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The Philosophy of the Matrilineal Kinship System as A Cultural Heritage of Minangkabau

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Abstract

This study examines the philosophy underlying the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system as a cultural heritage rich in meaning and social values. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and library research, the study finds that this system is not merely a social structure but also reflects gender balance, collective family responsibility, and a close relationship between custom and religion through the principle of adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah. Amid globalization and modernization, this philosophy remains relevant for strengthening cultural identity and shaping social character. The study therefore argues that understanding and preserving the philosophical foundations of the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system is essential for sustaining the noble values of Indonesia's cultural heritage.

Keywords

Minangkabau; matrilineal; kinship; philosophy; cultural heritage

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Introduction

Indonesia is widely recognized as a country of immense cultural diversity, reflected in the hundreds of ethnic groups spread across the archipelago. One clear manifestation of this diversity lies in the kinship systems practiced by indigenous communities. Amid the predominance of patrilineal kinship systems in many parts of Indonesia, the matrilineal kinship system of the Minangkabau people in West Sumatra stands out as a distinctive and compelling subject of study. The Minangkabau matrilineal system is not merely a mechanism for tracing descent through the mother's line, but also embodies profound philosophical values that reflect the community's worldview.

The Minangkabau are one of the largest ethnic groups in Indonesia and are widely known for the uniqueness of their customs and culture. Their matrilineal system places women at the center of social structure and inheritance. In this system, ancestral property, customary titles, and family identity are passed down through the maternal line. This arrangement demonstrates the important role of women in Minangkabau social structure and challenges the common assumption that patriarchal systems dominate traditional societies. Even so, the system does not marginalize men; rather, it assigns them different strategic roles, especially in customary decision-making through institutions such as kaum and adat councils.

The philosophy underlying the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system is inseparable from the principle of *adaik basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*, which guides Minangkabau life. Within this framework, custom and Islam are harmoniously integrated, creating a unique and balanced social order. Although the matrilineal system structurally grants women an important position, it is not regarded as contradictory to Islamic teachings in Minangkabau society. Instead, it is interpreted in ways that remain aligned with religious values. This philosophy teaches the importance of balancing the roles of men and women in social life.

The uniqueness of this matrilineal system is also reflected in the structure of the *rumah gadang*, the principal symbol of Minangkabau culture. The *rumah gadang* is not simply a residence, but also a center of social activity and a symbol of the continuity of the matrilineal line. High ancestral property such as the *rumah gadang* is inherited by daughters in the family, while married men do not live permanently with their wives in the *rumah gadang* but remain attached to their mother's house and clan. This concept underscores that the matrilineal kinship system is more than a mode of inheritance; it also reflects a value system and a particular way of understanding life and relations among family members.

However, in the context of rapid globalization and modernization, the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system faces considerable challenges. Changes in lifestyle, urbanization, and shifts in social values have transformed social structure and gender roles. Many young Minangkabau migrate to large cities or even abroad, which indirectly affects their attachment to the traditional kinship system. *Rumah gadang* that once symbolized collective pride are now often left uninhabited, and customary inheritance practices have begun to shift. This situation raises concern that the philosophical values embedded in the matrilineal system may gradually disappear if they are not properly transmitted and preserved.

In this context, it is important to undertake a philosophical study of the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system, not only as a unique cultural phenomenon but also as an intellectual heritage containing important values for the development of a just, balanced, and civilized society. This study aims to explore more deeply the philosophical meanings underlying the system, such as gender balance, collective roles within the family, and the values of social responsibility attached to each family member.

A deeper understanding of the philosophy of this matrilineal system can also contribute to wider discussions of social and cultural development in Indonesia. At a time when gender equality and the preservation of local culture have become important issues, the Minangkabau matrilineal system can serve as an example of how traditional values may remain compatible with modern principles without losing their cultural roots. Thus, this Minangkabau cultural heritage should be preserved not only physically through buildings or customary ceremonies, but also philosophically and intellectually so that it remains alive and relevant for present and future generations.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach based on library research. The analysis relies on published sources relevant to the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system and focuses on interpreting the philosophical meanings embedded in that system as a form of cultural heritage.

Results and Discussion

The philosophy of the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system is rooted in a high regard for women as guardians of family continuity and custodians of culture. Lineage and inheritance are traced through the maternal line, while ancestral property such as the rumah gadang and other assets is inherited collectively within the female line, making women the symbolic and social center of Minangkabau life. This system places women in an important economic and social position within the family, while men, especially the mamak, serve as advisers and protectors of their sisters' children, thereby creating a balance of roles between the two.

This philosophy is reflected in sayings such as "Bundo Kanduang, limpapeh rumah nan gadang," which emphasizes the mother's position as the main pillar of the rumah gadang. The system also stresses communality, since ancestral property belongs to the wider family and cannot be sold individually, thereby protecting collective welfare. The adaptability of the matrilineal system to changing times is likewise part of the philosophy of "Alam takambang jadi guru," which teaches the importance of learning from and adapting to one's environment.

The term matrilineal derives from two words: mater, meaning mother in Latin, and linea, meaning line. Matrilineal therefore refers to a lineage system traced through women, with the maternal line extending upward to mothers and downward through daughters. The related term matriarchy derives from mater and archein, meaning rule, and is used in Minangkabau discourse to describe women's authority in family matters, including control over ancestral property and the rumah gadang (Taufiq, 2023).

Socially, this system provides economic protection for women and their children and encourages educational and decision-making processes that involve senior women in the family. The Minangkabau matrilineal system is therefore not only a cultural heritage but also a resilient and distinctive social structure that has endured for centuries as a marker of Minangkabau identity.

Matrilineality emphasizes kinship traced through the mother's line, whereas matriarchy refers more specifically to power being held by women and to their role in determining policy. A key question, therefore, is whether Minangkabau women possess power equal to or greater than that of men. In everyday practice, however, formal public leadership positions are generally held by men, while women occupy an honored and strategic place within the domestic and kinship structure (Taufiq, 2023).

As a kinship principle, Minangkabau matrilineality differs from other descent systems in several respects. Among its distinguishing features are descent calculated through the mother's line; children's clan identity following the mother's suku; the principle of babangso kabakeh ayah, referring to paternal descent in another sense; the saying jauh mencari suku dakek mencari ibu; the phrase tabang basitumpu hinggok mancakam; and the distinction between pusako tinggi, inherited from maternal uncles to nephews and nieces, and pusako randah, inherited from fathers to children (Munir, 2015).

The characteristics of matrilineal kinship described by J. De Jong and Muhammad Radjab include descent through the mother's line, the formation of suku through the mother's line, exogamous marriage, collective responsibility within the clan, the theoretical authority of the mother, the important role of the mamak, residence patterns that connect husbands to the wife's household, and inheritance passed from maternal uncles to the children of sisters (Munir, 2015).

Islam and matrilineality are inseparable in Minangkabau culture. From an anthropological perspective, Tsuyoshi Kato argues that Islam and Minangkabau identity form an integrated whole. The two elements shape one another, and a person's membership in the Minangkabau ethnic community is strongly tied to that relationship. In this view, a Minangkabau person who no longer professes Islam is no longer regarded as fully Minangkabau. Kato also identifies the tradition of merantau, or migration, as another hallmark that distinguishes Minangkabau society.

Minangkabau custom and culture are guided by the philosophy adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah. This maxim has broad meaning and admits many interpretations, but fundamentally it conveys that Minangkabau custom is grounded in Kitabullah, namely the Qur'an. Accordingly, what is taught in Islam is understood to be compatible with what is taught in Minangkabau custom and culture (Maryelliwati, 2016).

The Minangkabau are one of the ethnic groups of the Indonesian archipelago. Administratively, Minangkabau society is centered in West Sumatra, while culturally its sphere extends beyond the province to include, among other areas, parts of mainland Riau, northern Bengkulu, western Jambi, the west coast of North Sumatra, southwestern Aceh, and Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia.

Within this cultural framework, matrilineality is one of the main features that defines Minangkabau identity. Their customs and culture position women as the heirs of ancestral property and kinship continuity. Descent is referred to the mother and is known as samandeh, or sharing the same mother, while fathers are often referred to as sumando and are treated as affinal relatives within the family.

Three dominant elements characterize the matrilineal system: descent "through the mother's line," marriage with people outside one's own group, now commonly described as matrilineal exogamy, and the central role of mothers in education, the safeguarding of wealth, and family welfare.

The matrilineal system makes matters concerning women especially important and turns them into the collective responsibility of the clan. For this reason, the existence of Minangkabau women occupies an important and honored position, since the dignity of women is regarded as a primary value in both Minangkabau custom and Islamic teaching.

In Minangkabau society, which adheres to a matrilineal kinship system, the birth of a daughter is highly anticipated because the continuity of a clan depends on daughters. A mother's clan line can continue only if she has daughters; if she does not, that lineage is considered to come to an end in customary terms.

At the same time, while the presence of a daughter is eagerly awaited, it also carries serious responsibility once she reaches adulthood. Having a daughter entails considerable obligations, and she in turn bears major responsibilities as a member of both her clan and the wider community.

Although Islam generally follows a patrilineal principle while Minangkabau custom follows a matrilineal one, the two have been reconciled in Minangkabau society. The matrilineal kinship system there forms the cultural core of Minangkabau life, while patrilineality in Islam is understood as only one aspect of a broader religious framework. This relationship can also be seen in the distinction between inherited property in the matrilineal system and the transmission of titles or symbolic inheritance in the patrilineal system (Naldo, 2022).

Conclusion

The philosophy of the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system is rooted in a high regard for women as guardians of family continuity and preservers of culture. Lineage and inheritance are traced through the maternal line, with ancestral property such as the rumah gadang and other assets inherited collectively within the female line. This arrangement places women in a central social and economic position, while men, especially the mamak, function as advisers and protectors of their sisters' children, thereby creating a balance of roles between the two.

The term matrilineal refers to descent through the mother's line, while the related notion of matriarchy points to women's authority in particular domains of family life. In Minangkabau society, women hold important rights over ancestral property and the rumah gadang, and their voices are considered in family affairs. However, formal customary and political leadership is generally held by men. The system therefore reflects not female domination but a distinctive distribution of rights, responsibilities, and authority.

Islam and matrilineality are deeply interconnected in Minangkabau culture. Through the philosophy of adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah, custom is understood to be grounded in Islamic teaching. For that reason, the Minangkabau matrilineal kinship system should be understood as a cultural and philosophical heritage that remains relevant for preserving collective identity, maintaining social balance, and sustaining the noble values of Minangkabau society in the present.

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