

# SURAU WITHOUT BUYA: Authority and the Shifting Foundations of Minangkabau Cultural Life in Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This study examines the shifting role of the *surau* within Minangkabau society in West Sumatra, where it once functioned as a central institution for worship, learning, and the moral formation of young men. Traditionally anchored in the authority of the *buya*, the *surau* embodied a living synthesis of Islamic teaching and customary values. Drawing on field-based research, including in-depth interviews with religious scholars, customary leaders, and cultural experts, this study traces a significant transformation in its contemporary meaning. The findings suggest that the gradual detachment of the *surau* from the figure of the *buya* has eroded its philosophical and cultural significance, reducing it to a largely symbolic or physical space. This shift is closely linked to the diversification of Islamic educational orientations and the growing influence of local political dynamics. As a result, the *surau* no longer operates as a formative cultural institution, raising broader questions about continuity, authority, and identity in Minangkabau society.

**Keywords:** *Buya*, Islam, Minangkabau, *Surau*, Southeast Asian studies.

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## Introduction

As an ethnic group with the largest matrilineal society in the world, Minangkabau of West Sumatra, Indonesia has several unique aspects.<sup>1</sup> One of its uniqueness is the presence of *surau* (traditional mosque) as a cultural landmark containing rich customary philosophy. The customary philosophical content can physically be found in the presence of *surau*, which is inseparable from Minangkabau's traditional house (*Rumah gadang*—big house).

*Rumah gadang* is a special residence for a clan in Minangkabau where women live in and they are led by a *Bundo Kanduang*. Meanwhile, boys are customarily required to sleep in *surau*. Hence, *rumah gadang* was indeed designed not to have room for boys. That is why, the *surau* is not too far removed from *rumah gadang* because *surau* is an inseparable cultural entity of *rumah gadang* as the cluster of Minangkabau's traditional cultural center.<sup>2</sup>

In the past, *surau* functioned as the center of religious activities for Minangkabau boys. A male Minangkabau child who is on his way to becoming an adult (*'âqil bâligh*, around the age of 7 years old) is obligated to sleep and learn religion in the *surau*. This is meant to educate Minangkabau boys to live independently outside the home. In the *surau* boys of the same clan gather to learn about Islam, Minangkabau customs and philosophy, and *silat* for self-defense. Since a very young age, Minangkabau boys forge their character in the *surau* until they are adults, when they would then be asked to leave their hometown to wander (*merantau*) on a journey.<sup>3</sup>

There are at least 25 *surau* scattered throughout West Sumatera and they were built in between the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, some of these *surau* have undergone physical renovations and been converted into a *masjid* or *madrasah*. While the rest remain as a *surau* building structure.<sup>4</sup>

In this perspective, although it retains a similar function as a place of worship, the anthropological understanding of mosque differs to that of *surau*. A mosque is a religious landmark whereas *surau* is a cultural one. As a cultural landmark, *surau* does not only serve as a place of worship but also as a cultural institution for preserving and maintaining Minangkabau's customary philosophy that is passed down from one generation to the next.<sup>5</sup>

Minangkabau's customary philosophy is found in values of wisdom embodied within numerous Minangkabau expressions called *petatah petiti* (proverbs), assorted customary practices or various structural landmarks containing symbolic messages of virtue. As a branch of philosophy, the study of value (axiology) has been carried out since the ancient Greek period by philosophers like Plato regarding beauty, virtue, wisdom, and justice.<sup>6</sup> In the Minangkabau context, understanding customary values is crucial as all social relations in Minangkabau are arranged by or based upon values contained within existing customs.

Nonetheless, according to Munir et al.<sup>7</sup> many arguments have been raised regarding the issue of what the most dominant determining factor of values is. According to Frondizi<sup>8</sup> and Bahm,<sup>9</sup> the idea on the nature of value is highly complex because it involves the fact that there are many different kinds of value and that more confusion about value has been caused by wrong ideas.

Given the aforementioned background, this study is aimed at describing how the philosophical value of Minangkabau custom in the past was produced and distributed from one generation to the next via the *surau*. Accordingly, the study focused on the existence of *surau* as a cultural landmark of Minangkabau and a locus where Minangkabau customary values were produced and distributed from one generation to the next. For that reason, the focus of this study is unlike that of previous research that largely examined *surau* through the perspectives of education or architecture.<sup>10</sup>

## Method

This qualitative study with a field research approach was conducted in order to obtain accurate, contextual, and in-depth data directly from primary sources. Additionally, by conducting field research, we were able to experience the *surau*'s past natural atmosphere by observing the local community setting. Primary data were collected from three key informants through in-depth interviews. The key informants are Buya Gusrizal Gazahar, (General Chair of the Indonesian Ulama Council of West Sumatera, a prominent ulama, a Minangkabau customary leader and caretaker of a *surau* in Bukit Tinggi); Yulizal Yunus (Chairperson of the Minangkabau *Kerapatan* Customary Institution); and Duski Samad (Chairperson of the Indonesian Mosque Council of West Sumatera). Additionally, research data were also collected by observing activities in the Titian Surau, Payakumbuh.

The interviews were done individually in February of 2023 in Padang Municipality and Bukit Tinggi Municipality, in West Sumatra Province. The interviews began by raising several general questions, which are most qualitative in nature, to gain an understanding of *surau* according to their perspectives. For instance, what is your understanding of *surau* in Minangkabau culture? Some of the subsequent questions were specifically designed to understand *surau* as Minangkabau's customary philosophical landmark, such as what Minangkabau customary philosophy is embodied in *surau*? Subsequently, the interviews raised essential questions such as what caused *surau* in West Sumatra to lose its essence as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy?

The raw data gathered from the informants were accordingly processed to identify various relations existing within the collected information. These relations were then categorized conceptually to generate themes that are presented as research novelty. The data presentation process by way of thematic categorization was tested for its validity against various relevant theories and literary studies. The entire data presentation is in the form of descriptions and interpretations aimed at addressing the research question formulated above.

## The Rise of *Surau* as a Landmark of Minangkabau Customary Philosophy

A landmark can be defined as a natural structure created naturally due to natural or social processes referring to a certain area such as a square or city park as public spaces or monuments and bridges in a city. However, landmarks can also be defined as residential buildings, meeting halls or human-made places of worship like churches in most European countries, temples in East Asia, or mosques in some Muslim regions.<sup>11</sup> Landmarks inform a specific meaning of a place or building in a particular location.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, having a good understanding of landmarks is essential as they contain assorted values of history, identity, and philosophy, which influence or are influenced by the surrounding culture.

As a cultural landmark that embodies Minangkabau's customary philosophy, *surau* can be understood by observing its historical presence in three different phases of history. The first phase is the pre-Islamic phase, the second phase is the period of introduction to Islam (*kaum tuo*—old generation), and the third phase is the period of renewal (*kaum mudo*—young generation). Each phase assigned *surau* with distinct functions according to the anthropological scope and period of the Minangkabau people at that particular period of time. Despite each of the phases having differing characteristics, the religiosity factor has been the underlying philosophical value of *surau*. This implies that in any given phase, *surau* has always been closely associated with the religiosity of the Minangkabau people.

First, *surau* during the pre-Islamic phase. In this period of time, *surau* as a building had already been recognized by Minangkabau traditional community before Islam was introduced to West Sumatra, even before it was introduced to the current Indonesian archipelago. According to Bowen,<sup>13</sup> during this phase, the physical structure of *surau* was a construction with hipped roof (*limas*) similar to the pyramid roof (*meru*) of Hindu temples. *Surau* during this phase functioned as a place for worshipping the gods by the pre-Islamic Minangkabau community at the time.

Second, *surau* during the initial introduction of Islam by Syekh Burhanuddin.<sup>14</sup> This was the early period of Islam's introduction and development in Ulakan, Pariaman, West Sumatra during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, wherein Islam was disseminated by Buya Burhanuddin who had just returned from Aceh to learn about Islam.<sup>15</sup> Syekh Burhanuddin was a key figure in the process of *surau*'s transformation into an Islamic place of worship and education institution.

The second phase is the most pivotal period marking the rise of *surau* as Minangkabau's customary philosophical landmark, because during the early period of this phase *surau* underwent a religious and cultural transformation. *Surau* that previously functioned as a holy place of worship for Hinduism and Buddhism had transformed into a place of worship for Islam. Subsequently, *surau* had developed into a venue for Islamic

education, particularly traditional Islamic mysticism<sup>16</sup> and Sufism.<sup>17</sup> According to Abdullah, it was recorded that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Buya Burhanuddin introduced *Tharîqah Syatthâriyah* to Minangkabau, which still thrives to this day.<sup>18</sup> During this phase, *surau* had turned into a socio-religious institution for spreading Islamic teachings in Minangkabau.

At this stage, *surau* was not only a place to learn about Islam, especially Sufism, but it had also become a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy because it had been an arena for transfer of noble Minangkabau values and customary philosophy from one generation to the next. According to Dib and Lukito and Iskandar, *surau* became a place for Minangkabau boys to learn about *Silek* (Minangkabau traditional art of self-defense), and place to exchange various Minangkabau philosophical values known as *petatah petiti*, which are proverbs recognized as ancient Malay literature. *Petatah petiti* contains advices, views, noble customary values, or guidance for virtuous life, along with guidelines for engaging in social relations.<sup>19</sup> The matrilineal culture that resulted in the custom of wandering for Minangkabau boys since they were little and the philosophical values contained in *petatah petiti* became an intersecting point laying the foundation for *surau* to be considered a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy.

As a landmark and in terms of physical structure, *surau* is a single symbolic unity along with *rumah gadang*, *rangkiang*, and *balai adat*, which are the three other vernacular buildings of Minangkabau. Vernacular buildings are authentic architecture present at a particular time or place and it is not of foreign origin.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, vernacular structures are symbolically full of local cultural and traditional philosophical contents since they are designed based on the local community's cultural and customary traditions and rules. *Rumah gadang* (big house) serves as a residence for one Minangkabau clan and only girls/women live in it. Meanwhile, boys are required to sleep in *surau*.<sup>21</sup> As for *rangkiang*, it is a vernacular building similar to *rumah gadang* but smaller in size, it is located in front of *rumah gadang* and functions as a granary.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Sinking of *Surau* Trilogy as an Arena for the Customary Education of Minangkabau Boys**

In *surau* children not only learn how to read and recite the Qur'an, they also learn *silek* (self-defense), speeches, oratorical skills, and other things. The philosophical function of *surau* is dubbed by Yulizal Yunus as the *surau* trilogy, referring to it as an arena of customary education for Minangkabau boys.

In *surau*, there is a trilogy of education, which are: first learning to recite the Qur'an or about Islam, particularly Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and *tauhîd*, this is main one. Second, teaching of Minangkabau customs starting from story of origin, ethnicity, Minangkabau historical literature, and customary norms as guidance and clothe for life. Third, learning self-defense or *silat*. These three are a single unity considered a trilogy.

As an education institution, *surau* has no classroom, no formal bureaucracy, and no curriculum. The learning methods employed in *surau* included practicing speech delivery, reading and memorizing using the *halaqah* model, which is a learning model in which students sit cross-legged around the instructor. The education materials taught in *surau* encompassed education on customs, literature, music, dance along with *petatah petitih* and silat self-defense.<sup>23</sup> Education pertaining to religion, customs and culture as well as self-defense given to Minangkabau boys was a single inseparable unity of *surau* trilogy. Accordingly, *surau* was an inseparable part of the collective memory of Minangkabau people as a whole.<sup>24</sup> In this process, *surau* transitioned into a cultural institution.

According to Buya Gusrizal Gazahar, initially, *surau* in Minangkabau was indeed a mere place of worship. But subsequently, in line with the habitual practice of the Prophet PBUH when he founded the Nabawi Mosque in Madinah, *surau* did not only develop as a means for worshipping, it also served as a social, economic, political, and cultural institution.

*Surau* is not merely a means, it is an institution. It is an institution that had developed socially and culturally although initially there might not have been a comprehensive conceptual understanding of *surau* as a cultural institution in Minangkabau.

Eventually, *surau* had become an institution that was passed on from one generation to the next as an Islamic traditional heritage in Minangkabau.<sup>25</sup> This process was done through the understanding of Nasr, i.e., continuous maintenance of Islamic tradition from one period to the next without being limited to a certain period.<sup>26</sup> *Surau* became an Islamic historical legacy where transmission of religious and customary experiences to Minangkabau boys occurred. Education of religion and customs in *surau* since a very young age is a single learning entity to transform the middle way of peace from the tension that occurred when religion (Islam) intersected with Minangkabau custom. It is meant to provide Minangkabau boys a good understanding of the foundation of Islamic faith as a basis for Minangkabau customary practices.

This perspective is a basic philosophy that regulates all cultural customary social relations in Minangkabau, manifested in the philosophy of *Adaik Basandi Syarak, Syarak Basandi Kitabullah* (ABS/SBK - customs based on sharia, sharia based on the Qur'an). ABS/SBK is the pinnacle of contact, clash, adjustment, and combination between Minangkabau customs that have existed since the time of the founding ancestors of Minangkabau and Islam, which came later. ABS/SBK served as Minangkabau's social consensus in the early period of Islam's introduction to West Sumatra.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime, *silat*, self-defense education, is provided to equip boys who were raised in a matrilineal culture, so that they are ready to go out of their hometown and wander out into the world once they have matured. According to M. Sayuti Datuk Rajo Penghulu as cited by Siregar et al., *silat* is one of the 10 basic skills that Minangkabau boys need to have before wandering out of their hometown.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, *silat* (also known as *silek*

Minangkabau) in Minangkabau culture is a local culture and bounded entity that is an integral part of Minangkabau's identity building.<sup>29</sup>

According to Yulizal Yunus, the *surau* trilogy as an arena for the customary education of boys in Minangkabau had different Gurus in charge. Unlike Yunus, Gazahar in fact argues that a *surau* in Minangkabau should have one *guru* who serves as a caretaker or leader known as *buya*. With such a position, a *buya* is a religious leader of the people in Minangkabau. However, a *buya* (as a religious leader) is also a person who should have a good understanding of customs. Accordingly, a *Buya* can also hold a position as a *Datuk*, a customary leader. Since a *buya* is also required to be a person of knowledge, in addition to being a *Datuk*, a *buya* is also a scholar.

Most *buya* are also *Datuk* who hold customary standing in their clan. To the people of Minangkabau, it is not right if there is an institution of *Tungku nan Tigo Sajarangan* or *Tali nan Tigo Sapilin* being symbolized only by an individual. Within each Minangkabau individual, there should be 3 cultural threads. Essentially, the thread of religion is held by *Buya*, the thread of custom is held by *Ninik Mamak* (customary elder based on matrilineal lineage-Researcher), the thread of government is held by scholars. Accordingly, the self of a *Buya*, leading the *surau*, should be knowledgeable about religious, customary tradition, and a scholar as well.

Gazahar perspective in the context of *surau* leadership as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy differs to various past perspectives. In the past, *Tungku nan Tigo Sajarangan* or *Tali nan Tigo Sapilin* have been used to describe leadership in Minangkabau community in terms of power distribution and decision making.<sup>30</sup> Although indicating a different function, *Tungku nan Tigo Sajarangan* or *Tali nan Tigo Sapilin* is one unitary system of leadership under the *Ninik Mamak* (custom), '*Ulamâ*' (religion), and Intellectuals (scholars/government). The *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*, *Tali Tigo Sapilin* system also serves as a philosophy in the leadership of the Minangkabau community.<sup>31</sup>

*Tungku nan Tigo Sajarangan* can be understood through a literal illustration of a container or pan sitting on top of three stones, while *Tali nan Tigo Sapilin* can be defined literally as three ropes tied into one. This expression was inspired from cooking activities in the Minangkabau culture. Traditionally speaking, the cooking utensils used by the Minangkabau community included three stones arranged in the shape of a triangle or delta sign as a strong and balanced base for placing a container or pan. The arrangement of these three stones is considered a hearth. Such description shows that cultural manifestation sourced from the customs of Minangkabau's ancestors can serve as Minangkabau's culture and customary philosophy.

### ***Buya* the Pillar of *Surau***

*Buya* is a religious actor who understands traditional custom and knowledgeable, and serves as the center or pillar of *surau*'s existence as a landmark of Minangkabau's

customary philosophy. Accordingly, the essence of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau's customary philosophy is personified in the figure of the *Buya* who looks after the *surau*. *Surau* and *Buya* is a single entity establishing the landmark of Minangkabau's customary philosophy. This understanding suggests that *surau* should have a *Buya*, and a *Buya* should also have a *surau*. This description is based on Gazahar's following opinion:

So, *surau* must have a *Buya*, and *Buya* must have a *surau*. That is why in the past there's this Minangkabau proverb "No *Surau* without *Buya* and no *Buya* without *surau*." So, if you want to know the source of a person's knowledge, you would ask, "*Dima Suraunyo?*" [Where is your *surau*?]. If they respond, "*Surau tepi sungai.*" [The *surau* by the river]. The follow up question would then be, "*Siapa Buya di Surau itu?*" [who is the *Buya* at that *surau*?]. *Surau* and *Buya* is an inseparable duality.

Subsequently, the current research found that the disappearance of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy shall be dependent upon the presence (or lack) of a *Buya* as the *surau* caretaker. This suggests that *surau* has lost its function as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy because it has been deserted by *Buya* as the pillar of *surau*'s existence. The key figure in *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy is the figure of *buya* who in Minangkabau's socio-cultural structure functions as a religious leader, a figure with good understanding of Minangkabau culture and custom, and a scholar.

Various past research explain that *surau*'s function as an education institution in Minangkabau has declined since the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup> This was a phase when Minangkabau Muslims were in an arduous situation brought about by pressures from Dutch colonial government's politics and economy as well as the idea of religious reform through the policy of *ethischepolitiek* by establishing schools with modern education system. The Dutch government's policy was issued in early 1840 with the main objective of political interest for Dutch occupation in Minangkabau.<sup>33</sup>

The establishment of schools with modern education system had subsequently brought in people in Minangkabau to learn in Dutch schools from an early age in order to be accepted to work as part of the bureaucracy in Dutch business offices. At the time, the Dutch developed a bureaucracy to support the coffee forced cultivation system and other business needs in Minangkabau. Native Minangkabau children were beginning to choose to go and study at schools established by the Dutch government.<sup>34</sup> In these schools, indigenous children were introduced to social sciences and natural sciences without any emphasis whatsoever on religious knowledge and Minangkabau customs, which were taught in *surau*. In the Dutch schools' students learned to use tables and chairs and experience tiered learning.<sup>35</sup>

The rise of public schools established by the Dutch at the time did not immediately end the presence of *surau* as one of the education media in Minangkabau. *Surau* during the time of the Dutch government served as an institution for Sufism study and a distinct

place for the community to disseminate information.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, during the Dutch government rule, after the establishment of public schools, *surau* functioned as a cultural center, a complementary structure to Minangkabau's *rumah gadang*, a center for information dissemination, and an institution for traditional Islamic education.<sup>37</sup> This phase indicates the influence of external factors in Minangkabau culture that led to the marginalization of *surau* brought about by various Dutch government policies in the field of education, economy, and religion.<sup>38</sup>

However, the effect of external factors in Minangkabau culture did not necessarily have a negative impact on the presence of *surau*. These external conditions had led to change in the *surau*-based traditional Islamic education system, and it underwent transformation along with the Islamic reform that occurred in Minangkabau. *Surau* then became a long-standing Islamic education institution up to early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, external factors within the scope of contemporary conditions that affect the loss of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy caused by *Buya*'s abandonment are impacted by the climate of political party contestation. According to Gazahar, politicians in Minangkabau are one of the key factors resulting in the disappearance of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy.

*Buya* are now abandoning '*ulamâ*' due to political unease. Because politicians feel uneasy with the presence of '*ulamâ*' who possesses a significant number of supporters and influence among the community. That is why politicians or politics is considered one of the factors that killed *surau*. So, these politicians are happy to take *Buya* along on their travels to keep them away from *surau*, and, importantly, so that '*ulamâ*' has no influence in the community.

Gazahar's statement leads to a duality. *Buya* abandoning *surau* because of their discomfort with the political activities of politicians who are pulling '*ulamâ*' into the world of politics, or '*ulamâ*' are enticed to offer their charisma to legitimize the political activities of politicians. '*Ulamâ*' offer their political legitimacy to support politicians by using their charisma or appeal before their congregation.<sup>39</sup> The relationship between '*ulamâ*' and the community has long been institutionalized through the norm of patron-client in West Sumatra. Accordingly, '*ulamâ*' and the government (politics) possess power in their relationship with the community.<sup>40</sup> In the political history of Indonesia and Minangkabau, '*ulamâ*' indeed played a vital role in the struggle for Indonesia's independence and they were key actors in the nation's political, social, and cultural life.<sup>41</sup>

Nonetheless, Political parties or politicians initiated to persuade '*ulamâ*'s by conducting numerous honorary visits or also commonly known as political safaris to '*ulamâ*'. The research suggests that political parties and politicians in Minangkabau hold audiences with *buya* because they believe that '*ulamâ*' are individuals who possess greater capacity than commoners. *Buya* are considered closer to God on account of the various activities they do in the *surau*. *Buya* are even believed, through their spiritual ability, to be

capable of predicting political wins or obstacles that may hinder politicians' political efforts.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in terms of relations between 'ulamâ' and politics in Minangkabau West Sumatra, *buya* plays a role as a political mastermind capable of controlling social behavior during general elections.<sup>43</sup> This may occur when an 'ulamâ' is committed to supporting a certain party, the congregation will surely follow, this is shown by the case of the well-known *Syatthâriyah* Islamic Boarding School in Padang Pariaman Regency, during the election *Syatthâriyah* members from all corners of West Sumatra followed the bidding of their leader.

## Conclusion

A *surau* has a *buya* as a religious figure who understands traditional customs and possess extraordinary level of religious knowledge. Consequently, the essence of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy can be personified in the figure of a *buya*. The disappearance of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy depends on the presence or absence of *buya* as a caretaker of the *surau*. This implies that the disappearance of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy is dependent on the *buya* as the pillar of *surau*'s presence. *Surau* without *buya* is a process of cultural dialectics occurring internally within the Minangkabau culture that may lead to the loss of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy.

This might have been caused by the rise of several schools established by the Dutch government attracting the interest of parents and children alike during the time of Dutch rule. Such external conditions had driven change in the *surau*-based traditional Islamic education system to undergo reform in line with the Islamic reform happening in Minangkabau at the time. Today, the disappearance of *surau* as a landmark of Minangkabau customary philosophy is the result of abandonment by *buya* who are influenced by the climate of local political party contestations, which consider *buya* a figure who has great influence on the people's political choices in the current era of political contestation. This research may have implications on various studies with multidisciplinary approach between (Minangkabau) customary philosophy, religion, and politics. A very interesting question for future study may include, can philosophical values inherent within the traditional customs of an existing culture be lost when coming into contact with a dominant political interest.

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