

# The Social Functions of *Rumah Gadang* of Kinari Village in Modern Society

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**Abstract.** *Rumah Gadang* is a traditional house for Minangkabau people, the majority of whom live in West Sumatra. In addition to being a place of residence for the matrilineal family, the traditional house and a place of family consultation, places of ceremonies, inheritance of custom values, and representations of matrilineal culture. The paper will analyze the change of the traditional house function and its factors based on 146 traditional Nagari Kinari. The study uses a qualitative approach to identifying and collecting field data through the fieldwork in Nagari Kinari, Solok. The result shows that traditional houses in Kinari have dramatically changed their functions in matrilineal families' homes and educational centres. However, they are still places for important ceremonies and the manifestation of social status. The function in essential ceremonies and social status symbols. These changes occur due to social changes, including changes in family structure, economic income, the national education system and personal awareness, and differences in understanding traditional culture.

**Keywords:** *Rumah Gadang, matrilineal society, function, social change*

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## 1 Introduction

Minangkabau is the leading ethnic group living in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Minangkabau is best known in anthropological circles for its matrilineal system. Since ancient times, they have continued the inheritance of matrilineal lineage and property, retaining a lifestyle centred on matrilineal lineage. From the important work of de Josselin de Jong [1] until the newly published ethnography of Gregory Mark Simon [2], lots of Indonesian and western scholars have already made many types of research on Minangkabau society from different aspects, including matrilineal social organization, custom, marriage, inheritance of property, religion, performing art, and also traditional architecture.

Many studies have shown that *Rumah Gadang* is one of the traditional architectural beauties materialized by its society and culture. It also appears as a proud identity symbol of the Minangkabau people. The architecture of a Minangkabau house is more accessible to recognize than the architecture of other cultures. After all, the exterior design consists of a curved or horn-

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like roof structure [3]. Elda Franzia et al. analyzed the visual form of *Rumah Gadang* as the symbolic representation of Minangkabau's ethnic identity [4]. *Rumah Gadang* is the place where the maternal lineage lives. As female family members own the house, the ownership is passed through matrilineal lines. In addition to being a place of residence for the matrilineal family, the traditional house also serves as a place of family consultation, ceremonies, inheritance of custom values, and matrilineal culture representations. The social functions of the traditional houses reflect the customs and values of the Minangkabau. Dharma Widya emphasized that the traditional house is the first place in one's personality's development to appreciate the character and outlook of the community, which reflects harmony that is included with the elements of *raso* (taste), *pareso* (feeling), *malu* (shame), and respect for each other [5]. It serves as a residence, a hall for family meetings, and a place for ceremonial activities. Syafwan pointed out that the traditional house reflected the matrilineal system they embraced, a symbol of togetherness, cooperation, and democracy, the identity of a people, and the inherent desire of the people [6]. Compared with most articles that showed the traditional functions of traditional houses, Mina Elfira and Bambang Wibawarta discuss the modified functions of Minangkabau traditional house in the contemporary Minangkabau society of West Sumatra with qualitative data which is collected between 2017 and 2018 [7]. However, most of the research took place in the *Darek* region of West Sumatra, such as Tanah Datar, Agam and Limapuluh Koto. Therefore, this paper, which uses the data of Nagari Kinari, Solok to analyze the change of the traditional house function and its factors, will supplement the research outside *Darek* region of West Sumatra.

## 2 Method

This study uses a qualitative approach to identify and collect field data through the fieldwork in Nagari Kinari. Nagari Kinari is one of the villages in the Bukit Sundi District, Solok Regency. Geographically, this village is located at 0°31'-1°45' south latitude and 100° 25'-101°41' east longitude, about 2 km from Muara Panas, the capital of Bukit Sundi District and about 10 km from Solok City. According to the year 2016, the total number of villagers is 4,482, 2,109 of them are men, and 2,373 of them are women. With the village head, village cadres, and local villagers, 146 traditional houses of this village were documented via photos and texts. All houses were labelled in Google Maps with different colours representing different clans and forming a location map for these traditional houses (see Figure 1). A purposive sampling method of informant selection was adopted, but the number of samples is not predetermined. Information about the functions of traditional houses and reasons for preserving them is obtained via depth interviews and participant observations.

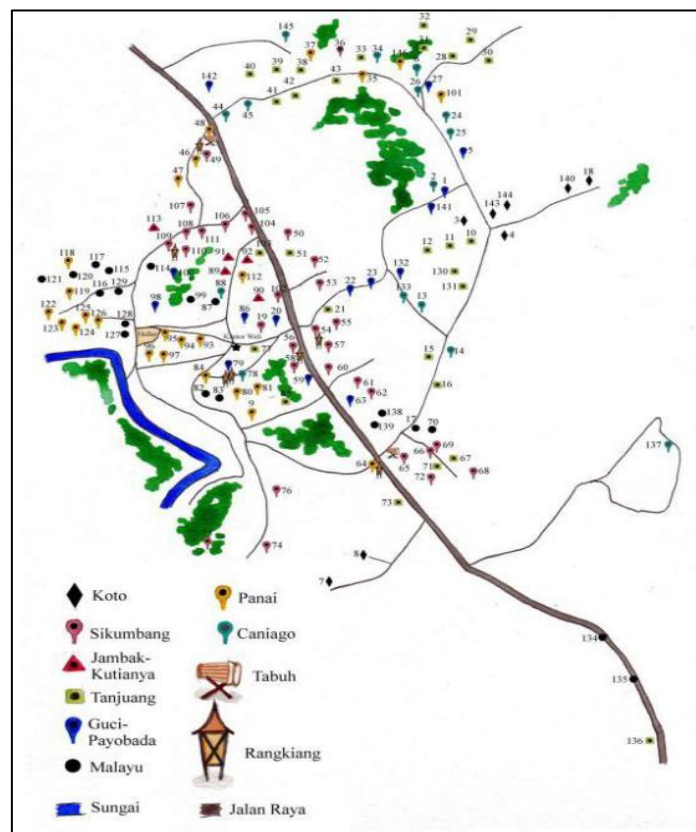


Figure 1. Map of Traditional Houses in Kinari Village (2017)

### 3 Results and Analysis

Although the traditional house is really important as an icon and one of the identity symbols of the Minangkabau people, in the fact that it generally experiences a slump and faces the problem of repairing in West Sumatra because the construction and maintenance of the traditional house require a lot of money and energy. More and more traditional houses are replaced by modern houses both in urban or rural areas where the matrilineal system is still strongly practised through economic and social development. Usman, Riza, Vellinga, and other scholars' research also show that currently *Rumah Gadang* seems to have been mostly abandoned today, with their residential and ritual functions taken over by modern houses. Kamrita as *Bundo Kanduang* and also chairman of the *Minang* Village Forum said there were 68 *Rumah Gadang* in Sumpur Village, Tanah Datar District in 2012, but in poor condition. Some were damaged, some were broken, and some were likely to collapse. Whereas in the past, this village had more than 200 *Rumah Gadang* [8]. Base on date from *Lembaga Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Nagari* (LPMN), Sulit Air village had 111 *Rumah Gadang* before, but there were only 61 left. Several houses were no longer suitable for living [9]. In 2016, Solok Selatan Regency achieved an Indonesia World Records Museum (MURI) record with 134 *Rumah Gadang* in one village [10].

Compared to previous studies and data, Kinari village has more traditional houses than other villages, and the condition of traditional houses there also looks better. The village has a long tradition of preserving the Minangkabau indigenous culture and traditional houses. There are 146 traditional houses in Kinari in 2017. Most houses are still inhabited by people and are kept in good condition. The village head said that the villagers were suggested to open the windows of traditional houses every day. Regarding the location of traditional houses, most of them are located in this village's centre. These traditional houses belong to eight clans (*suku*), which can be categorized as follows: fifteen for *Caniago* clan, fourteen for *Guci-Payobada*, six for *Jambak-Kutianya* clan, eight for *Koto* clan, twenty-four for *Malayu* clan, twenty-four for *Panai* clan, twenty-seven for *Sikumbang* clan, twenty-eight for *Tanjuang* clan.

According to Sudirman, the ideal spatial layout of traditional houses should be possessing four vertical spaces (*lanjar*) and has several rooms (*ruang*) in odd numbers, such as five rooms, seven rooms, or nine rooms [11]. According to this research, most traditional houses in Kinari have four rooms (79.45%). Also, traditional houses consist of five rooms, six rooms, seven rooms, eight rooms or even ten rooms. This situation is different from other areas where the house consists of an odd number of rooms. The numbers and percentages are shown in the chart below.

**Table 1.** Percentages of Houses Based on Different Rooms

| Number of Room | Sum of Houses | Percentage |
|----------------|---------------|------------|
| 2              | 2             | 1.37%      |
| 4              | 116           | 79.45%     |
| 5              | 6             | 4.11%      |
| 6              | 18            | 12.33%     |
| 7              | 1             | 0.68%      |
| 8              | 2             | 1.37%      |
| 10             | 1             | 0.68%      |

Mr. Syahrial Chan, a Kinari villager, as the notable person in the field of Minangkabau culture, said that traditional house has several important functions, which can be explained as follows,

- 1) a place for family or community gatherings, primarily to hold all forms of ceremonies, such as the inauguration of the clan head (*batagak panghulu*), marriage, religious recitation, and the funeral ceremony,
- 2) a monument, having historical value, philosophy, and traditional teachings, and a symbol of Minangkabau customs' greatness,
- 3) an institution, being a source of unity among the *saparuik*, the people's administrative centre, and the place for nephew coaching in traditional education, etc.

After observing and conducting in-depth interviews in the village for a long time, it is found that the social function of traditional houses has changed to some extent. It is embodied in the following four aspects.

### 3.1 A Place Called Home

The important concept in Minangkabau society is *suku*. The same *suku* means all members of that are considered to be from the same female ancestor. The most basic political and economic unit of Minangkabau society is the matrilineal lineage called *kaum* or *pariuk*. Usually, members that include five generations form the *sekaum*. They generally live in the same house and work and produce together for the prosperity of this family. In the past, traditional houses often accommodated the members from one *kaum*. According to Willinck's research, in the Highlands, a single *rumah-kamanakan* sometimes houses seventy to eighty people descended from the same ancestral mother [12]. Muhamad Radjab mentioned in his autobiography, "when I was a child (in the year of 1910), my family's ancestral house was about 16 meters long and 8 meters wide. The floor was 2.5 meters above the ground. There were seven rooms in the house, and each room was the home to a married woman and her children. At that time, about 40 people lived in that house" [13]. Because it takes a lot of energy and financial resources to build and maintain a traditional house, the number of families willing to build a new house is becoming less and less. Kato's research shows that the proportion of adat houses in IV Angkat was nearly 69% in the early 20th century, but only left 13% of 395 houses were adat houses in the 1970s. New adat houses are seldom built, only 5% cases were a new adat house built during the past thirty years. The average estimated percentage of Minangkabau houses per village goes up from 9% to 13%. It is very close to Syafei's research, that is, 8%-12% of the houses are traditional houses [14]. Data from Kinari shows that the percentage of traditional houses in 2011 is nearly 15%, much higher than the average data of West Sumatra in the 1970s. However, the number of modern houses is nearly 5 times the number of traditional houses [15].

According to villager S, the construction of a modern house named *gedung* in Kinari village lasted about 20 years, from the 1960s until the 1980s. Building a modern house has become a mainstream living style of its low cost and durability. S stated that the villagers started building houses after planting cocoa and cloves, which increased their income, therefore improving their living conditions.

With the increase in modern houses and the emergence of nuclear families, the number of people living in traditional houses has been greatly reduced. In Kinari, there are very few cases where married sisters live together in one traditional house. In 2015, the percentage of the nuclear family in Kinari was 79.14%, the expanded family accounted for 13.43%, and the single-parent households and single-family households occupied 5.71% and 1.14%, respectively. These sampling statistics based on demographics and household registration. Generally, people who can move out will choose to build the new houses nearby, and those who can not afford to build new houses or the youngest daughters will stay with their mothers in the traditional houses if they have one.

Although there are still many traditional houses inhabited, traditional houses are no longer the home for the matrilineal lineages. It will become a temporary place of residence for the big matrilineal family only during the *Eid al-Fitr* holiday and *Eid al-Adha* holiday. Meanwhile, some traditional houses are now vacant in daily life because families are living in their own modern houses.

### 3.2 A Place for Traditional Education

Traditional houses became the centre of education for women members in the community, but it was also one of the kinship ties. Traditionally, only women could have rooms in the *gadang* house, while a boy would leave the house and stay in the prayer rooms (*surau*) of his lineage when he was seven years old. Girls were taught how to be elegant and how to treat their family well. Meanwhile, boys needed to learn religious knowledge and martial arts in *surau*. Due to the outbreak of war and the two political turmoil in the 20th century, more and more parents are hesitant to let young boys live in *surau*.

With the promotion of education in the country, improvement of local education, and parents' attitudes towards sending children to school, girls have more opportunities to get a secular education. Villager K even had studied in Jakarta in 1938 and became a teacher in Padang later. Now, Indonesians are required to attend 12 years of school. The 12-year compulsory education program launched by the Education and Culture Ministry in 2013 replaced the previous nine-year compulsory education program launched in 1994 [16]. Currently, there are four kindergartens, four primary schools, and one middle school in Kinari. Children spend much more time in school with their classmates and teachers compared with their parents.

Also, most parents have to work in the daytime, in the factory, or on the farm. Nowadays, more and more children are being cared for by grandparents. So, traditional houses function as the place for teaching and learning traditional knowledge has become weaker and weaker.

### 3.3 A Place for Ceremonies

A traditional house is a place for traditional ceremonies, such as marriage, funeral, religious recitation, and the clan head's inauguration. Until now, this function is still preserved. When I asked the villagers why they needed to build or repair the traditional house, most of them said they needed to use it for marriages and funerals. Although modern society's fast pace has prompted more and more young people to hold weddings in towns, if they want to have a wedding in the village, it must be held in the traditional houses. Nearly five years ago, clan heads and community leaders of Kinari made an agreement that the bride's family had to hold the traditional wedding before the modern one in Kinari. The traditional wedding has to behold in a traditional house. As we know, males can get a title from their lineage only after the traditional wedding. So

traditional house plays an important role in the traditional wedding. The villagers will feel ashamed if they do not have a traditional house to hold a wedding. If someone does not have his own traditional house, he should borrow one from his closest lineage.

If a Kinari villager has died, the whole village will be informed by local mosque's announcement. Then, the bereaved family will hold a death ceremony at the traditional house. The relatives will clean the body of the dead and recite the Qur'an there. The villagers will visit the family and mourn for the dead. Although the living room is big in a modern house, it can only accommodate nearly ten people. By contrast, traditional houses can afford more people at once. Therefore, it is more convenient to receive visitors from the whole village in a traditional house.

Villagers mention the word "*peduli*" (care about) many times when asked why they still need traditional houses when they already have new houses. Caring about marriage and funeral symbolizing two important parts of the life cycle means caring about the traditional Minangkabau culture, the close relationship of matrilineal families, the *gotong-royong* (cooperation) spirit, and Minangkabau identity.

### 3.4 A Place as Social Status Symbol

As many researchers have mentioned, not all villagers can own traditional houses; only indigenous people have the right to build them. So, traditional houses are a status symbol of the family. In the old days, the villagers who had traditional houses usually had more property because their ancestors lived there for a long time and gained more land than others. Usually, the size of a traditional house also reflects the wealth of the family. Even today, when someone is in love, the elders in the family usually ask where their lovers' traditional house is to judge whether it is a suitable choice.

Although the traditional house construction was rarely done in Kinari after the 1970s, there are still five traditional houses built or enlarged around the 1980s and one modern style traditional house built in the 1990s. These houses are all funded by successful *perantau* who are going outside to look for a living. It is hard to build a traditional house for a villager because the cost is relatively high. It was said that building a traditional house now needed at least three billion rupiahs ( $\approx$ 210583 US dollars). If someone wants to have ornamental carvings for decoration, the cost will be higher because the number of craftsmen who are good at carving decreases greatly, and the engraving process takes a long time.

*Merantau* is a socially and culturally institutionalized pattern of migration in Minangkabau society. Minangkabau society encourages younger people to *merantau* to gain more wealth. According to the investigation, most of *perantau* Kinari made a financial contribution to the traditional houses' maintenance. Marcel Vellinga found that Abai villagers are still keen to build

or renovate the traditional houses because they can be regarded as strategic instruments used to constitute social differentiation [17]. Reenen thought that the members of the 'house with eleven rooms' in *Rao-Rao* seem to underline and reinforce their status as a wealthy and honourable group [18]. In Kinari, the newly built or renovated traditional houses also become a symbol of the successful family by modern standards.

#### 4 Conclusion

Since the 1970s, the number of traditional houses has been decreasing. Although there are still 146 traditional houses in Kinari, their functions have changed dramatically. First, traditional houses no longer accommodate all the same *kaum*, although it still belongs to the female members. Some traditional houses accommodate one nuclear family or one extended family only. Second, the traditional house's function as the place for teaching and learning traditional knowledge has become weaker and weaker because of the flourishing development of educational institutions in Indonesia, whether for secular education or religious education. Concerning the two remaining important functions, namely the place of important ceremonies and social status symbols. In the village, people to a great extent still choose to hold weddings and funerals in the traditional house. Although the symbol of social status also changed from the primitive settlers to the successful *perantau*, the traditional house reflects the owner's social status.

These changes are derived from social changes, including changes in family structure, household income, the national education system, personal awareness, and differences in understanding traditional culture. The development of society will progressively bring about functional changes to the traditional house. It will find that functional practicability has changed if more details were compared, but the ritual and social functions have been preserved because these two functions reflect the core of the Minangkabau culture. Although some functions of the traditional house have changed, their core functions have not changed.



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