



Southeast Asian Studies at the  
University of Freiburg (Germany)

Occasional Paper Series

[www.southeastasianstudies.uni-freiburg.de](http://www.southeastasianstudies.uni-freiburg.de)

Occasional Paper N° 35 (March 2017)

## **Merantau and Minangkabau Modernities: Stories of mobility in prose and practice**

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# Merantau and Minangkabau Modernities: Stories of mobility in prose and practice

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## Abstract

*This paper combines insights from anthropology and cultural studies to explore the iconic narrative of merantau (journeying in search of success) as it unfolds both in everyday conversations amongst Minangkabau migrants from West Sumatra, and also in national Indonesian popular fiction. The authors focus on two key cases: the migration journey of Rahmat, a Minangkabau entrepreneur working in the photocopying industry in Java, and the popular semi-autobiographic coming-of-age novel Negeri 5 Menara (Nation of 5 Towers, 2009). In analyzing resonances and disjunctures between these cases, the authors seek new insights into the role of contemporary merantau stories in an increasingly mobile Indonesia.*

## Key words:

Merantau, journeying in search of success, Minangkabau migrants, Negeri 5 Menara.

## **Merantau and Minangkabau Modernities: Stories of Mobility in Prose and Practice**

The merantau narrative, journeying in search of success, features strongly in the popular imagination of the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra. This collaborative paper brings together two “stories” of merantau: the everyday migration journeys of the Minangkabau community of Nagari Atar village, who travel to cities in Java to join the photocopying business, and the popular semi-autobiographical novel *Negeri 5 Menara* (Nation of 5 Towers), written by successful Minangkabau journalist and entrepreneur Ahmad Fuadi, about a young boy who travels from West Sumatra to Java to pursue his education. The authors will explore resonances and common narrative arcs between the two cases. These cases are different in scale, form, and social strata, but what brings us together is an interest in stories: not just people’s life stories or stories presented in a work of fiction, but the stories that subsequently get told about and around certain merantau journeys; the perceived power of certain stories; what is included and what is left out of these stories. In this project, we demonstrate how individual stories (life history, text) become embedded in larger social imaginings about success, social responsibility, and the “modern lifestyle”. By telling and re-telling merantau stories, narrators and audiences craft and maintain multi-layered social identities: as Minangkabau, as Indonesian, as part of the Islamic ummah, and as part of a global cosmopolitan community. The stories told around merantau experiences can shed light on changing notions of social mobility in Indonesia today, with links to broader socio-political discourses around “developing” the self and the nation. Especially in the context of increased speed and volume of media and information flows, the way that these kinds of stories are transmitted and acquire meaning in different contexts is a crucial area of study.

The central characters of our two merantau stories are Rahmat and Alif. Rahmat is a pseudonym for a small-business entrepreneur from rural West Sumatra, one of several participants in our broader ethnographic study of migration between Atar and Yogyakarta, whose journey represents the experience of many young, rural Minangkabau men. Alif is the fictional protagonist of *Negeri 5 Menara*, a novel that has been widely embraced among young, urban, educated Indonesians as a source of inspiration and motivation to pursue dreams of a global education. By bringing these two very different stories into a dialogue, we hope to bridge gaps between rural and urban studies, work across different social classes of research participants, and across different disciplinary perspectives and methodologies. With this in mind, we combine detailed ethnographic observations, close textual analysis and cultural studies approaches, in an attempt to offer new insights into contemporary merantau stories and their broader significance for Minangkabau people specifically and Indonesian media consumers generally.

The notion of “story” implies a narrator and an audience, and we trace these roles as they shift and change across different forms of storytelling, whether in prose or practice. The merantau narrative that Rahmat recounts to a foreign ethnographer may be different to the one he shares with his extended family when he returns to Atar, and different again to the tales circulated about him by others. Similarly, the fictional story of Alif is framed within the “real-life” story of author Ahmad Fuadi, and also within the tales that get told about him amongst readers, audiences, and the media. This paper attempts to grapple with the question of how narrative form and intended audience impact the way a story is told. In addition, we

seek to trace not just the literal mobility of people, but also the figurative mobility of language and ideas, as merantau comes to gain, via storytelling, new meanings in new contexts.

After outlining key theoretical perspectives on migration and mobility and introducing our two cases in more detail, the body of this paper is divided into three main sections. Firstly, we focus on motivations to merantau, then the experience of merantau, and finally the implications and impacts felt after merantau. In each section, we offer ethnographic and textual examples from our two cases, seeking to tease out the resonances and divergences between these two stories. In doing so, we trace the ways in which the ancient notion of merantau, both as a social practice and an abstract idea, continues to play an important role in contemporary Minangkabau identities. What emerges is a cyclical narrative of merantau, where individuals are motivated to migrate in search of new experiences and new opportunities, and then their stories in turn encourage others to undertake similar journeys. While in reality, migrants often experience hardship, failure, and even tragedy, these are not typically the focus of the merantau stories that enter social circulation. Our study is primarily concerned with publically articulated “success” stories, yet we also remain keenly aware of their unspoken opposite, the story of failure.

Merantau stories are predominantly masculine stories of male entrepreneurs, told from the perspective of men who have migrated or hold ambitions to migrate in the future. The Minangkabau people are famously matrilineal, and many previous scholarly studies have focused on men’s lack of ownership rights in the village as a significant “push factor” to merantau. We highlight instead the role of self-development discourses in the drive to travel. Particularly in the case of Fuadi’s novel, which has a significant female readership, merantau is viewed less through the lens of gender, and more through the notion of a universal impulse to gain knowledge in distant lands, ultimately for the good of one’s homeland. The concept of merantau in contemporary Indonesia therefore intersects with powerful developmentalist discourses, as we will demonstrate in the closing sections of this paper.

## **Merantau in scholarly perspectives**

Our work engages with and contributes to scholarly literature on Minangkabau, migration and modernities as well as studies of contemporary Indonesian social identities more generally. Previous studies of Minangkabau society have focused on traditional kinship structures and matrilineality, whereas this paper aims to look beyond these ties towards other social networks, particularly as people move into new contexts and the power of older social ties weaken. Minangkabau is an ethnic group indigenous to highland West Sumatra, renowned for their matrilineal and matrilocal culture, with property and land passing down from mother to daughters and the male spouse moving to the house of their wife’s matrilineal family; meanwhile, religious and political affairs are the responsibility of men (Hadler 2008: 138-176; Biezeveld 2002: 67-72; Metje 1995: 24; Kato 1982: 23). Ethnographic literature focusses on two main subjects: Minangkabau society’s unique combination of matrilineal and Islamic culture (Kraus 1984; Harahap 1987; Kato 1982; Benda-Beckmann 1979; Benda-Beckmann et al. 2003, 2007; Metje 1995; Blackwood 2000), and the Minangkabau concept of migration (merantau). This paper focuses on the latter, while also acknowledging the crucial role of kinship and other social formations in migration. Access to social, cultural and economic capital are regulated by kinship structures (Blackwood 1997; Kirner 2003), but we aim to widen the view to other social relationships than kinship; concerning Minangkabau,

this perspective has been neglected. Minangkabau social networks in merantau are shaped through cultural concepts emerging from a broader Indonesian context, including mutual assistance (*gotong-royong*), rotating savings and credit associations (*arisan*) or ideas of traditional village democracy with prolonged discussions and consensus (*musyawarah* and *mufakat*). We argue that these concepts of mutual help and collectivistic values play a crucial role in merantau success stories.

Classical scholarly approaches to migration primarily explored reasons and consequences of migration. However, the end of the twentieth century saw a shift from ideas of unidirectional international migration to approaches conceiving migration as transnational, multi-directional and highly complex (see for example Pries 1999; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007; Vertovec 2009; Glick Schiller & Caglar 2009; Drotbohm & Nieswand 2014). This shift and other recent critical approaches to migration (e.g. Glick Schiller 2014; Elliot & Urry 2010) serve our focus on social practice, narratives of mobility, and circularity. In this paper, we use the notion of mobility in the broadest sense to describe opportunities for movement between different levels of society, encompassing geographic mobility both within and beyond the nation, as well as economic upward mobility, and social mobility related to concepts of social status. Here, the concept of “movement capital” (Kaufmann, Bergman & Joye 2004) is helpful as we explore the way that merantau stories are positioned as journeys of self-development. In addition, the literature on symbolic flows such as movements of styles, ideas, images and symbols (Lange & Büttner 2010; Ma 2002; Reetz 2010) informs our understanding of merantau stories themselves as mobile entities.

We situate our own study of merantau in these broader discussions about migration and mobility, as well within the specific literature on Minangkabau merantau (most notably Abdullah 2007 [1972]; Naim 1973; Kato 1982; Harahap 1987, Chadwick 1991; Iman and Mani 2013), which has focused mainly on push and pull factors for migration. Naim highlights the voluntary and temporary notion of merantau (1973: 18-19; 413-416), the scale of which has changed over time. Centuries ago, the “rantau” (migration destination) were satellite states of the first three *luhak* (place of Minangkabau origin) around Gunung Merapi in West Sumatra. Men would collectively leave their homeland to cultivate bushland in these areas. In the 17th century, the rise of Malacca as a bustling trading centre attracted many Minangkabau and trade became the main motivation for migration. Temporary voluntary migration thus has a long history in Minangkabau communities, and continues to gain popularity and importance as a social institution, as the Minangkabau adapt to new circumstances. After Indonesian independence in 1945, nearly half the population in West Sumatra undertook merantau (Naim 1973: 64), mostly to Java, contributing to rapid urbanization. Merantau patterns became more individualistic and although education and white-collar jobs were a growing propulsive factor, trade and entrepreneurship remained the main occupations. While merantau was typically meant to be temporary, increasing numbers of migrants settled with their families in the rantau, while still maintaining ties with their homeland. The 2010 census reveals half the Minangkabau population lives outside West Sumatra (Subdirektorat Demografi 2011). Comparing major ethnic groups in Indonesia, Naim concludes that the socio-systemic migration pattern of merantau is unique to Minangkabau. While other groups are also highly mobile, it is “not because of the socio-cultural stimuli incorporated in their socio-cultural systems, but because of other factors” (Naim 1973: 401). Classical literature about merantau stresses the precarious position of men in Minangkabau society (Naim 1973; Kato 1982) as an explanation for the phenomenon and makes a clear

divide between homeland and rantau. These studies suggest merantau practice serves to uphold local power structures. While rantau is seen as a space for change and “modernity,” the homeland remains “traditional,” sticking to adat (customary) law and matrilineality, using merantau as an escape valve. In contrast to these earlier studies, we seek more complex stories of circular merantau journeys. Our combination of ethnography and textual analysis of narratives in popular culture offers the chance to widen understandings of Minangkabau migration and contributes to broader analysis of public discourses around personal development and social responsibility in contemporary Indonesia.

We use guardedly the term “modernities” in this paper, to designate the imagined “modern lifestyles” that are presented in contemporary merantau stories. These modernities are on the one hand characterized as idealized futures, while on the other hand seen as being a potential source of dangerous external influences. As an analytical framework and category, the concept of “modernity” is highly contested and often deeply entwined with prescriptive colonial discourses of progress (Kahn 2001; Gaonkar 2001; Dirlik 2011). In this paper, we do not use “modernity” as a simple descriptive category. Rather, we engage with the different kinds of modernities being imagined and constructed by the “narrators” of our different merantau narratives. Throughout these stories, descriptions of idealised “modern” lifestyles proliferate; however, what is meant by the term “modern” is often slippery and unstable. Ideas about “Islamic” modernity sit side-by-side with notions of “Western” modernity and nationalist “Indonesian” modernity, as our protagonists negotiate different layers of their social identities, through stories of merantau.

## **Merantau in practice, merantau in prose**

Our detailed anthropological study of Minangkabau migration practices was carried out in Nagari Atar (Atar Village) in West Sumatra’s Tanah Datar regency, and the Javanese city of Yogyakarta, the main destination of Atar’s perantau (migrants). Methodologically, this research involved living with Minangkabau diaspora communities in Yogyakarta, and then accompanying them on return journeys to their home village in West Sumatra. In Atar the subsistence economy is mainly based on wet rice cultivation, which shapes the landscape: just the hills protrude out of the paddy fields, and the houses are built upon the hills, surrounded by a handful of fruit and coconut trees. The centre of most activities is the market, which runs every Friday. In addition, three permanently opened shops (lapau) and a sizeable mosque and prayer house (surau) are located along the main road. That is the homeland of Rahmat, the protagonist of our first merantau story. All quotations used in this paper are from interviews conducted with him during 2013-2014. He left Atar 30 years before, and plays an important role in the merantau community in Yogyakarta. For his generation, merantau became a mass phenomenon in Atar. One generation before Rahmat’s, a few men left Atar and one opened a photocopy shop in Bandung, a city in West Java. His success led the next generation in the 1980s to merantau in increasing numbers. Seventy-five percent of the generation following Rahmat (mainly men) left the village and 86 percent of them work in the photocopy business. Throughout this paper, we explore Rahmat’s personal merantau story; however, the study is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork with various participants, allowing us to note that Rahmat’s experience is typical of the journey of many young men from rural West Sumatra.

Our second merantau story is drawn from *Negeri 5 Menara* (“Nation of 5 Towers”, 2009), a popular semi-autobiographical novel by successful journalist and entrepreneur Ahmad Fuadi. The novel, which was adapted into a film in 2011 (dir. Affandi Abdul Rachman), tells the story of Alif Fikri, a young Minangkabau boy from Nagari Bayur on Lake Maninjau in rural West Sumatra, who, at 15 years of age, embarks on an “education” merantau to a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) in East Java, which equips him with the social and educational capital to study and work overseas, and successfully take part in a global, cosmopolitan lifestyle. The term merantau features heavily in Alif’s story. The novel opens with an ancient poem by Imam Syafii, a Muslim jurist and poet born in Gaza (767 C.E.) and raised in Mecca: “Clever and civilized people will not remain in their hometown / Leave your land and explore (merantau) foreign fields!” Here, from the very beginning the concept of merantau is presented not just as a Minangkabau, or Malay, or Indonesian idea, but one that is also closely tied to Islamic faith, and the global Islamic ummah. This sense of merantau’s universality continues throughout Alif’s story.

In this paper, we offer close readings of the novel itself, but also explore the stories told around this novel: the author’s own merantau experience, the reactions of public figures to the story, and the ways that readers have been inspired by the tale. By providing an account of the wider context of consumption, we explore the ways in which this particular merantau story has become meaningful in the lives of young urban Indonesians. In doing so, we suggest that the discursive spaces around Ahmad Fuadi’s *Negeri 5 Menara* share many similarities with the *surau* (prayer houses) and *lapau* (small shops) of Nagari Atar: a space for sharing nostalgic tales of merantau and inspiring future perantau to continue the cycle. Ultimately, as well as exploring the literal mobility of people, this paper will use these two case studies to trace the figurative mobility of language, stories and concepts, and the changing ways that the term merantau is used by Minangkabau people and other Indonesians in contemporary contexts

## **Motivations to Merantau**

Covering the exposed body, which means to seek for fortune. We hope to find fortune by migrating [merantau] to another region.

Talking about merantau, Rahmat articulates a need to leave the home village, as the only way to become a complete person. Like most of the people in our study, he experienced his village as backward, determined by repetitive agrarian activities, adat and social control. There is little chance for personal gain or to have a better life (*kehidupan lebih*). In contrast, perantau – individuals who left successfully and are living abroad – are highly respected. They become role models for those longing for acknowledgement and social advancement.

Life there is still... My parents were not capable to... then I saw the homecoming friends from the rantau (lit. shoreline, overseas) [...], they have a better life, so finally I did merantau.

Most of the participants describe life in their home village as boring and monotonous, without a chance to take part in a “modern lifestyle” they get to know from media and especially from visiting perantau. Like many migrant workers, when they can afford it, perantau return at least once a year for Idul Fitri – the Islamic feast of breaking the fast at the end of Ramadan – to their homeland, specifically to their wife’s mother’s house, bringing stories and material goods from the “merantau world”. The images they communicate are

about success, wealth and advancement. These stories are told in the surau and lapau. The surau (prayer house) serves official religious purposes and each clan in a certain area would have one. Clan gatherings are held here and religious as well as profane instructions are given. Unmarried and widowed men used to live in the surau and perantau would always come to the surau to talk about their experiences. The lapau (small shop) lacks the religious connotation but also serves as an important space to impart knowledge.

The social status of a returned perantau is based on size of their car, imported Jeans, trendy jilbabs (headscarves) and other goods that mediate images of modernity. Furthermore, status is based on the amount of money they spend to support their family and for the common good in their home village. Perantau are the main carrier of images of a “merantau modernity”, and “development” and “modernity” are positively connoted. Merantau is conceived to be for the sake of the village. For a Minangkabau it would be an honour to leave the village to serve it by being a successful entrepreneur.

It should be like, if you love the village you live there, but no, for Minangkabau it the other way round, if we love the village we leave it. That means, when we go merantau, succeed, we can help our village.

Minangkabau society is matrilineal and matrilocal, and men usually stress the fact that they cannot own land or a house (*harta pusaka tinggi*, all property) in West Sumatra, as everything belongs to the female members of his wife’s family. However, everything they achieve in the rantau is considered their personal belonging (*harta carian*); it would be passed to sons as well as daughters. Following extensive observations and interviews, we do not believe the wish to escape or overcome the matrilineal system is the main motivation for them to merantau. Rather, the notion of self-development and a sense of social responsibility towards the village play a more important role. Moreover, as Rahmat explains, by doing merantau, men seek to improve their chances in the marriage market.

If one accepts a husband, [the family] looks what he has achieved. It will be asked, where did he merantau to and what kind of enterprise does he have. If he has opened a photocopy shop, they will ask, how many branches he already has.

Despite not being direct beneficiaries, perantau like Rahmat highly value matrilineal inheritances: they maintain their mother-in-law’s house, knowing their daughters will always have the opportunity to return to the village and claim their heritage. Ultimately, this matrilineal inheritance remains totally connected to place, thus limited to clan homeland in West Sumatra, and not hugely influential on life in the rantau.

Echoing Rahmat’s musings on the role of matrilineality in shaping life-choices in Nagari Atar, a powerful maternal figure features strongly early on in the novel *Negeri 5 Menara*. Alif’s reluctant merantau journey begins when he is pressured by his mother to attend a religious school. She insists that this is not a matter of money, but rather an ideological choice, as she believes more bright young Indonesians should train as religious leaders; she wants him to be “like Buya Hamka [prominent Islamic scholar and novelist], who was from our very own village” (p. 8). Alif however sees this path as shutting the door on any chance he has at a modern, global lifestyle, as he reflects to himself:

I wanted to study at UI [a leading university in Jakarta], ITB [a leading university in Bandung] and then go to Germany like Mr Habibie [Indonesia’s minister for Science and Technology,

who later became president]... I wanted to become someone who understood all the modern theories, not just religious knowledge of fiqh and hadist (p. 8).

Eventually Alif relents to his mother's request, but he chooses a "modern pesantren" in East Java (the fictional "Pondok Madani", modelled after the real "Pondok Modern Gontor") recommended by his uncle, as he believes it will provide greater opportunities for his global ambitions. Pondok Madani is renowned for its comprehensive academic coverage of both religious and non-religious subjects as well as its language immersion approach, where classes are delivered entirely in Arabic and English, languages which are later in the novel described as "dua kunci jendela dunia" ("the two keys to the windows of the world", p. 293). This mastery of the "global" languages is one of the key motivating factors in Alif's choice to attend a boarding school so far from home. Yet as well as Alif's desire to master global skills, there is a deeper underlying wanderlust at work here. Although Fuadi does not frame Alif's journey to East Java as a typical Minangkabau merantau experience (given that he migrates for educational rather than entrepreneurial purposes), there are numerous suggestions throughout the novel that his "Minang-ness" makes him particularly suited to this experience of travelling and living far from home. His parents both seem to accept relatively easily his decision to attend school so far away, and on the long bus ride from West Sumatra through to East Java, he is surrounded by many familiar Minangkabau faces, as he meets local traders on their way to large markets like Tanah Abang in Jakarta. During this journey, and throughout his story, Alif characterizes Minangkabau people as natural travelers, with a "global spirit... descended from Alexander the Great" (p. 98). This is a popular tale amongst the Minangkabau people; the themes of travel, worldliness, and of conquering distant lands, tie in with many other aspects of the self-mythologizing that occurs around the merantau narrative. This underlying spirit of seeking success far from home combined with the specific tools for social mobility that Alif sees on offer at Pondok Madani, are ultimately what motivate him to merantau.

Looking at these two cases side by side, we can see several resonances around what motivates the merantau impulse. Both Rahmat and Alif have comprehensive imaginations about the world beyond. Their merantau journeys start with stories and images of a modern lifestyle, which become a propulsive ideal. While Alif models himself on successful public figure B.J. Habibie, Rahmat follows the example of perantau from his Nagari who succeeded in Java. The decision to merantau is much more likely when you know someone who made it before. Both Alif and Rahmat dream of a better life abroad, and they both feel that this dream exemplifies their Minang-ness. For both, merantau is not just geographic mobility but also a chance for social mobility: Alif and Rahmat long to become leaders or role models and the opportunity to gain status (symbolic capital) is therefore a crucial motivation. Although merantau is not only undertaken by men, it is definitely seen as a masculine norm to merantau. In these cases women play a motivating role (Alif does it for his mother and Rahmat for a better position on the marriage market). However, tropes of matrilineality do not feature strongly as each merantau journey progresses, and these stories are ultimately recounted less through the lens of gender, and more as tales of personal development.

At first sight, the most prominent difference between the two stories seems to lie in economic versus educational motivations. The economic aspect is stronger for the participants in Atar while Fuadi's novel stresses education. Nevertheless, both Rahmat and Alif are in a broader sense seeking both knowledge and profit. "Movement capital" can procure for individuals

both social and economic capital, and these different kinds of capital are in fact deeply entwined. Another important point of contrast between our two cases is the space of transmitting the stories of merantau. In rural West Sumatra, specific places like the surau (prayer house) and the lapau (small shop) become a site where people meet and swap tales of merantau. The space of the novel, on the other hand, is more abstract, as Alif's story circulates in national popular culture. We will tease out these different sites of storytelling in more detail in the next section. By exploring some of the resonances between Rahmat and Alif's motivations to merantau, we have begun to illustrate how merantau narratives are cyclical: stories and experiences shape the social practice of merantau and the conception or ethos of merantau. Merantau is driven by stories and is a circular process, as migrants return, transferring images of the merantau world and causing new generations to seek fortune in a foreign region. Within this cycle, narrative and social practice are closely connected and mutually reinforcing, as will become further evident in subsequent sections.

## **Experience of Merantau**

IWATAR (the Association of the People of Atar) is more about ties among migrants (perantau) coming from a common region, which is Atar. It is a forum for gathering, a forum to meet, to get to know each other's condition, a forum for mutual help and for the exchange of news and information, only that.

The city of Yogyakarta is one of the main merantau destinations for the people of Atar. In Yogyakarta's wider diasporic community, Atar migrants experience a stronger sense of overall Minangkabau identity, yet the nagari-level remains the most important peer group, with almost all Minangkabau associations in Yogyakarta referring to a specific geographical region of West Sumatra. For perantau from Atar, IWATAR (Ikatan Warga Atar), the Atar People's Association is the defining group for community-building as well as business and social matters. The association covers nearly all everyday needs, provides basic health insurance, and they finance charitable projects in their nagari for a minor monthly fee. More importantly, it offers a strong social network. As Rahmat's quote above indicates, perantau conceive IWATAR as a forum for mutual help, exchange of ideas, news and information, and thus a space to share stories. This consolidates social integration and promotes prosperity. The close socio-economic ties among Atar people is evident in the fact that 86 percent of perantau work in the same industry, the photocopy business. A short history of merantau from Atar along Rahmat's merantau-experience can shed light on the cycle leading to such a specialization in merantau economy.

In the 1960s, one individual from Atar started a photocopy business in the city of Bandung in West Java, after resigning from military service. Soon he obtained help from a brother, who – after earning some seed money – opened his own shop with the former boss' support. This process continued, and today every household or clan in Atar has more descendants living in rantau communities than actually living in Atar itself. Rahmat was one of the first perantau to settle in Yogyakarta. Previously he too worked in Bandung, at a cousin's photocopy shop.

In Bandung the seniors who left the village first were present, that is the reason why I went there and got a job in the enterprise of an elder cousin. Then a friend asked me to open a photocopy shop in Semarang for him, his name is Yuda, I still call him my boss in Bandung. He is very successful. We had a simple and informal agreement, that I commit to work honestly for him and when the time has come, he will help me to start my own enterprise.

And even though I could never demand the agreement to be fulfilled, he would help me to get my own place for a photocopy shop.

The subtext of this story is that soon after arriving in Bandung, Rahmat was searching for an “induk semang,” a patron, someone who is not necessarily family and has a central and high position in the field of interest.

When you come to the rantau first search for an induk semang. Do not rely too much on your siblings, because an induk semang can help you to become a successful entrepreneur while siblings not necessarily do so.

Therefore, he became operator for Yuda (Minangkabau himself) whom he still calls boss, even after his own success. Yuda (his patron) gave him his first loan to rent a shop in Semarang and another loan when he decided to move to Yogyakarta with Yuda’s brother. In Yogyakarta they were the first people from Atar to open a photocopy shop. The shop in Semarang he gave to his younger brother, which displays that kinship also plays an important – though perhaps not defining – role in the merantau social networks.

Nowadays Rahmat is well off. He has helped four former operators in his shop to open their own business. Two of them are cousins from his wife, one is his nephew (son of older brother) and one is from Java. Furthermore, he helped three of his four brothers to become entrepreneurs themselves. In this manner, the perantau from Atar developed a strong business network in many cities in Java; indeed, the people from Atar dominate the photocopy business in Bandung, Yogyakarta, Semarang, Pangandaran and other minor cities. Much of their success relies on traditional concepts of mutual help and formations of cooperation, such as their institutionalized weekly arisan meetings. Arisan is a type of a rotating savings and credit association, which allows participants to receive a big amount of investment money at once. These arisan meetings have several levels of meaning. Arisan is central for the merantau community, serving as an important economic space, while also fulfilling social functions and cultural denotations. Practices like arisan amongst the Atar diaspora strengthen the perantau community’s sense of shared identity, community and support network, while also assisting them to pursue their individual goals.

Like Rahmat and his fellow perantau from Atar, Alif’s merantau experience in Negara 5 Menara is a challenging yet rewarding one, in which he develops important social networks for his future success. As is often the case in stories of migration, Alif becomes simultaneously more aware of his Minangkabau identity (“for the first time, I shook hands with a non-Minangkabau person” (p. 94)), as well as developing further layers of social identification: as Indonesian, as a modern global citizen, and as part of the global Islamic ummah. Alif bonds with five close friends at Pondok Madani: Dulmajid (from Madura), Raja Lubis (from North Sumatra), Basosalahudin (from Sulawesi), Atang Yunus (from West Java), and Said Jufri (East Java). They all have different dreams and ambitions for their respective future merantau. Raja dreams of travelling to Europe, Baso and Atang hope to study in the Middle East, while Said and Dulmajid base their futures within Indonesia. They gather beneath the tower of the mosque and gaze at the clouds, each seeing the image of their most desired merantau destinations. Again, here merantau is something broader than Minangkabau, something applicable to all Indonesians. The “multicultural” group of friends in many ways symbolizes a modern national identity, while still conforming to stereotypical local features. As Alif and his friends develop and grow together throughout the novel, Pondok Madani becomes a

microcosm of the nation, uniting and bringing out the best in Indonesia's different ethnic groups. The school also comes to symbolize a fusion of "Islamic" and "Western" modernities, of how best to combine these different influences. The boys' intellectual journey is characterized by a high variety of different scholarly traditions:

Beneath the shadow of the tower, we would discuss our dreams... we would plan our future good deeds, we would discuss the work of Rumi... speculate about the shape of Trafalgar Square, try to understand the advice of Plato, and admire the stories of Tariq bin Ziyad (p. 94).

The inclusion of famous Islamic poet and philosopher Rumi in the same sentence as ancient Greek philosopher Plato is emblematic of the school's approaches to knowledge: drawing on the most positive elements of different "traditions" in pursuit of material, spiritual and intellectual success.

The Arabic phrase "man jadda wajada" ("siapa yang bersungguh-sungguh akan berhasil" (Ind.); "whoever applies themselves earnestly will succeed" (Eng.)), is repeated regularly throughout the story and is a key lesson that Alif and his friends take away from their time at Pondok Madani. This lesson is brought to them by their beloved teacher Ustad Salman, who presents in his classes a compelling fusion of Islamic spiritual development and neoliberal individualist ideologies. That is, although delivered in the context of religious education, the language Salman uses and the sentiments he expresses are typical of neoliberalism, understood broadly, as a malleable technology of governing and self-governing aimed at optimization of people and resources, which has been influential across a range of different global contexts (Ong 2006). "What makes a successful person different to an ordinary person?" Ustad Salman asks his class, before explaining that the secret is "going the extra miles" (p. 106). He urges them to go above and beyond the efforts of "ordinary" people, and not to allow others to interfere with their pursuit of success: "it is YOU who have the ultimate control over yourself, so never give up that authority to someone else" (p. 106). This kind of individualistic motivational discourse, which features much more strongly in Alif's story than Rahmat's, is part of a distinct trend in contemporary Indonesia, and we will return to this topic towards the end of this paper.

Under the "inspirational guidance" of his teachers, Alif develops even greater ambition to merantau further afield; he dreams of studying in the US and becoming an international reporter. Occasionally there is tension evident between the desire for material and spiritual "success". For instance, when Atang, Baso and Alif are offered money for a speech contest, they are "surprised and unprepared for the offering. The mandate and message that Pondok Madani had given us was that we should do things with sincerity (ikhlas), without the expectation of accolades and rewards" (pp. 220-21). Yet despite these tensions, Fuadi's novel ultimately presents an apparently seamless fusion of different "modernities" (both religious and secular), and of different types of "success". Pesantren leader Kiai Rais personifies this synthesis, appearing variously as a devout preacher in "long white tunic, a Haji cap and a turban cloth slung over his shoulder," a motivational speaker in "a crisp white shirt, tie, black pants, shiny shoes," and even a soccer star in a bright "Maradona" jersey (p. 165-6). The Pondok Madani experience teaches Alif that it is possible to simultaneously occupy these seemingly different worlds: to be a pious Muslim, to be a materially successful global jet-setter, to play football and read the Quran, to enjoy eating both West Sumatran rendang and Middle Eastern kofta. Ultimately, Fuadi's novel portrays merantau as a physical, mental, and

spiritual journey. It is not just the act of travelling far from home that constitutes the central character's mobility, but rather how coming into contact with different knowledges and traditions allows him to draw on their best aspects and fuse them together on the road to achieving his dreams.

Here, there are significant divergences between our two accounts of merantau experience, divergences that, as we will explain below, relate to both the form and intended audience of these merantau stories. Fuadi's *Negeri 5 Menara* emphasizes the importance of cosmopolitan ideas, the wider Islamic ummah, Indonesian nationalism, and global modernities as key identity markers fostered during Alif's experience of merantau, while Minangkabau identity does not play a large role. In contrast, the Atar people strongly develop their "Minang-ness" or "Atar-ness" during merantau, as they face the daily realities of life in a diasporic community. Social networks (IWATAR, arisan) are crucial for their success and these networks rely on origin. Although the Atar diaspora in Yogyakarta do indeed experience and appreciate the multicultural setting of the city (which strengthens their sense of being part of the Indonesian nation), their primary support network remains fellow Minangkabau people. Similarly, religion (Islam) plays an important but ambivalent role in the social identities of the Atar diaspora, but certainly not in the same way that Alif's pesantren life is structured by Islam in Fuadi's novel. There is evidently a strong connection between the available support network, and the way that certain social identities are prioritized in accounts of merantau. For example, Rahmat's involvement with IWATAR means that many aspects of his financial and social wellbeing are closely tied to his identity as a Minangkabau entrepreneur from Atar. Alif, on the other hand, develops a stronger sense of Indonesian and Islamic identity because his support networks are primarily his multiethnic group of friends (representing Indonesia), and the wider pesantren structures (representing Islam). In addition, in keeping with his self-characterization as a modern, global, cosmopolitan citizen of the world, Alif's story comes across as a far more individualistic one than Rahmat's merantau experience.

Importantly here, the form and intended audience of these two merantau tales impacts heavily upon the way each experience is presented. Novels and films in Indonesia frequently display a highly didactic approach to questions of national identity, whereas everyday conversations can display more ambivalence about such topics. Fuadi's novel is based on his own experiences, yet it clearly conforms to standard tropes of official nationalism, with its idealization of "unity in diversity" (*bhineka tunggal ika*) represented by Alif's group of five friends, and its representation of religious piety and modern global lifestyles as compatible goals for trendy young Indonesian Muslims. Given the intended nation-wide audience of young urban consumers, there is a range of both official and unofficial mechanisms in place to ensure that popular novels or films reinforce such tropes. Rahmat's merantau story, meanwhile, is recounted in person to the figure of the anthropologist, and as such is subject to a very different range of parameters. In this context, there is arguably less impetus for him to include idealized representations of nation and religion, and as such, the anthropological account of the lived experience of merantau can allow for a greater degree of nuance. Yet of course, the genre of anthropology itself also plays a role in shaping the kind of story being recounted, which is an important consideration when reflecting on the different but complementary kinds of knowledge that can be shared in transdisciplinary work such as this.

## After Merantau

In this section, we examine the repercussions of merantau for Minangkabau society back in West Sumatra. After many years, Rahmat became a successful entrepreneur owning three photocopy branches and helping many others to establish themselves in the industry throughout Java. One of the first things he did with his own business profits was buy a car.

Yes, the photocopy machines were already new, we had already customers. Yes, like that [...] I was saving money until I could buy a car Alhamdulillah. I bought an Avanza [Toyota] back then. I paid in cash. Cash, more than 100 million. After that, I could return to Padang [stands generally for West Sumatra or homeland, home village] with my wife and my children, taking the car.

He did not buy the car before making the initial investments for his business like new machines and being sure to have a sufficient stock of customers. That he was paying with saved cash money underlines on the one hand his often conservative subsistence business strategy, while on the other hand it indicates the difficulties to get an official loan. Most interesting for our discussion here, is the role of material objects, like the car, in contributing to status, social capital, and the overall mystique of merantau stories. When asked about the reaction of the people in Atar when he returned with his own car, Rahmat explained:

Well their reaction, my family was happy to see us. To see that we are happy, we got more attention. More attention that's it, after that we returned, returned to Yogya[karta], I sold my car again. [...] because there was no need any more, we still needed many other things, I took the money for other purposes, I took it for the expansion of my business.

Given that he immediately sold the car after returning to Yogyakarta, it appears that he bought it primarily to boast and to please family in Atar. The car becomes a materialized symbol of his success in the “merantau world”, proving social distinction amongst his village community. He describes in the passage above how he got more attention due to the car, and from many other observations in the village, it was clear that the people rate the perantau among other things by their car. Not without pride, they tell about traffic jams worse than in Jakarta when the perantau come home for the festivities at the end of Ramadan. Back in Yogyakarta, the car becomes less necessary and he prefers to put the capital into business development. Today he can afford to have a car constantly, one which – and that is of great importance for him – is the second costliest among the perantau from Atar in Yogyakarta.

Another strategy for status improvement are development projects in the village. Rahmat feels responsible for the people in Atar and he cleverly combines the common good and private gain through his projects. For example, in building a new road, local workers are paid and some farmers get better access to their fields, while Rahmat gets a road to the surau of his clan, not to speak of the prestige and the patronage position over the ones who work for him.

Yes, because when I go home it is not just to mess around. We wish to change the way of their thinking, firstly, secondly we want change the physical state. In our region, in my village especially in my neighborhood, I have to make something every year to change the physical [infrastructure]. Be it the road to the surau, the prayer house, small public spaces. Places with a bigger scope are the affair of the government. But those with a local scope are managed in self-help [swadaya].

He feels responsible to step in where the state is lacking in improving the infrastructure by referring to the concept of *swadaya* (self-reliant, non-governmental). Furthermore, he has an obvious agenda to change the villagers' "mindset" or "way of thinking," often in regard to their work ethic. Thus, like many *perantau* he has a patronizing relationship with the "simple" people in the village.

However, Rahmat wants to retire in the village. He sees himself as a role model for the people in the village and likes to imagine himself as a wise, respected, pious old man, from whom everyone will seek advice.

When we maybe already get closer to our creator. We are not supposed to buy clothes like Jeans anymore, we might not style our hair like this anymore. So when we finally get weaker, nah in this moment I tend to live in the village. Why? Because in the village the people need people like us. Nah personalities which are already old, who are experienced, have knowledge, that is how it is in the village, that is what the people need. Here [in the rantau] when our children come of age while we get old, they will have a different approach to earn money. They make a living having been schooled, I tried it without any knowledge [ilmu]. Consequently there will be fighting, "father do this like that, I got that right myself".

Besides longing for the recognition and status he expects to get in the village, he is worried about future conflicts with his children when they take over the business. Rahmat's notion of what an old respected man has to wear and how he should style his hair illustrates how he imagines seniority in the village, a position he characterizes as far removed from the "modern lifestyle" of the *merantau* world. Generally, Rahmat is of the mind that the *perantau* are role models for the village people but he is also aware of the changes that *merantau* practices have brought to village society and he criticizes the decline in mutual help and solidarity.

In former times, when I was a child, the sense of kinship, of mutual help [*gotong royong*] was still strong. Still good. Today it is rather declining. [...] Firstly, they are already influenced from, most of them have *merantau* children. Most of them have been already to the city. When they come home to Padang, eh to the village they sometimes have changed their appearance, sometimes their economic status is changed because their children are successful. Because essentially everyone is already successful. When we wanted to work in the former days, when we planned to harvest everyone was helping. Mutual help [*gotong royong*], today most of them would pay someone for the work.

This quote shows some ambivalence regarding the effect of *perantau* on the village society. Suddenly *perantau* are not role models anymore but those who brought change and with it declining village solidarity and disappearing traditions of mutual help. Rahmat reverses this argument in the further discussion though, saying that his lesson from *merantau* is the importance of mutual help and that it is his main goal to bring back the social cohesion from the past. Rahmat has a strong sense of mission. He gives motivational speeches at the school encouraging children to *merantau* and seek knowledge. Furthermore, he was central in plans to build a photocopy monument in the village. This costly and vast monument of a photocopy machine symbolizes the success of the people who left, a materialization of their *merantau* story and a legacy of the *merantau* generation.

In Negeri 5 Menara, Alif's story is also a successful and inspiring one. Alif narrates the entire story looking back from a future life as an international journalist, flying from Washington

to London, owning all the latest gadgets, and participating in a decidedly global modern lifestyle. He writes “my office is just a stone’s throw away from The Capitol, only a few dozen minutes by car from George Bush’s office at the White House” (p. 2). The implications are clear: despite his humble beginnings in a small rural village in West Sumatra, Alif’s merantau has taken him right to the epicenters of global power. In his descriptions of Alif’s future success, Fuadi includes symbolic trappings of modern consumer life:

I put my camera, digital recorder, and ticket into my faded green National Geographic backpack. All ready... I put on a knee length black coat and wrap a dark brown cashmere scarf around my neck. Okay, all sorted. I fold down the screen of my shiny silver Apple PowerBook (p. 2).

While the faded backpack suggests that Alif retains frugal habits from his pesantren days, it also highlights how mobile and well travelled he has been. His cashmere scarf and high-end laptop computer represent the material success of his life, in much the same way as perantau returning to Atar sport designer jeans and new smartphones. Yet Fuadi is keen to stress that despite his material success in the “Western” world, Alif also maintains strong links with the global Islamic ummah, evident in the dual purposes he cites for his trip to London:

My job as a reporter is to go to London for an interview with Tony Blair, and I also have a private mission to attend The World Interfaith Forum... I’ve been invited as a panelist... an Indonesian journalist working in the US and providing full coverage of Muslim issues in America, including the 11 September 2001 attacks (p. 3).

Later Alif discovers his former classmate and close friend Atang is to attend the same forum, representing Al Azhar University in Egypt, and discussing the role of Malay Muslims in Arab nations. While in London, they also meet with Raja, who has completed a law degree, is running activities for the Indonesian Muslim diasporic community at the local mosque, and taking evening classes in linguistics at London Metropolitan University. Their meeting in London exemplifies the global cosmopolitan identity these young Indonesians developed during their education merantau at Pondok Madani. We are offered a picture of an idealized modern global citizenship where local identity (e.g. Minangkabau), national identity (Indonesia) and religious identity (Islam) all remain important parts of a seamless whole.

At the same time, there is a hierarchy between these different layers of identity. Local and national identities, while cherished, are also portrayed as constraining and holding back the potential of bright young students like Alif. There is a sense that he has achieved success despite his humble origins in West Sumatra. Similarly, although the story is overtly nationalist, in some ways “Indonesia” appears less prestigious than other identity markers; this is exemplified by the ban on speaking Indonesian language at Pondok Madani, with its implication that English and Arabic, as “the two keys to the windows of the world” provide a more important route to success. In addition, Alif’s Minang-ness and Indonesian-ness are depicted as natural organic identities that “just happen”, as opposed to the more challenging work of mastering global identities through English and Arabic. Thus, Fuadi’s focus here seems to be how a merantau journey can build on and develop additional layers over and above an essentialized, pre-existing identity.

The merantau experience, while challenging, frequently results in a sense of superiority over those with less mobility. In the same way that the Atar perantau community in Yogyakarta look down on their home villages back in West Sumatra as needing to be “developed”, Alif

and his friends also display a paternalistic attitude towards their homelands, and to Indonesia in general. For example, Dulmajid is from a poor salt-farming family in Sumenep, Madura, and Alif explains that after his friend graduates, “he wants to return home and emancipate his village from backwardness by establishing a school” (p. 243). When Raja, Atang and Alif meet in London, they discuss Indonesia in a similar manner. “My country is my paradise, and when the time is right, we must return and bring our knowledge home, to advance and develop our nation,” says Atang, and the others agree (p. 405). Such sentiment is familiar in contemporary Indonesia, where nationalism is often deeply linked to an ongoing and deeply entrenched developmentalist outlook. This “developmentalism” is a legacy of Dutch colonial discourses, and in more recent history, the New Order regime’s ideological cornerstones of “modernization” and “development” at all costs (*pembangunan*). We will return to the important intersections between merantau stories of self-development and wider socio-political discourses of developmentalism in the closing sections of this paper.

As is evident from Rahmat’s story, an obligation to give back to the community is something many perantau experience. In the case of *Negeri 5 Menara*, the role of Ahmad Fuadi the author is important here, as beyond the text – like many returned perantau – Fuadi performs a story of “success”. He travels around Indonesia delivering “motivational lectures” and fulfils his social responsibility to give back to the community through “Komunitas Menara”, a foundation promoting and supporting education initiatives for disadvantaged students. Ahmad Fuadi’s real life story and public persona constitute a significant part of this textual narrative of merantau, for a text can never exist in isolation from the context of distribution and consumption, and the stories told around it. The novel’s reception is another vital aspect of this lived text. Fuadi’s novel has earned high praise from public figures, including former president B.J. Habibie, who applauds it as a tale “full of motivation, talent, passion, and optimism to become more advanced and never give up.” Habibie characterizes the novel as “not simply a work of art,” but “a very valuable lesson... about the role of education and acculturation in nurturing powerful human resources” (cited in *Negeri 5 Menara*). The Governor of West Sumatra, Gamawan Fauzi also extols the novel’s virtues:

Reading this book is like witnessing a return of the great Minang writers of the past. But this time, the scope is much broader, with wider global nuances not just limited to the archipelago or to Minangkabau cultural traditions... [But] no matter how widely these young people roam and how fully they enter modern civilisation, they can never completely shake off their cultural roots. This is a new kind of lifestyle and a new model for Minang youth literature today, which is different to the past when the Rantau was still limited to local territories. I hope this novel will become a key text in the study of modern literature in our homeland (cited in *Negeri 5 Menara*).

As a West Sumatran himself, Governor Gamawan Fauzi is directly engaging with the merantau theme of this novel, and identifying the shifting definitions of merantau at work in Indonesia today; that is, merantau does not only entail domestic economic entrepreneurship, but also encompasses journeys in pursuit of education, as well as overseas travel to ever more distant lands. While other public figures do not address the theme of Minangkabau merantau quite so specifically, they unanimously praise the inspirational potential of this novel and its subsequent film adaptation, and express hope that readers and audiences will be encouraged to pursue the kind of social mobility and success depicted in the story. Alif’s tale of mobility has indeed gained a huge following among young consumers

throughout the country, well beyond West Sumatra, particularly since the release of a film version in 2011. Public reception of *Negeri 5 Menara* highlights the central role that popular texts can have in imagining and constructing idealized identities, particularly among young urban Indonesians. As is the case with the stories of returned perantau in Nagari Atar, the tales that are told around a particular experience of migration form part of a powerful cycle, encouraging future perantau to pursue similar goals.

In considering the “afterwards” of merantau, it is clear there are a number of similar discourses at work in the two cases. The main goal of both protagonists, Alif and Rahmat, is the performance of their successful merantau story. Their success is displayed at different levels, aiming to represent social prestige, influence, power, piety and advantage. Although Rahmat faced difficulties early in his merantau journey, he bought a car for the visit home, just to accomplish the performance of a successful merantau, before selling it upon his return to Yogyakarta. The car is a status symbol, a marker of success and participation in a “modern lifestyle,” just like Rahmat’s designer jeans and trendy hairstyle, or Alif’s laptop, camera, and cashmere scarf. Power plays a crucial but disguised role for both protagonists. Alif works in Washington, the center of “Western” power, his friends study in Egypt at Al Azhar University (one of the most prestigious Universities in the Islamic world) and London. This alone gives them authority. Rahmat is seeking authority as well and has achieved a central (patronage) position in the diaspora community in Yogyakarta. He runs community activities, lends money, rents photocopy machines, and initiates development projects in Atar. His authority, like Alif’s, is based on experience and success in merantau. This success is strongly connected to symbols of a “modern lifestyle” which in the Indonesian (and particularly Minangkabau) case explicitly includes Islamic notions. Merantau ultimately empowers them to patronize others, especially those who lack the experience of a merantau journey. This patronage is framed as a strong wish to give something back to the community. Of course, community has different meanings in the two cases, as Rahmat basically addresses the people from Atar, while Alif’s story has a broader audience on a national scale. The spaces that their respective stories circulate within reflects where they hope to build social status: while the author of the book is building status at a national level, status for the perantau from Atar is based in Atar, even though they are living in Yogyakarta. Yet despite these differences in scale, both Rahmat and Alif seek to justify their personal success in terms of legitimizing it as a gain for community welfare. Personal ambition is portrayed as a collectivistic agenda to promote “success” in others. In a striking parallel with Fuadi’s lecture programs, while in Atar, Rahmat delivers motivational speeches at the local school, depicting him and his merantau journey as a role model. There is an enthusiastic audience for success stories like Rahmat’s and Alif’s, and discursive spaces such as the “motivational lecture” promote the continued circulation of an idealized merantau narrative.

## **Personal development, community development**

Unlike previous studies of Minangkabau merantau practices, our study reveals that notions of developing the self and developing the community are a prominent theme in the stories told around merantau. Tropes of civilization (“covering the exposed body”) and independence (“swadaya”) feature heavily in these stories, and these tales of individual development are then embedded within broader discourses of social responsibility and “giving back” to the community or the nation. The notions of advice giving, motivation, self-help, and personal development that arise in both Alif and Rahmat’s cases are worth further

investigation, as they tie in with broader trends in the contemporary Indonesian mediascape. In most Indonesian bookstores today, large and prominent spaces are devoted to self-help literature. This section has grown steadily over the past decade, and offers guides on a wide range of topics, from the benefits of “positive thought” to how to become a “Muslim Millionaire” by “Mastering Love and Wealth in 365 Days”. Alongside this written material, the Indonesian mediascape has also witnessed a huge boom in motivational seminars (both live and broadcast on television) focusing on self-development and often combined with religious elements (See Muzakki 2007; Fealy & White 2008; Rudnyckyj 2009; Schmidt 2014). In Indonesia’s businesses world, professional development programs have grown exponentially, as illustrated in Rudnyckyj’s study of the widely implemented “ESQ” (Emotional and Spiritual Quotient Training) program, which – like Alif’s beloved Ustad Salman – draws on a mix of business leadership training, Islamic teachings and popular psychology in an attempt to create a more disciplined, less corrupt company employee. The Indonesia-wide “self-development” (pengembangan diri) trend, with its normative prescriptions for achieving an ideal “self”, offers a rich entry point into understanding societal aspirations and everyday identity politics in contemporary Indonesia. Our cases, which examine the significant role of personal development discourses in merantau stories, contribute to emerging scholarly research into the kinds of “self” being idealized in such development processes; a self that can successfully participate in modern lifestyles while also balancing a commitment to religious faith and local communities.

The social responsibility of the successful perantau self to “give back” to their village and nation is also worthwhile examining in more detail. Earlier, we described the somewhat paternalistic attitude that Alif and his friends, as well as Rahmat and the returned perantau, display towards their homelands. While on the one hand, their merantau stories are “success stories” about upwardly mobile individuals from humble roots entering the world of domestic entrepreneurship or global education; on the other hand, they reveal the persistence of powerful neoliberal developmentalist ideologies (Ong 2006). Paternalistic attitudes towards isolated regions and disadvantaged communities are not limited to our two cases. Throughout contemporary Indonesia, there is a widespread sense that less mobile members of the community are automatically in need of “development”. Attempts to alleviate “backwardness” through popular social programs like “Indonesia Mengajar” (Indonesia Teaches) – which sends highly educated young urban teachers on work placements to remote areas in an attempt to “inspire” and “advance” local students – often reinforce deeply entrenched assumptions around development. These assumptions are legacies of colonial ideologies of progress and contemporary neoliberal developmentalist logics, where poverty and inequality are not the responsibility of the state but natural facts resulting from insufficient “modernization” or integration into global capitalist circuits of production. Such assumptions were a cornerstone of the New Order regime’s 30-year developmentalist agenda. Strikingly similar discourses of developmentalism and modernization persist into the post-reform era, with only minor modifications.

In a related study on the relationship between “optimism” and “education,” Gellert (2015) has argued that contemporary ideologies of development in Indonesia favour “topdown stability” and individualism rather than collectives as the best path to address problems facing Indonesia. In many ways, popular narratives like *Negeri 5 Menara*, and the stories told by returned perantau, with their emphasis on *swadaya* (self-sufficiency), function as part of this ideology of development, where hope for the future rests solely on the individualist

efforts of upwardly mobile Indonesians like Alif or Rahmat to achieve global or domestic success and then use such success to inspire and advance those who have been left behind. And while this kind of story may be inspirational, it can also suppress analysis of real structural inequalities in marginalized parts of Indonesia. In other words, representations of poverty as a natural fact, but one which can be easily overcome through individual effort, diverts attention from widespread negative consequences of, for instance, widening income gaps between rich and poor, towards vague notions of the power of positive thought, therefore suppressing any relevant political and social action that might lead to material changes in these conditions. In the majority of inspirational success stories that circulate in contemporary Indonesia, poverty and inequality are lamentable, but can ultimately be overcome if one is sufficiently “motivated.” Failure, therefore, often lies solely at the feet of the individual. As such, unspoken stories of failed merantau become a silent and somewhat shameful underside to the highly normalized tropes of success that we have presented through Alif and Rahmat’s stories.

Ultimately, merantau, both as a practice and an abstract idea, continues to play an important role in contemporary Minangkabau and Indonesian identities. As we have made clear in the preceding sections, although very different in scale and scope, strikingly similar themes are apparent between our two case studies. A circular merantau narrative emerges: young men are motivated to seek success; they experience certain elements of a “modern lifestyle”; and then the stories and actions of returned migrants motivate new perantau to embark upon similar journeys. Individual stories, such as Rahmat’s life history or Ahmad Fuadi’s novel, become embedded in larger social imaginings about ideal modern lifestyles. The Minangkabau modernities imagined in both cases are characterized by a cosmopolitan widening of worldviews, and increased consumption of material goods. Yet at the same time, these stories advocate a balance between cosmopolitan consumer lifestyles and more “traditional” ideologies. Rahmat, for example, warns against declining levels of village solidarity and aims to revive practices of mutual help in his home village. Meanwhile, Fuadi’s novel promotes a fusion of “Islamic” and “Western” modernities as the best way to deal with challenges of living in a rapidly changing society. Merantau stories can thus help both narrators and audiences craft and maintain a multi-layered modern identity: as Minangkabau, as Indonesian, as part of the Islamic ummah, and as part of a global capitalist system. Moreover, as we explained above, the stories told around merantau experiences can also shed light on changing notions of social mobility in Indonesia today, with links to broader socio-political discourses of motivation, self-help, developmentalism, and social responsibility, discourses, which are not necessarily as empowering as they may first appear.

In bringing our two cases, approaches and disciplines into dialogue, we have offered a broader methodological and theoretical framework for scholarly work on rapidly changing regions like Indonesia. Changes in communications technology means that stories can circulate with greater speed and scale than ever, requiring new approaches and perspectives. A combination of ethnographic fieldwork and close textual analysis has allowed for deeper insights into complex contestations around social identities in contemporary Indonesia, insights that cut across many traditional divides in Indonesian studies between rural and urban case studies, as well as between different socio-economic sectors of society. The kinds of knowledge produced by each case study are different, but also complementary, and we hope that this paper can serve as an example of the productive work that can be done at the intersections of area studies, cultural studies and anthropology. Ultimately, this joint project

has embraced this nexus of different approaches to offer insights into the role of modern merantau stories and their broader significance for the social identities of Minangkabau people, as well as other Indonesians, in a rapidly transforming and increasingly mobile Indonesia.

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