



## THE DYNAMICS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF MINANGKABAU HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ahmad Fadil

Universitas Islam Negeri Imam Bonjol Padang; [ahmadfadil280522@gmail.com](mailto:ahmadfadil280522@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*The historiography of Minangkabau reflects a dynamic evolution from oral traditions to contemporary decolonial scholarship. Historically, Minangkabau historiography emerged from pre-colonial traditions such as tambo, kaba, and tarombo, which functioned as moral and cosmological narratives sustaining social cohesion and identity. During the colonial era, European scholars reframed Minangkabau history within ethnographic and administrative frameworks, producing positivist and Eurocentric narratives that marginalized local epistemologies. In the national period (1950–1980s), historiography was institutionalized within Indonesian academia, adopting modern historical methods but often subordinated to nationalist ideology. The contemporary phase, however, marks a paradigm shift toward critical and decolonial approaches emphasizing local agency, microhistory, and reinterpretation of indigenous sources. This study employs a qualitative historiographical analysis using postcolonial and decolonial theoretical frameworks to trace epistemological and ideological transitions in Minangkabau historical writing. Findings reveal that epistemological shifts from oral to written, from colonial objectivity to reflective locality were shaped by power relations, academic paradigms, and cultural negotiation. Ideologically, historiography moved from adat-based cosmology, through colonial hegemony, to national integration and finally to local reclamation. The study concludes that Minangkabau historiography represents an ongoing intellectual resistance, where decolonial narratives reclaim historical agency and restore indigenous knowledge systems within modern scholarship.*

*Keywords: Historiography; Minangkabau; Decolonization; Epistemology; Ideology*

## Introduction

Historiography, as a discipline that focuses on the writing and interpretation of history, not only serves to document events, but also reflects the epistemological and ideological frameworks used by societies to understand their past. In the Indonesian context, Minangkabau historiography offers a rich field of study for exploring the intersection between oral tradition, colonial discourse, and postcolonial reflection. From its early days, through tambo and kaba narratives that combined myths, genealogies, and moral teachings, to the colonial period when historical writing was shaped by European ethnographic perspectives, Minangkabau historical thought has undergone significant transformations. These changes are not merely methodological, but are also closely related to the dynamics of power, identity, and the way society produces knowledge (Nurhuda & Syaputri, 2023).

Early Minangkabau historiography was rooted in cosmological and normative traditions that emphasised moral order and social legitimacy, rather than empirical accuracy. The arrival of colonialism in the 19th century introduced a positivistic framework that marginalised local epistemology, positioning Minangkabau culture as an object of study rather than as an autonomous source of historical knowledge. In the post-independence era, national historiography redirected historical narratives to support Indonesia's nation-building project, highlighting the Minangkabau's contribution to national identity but often neglecting local particularities. However, in recent decades, local perspectives have re-emerged through postcolonial, decolonial, and micro-historical approaches that seek to re-examine historical sources and restore the role of local communities as subjects of history (Purwanto, 2001). Despite these advances, debates continue regarding the appropriate epistemological basis for writing Minangkabau history. Some scholars emphasise empirical reconstruction by following Western historical methods, while others promote decolonial and indigenous scientific frameworks that prioritise oral knowledge, culture, and affective dimensions. This ongoing dialogue highlights the tension between universal and local historiographical paradigms, a central issue in contemporary Indonesian historical studies. Therefore, examining the dynamics of Minangkabau historiography provides broader insights into the politics of knowledge, identity formation, and cultural continuity in the postcolonial Southeast Asian context.

The aim of this study is to analyse the evolution of Minangkabau historiography from the pre-colonial period to the contemporary era, identifying the main epistemological and ideological factors that shaped its transformation. By tracing this trajectory, this paper argues that Minangkabau historiography not only reflects historical change, but also a continuous struggle to maintain authority in defining and interpreting the past. The main conclusion affirms that the decolonial direction in Minangkabau historiography is a form of reclaiming epistemic authority over the local memory system from the remaining colonial and national hegemony. Through this perspective, historiography is understood as a living dialogue between tradition, power, and modernity revealing how a community's identity is negotiated through the way they tell their history.

## Methods

This study utilises historical research methods with a historiographical approach, which aims to trace, examine, and interpret the development of Minangkabau historical writing from the pre-colonial to contemporary periods. The research stages were carried out through four main steps, namely heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (historical writing) (Abdurrahman, 1999). The heuristic stage involved the collection of various historical sources, both primary and secondary. Primary sources include local manuscripts such as Tambo Alam Minangkabau, Dutch East Indies colonial archives, administrative reports, and historical documents stored in the National Archives and university libraries. Secondary sources were obtained from academic books, journal articles, and scientific works relevant to Minangkabau historiography and the development of Indonesian historical writing.

The next stage is source criticism, which is the process of verifying the authenticity and credibility of the sources that have been obtained. External criticism is used to assess the origin and physical condition of the source, while internal criticism is used to test the content and objectivity of the information contained therein. After that, interpretation was carried out, namely the interpretation of historical data and facts by considering the social, cultural, and political contexts behind them. Researchers linked each historiographical period pre-colonial, colonial, national, and contemporary with the epistemological and ideological dynamics that influenced it. The analysis is conducted qualitatively, emphasising the relationship between local knowledge traditions and colonial and nationalist influences in the formation of historical narratives.

The final stage is historiography, which is the compilation of research results in the form of a systematic and chronological scientific historical narrative. The writing is carried out with attention to scientific principles, a balance between facts and interpretation, and efforts to decolonise knowledge in order to present the local Minangkabau voice as the subject of history. Thus, this method allows researchers to understand the development of Minangkabau historiography not only as a record of past events, but also as a construction of knowledge influenced by the social, cultural, and ideological contexts of each era.

## Result and Discussion

### The Development of Minangkabau Historiography from the Pre-Colonial to Contemporary Periods

The development of Indonesian historiography is generally divided into three patterns, namely traditional, colonial and national, as is the case with Minangkabau historiography (Aprilia, 2024). The development of Minangkabau historiography shows a long journey from oral tradition to contemporary scientific and decolonial approaches. In the pre-colonial period, Minangkabau historiography was rooted in the traditions of tambo, kaba, family genealogy, and oral tales. Tambo, such as Tambo Alam Minangkabau, was not merely a chronological record, but a symbolic narrative that explained the origins of identity, the legitimacy of customs, and the relationship between customs and beliefs at that time. History during this period was cosmological and

normative, rather than analytical. Historical truth was measured through customary values and social legitimacy, rather than empirical evidence (Nurhuda & Syaputri, 2023).

Minangkabau historiography grew from strong roots in oral tradition and customary culture. Forms such as tambo, kaba, tarombo (family genealogy), and various oral tales became the main means for the community to record and pass on past experiences. In this context, Tambo Alam Minangkabau occupies a central position as a narrative source that describes the origins of ancestors, the formation of nagari, and the relationship between adat and Islam (Yazan & Khusairi, 2017). However, tambo cannot be equated with modern historical works, because it is not merely a chronicle or record of events, but rather a symbolic narrative that explains the social cosmos and the legitimacy of Minangkabau customs. Truth in tambo is measured by its conformity with traditional values, social balance, and the authority of traditional leaders, rather than by empirical evidence as understood in modern historiography. Therefore, this form of pre-colonial historiography is cosmological, normative, and didactic in nature, serving more to instil values and maintain social cohesion than to compile a chronological sequence of events (Iskandar Zulkarnain Dalam Tambo, n.d.).

The characteristics of Minangkabau pre-colonial historiography can be seen in its tendency to place history as a mirror of the social order. The kaba tradition, for example, is not only a story of heroism, but also a reflection on the ethics, leadership, and collective identity of society. Each story is presented in the form of a long narrative that is read or sung by a kaba craftsman, so that the transmission of historical knowledge depends on oral tradition and memorisation. Meanwhile, tarombo or family genealogy plays an important role in confirming matrilineal descent and customary rights. With the development of the writing tradition, some tambo and kaba were then copied in Arabic-Malay or Old Malay script, mainly by local scholars and writers in the 18th to 19th centuries. This transition from oral to written tradition marked the emergence of a new awareness of the importance of preserving collective memory. However, the flexible and multivocal nature remained intact; each nagari or tribe had different versions of tambo and kaba, adapted to their respective local contexts (Abdullah, 1970b).

Pre-colonial Minangkabau historiography also shows the connection between adat and Islam as two pillars of society. Historical narratives are never entirely secular, but are always linked to religious moral values. The stories of figures such as Bundo Kanduang, Cindua Mato, or Datuk Katumanggungan demonstrate efforts to harmonise customary law with Islamic law. Through these stories, the community interprets history not as a series of facts, but as a guide to life that frames the relationship between humans, nature, and God. Thus, pre-colonial Minangkabau historiography reflects an integral worldview, where history, customs, and religion merge into a single system of knowledge that serves to build social legitimacy while preserving the cultural identity of the Minangkabau people (Nelmawarni & Pratama, 2024).

It can be concluded that the development of Minangkabau historiography, as described above, shows a complex epistemological evolution from an oral-based knowledge system to a more reflective and scientific historical consciousness. The traditions of tambo, kaba, and tarombo not only function as historical records, but also as social constructs that maintain the collective

identity, customary legitimacy, and cosmological values of Minangkabau society. In other words, pre-colonial Minangkabau historiography represents a paradigm of knowledge oriented towards morality, customs, and social balance, rather than empirical objectivity as in the modern Western paradigm. The transition from oral to written tradition in the 18th–19th centuries indicates a shift in historical consciousness, as local scholars and writers began to record collective narratives in written form. This can be interpreted as a form of resistance against epistemic colonialism, as such writing preserved local authority in defining its own history. Thus, Minangkabau historiography is not only a cultural heritage, but also a manifestation of the decolonisation of knowledge that rejects the dominance of colonial narratives in the writing of the history of the archipelago.

Entering the colonial period (19th century to early 20th century), the writing of Minangkabau history was greatly influenced by European perspectives. The Dutch colonial government and Orientalists such as W. van Ronkel, J. Kreemer, and C. Snouck Hurgronje wrote about Minangkabau within an ethnographic and administrative framework. Their narratives framed Minangkabau as a static indigenous society subordinate to colonial power. Meanwhile, early indigenous historians such as Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah and Inyik Canduang began writing about the history of Islam and Minangkabau customs in response to the hegemony of colonial narratives. However, their writing style was still apologetic and moralistic (Darwis, 2013).

Minangkabau historiography during the colonial period was a form of historical writing that developed under the shadow of Dutch East Indies rule and European Orientalist thinking. In essence, Minangkabau colonial historiography can be understood as a perspective and form of historical writing about Minangkabau society that arose from the interaction between local traditions and colonial knowledge projects. Its main purpose was not merely to record the past, but also to legitimise the colonial power structure by presenting Minangkabau as an object of ethnographic and administrative research. In this context, history was no longer written from the perspective of the Minangkabau people themselves, but rather from a colonial point of view that positioned them as a ‘traditional’ society that had to be studied, classified and regulated (Netscher, 1881).

The main characteristic of Minangkabau colonial historiography is the strong influence of European positivism, which emphasises empirical facts and written documentation as the main sources. Colonial writers such as J. Kreemer in *De Minangkabausche Nagari* (1912) and W. van Ronkel in his philological study of Malay manuscripts interpreted Minangkabau customs descriptively and formalistically without considering the social meanings and religious values that lived within them. They tended to view Minangkabau society as a static, traditional entity, closed to change and in need of Western civilisation's guidance (Westenenk, 1918). Thus, Minangkabau history was reduced to a catalogue of customs, nagari structures and legal practices that were considered exotic but backward. C. Snouck Hurgronje, for example, in his study of Islam in the Dutch East Indies, considered the relationship between customs and Islam in Minangkabau to be a form of syncretism that needed to be monitored by the colonial government so as not to cause political resistance (Hurgronje, 1973).

The historiography of Minangkabau during this period is mostly found in colonial reports, ethnographic works, and administrative records. Manuscripts such as *Verslag van het Binnenlandsch Bestuur* or the reports of the *Controleur Padangsche Bovenlanden* are the main sources for describing the social life of the community. In addition, scientific publications in colonial institutions such as *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (KITLV)* also reinforced the scientific image of colonial knowledge about Minangkabau. In this kind of discourse, history was not a space for dialogue, but rather a tool for understanding and controlling the local community (Fadila, 2018).

However, in the shadow of this strong colonial discourse, responses emerged from among Minangkabau intellectuals. Figures such as Haji Abdul Karim Amrullah (Haji Rasul) and Inyiak Canduang wrote about Islamic history and customs from a moral and religious perspective. Their writings attempted to correct the negative image created by the colonials, but their approach was still normative and apologetic, emphasising the defence of Islam and customs as the moral identity of society rather than a critical analysis of the social structure. These works show a transition phase from colonial historiography to local historical consciousness, in which the Minangkabau people began to reclaim authority over their own historical narrative (Herman, 2021).

Thus, Minangkabau colonial historiography is characterised by tension between two forces: hegemonic colonial knowledge and a growing local consciousness. On the one hand, colonialism produced rich historical documentation that was nevertheless full of power bias; on the other hand, it also triggered epistemological liberation efforts that would later develop into national and decolonial historiography. Studies such as those conducted by Mestika Zed in *Metodologi Sejarah* (2003) and Taufik Abdullah (1970) emphasise that this colonial historiographical legacy must be read critically, as it contains traces of ideology and power relations that shape the way we understand Minangkabau's past to this day.

In the early days of independence and the national period (1950s–1980s), Minangkabau historiography began to enter the realm of modern academia. Figures such as Taufik Abdullah and Mestika Zed became pioneers in integrating social and economic historical methods into Minangkabau studies. Taufik Abdullah, through his work *Schools and Politics* (1970), introduced a structural and sociological approach, while Mestika Zed traced the dynamics of Padang's transformation and the changes in Minangkabau society in the context of colonialism and modernity. During this phase, Minangkabau historiography became part of Indonesia's national historical narrative, in which the emphasis on regional struggles and national integration became dominant. Historiography served as an ideological instrument for building national identity, so that local perspectives were often subordinated to the interests of the state (Abdullah, 1970).

Minangkabau historiography in the early days of independence (around 1950–1980s) marked an important phase in the shift of local history writing from narrative and colonial traditions to a modern academic form oriented towards nationalism. During this period, history was no longer written merely to commemorate regional figures or events, but became part of a larger project to shape Indonesia's national identity. The historiography of Minangkabau in the early days of independence refers to the efforts of historians to place the historical experiences of

the Minangkabau people within the framework of the newly independent nation's history. History was understood as an educational and ideological tool that affirmed the role of the region in the struggle for independence, development, and the formation of national consciousness. In this context, Minangkabau is not only seen as an ethnic entity, but also as one of the pillars of nationality that has contributed greatly to national history through the roles of figures such as Hatta, Agus Salim, and Tan Malaka (Fitri et al., 2022).

The characteristics of Minangkabau historiography during this period were greatly influenced by the spirit of nationalism and scientific approaches that developed in Indonesian academia after independence. Historical writing began to use modern historical methods, such as source criticism, periodisation, and socio-economic approaches, although it was still oriented towards a macro or structural framework (Abdullah, 2001). Historians such as Taufik Abdullah introduced historical analysis that combined social science theories, particularly in his work *Schools and Politics: The Kaum Muda Movement in West Sumatra (1927–1933)* (1970). Through this research, Abdullah demonstrated that Minangkabau history cannot be understood merely as a series of events, but rather as the result of complex interactions between social structures, education, and colonial power. This approach reflects the characteristics of academic historiography at that time: objective, systematic, and seeking to explain the social causes and effects of historical events.

The form of Minangkabau historiography in the early period of independence tended to combine two dimensions: first, a strong spirit of nationalism, and second, the use of established scientific methodology. Many historical works produced during this period placed Minangkabau in a strategic position as a 'contributor to the nation.' Local history was written in line with the grand narrative of national development proclaimed by the state. For example, in Rusli Amran's research, such as *Padang Riwayatmu Dulu* (1986), we can see how the socio-economic dynamics of the city of Padang are explained in the context of modernisation and colonial change towards independence. This form of historical writing shows a strong academic tendency, but at the same time reveals its subordination to state ideology, namely that regional history must support the integrative image of the Indonesian nation (Amran, 1986).

In addition, academic works during this period began to be published through formal institutions such as universities, LIPI, and the Centre for Historical Studies, which demonstrated the institutionalisation of historical knowledge. Historiography no longer relied solely on oral traditions or *tambo*, but on archival research, colonial documents, and other written sources. However, adherence to the national paradigm meant that many historical works on Minangkabau during this period focused on elite figures, political movements, and Minangkabau's contribution to the nation, while the dimensions of local culture, women, or small communities were largely overlooked. Thus, Minangkabau historiography in the early days of independence can be understood as a phase of epistemological transition: from local-traditional history writing to modern scientific history with a national orientation, characterised by rational methodology but still under the umbrella of the ideology of national integration (Kartodirdjo, 1992).

Entering the contemporary period (1990s to present), Minangkabau historiography has undergone a transformation towards a more critical and reflective direction. Researchers began to question the elitist and centralistic historical paradigm and revived local sources such as manuscripts, chronicles, and colonial archives with new approaches, including a more objective approach, microhistory, and cultural studies.

In the contemporary period (from the 1990s to the present), Minangkabau historiography has undergone a fundamental change, moving from writing that was still bound by national or colonial frameworks to a more critical, reflective, and community-based form. Historiography in this sense is not merely about writing down ‘what happened,’ but also examining how historical narratives are formed, who are the subjects and objects of historical writing, and how power, identity, and collective memory interact. Thus, ‘contemporary Minangkabau historiography’ can be understood as an active process of constructing, reflecting on, and reconstructing local history through the perspective of the Minangkabau community itself, using the latest theoretical frameworks and methods (e.g. microhistory, postcolonialism, subaltern studies) that challenge old assumptions about history (Purwanto, 2001).

The main characteristics of contemporary Minangkabau historiography include: first, more diverse sources, not only colonial archives and government records, but also tambo (oral traditions), local manuscripts, community archives, and citizen testimonies. This reflects greater attention to local agency and plurality of voices. Second, a critical methodological approach, with historians and researchers beginning to question homogeneous grand narratives, highlighting the involvement of local actors, and considering socio-cultural, economic, gender, and identity contexts in historical analysis. Third, reflective writing on power and the dominant discourse of historiography seeks to reveal how colonial or national narratives construct the Minang people within a certain framework, then offers alternative writings that provide space for the margins, differences, and internal conflicts of Minangkabau society. Fourth, local orientation but with a global network. Although the focus is on Minangkabau, contemporary writing is influenced by global historical theory and transnational knowledge networks, resulting in a combination of locality and historiographical globalisation (Asnan, 2007).

In practice, contemporary Minangkabau historiography appears in various forms. For example, through micro studies that highlight a single nagari, a single event, or a single Minangkabau community group that has been neglected; through a re-reading of customary texts and oral traditions by placing them in a modern historical context; or through critical efforts to review how Minangkabau is represented in Indonesian national historiography. In addition, research on material cultural heritage such as rumah gadang architecture, the tradition of merantau, and diaspora networks is also part of a broader historical narrative. Overall, this contemporary historiography offers a more diverse view of history, open to many voices, and places the Minangkabau people as the main actors in their historical journey, not merely as objects of study.

### **Factors Affecting Changes in Historiography in Minangkabau**

Over time, Minangkabau historiography has undergone a fundamental shift driven by interrelated epistemological and ideological factors. From an epistemological perspective,

Minangkabau traditional philosophy, with its proverbs ‘raso pareso’ (which refers to understanding through feeling and thought) and ‘alam takambang jadi guru’ (nature is the teacher), has become the basis for how the community understands and narrates its own history. Research by Yulika (2011) shows that the distinctive epistemology of Minangkabau places knowledge as a synthesis between sensory/empirical experience and feeling/heart, so that oral sources, customs, and shared values become an important part of their historical construction (Yulika, 2011). However, when the colonial perspective entered this region, the dominant epistemology changed. Colonial historiography largely imitated the European model, which emphasised written sources, formal chronology, and political power, often marginalising local epistemology and customs. For example, Indonesian historiography in general faces the challenge of “Indonesia-centrism” or epistemic colonialism, which imposes a Western framework of thinking on local history (Ardhana & Puspitasari, 2024).

Ideologically, nationalism, religion, and modernity have shifted the narrative of Minangkabau historiography. The influence of Islam in the writing of Indonesian history before the colonial period changed the historiographical focus from kingdoms and customs to Islamic scholars, preaching, and Islamic networks (Hakim & Haif, 2019). Furthermore, the spirit of nationalism after independence encouraged Indonesia-centric and state-centric historiography, which demanded the integration of regions into the grand national narrative. This gave rise to a model of historiography that sometimes marginalised local uniqueness and promoted state legitimacy or national identity. For example, in the context of Minangkabau, Andoni's (2022) study shows that the model of 19th-century Islamic radicalism historiography in Minangkabau was shaped by a historiographical paradigm influenced by nationalism and academic consumerism, as well as an ideology that sought to present the region as part of a larger national or international narrative (Andoni, 2022). Thus, the transformation of Minangkabau historiography is not merely about changes in historical methods or sources, but represents a shift in epistemology and the direction of values and identity from traditional and local to colonial and national.

Based on the above explanation, it can be concluded that from an epistemological perspective, change occurred due to two main factors: (1) the emergence of criticism of local epistemology, which was considered ‘primitive’ by Western/colonial frameworks, leading to the adoption of Western methods in historical writing in order to gain scientific ‘legitimacy’; (2) the need to represent local voices with their own epistemology, which encouraged a new historiography that was more reflective of the Minangkabau experience (e.g. the use of oral sources, customs, local values).

From an ideological perspective, historiography changed because the ideological agenda of colonialism sought to control narratives of the past in order to facilitate political legitimacy, nationalism sought to integrate local regions into a national identity, and modernity demanded historiography that was standardised according to international academic norms. These ideological changes altered what was considered important to write about (historical subjects) and how those stories were told. Finally, this interaction between epistemology and ideology has resulted in Minangkabau historiography that continues to move from traditional narratives to Islamic national

narratives, then to historiography that is more critical and reflective of the colonial and global contexts. This confirms that historiography is not only a record of facts, but also a construction of knowledge that is influenced by who writes it, for whom, and within what value framework.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the development of Minangkabau historiography is a complex and dynamic process, reflecting fundamental changes in the way society understands, writes, and interprets its own history. From the pre-colonial period, which was rooted in the cosmological and normative traditions of tambo, kaba, and tarombo, to the colonial period, which was dominated by European positivism and Orientalism, Minangkabau historiography underwent a sharp epistemological shift. In the post-independence national period, historical writing began to be directed towards strengthening national ideology and national integration, so that the local identity of Minangkabau was often placed within the framework of Indonesian national history. However, in the contemporary era, a new approach has emerged that is more critical, reflective, and decolonial, emphasising the importance of local voices, oral sources, and a re-reading of colonial heritage and centralised nationalism.

Thus, it can be concluded that changes in Minangkabau historiography are not only caused by developments in scientific methods, but also by ideological changes—from colonial and nationalist domination to efforts to reclaim local epistemic authority. The findings of this study indicate that epistemological and ideological factors are the two main drivers that influence the direction of Minangkabau historiography from time to time. For future research, it is necessary to conduct more in-depth studies of local archives, nagari tambo-tambo (traditional chronicles), and the oral history of grassroots communities in order to create a more participatory and pluralistic historiography. Ongoing follow-up research also focuses on the application of digital humanities methods to digitise and analyse Minangkabau manuscripts more broadly.

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