a stronger feeling of loyalty to Koto Kayo, he would not think of selling his land, or moving to another village. He could instead share his property by giving it to the village. People would then not neglect him. At the end of Ramadan there is financial support from the mosque, taken from *zakat* donations and given by many migrants. On another religious festival there is the distribution of meat. Basically, people will not let elders who have

helped the community go without any support. That would be an embarrassment. If Abdul feels vulnerable in his old days, that is simply on account of his own unconfident feelings. In fact, he still has a chance to improve himself and go back to the community.”

These village elder’s remarks capture the logic of a society in which success, faithfulness to Minangkabau values, and loyalty to community have resulted in strong and well-endowed institutions of community charity, but also in little tolerance for those who fail to comply with these virtues.

CONCLUSION

The Minangkabau community of Koto Kayo presents a sophisticated adaptation of matrilineal norms in the course of active participation in the wider Indonesian economy. The perspective adopted here is based on the situation of older people in this particular rural community and might be expected to reflect a more conservative and traditional side of the culture. Matters may be different in urban or less traditional settings. However, where the majority of younger people migrate, often permanently, while their elders remain in the village, this kind of situation is likely to be creating vulnerability in old age in many different parts of the world. Yet, far from a picture of system failure, as anthropologists once proposed for matriliney, Minangkabau matrilineal and community networks are notable for the major influence and respected roles they continue to give older people in the running of society.

The logic of woman-centered kinship does, however, impose constraints, one of which is undoubtedly severe: the absence of daughters in a matriline is fatal to that social unit and inevitably lessens the status of current members. Other problems can become all but impossible to resolve happily: a husband’s marginal position in his wife’s household may leave him without a comfortable place to live after her death; the uncertainty that no daughter will return from *rantau* to assume responsibility for the *rumah gadang* haunts many families. In this respect, the picture of later life in Minangkabau society given in this paper is inevitably incomplete: the story needs to be told too from the perspectives of the many Minangkabau who have chosen to live away from Koto Kayo.

NOTES

1. *Ageing in Indonesia 1999–2007* is a longitudinal anthropological and demographic study of three Indonesian communities, supported by the Wellcome Trust. We are particularly grateful for the research assistance of Tengku Syawila Fithry in the collection and analysis of data reported in this paper.

2. There is little discussion of the exact procedure in *adat* law; collateral lines in such cases are matrilineal kin who are distant not only genealogically (e.g., female descendants of the sister of a great grandmother), but who have long lived elsewhere with no involvement in Koto Kayo. Further discussion of *adat* and its role in Koto Kayo is given in Indrizal and Fithry (2005).