

Resensi Buku:

Being There and Being Here

Judul	: Being There and Being Here: And Marcel Vellinga <i>Constituting Unity and Difference</i> , Vernacular Structure in A Minangkabau Village
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It is not a review of the above Vellinga's Leiden PhD's thesis, in the real sense of the word, as I will only discuss it in line of the concept of *being there* and *being here* – the title of the first and the last chapter of *Works and Lives, The Anthropologist as Authors* (Clifford Geertz, Stanford, 1988, Stanford Univ. Press) – without implying that Vellinga applied Geertz's idea – there is no reference to Geertz's book in his thesis. This thesis is a perfect picture of how an anthropologist produces an ethnographic description from the data collected in the field, *being there*, in the university compound, *being here*. Vellinga starts with the information on Abai, a Minangkabau village, he collected during his fieldwork, and authoring¹ the thesis in Leiden or somewhere else.

¹ Geertz uses this term as a constituent of the title of his book quoted here, while James Clifford and George L. Marcus use the word *writing* in their *Writing Culture, The Poetics ad Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley, 1986, Univ. of California Press) which is similar to the term used by university students in preparing their

thesis. They are writing a thesis and not authoring it. However I prefer the term *authoring* as they are not simply writing it like a typist copying a piece of letter composed by the boss. They are, as a matter of fact, composing it by mixing the data he collects from the field with materials from publications not available in the field. The data they collect from the field is raw materials and they have to cook it in an university 'kitchen'. One can then suspect its authenticity of being the pure picture of the society where he did his fieldwork. Independently, in the 80s, I began to contrast between *penulis* 'writer' and *pengarang* 'author' in Malay, despite the fact that at that at time the most popular term was *penulis* while *pengarang*.is regarded being an old term, denoting some old storytellers who based their stories on their imaginations, rather than the 'present' reality. I said that I am not writing an essay but composing it, just like what I am doing when I am making a flower arrangement. Quite usually I have to use the variety of flowers, originating from different places, as well as many kind of leaves not necessarily related to any flower. In addition to that I also have to use some strings and other materials I need to make

As he compares his data with information from his readings – I don't take into account the fact that he decided to carry that research after reading information on that society, one might suspect the authenticity of his ethnographic description. One can question it "(Being Here.) Whose Life Is It Anyway?" (cf. Geertz, vii, 129)². I have the same suspicion as he sees Abai in line of the Minangkabau cultural phenomenon, past and present. As the Abaians believe the existence of *hantu*, *mambang*, *setan* and *iblis* (90-93), he then does his best to relate it to the information available in previous studies on Minangkabau, especially from the 19th century. It suggests, at least to me, that it shows the continuity of the present to the past, which I doubt. In the first half of 1950s, older people told me a story about incidents took place before 1940 or earlier in my native village.

Sometime in the evening, people heard the voice from east hill asking: *Olah?*, 'ready'. If the west answered it with *Olah*, someone would die that night. But if the west answered it with *Olun*, 'not yet', nobody would die. As I never experienced such a thing, it is simply a story for me, about accidents in the past. Or I might evaluate it as a metarepresentation, 'what people say', *dunia kata orang* (Francois Recanati, *Oratio Obliqua, Oratio Recta: An Essay on Metarepresentation* (Cambridge, 2000, MIT Press)³. It is only true in the

the flower arrangement. It is then a different type of reality, not a naked reality.

² I would also like to relate it to the following Niels Bohr's idea: "Physics is not about how the world *is*, it is about what we can say about it." (Paul Davies and John Gribbin, *The matter myth, beyond chaos and complexity*, London, Penguin, 1992 (21))

³ For me it is an important idea for understanding *Sejarah Melayu* as I discuss it in "Sejarah Melayu sebagai dunia 'kata

context of what someone tells and not outside it. It is not an absolute truth as we can question its truthful outside it⁴. Accordingly, we have to be careful in comparing the present phenomenon to a statement regarding an incident in the past, which Vellinga failed to consider.

Vellinga also failed to notice that to a Minangkabau people *setan* is different from *hantu*. The concept of *setan* is related to the Islamic teaching, a spirit who goes against the God's order, who tempts a Muslim to commit a sin. On the other hand, *hantu* is nothing to with the Islamic teaching, his existence is not mentioned in its teaching. *Hantu* is a spirit who disturbs the human life with no intention of tempting them to commit a sin. I always translate *hantu* to 'ghost', while *setan* is a cognate of 'satan'.

I agree with Vellinga that neither *kampung* nor *suku* is (necessarily) a unified descent group (65). However, I regret his failure to carry the idea further on. I **now**, not when authoring 'Some remarks on Minangkabau social structure' (BKI 120, 1964, 293-326), suspect that one sees *kampung* as unified descent group simply because they regard it as a

orang" which will appear in *Jurnal Filologi Melayu* 2005.

⁴ According to *The New Straits Times*, 17 March, 2005, Vatican tells people not to read Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (London, 2003, Corgi Book) as it is only a collection of "shameful and unfounded lies". As far as that novel is concerned it is simply what Brown says on the "situation in the Catholics world", which is not a true according to Vatican. It is only as far as the novel is concerned. (In this case please also read Maureen Dowd's article: "The Vatican Code", NYT, 27 March, 2005. According to her, Vatican did not read how the novel ends.) I can provide other examples, however, for the present discussion I would like to limit it to that respective example only. .

*clan*⁵ which is an unified descent group in ethnology literature. In their study of Minangkabau society, they simply looked for the concept of *clan*. They might arrive, however, to a different picture if they started from the other end as I did in 1964, although I do regret my inability to carry it further on. I failed to make use the presence of concept *bolah* or *balah* (1964, 306-307), *belah* (another half) in Indonesian, denoting two families in two different locations as offspring of the same genealogical ancestor. As they are staying in two different locations they belong to two unrelated *kampung*s and *suku*s as it is also expressed by *Rajo badiri sandirinyo, timbalan rajo Banua Ruhun, timbalan rajo Banua Cino, sapiah balahan jurai* ‘The (Minangkabau) king was an independent king, equal to the king of Rome, equal to the king of China, and yet they were genealogically related’ (*Cindua Mato*, Syamsuddin St. Rajo Endah, Bukittinggi, 1985, 7), as well as by *kain tanunan Puti Ruhun, sapiah balahan*⁶ *Bundo Kanduang* ‘the fabrics woven by the Roman Princess, who was

⁵ As being a novice – after getting the degree from the Univ. of Indonesia in 1959 I was appointed as a teaching staff in Malang - I then simply applied ideas I found in anthropological literatures without daring to venture beyond it. I simply related what I found in the society to the ideas available in anthropological literatures. I related the concept of *kampung* and *suku* to that of *clan*. Due to that, I did not dare to develop an idea simply based on the facts I found in the society. I did not dare to develop an idea on kinship system based on the idea of the concept of *balah*, *balahan* - I will explain the term later on. I simply mentioned its existence in my 1964 article. .

⁶ *Sapiah balahan* is the cognate of the Indonesian *serpiah belahan*, ‘genealogically related’. It then denotes that although they are genealogically related they however belong to two different kinship organizations.

genealogically related to Bundo Kanduang’ (Endah, 114). I failed to explore the concept *balahan*⁷ which is different from that of *kampung* and *suku*⁸. Vellinga and me simply raised the issue but failed to develop it. I only went to the extent of saying that a *kampung* and *suku* is either a territorial unit or a genealogical unit (1964:306ff).

⁷ My friend, in his e-mail to me, admitted that so far he failed to see the importance of the concept *balahan* in studying Minangkabau social structure. He changed his mind when someone told him that one of his by-laws is his *balahan*. I understand why he failed to notice the presence of the concept of *balahan* as it is not concrete as is the case with the concept of *kampung* and *suku*. A lot of the Minangkabau people are not aware of its presence, or they might aware about it, but do not know who and where is their *balahan*. Or they might know who and where their *balahan* are staying, but they might not regard it important. It is better for them to only bother about their immediate relatives rather than to bother of the members of their *balahan* in another location. I am aware of the existence of my *balahan* in Saok Laweh, a village about twenty kilometers from my native village – someone told me in 1950s, but I never bother(ed) to know them. I simply regard that they are not my relatives. However, despite the fact that I did not bother about members of my *balahan*, I did mention its existence in my 1964 article due to the presence of the respective term in Gayo social organization (cf. Junus, 1964:307). And the information, by e-mail, I get from a number of Minangkabau people, confirms their awareness of the existence of the concept of *balah(an)*. As information shows variable within the concept of *balah(an)* among people from different localities, I think it can be only discussed ed in a separate discussion.

⁸ It is quite impossible for a non-native ethnologist to discover the term and concept of *balah(an)* as it is not concrete as it is the case of that of *kampung* and *suku*. As matter of fact, a lot of Minangkabau people did not realize its existence as can be seen in Taufik’s above e-mail to me.

Some Abaians are regarded as descendants of 'original' settlers, *nan datang dulu*, while others are descendants of the 'newcomers' who came later, *nan datang kemudian* (55). As suggested by various studies, the difference between the 'original settlers' and the newcomers is an important element in Minangkabau social structure⁹. In 1964 I used this idea to challenge the idea that a *kampung* (and *suku*) as a unified descent group, but I forgot that my anthropological orientation at that time was male oriented. Everything is seen from the perspective of a man rather than a woman. I talked about a man marries his mo.br.da, mother's brother's daughter, instead of a girl marries her fa.si.so, father's sister's son.

The male's perspective makes us believe that it was men who moved from one location to another. We ignore the possibility that it was done by women as *rumah gadang* only accommodates women. No compartment was and is reserved for men as they were and are reserved only for a woman to receive her husband. This was (and is) also applicable in case a landlady let a tenant attached to her (=landlady) 'maternal descent' and cultivated her property in a (relatively) separate location. It was (and is) the place where she received or receives her husband, a helping hand in cultivating it.

Accordingly, an ethnologist cannot simply depend on the information provided for in previous studies on the ethnic groups he deals with. He also needs the information given by an 'intelligent' native people. Although an

⁹ This is also confirmed by information from several Minangkabau people who answered my question regarding the existence of the concept of *balahan* in their respective native villages.

ethnologist can talk about the existence of Minangkabau people that refers to the natives of the West Sumatra, the 'Minangkabau' people might use another term referring themselves when talking among themselves. By listening to the way the Minangkabau people referring themselves when talking among themselves, we will discover the presence of the term *urang awak* 'our people'¹⁰. And when a Minangkabau is in the area outside West Sumatra, he is usually referred to (by a non Minang) as *orang Padang* 'the man from Padang'. Only at formal function they will refer him as *orang Minang(kabau)* 'Minang(kabau) people'. Due to that, there is a sense of artificiality in the usage of the term 'Minangkabau'. Or it is simply used with a political flavor. And the Abaians refer themselves as Minangkabau people as they talk to Vellinga. The fact that Vellinga is a non Minang prevents them from using the term *urang awak*. And as the conversation took place in the Minangkabau area, prevents them from using the term *urang Padang*. The only term available to them is Minangkabau. Due to that, an ethnologist should evaluate the information provided for by the native. He cannot simply accept it at its face value as its meaning also depends

¹⁰ But we have to be careful in assigning meaning to the term *urang awak*. Its meaning is *orang Minang* 'Minang people' if it is used in the following context: *dek urang awak bak iko, dek urang Jawa lain pulo* 'we do it this way, the Javanese do it differently'. It has another meaning in the following context: *dek urang awak bak iko, dek urang Padang lain pulo* 'we do it this way, the Padang people do it differently'. Accordingly, we can question the existence of the sense of Minangkabauness among themselves as stated as well by Mestika Zed in *Pemberontakan Komunis Silungkang 1927, Studi Gerakan Sosial di Sumatera Barat* (2004, Yogyakarta, Syarikat, pg. 20).

on a particular (cultural) condition I just elaborate.

Accordingly, there are three facets of the Minangkabau society an ethnologist might fail to notice. First, I think the most difficult one, is the probability that they might fail to notice the presence of the *balahan* concept since it is not concrete. Only members of a particular unit of a *kampung* or *suku* know it. And also by chance only members of another unit might recognize it, although they are familiar with the concept, especially those who grew up in their native village. I do not remember how I was able to get the information regarding its presence in a Gayo society since I got it only from a Gayo student in Malang during preparing my 1964 article, without ever going to Gayo-land in Northern Sumatra. A researcher therefore has to draw a plan that enables him to get such information.

The second facet is how a researcher has to use the information from his readings in order to understand the society he is now dealing with. As I

mention above, Vellinga understands the world of spiritual beings of Abaian people in terms of information his reading materials provides him. He never questions it whether it is still valid for the **present** Abaian society. As a matter of fact, I am sure, the present Abaian differs from their ancestors. They might question what they inherit from their ancestor. Or they know it through stories told by elder peoples. The situation can be compared to what I found in my native village I mention above. And it is also possible that the society has changed due to the presence of modern equipments. TV programs will introduce people to external world. And the availability of modern transport will take them to an external world as well as bringing strangers to their doorsteps. .

The third facet is how a researcher has to understand the information he gets as is the case how a researcher has to assign meaning to the word Minangkabau when they refer themselves as Minangkabau people as I have discussed above.

Kuala Lumpur, 6/4/06
Umar Junus
junus@pc.jaring.my

