

**THE MORAL AUTHORITY OF THE MATERNAL: REFLECTED IN
SOME NEOLITHIC FINDS AND OBSERVED IN VILLAGE WEST
SUMATRA**

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The Mother as Queen and Domesticator of Energy in Nature and Culture: Statue of Minangkabau Queen Mother known as Bundo Kanduang (Our Own Mother)

The annual cycle of germination, growth, and harvest held both mystery and material sustenance for early farmers. These ancient agriculturalists must have recognized the analogy between grain seeds germinating in the field and new life growing in the womb, for the representation of this analogy is found in many Old European sites. The pregnant vegetation goddess (she is popularly known as the earth goddess or Mother Earth) was one of the most-represented female

figures depicted in Neolithic Old Europe. Hundreds of pregnant goddess figurines have been unearthed from Old European settlement excavations.

Marija Gimbutas

*Take the small knife used for carving
Make a staff from the lintabuang tree.
The cover of pinang flowers becomes a winnow
A drop of water becomes the seat.
A fist becomes a mountain
Growth in nature is our teacher.*

Minangkabau Proverb

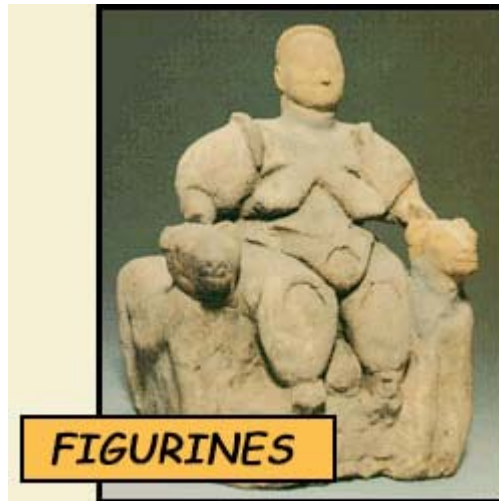
These two citations suggest similar stories about the relationship between nature and culture. In the first, Marija Gimbutas (1999:15) hypothesizes that pregnant vegetation goddess figurines of Neolithic Europe and Asia Minor (ancient Anatolia), in the era between 7000 B.C. and 3000 B.C., are modeled on human birth processes. The second is a Minangkabau proverb drawing parallels between nature and culture by suggesting that growth in nature should be taken as a model for culture. The two citations represent an equivalent focus on the wheel of life and its cyclical turning, interweaving nature and culture in pondering the lessons to be learned from one in order to ensure well-being in the other.

According to M. Nasroen (1957), a Minangkabau philosopher, the fit between nature and culture is the source from which the Minangkabau derive their primary social principle, matriliney. He says that the Minangkabau matrilineal social system, the largest and most modern matrilineal society in the world today, comes from the time of ancestor worship and the animism that prevailed before Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam influenced local custom. He suggests that the maternal principle, which stands at the core of Minangkabau

symbology, is part of an animistic ontology associating the maternal with the life-giving attributes of nature.

These similarities suggest certain commonalities between Minangkabau and Neolithic attitudes elevating maternal features to the status of the highly respected, magical, and perhaps sacred (depending on what the reader means by "sacred.") While there is no evidence that the Minangkabau ever made figurines of any kind, their folklore speaks of a rice goddess and of a founding Queen. This folklore can be compared with figurines such as found at Fatah-juk juxtaposing maternal authority and raw animal power.

For example, there is the clay statuette found at the Neolithic site of Fatah-juk, which Ian Hodder (2005:36) describes as "voluptuous" (not the word I would have chosen to describe this figure.) The statuette reminds me of the juxtaposition of moral maternal authority and raw animal power found in a well-known Minangkabau tale, one they call their "state myth." The Fatah figure is of an expansive-looking woman sitting on a throne with her arms (or hands) resting on the heads of two leopards, which appear somewhat docile. Is this because these animals serve the seated woman?



Çatalhöyük "Mother Goddess" from

<http://www.smm.org/catal/artifacts/figurines/>

In the Minangkabau story, often performed on state occasions, the founding Minangkabau Queen Mother, called Bundo Kanduang (Own Mother), has at her disposal a powerful bull and horse to do her bidding. She is the domesticator of animal and natural energy. In the story Bundo Kanduang delegates these animals to protect her son when he travels beyond the borders of her Queendom where physical force as opposed to moral authority reigns. With the help of her magical animals, the Queen's son subdues and domesticates the chaos that reigns beyond her borders. As the extension of the Queen the sons/animals are the domesticators who transform unbridled physical force into socially recognized allegiance to the Queen's order.

The theme of women controlling animal energy is carried over into contemporary Minangkabau village life through the association of the bull with Minangkabau matriliney. For example, there is the buffalo-horn shape of the

rooftop of the matrilineal long house and the headdress of Bundo Kandung and senior women dressed in ceremonial clothes.



The Matrilineal Longhouse

The name "Minangkabau" means victorious buffalo. The name refers to the mythical time when the Minangkabau won a famous battle pitting them against marauding patrilineal Javanese, who wanted to install patrilineality. The Minangkabau defeated the Javanese through trickery. Suggesting that the war be decided by dueling buffaloes, to which the Javanese agreed, the Minangkabau strapped knives to the horns of a baby buffalo and after starving it for a few days sent it out to do battle. When the Javanese buffalo saw the baby buffalo, it stood calmly. The baby buffalo, on the other hand, in a fury of hunger butted into the testicles of the bull buffalo looking for milk. By playing on this theme of nurture, the Minangkabau won the day. To this day this story is told with great hilarity.

The buffalo theme is woven through contemporary daily life in other ways as well. For example, the social unit most important to the conduct of daily adult affairs is the mother, her brother, and the laboring buffalo, the work horse of Minangkabau agriculture. This triumvirate is prominently displayed on the council houses where men and women gather to conduct village affairs.



**The Mother, the Brother, and the Bull – the Working Basis of
Minangkabau Life**

When looking at the maternal figurines of Old Europe referred to by Gimbutas and others as "mother goddesses," one wonders whether these figures signified a personalized, hegemonic Goddess (a female version of the transcendent Father God of the Judeo-Christian tradition) or whether they were symbols of the superior moral authority of the life-giving, nurturing presence that is immanent in the concept of growth in nature and instantiated by the life-giving

functions of the maternal. According to Joan Marler (private communication, 2005), Gimbutas understood the so-called goddess figurines of Old Europe to be aspects of a "meta-language" expressing the sacredness of and human interrelationship with the natural world. For example, in *The Language of the Goddess*, Gimbutas (1989:xvi) defined the Goddess as "a cosmogonic figure, the universal fruitful source" of all life in nature. Marler suggests that Gimbutas interpreted female sculptures as visual metaphors of the life-giving, death-wielding, and regenerative powers of the natural world. This set of meanings is consistent with the Minangkabau ontology merging the maternal in nature and culture.

In the following I present two Minangkabau scenarios as hypothetical models for thinking about two intriguing figurines excavated at Fatalh⁻γηk. First, there is the aforementioned clay statuette of the sitting female figure flanked by two leopards (found in a grain bin); and, second there is the much smaller, less imposing female figurine with a wild seed embedded in her back (see Hodder 2005:40.) The difference between the two types of figurines, one seemingly made with considerable thought and the other hastily fashioned, is common in the Neolithic record from the Middle East. The difference suggests that they were made to serve different social ends.

Ian Hodder's (2005:40) claim that these figurines reflect the important role women played in the nascent domestication of plants makes eminent sense. Based on the Minangkabau stories presented below, I would go further to suggest that both of the Fatal figurines signify the dominant symbolic function played by the female nurturing principle, but in different ways. The more elaborate figure

reflects a social ontology reflecting the power of the maternal principle in the domestication of raw animal power for social purposes. The figure with the seed of grain on the other hand may be part of the symbolic work that accompanied the observation of seed growth for purposes of harvesting, a kind of amulet protecting and plant food regeneration. Some kind of symbolic work undoubtedly preceded the evolution of plant domestication. I suggest that both figurines mark a cultural threshold related to animal and plant domestication, which all the evidence at Tatalh̄yηk suggests did not happen overnight.

For more on this argument I turn next to Minangkabau lore about the "rice goddess" and then to their state myth about their founding Queen Mother. First the "rice goddess."

THE PUBLIC POWER OF THE DOMESTIC: THE MOTHER, THE BROTHER, BIRTH, AND RICE AGRICULTURE

One of the prominent ethnic groups in Indonesia, numbering some four million in their homeland province of West Sumatra, the Minangkabau are the largest matrilineal society in the world today. The Minangkabau are famous in Indonesia for their matriarchal customs called *adat matriarchaat* and for their dedication to Islam.¹ While the Minangkabau see no contradiction between their matrilineal ways, which they elevate to the status of the sacred, and Islam, foreigners think that these are in contradiction. This is because most people do not understand the as it spread around the world Islam adjusted to local customs making this a religion that was far more flexible than is understood in today's

¹ Although Islam first appeared in East Sumatra in the 9th century it did not reach West Sumatra until about the 16th century.

world of *jihadist* acts and patriarchal pronouncements, which represents only a fraction of the Islamic world.²

The Minangkabau are also known for their business acumen and literary flair. Banks, bookstores, and institutions of higher education in the cities, satellite dishes and schools in the villages make this a modern society that is connected to the global network of trade and media flows. This is definitely not a tribal society that the world thinks that anthropologists still study.

Beginning in 1981 and lasting until 2000, I visited the Minangkabau almost every year for several months at a time living in a village in the highland heartland of West Sumatra, the area believed to be the center of the Minangkabau traditional culture. My goal was to understand the role *adat matriarchaat* played in village social life. From this analysis I developed a definition of matriarchy in line with Minangkabau meanings. As far as I know, mine is the first attempt in Western scholarship to develop a definition of matriarchy based solely on an ethnographic case rather than defining it as a mirror image of Western patriarchy (Sanday 2002.)

With their brothers, Minangkabau women conduct the rice rituals and birth ceremonies. The ceremonies are carried out according to similar templates regarding good, evil, and the source of fertility. The Minangkabau live in a world of good, which is ensured by following *adat* (customary ceremonies) and in a world of evil, which takes over in the absence of *adat*. In daily life there is a

² In West Sumatra and elsewhere in Indonesia and the Islamic world, a distinction is made between "political Islam" (also called Islamism) and "cultural Islam." The former is fueled by the *jihadist* crusade while the latter is vastly more accommodating. The distinction puts into sharp relief the reality that in many parts of the Islamic world communities may subscribe to the "Five Pillars of Islam" while living in syncretism with pre-Islamic traditions. The success of the spread of Islam, now the most populous religion in the world, was due to its ability to accommodate local tradition.

constant tension between good and evil—doing the right thing according to custom to ward off the alleged natural tendency for evil spirits to prey on the vulnerable. This tension is particularly evident in the way the Minangkabau look after the newborn and the rice shoots in the fields.

Birth ceremonies demonstrate that being born within the sheltering nurture of the household does not alone shield an infant from marauding beings that inhabit the village bathing place and glide through the air from other villages. Birth is a time when everything must be done right according to adat in order for the mother and child to grow strong. When all the rituals are completed and the child has acquired protective amulets, several important hurdles have been surmounted: the spirits who live in the bathing places and stalk the village have been placated so that mother and child can go about, unhampered by the unseen forces that attack the weak mother and the vulnerable infant. Most important, the amulets protect the newborn from the illnesses caused by spirits, especially the bloodsucking vampires believed to emanate from certain other villages.³

Until very recently in the villages where I lived, ceremonies to promote rice fertility, to protect the rice seedlings, and to ensure a proper harvest were regularly performed. In these measures one finds overlapping maternal functions assigned to nature and culture, obeisance to a common ancestress, and the semi-deification of a queenly figure, known as the Mother of the Rice (the Queen of Rice), not unlike Our Own Mother (Bundo Kanduang, founding

³ I have no explanation for this belief other than to suggest that it serves as an explanation for the chaos and uncertainty that follows natural disaster, disease, or other experiences that rupture the balance of daily life.

Queen of the Minangkabau.) As with all growth in nature, growth of the rice is believed to depend on maternal nurture. The nurturing begins when the delicate rice seeds are placed in water for sprouting. Sprouted seedlings are sown in a "rice nursery" for the first stage of growth, during which time they are carefully covered for protection. Once they take root in the nursery, the vulnerable seedlings are transplanted to the cultivated rice field where they are nurtured with water and weeding.

Nurturing strength in the growth cycle is evident in ancient rice rituals, now abandoned but still remembered. Viewing a ritual performed for my benefit, I was struck by the reverence paid to the sheaf of seven rice seedlings known as "Mother of the Rice" and addressed reverently as *Sonan Sari Padi Aku* ("My Dear Honored Rice"). The seedlings are protected from the pests of the field by tying amulets around the rice stalks as they grow, and encircling the rice field with thorns. The sheaf of seven is given special attention because of its ability to produce a bountiful harvest. Like the common ancestress of each lineage, Sonan Sari stands as a dominant symbol of fertility, growth, well-being, and maternal nurture. Like the child who is ceremonially nurtured through the life cycle, Sonan Sari is protected by ritual as well.

The most elaborate and revealing ritual along these lines takes place when the first fruits of the field, represented by Sonan Sari, are cut and taken to the rice house. Sonan Sari is a bundle of seven stalks, one of which includes a stalk with four rice leaves, known as *Raja Padi* ("Queen or Mother of the Rice"). People say that the seven stalks grow facing toward the village because Sonan Sari Padi Aku will bring peace and a full stomach to those who eat from her field. Like the

seven grains of rice mashed for the baby to eat in its first eating ceremony, the seven stalks are thought to assuage the hunger of the people, for in these seven lays the soul of the rice. Before binding and cutting the bundle of seven a

Minangkabau prayer is offered to Sonan Sari:

Make a village, make peace
Sonan Sari Padi Aku
Sonan Sari, my Rice
We march home
We go up to the high house, the palace.

After the prayer is recited, the seven stalks are cut, bound, and carried in a ritual cloth back to the rice house. Seven sweet smelling leaves are wrapped around the stalks to neutralize the pests who always flee the fragrance. At the rice house, Sonan Sari is put in a coconut shell near the oldest of the four poles (meaning the first erected) on which the rice house stands. A smaller one-room version of the matrilineal longhouse, the rice house has the same architecture. The oldest pole of both the rice and the longhouses is the most revered pole and represents the unbroken line of the matrilineage back to the common ancestress. Both are the focus of all rituals.⁴

Once Sonan Sari is placed in the rice house, another prayer is recited, which consecrates the place so that the rest of the rice harvest will follow in great numbers (thousands, it is said) to be with the Mother, Sonan Sari Padi Aku. To this end, more rituals are performed both in the rice field and at the rice house. Once the entire field is harvested and the stalks are stored in the rice house, a being known as Induak Padi (also Mother of the Rice) is thought to protect the

⁴ As already noted the oldest post also symbolizes the fertility of the house.

stored rice. According to some, this being is a huge, benign snake that sits coiled on top of the rice in the rice house.

Besides being the first fruit of the rice field, Sonan Sari Padi Aku is also iconic of the first rice ever eaten. There is a famous proverb, which tells of the origin of Sonan Sari.

Oh, my dear, respected Padi,
You know the origin of rice
For you are Adam's apple.
You are the rice of Adam and Eve
Planted in Hindi
Below the Sarandi hill.

The words of this prayer place the origin of rice below the hill known as Sarandib (an ancient toponym for Ceylon) the place where some adat experts place the origin of the Minangkabau people. It is said that this rice came down from heaven. The rice came from God and when eaten by Adam became Adam's apple and when eaten by Eve turned into her breasts. It is thus a distinctly sacred food, as well as being food that makes people full and brings peace.

When the bundle of seven is deposited in the rice house a prayer is also offered to the original male leaders, the brothers of the first ancestresses, who are represented as the four posts on which the rice posts stand. These four posts stand for the four primordial clans, which are equated with the four original maternal lines. Thus, the entire ritual celebrates the partnership of male and female in the matrilineal clan system and the symbolic ascendancy of maternal meanings representing origin, the center and the sacred. In answer to the question regarding who controls ritual paraphernalia, it is clear that in the case of the Minangkabau this control is open to women and men. However, it is also

true that it is women who set the stage and acquire the ritual paraphernalia. Although they conduct the ceremony with men, it is women who put men on the stage and it is women who stage-manage the ritual.

THE FOUNDING QUEEN MOTHER AS DOMESTICATOR OF MALE AND ANIMAL ENERGY

Bundo Kanduang is the semi-mythical founding Queen Mother of the Minangkabau who is said to have ruled sometime in the 16th century or before, no one is quite sure. Her story is told in a famous "sung-narrative drama," often performed on festive occasions. Her alleged palace was recently reconstructed on a grand scale for tourists. While Bundo Kanduang is the moral arbiter of events in the story, the drama also focuses on her sons, one of whom is presented as her legitimate son, the other as an adopted son. It is the adopted son who domesticates raw power outside the Queen's borders with the help of the Queen's magical animals.

In this drama, Bundo Kanduang embodies the adat cultural order, which she teaches to her sons. The adopted son is named Cindur Mata and the title of the story is *Kaba Cindur Mata* (tale of Cindur Mata.) He is the raw masculine hero, while the Queen stands as the avatar of moral authority. In her role as mother and sister Bundo Kanduang shows a duty bound commitment not just to custom but also to seeing to it that her sons are educated in adat law. Only sons so educated can grow up to become proper men, knowledgeable in the ways of adat.

The key men in the story are Bundo Kanduang's two sons and her brother. The story revolves around the exploits of the Queen's brother who lives in an

adjacent Kingdom. The plot begins with the education of the sons (by the Queen) and then moves to the quandary the Queen faces when her brother breaks the marriage rule of adat. After promising his daughter in marriage to the Queen's son (a common type of marriage in Minangkabau culture), he breaks this promise and arranges to marry his daughter to a neighboring King. Upon hearing this, the Queen is enraged and sends Cindur Mata off to right the situation. Without going into further details (see Sanday 2002; 2003), all that needs to be said here is that the men in the story display a split consciousness; upholding the Queen's tradition on the one hand, subverting it on the other. In the face of transgression, however, the plot of *Kaba Cindur Mata* does not pose male and female in irreconcilable opposition and struggle, for even when the men break the Mother's law, with the help of Bundo Kanduang they find ways to heal the breach.

This is in keeping with the Minangkabau dedication to the accommodation of power struggles in the social distribution of power. Finding solution to differences rather than resorting to warfare and physical force was the means by which this society achieved integration and unity in the face of historical usurpation by numerous foreign patriarchal kings who came into their area looking for gold. Unlike other societies in which the maternal principle was attacked, the Minangkabau case seems to be one in which the dialectics of historical progress resulted in an implosion, not defeat, of the maternal principle.

The Minangkabau state myth demonstrates what happens to unruly males who subvert the social order. When Cindur Mata leaves the borders of the Queen's realm delegated by Bundo Kanduang to visit her unruly brother, he

crosses an unchartered territory where he encounters a group of thieves who epitomize the wild, uncultivated by the adat order. The land that they live in is described as a male-centered world, entirely absent of women, ruled by death and destruction, a place where physical power determines the dominance of particular figures, much like patriarchal social orders. The men in this world are depicted in apocalyptic terms as death machines. They are thieves who do not steal out of need but merely to extract men's souls from their bodies. They know no restraint and will kill anyone who trespasses in their territory. They can withstand any hardship and fight with the most fearsome of weapons. Their skin is so thick that even iron cannot pierce it. Each thief is likened to the worst aspects of nature—rough, gargantuan, lazy, and fierce, with no human attributes.

When the thieves attack Cindur Mata the great buffalo sent by the Queen to protect him on his journey becomes crazed with battle, as if possessed by the devil, biting, terrorizing, and killing the thieves. In the face of this superior force, because relative physical power is what is being tested on this killing field, the leader of the thieves recognizes that they have not only met their match, they have met their king. They surrender to Cindur Mata who then administers the sovereign oath of allegiance to the law of Bundo Kanduang, which the thieves readily accept as they bow to the Queen.

DISCUSSION: FEMALE FIGURINES AS ICONS OF DOMESTICATION AND SOCIAL CONTINUITY

The social power of maternal symbols in the human record is found in the archaeological evidence that the first material representation of the human form was cast as female. The female figurines of the Paleolithic and Neolithic suggest

growth, protection and nurture rather than the struggle, competition and endemic warfare so often associated with the much later images of male dominance. The many images of female figurines from Old Europe described by Marija Gimbutas provide powerful evidence of a social ontology founded on maternal symbolism. I use the word "maternal" rather than fertility because my experience among the Minangkabau teaches me that fertility is a semiotic dimension of the multivocal maternal symbol. The two are closely intertwined, because only the proper mother can ensure fertility in plants, humans, and animals.

This conclusion is supported by the fact that all senior Minangkabau women are referred to as Bundo Kanduang, especially in connection with the life cycle ceremonies so important to village life and to knitting the social fabric. On the ceremonial stage of these ceremonies, hostesses and guests move like Queens participating in stately ritual exchanges. They are Queens for a day performing the same functions of the semi-mythical Bundo Kanduang, teaching and performing for their children so that they will grow and mature in the ways of adat. There is no mother worship here; rather, like totemism, the ceremonies bring people together in a mutual display of good will, respect, and finery. It is a time for the proud celebration of tradition, a time when children learn the dominating role of custom.

In their ceremonial role, women are avatars of the original Queen and the accomplished mother. When they are called Bundo Kanduang they are both representatives of their lineage ancestress as well as descendents of the Queen Mother. The titled means Our Own Mother, referring to the mother who bore us

as well as to the original Queen, the one who founded Minangkabau adat (according to the story.) The title is usually applied only to those women who take their ceremonial roles seriously, which usually means older women who are active in lineage and ceremonial observances.

As mentioned, the figurines of the Neolithic record are not uniform, as the Γatalh̄ γηk figurines suggest. One suspects a difference of meaning separating the more elaborate from the hastily made clay figures. The Minangkabau case suggests two possibilities. The more striking figures have some direct relevance for the social order; the smaller figures may be amulets constructed and manipulated to ward off evil. Both play on the theme of the overarching maternal in different ways. One is like a Queen in having sovereign moral power; the other is more like the "fairy" in having localized magical power. Together the figurines represent the every present focus on balancing the forces associated with good and evil and as such represent physical templates whereby new generations are taught what they must do to survive and reproduce. No doubt, the larger more elaborate figurines play a central role as models of and for behavior connected with life, well-being, and trans-generational continuity in a world where humans, males and females alike, act as guardians, probably taking on separate but balanced roles in a society that harnesses rather than lives by brute force.

This symbolic complex is dramatically different from the much later triumvirate of the Divine King, the Warrior, and the Laborer, so often discussed in the literature and usually associated with warfare and conquest. The Neolithic symbolic complex such as seen at Γatalh̄ γηk and elsewhere appears more like a dynamic polyvalent duo, featuring the Mother and the Son/Animal. Although

this is not Goddess worship as we think of worshipping gods from ancient Greece to the present, it is undoubtedly part of the symbolic paradigm that over a long stretch of time gave rise to the concept of worshipping an almighty figure.

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