

## **The Noble and the Elders of Mandailing, Sumatra: the Challenges of Globalization and Regional Autonomy**

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### **Abstract**

The Mandailing people are one of hundreds of ethnic groups in Indonesia and Malaysia. Their homeland lies in the largely rural north-west island of Sumatra. Mandailing society is characterised by clan system (marga), genealogical tradition (tarombo) and customary laws (adat Dalihan Na Tolu), dramatized by the ritualistic music of the Nine Great Drums (Gordang Sambilan). Their practise of consultative governance among nobles and elders (Na Mora Na Toras) and egalitarian society in 'village republics' (huta or banua) was undermined during Dutch rule and abolished during the Japanese Occupation.

The Paderi War (1816-1833) precipitated a substantial exodus of the Mandailing to Malaya. This was followed by chain migration to the East Coast of Sumatra, and to urban centres like Medan and Jakarta in the 20th century. The Na Mora Na Toras established new settlements outside the homeland but modifying the governance structure to their new contexts, but still retaining political and kinship ties to the mother villages in Mandailing. Through colonial and post-colonial education and social engineering, the younger generation on both sides of the Straits of Malacca have largely lost their cultural identity, and become Indonesianised and Malaysianised.

In the recent decentralization process, the Mandailing homeland was reconstituted as a new district (Kabupaten) in the province of North Sumatra incorporating the coastal region to become Mandailing-Natal (MADINA, for short). Growing regional autonomy offers opportunities for the Mandailing people to revitalize their society by participating more directly in self-governance and self-determination.

This means reasserting traditional land rights, control of natural resources and environmental stewardship in a land devastated by destruction of bio-diverse rainforest; challenging institutionalised corruption through open and participatory governance;; seeking alternative development strategies such as growing 'conservation coffee' and other crops; reversing the braindrain and out-migration of the younger generation; reintroducing Mandailing folklore, literature and living skills into the educational system. The Mandailings can take inspiration from their traditional culture and governance, while working together with civil society, and strengthening knowledge and investment linkages between the homeland, urban centres and the rantau.

Globalization and regional autonomy bring new threats, but at the same opportunities for the preservation of natural and cultural habitat, and cultural recovery and transmission of indigenous knowledge and traditional environmental knowledge in forest conservation and water management, promoting the idea of 'Mandailing Aman' as a model of peace and prosperity in a turbulent Indonesia.