

Islamic Public Values in Action: Learning from Nagari Minangkabau's Approach to Public Governance

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Abstract

This study explores the *Nagari* as an indigenous institution within the Minangkabau culture of West Sumatra, Indonesia, emphasizing its role in governance and decision-making processes. Characterized by unique customs and autonomy, the Nagari functions as a self-governing entity that harmonizes traditional Minangkabau customs with Islamic values. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted from July to November 2023 in three Nagari – Sumpur, Taram, and Pasilihan – data were gathered through observations and interviews with community leaders. The findings reveal that decision-making is primarily achieved through *musyawarah* (consensus deliberation), ensuring inclusive participation and reflecting the community's values. The leadership structure, comprising kinship leaders, Islamic scholars, and knowledgeable individuals, fosters a balance between tradition and religion. This research highlights the significance of the Nagari as a model of effective governance that prioritizes community engagement and cultural identity, suggesting its resilience and adaptability in the face of contemporary challenges while providing insights into indigenous governance systems.

Keywords: Non-Western Public Administration (NWPA), Public Governance, Islamic Public Value, Indigenous Cooperative Institutions, Minangkabau.

Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelagic state, home to a multitude of ethnic groups, each with unique customs and cultural practices. These diverse communities are distributed across thousands of islands, both large and small, along the equatorial line from Sabang to Merauke. Among these ethnicities is the Minangkabau. The Minangkabau ethnic group is one of the largest in Indonesia, significantly dominating the West Sumatra region. According to the 2020 Indonesian Population Census, the Minangkabau population reached approximately 4,777,438 individuals in West Sumatra. Their cultural uniqueness has persisted for centuries, with the earliest references to the name "Minangkabau" appearing in a list from the Majapahit kingdom in Java in 1365 AD, which detailed the main Malay rulers. This name reemerges in the Ming

Chronicles of 1405 and in the *Nagarakartagama*, a work by Mpu Prapanca in the *Desawarna* section (Robson 1995). This historical context suggests that the Minangkabau have been recognized as a highland community for over 600 years.

Characterized by a rich tapestry of customs and linguistic unity, the Minangkabau culture extends from the heart of the highland villages, known as *Nagari-Nagari*, in the Darek region to expansive territories across the island. In the eastern part of Sumatra, Minangkabau culture interacts and intertwines with that of the coastal Malay world, while to the south, the Minangkabau engage with the communities of Bengkulu and Jambi, influencing local politics and customs (Znoj 2001). Historically, the Minangkabau have garnered recognition for their democratic way of life, which emphasizes consensus-based decision-making and community engagement in resolving societal issues. The *Nagari*, as an institution, is not only a territorial entity but also a vital aspect of the Minangkabau's genealogical and cultural identity. It serves as both a governmental body and a principal social institution, often described as a "mini republic" due to its clear territorial boundaries and autonomous governance structures that regulate the lives of its members (Manan 1995). As a confederation of regions within the Minangkabau governance framework, the *Nagari* possesses the authority to manage its own affairs (Kato 1982).

In contemporary times, the *Nagari* system, rooted in Minangkabau customary law, has adapted to various political regimes in Indonesia, yet the core principles of governance and the integration of democratic values remain integral to the cultural fabric of Minangkabau society. Hasan (2004) discovered that the social capital embedded in Minangkabau culture, particularly democratic values, remains preserved within the structure of *Nagari* culture. However, certain governance challenges persist, namely: (1) *Nagari* bureaucrats issuing regulations that contradict traditional democratic principles, both in terms of institutional structures and decision-making processes and (2) the low economic status and educational level of the community, which often hinder participation in *Nagari* governance.

Theoretical Framework: Decision-Making in Non-Western Public Administration

Decision-making is a critical process in public governance, encompassing the selection of a behavioral alternative from multiple options. Terry (1971) defines decision-making as a conscious response to various alternatives, involving an analysis of their potential outcomes. Similarly, Siagian (2005) describes it as the process of gathering relevant data to inform a choice among available alternatives. This indicates that decision-making is intentional and requires careful consideration rather than arbitrary choice; it necessitates clear identification of the problem at hand and analysis of the best alternatives available.

The decision-making process serves several essential functions within the framework of public governance:

1. It marks the starting point for all directed human activities, whether undertaken individually or collectively.
2. It is inherently future-oriented, as decisions relate to anticipated outcomes and can have long-lasting effects.

Incorporating the decision-making processes grounded in consensus deliberation, as exemplified in the Minangkabau Nagari, enriches the understanding of non-Western public administration (NWPAs). These processes underscore the integration of cultural values, ethical considerations, and communal engagement in public governance. By emphasizing deliberative decision-making as a fundamental aspect of governance, NWPAs highlight the potential for diverse models that foster inclusive and contextually relevant practices in public administration, ultimately contributing to a more pluralistic understanding of governance in a global context.

Methods

In this research, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three Nagari – Sumpur, Taram, and Pasilihan – important traditional centers in the Minangkabau community of West Sumatra, Indonesia. We gathered data through observations, interviews, and external sources, as suggested by Sangasubana (2011). The data were then analyzed as case studies within their specific contexts (Hancock et al. 2021), and we examined how these Nagari shape Islamic public values through Minangkabau customs (Denzin 2015, 2017). The fieldwork lasted from July to November 2023, beginning with preliminary observations and followed by interviews with 13 community leaders, including *ninik mamak*, *cadiak pandai*, and *alim ulama* from the three Nagari (see chapter bibliography). We also held follow-up discussions via phone throughout the research period. Our focus was on the daily rituals and practices of the indigenous Minangkabau communities, which allowed us to understand the roles and responsibilities of community leaders. We explored how these communities blend traditional customs with Islamic values in their local governance. A key finding was the decision-making process through *musyawarah*, or consensus deliberation. This practice involves community members engaging in open discussions to reach collective agreements, ensuring that decisions reflect the community's values and needs. In summary, we found a harmonious integration of indigenous public values and Islamic teachings within the Nagari. Despite the usual research limitations, our study serves as an important first step in understanding indigenous institutions in West Sumatra and contributes to discussions about governance structures. We acknowledge these limitations and hope future research will build on our initial findings.

Results and Discussion

Nagari: Indigenous Institution with Special Recognition

"Cupak salingka batuang, adat salingka nagari; diasaknyo layua, kok dicabuiknyo mati; lain padang lain bilalang, lain lubuak lain ikannyo." [The customs of each Nagari are unique; if exchanged, they no longer hold, different grasslands, different locusts, different ponds, different fish]. The Nagari is governed by a centralized authority within the Nagari itself.

The introduction of Islam to Minangkabau has had a significant impact on various aspects of society, including public governance. Nagari represents the embodiment of the Minangkabau customary community structure, which is shaped by both blood relations (genealogical) and territorial similarities (Latief 2004). Sasmita (2010) defined Nagari as a self-governing institution with its own government, encompassing a unified community governed by comprehensive customary laws and regulations that oversee community life. Each Nagari possesses its own unique characteristics, including its customs and traditions, which cannot be imposed upon other Nagari. This concept is known as *Adat Salingka Nagari* (Asrinaldi and Yoserizal 2020). This is further reinforced by Effendi (2003), who emphasized that each Nagari has its own authority, independent of other Nagari. This autonomy is underscored by the expression "*lain lubuak lain ikannyo, lain ladang, lain bilalang; lain nagari, lain adaiknyo*" [different ponds have different fish, different fields, different locusts; different Nagari, different customs]. The conditions for the establishment of a Nagari include having four *suku* (clans), a mosque, a community hall, a burial ground, and so on.

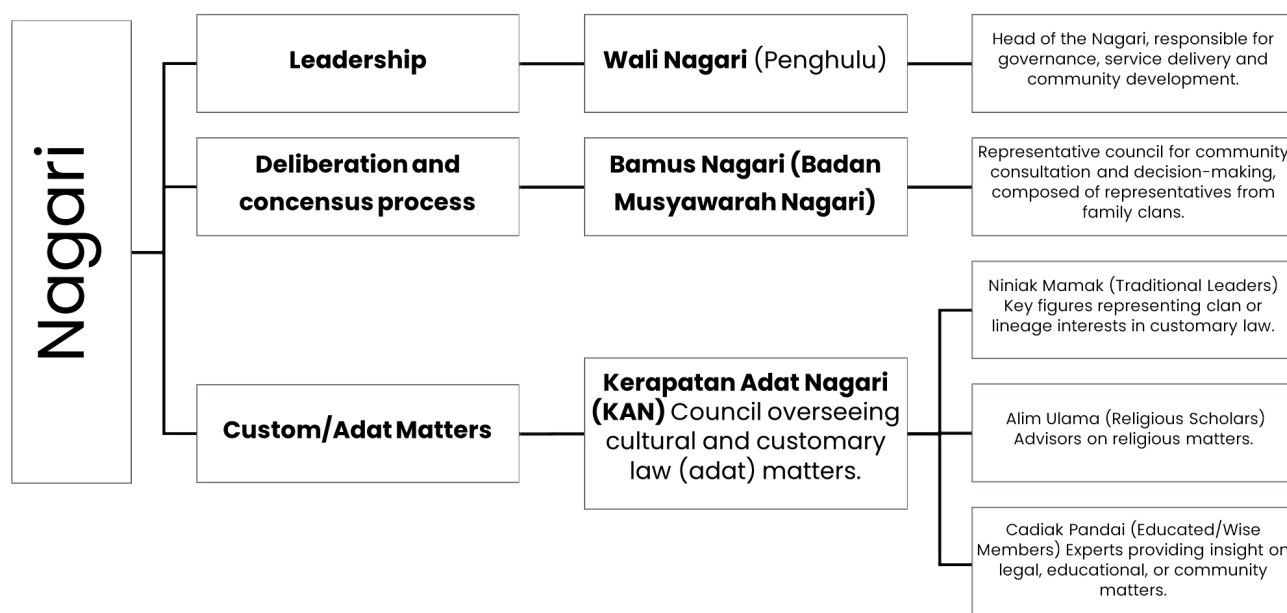


Figure 1. Nagari organizational structure by key actors. Source: Own elaboration (2024).

In addition, Azwar et al. (2018) the lowest-level government institution in West Sumatra, serves as the foundation of governance for the Minangkabau ethnic group, granting them customary rights and autonomy. As illustrated in Figure 1, each actor within the Nagari structure holds distinct functions while working collaboratively to uphold and preserve Minangkabau traditions. Nagari is a traditional name and political unit of the Minangkabau socio-political organization (Asrinaldi and Yoserizal 2020; F. V. Benda-Beckmann and V. Benda-Beckmann 2012) and currently serves as the lowest level of government in West Sumatra. As a political entity, Nagari should be seen as a political institution that undergoes institutional dualism during its transformation; apart from being governed by plural regulations and laws (K. V.

Benda-Beckmann and V. Benda-Beckmann 2021), this transformation has led to an ambiguous division of responsibilities between the state and the Nagari, such as in the determination of inheritance and resource ownership.

The influence of Adat, Basandi Syarak, and Syarak, Basandi Kitabullah (ABS-SBK) on the structure of the Nagari is evident through the presence of the *Kerapatan Adat Nagari* (KAN), which includes several institutional elements,¹ namely *alim ulama* and *cadiak pandai*. These institutional elements generally function to absorb the aspirations of the community and convey them to the Nagari government. In addition, they have programs aligned with their respective functions. Apart from the Nagari government and KAN, some Nagari have another institution known as *Majelis Ulama Nagari* (MUNA). The existence of the *Majelis Ulama Nagari* results in its own interpretation of *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*, where in Nagari Pasilihan and Taram, they interpret KAN as *Niniak Mamak*, MUNA as *Alim Ulama*, and Wali Nagari as *Cadiak Pandai*. In fulfilling their roles, all these institutions are based on the values of ABS-SBK.

In terms of social leadership within the Minangkabau community, the influence of Islam is evident in the structure of the *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan*, which consists of *Niniak Mamak* (kinship leaders), *Alim Ulama* (Islamic scholars), and *Cadiak Pandai* (intelligent and wise individuals). The leadership of *Niniak Mamak* is related to customs, represented by the proverb "*tinggi tampak jauh, gadang tampak dakek, ba padang laeh ba alam leba, nan tinggi dek dianjuang, nan gadang dek diambak*" [the tall can be seen from afar, the large can be seen from nearby, when high it is sought, when large it is supported]. The role of *Alim Ulama* is to guide and safeguard the community in their worldly and afterlife affairs according to Islamic teachings, symbolized by the proverb "*suluah dalam nagari, palito nan indak panah padam, nan manunjuak mengajari untuk bajalan luruih, bakato bana*" [in every village, a teacher who never fades, one who points out the right path, the guide]. The leadership of *Cadiak Pandai* is related to individuals who can solve problems together with *Niniak Mamak* and *Alim Ulama*. They are intelligent and clever in resolving community issues (Chlaudina 2021).

Decision-Making Process in Nagari

The concept of Nagari in Minangkabau culture, as described by various scholars, is a unique institution that serves both as a territorial and genealogical entity. According to Naim (1990), the Nagari is a microcosmic symbol of a broader macrocosmic order, functioning as a system that fulfills the embryonic requirements of a "state" in miniature form. This self-sustaining and autonomous system has often been referred to as "small republics" by foreign writers, given its ability to govern itself independently.

The Nagari is not merely a territorial unit but also a major social and governmental institution. It embodies the three main elements of governance – legislative, executive, and judicial – and serves as a holistic unity for various socio-cultural structures. The Nagari system, as an autonomous public entity, is likened to a mini-republic with clear territorial boundaries and its own government and customs that regulate the lives of its members (Manan 1995). Furthermore, it operates as a confederation of regions within the Minangkabau governance structure, with the authority to manage its own affairs (Kato 1982).

¹ Not all KAN (*Kerapatan Adat Nagari*) in the Nagari have the same institutional elements. This is because each Nagari has its own customs according to the mutual customs of the Nagari. For example, in Nagari Taram, there is a KAN with its own independent structure comprising *Tuanku 21* (the head of the assembly), *Pegawai Adat* (customary officers), and *Dubalang* (village head).

Historically, the bond of Nagari in Minangkabau was not only primordial and consanguineal, rooted in regional and customary kinship ties, but also structurally functional in terms of effective territorial governance. Over time, the Nagari system, which is grounded in Minangkabau customary law, has undergone various modifications in response to the political regimes governing Indonesia. Despite these changes, the fundamental principles of the Nagari, such as its autonomous nature and the integration of democratic values, remain preserved within the broader cultural framework of Minangkabau society

The legal foundation of Minangkabau originates from the Marapalam Agreement, which took place in 1837 following the Padri War. In this agreement, *all adat* (customary law) leaders were gathered. They unanimously agreed that the Minangkabau ideology is *adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*, which means that *adat* (custom) must conform to Islamic principles, signified by the phrase *syarak mangato, adat mamakai* (the law dictates, and the custom follows). This implies that if a custom is not aligned with Islamic law, the custom must adapt to Islamic concepts.

To execute activities within the Nagari (village community), Minangkabau has its own set of rules encapsulated in the legal framework known as *hukum adat salingka nagari* (translation in English). This legal framework is supported by several facilities, such as mosques and *balai* (council halls), which serve as decision-making venues in each Nagari. Before a legal decision is made in the *balairung* (council chamber), a deliberation process is conducted in the mosque or *surau* (prayer house), as reflected in the traditional saying: "*bulek kato dek mufakat, bulek aia dek pambuluah*" (consensus shapes words, as bamboo shapes water).

If the issue cannot be resolved in the *surau*, it is then brought to the *balai-balai*, and if no solution is found there, the case proceeds to court. These two places, the mosque and the *balairung*, are the main symbols of justice enforcement in a Nagari, often described with the phrase: "*camin nan tidak kabuah, palito nan tidak padam*" (a mirror that does not break, a flame that does not extinguish).

Furthermore, both institutions, especially the *surau*, play a crucial role in fostering a morally upright society in accordance with Islamic law. The *surau* serves not only as a place of worship but also as a center for conflict resolution. In the decision-making process, *adat* leaders or *penghulu* (chieftains) refer to the *adat* law, which is a set of regulations derived from the primary legal source of "*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi kitabullah*." This *adat* law governs several areas, including:

- a. Relationships between Nagari, luhak (territories), and rantau (outlying regions).
- b. The security and prosperity of the Nagari community.
- c. The *jihad nan ampekor* collaboration between the *urang nan ampek jinih* (the four groups of leaders) who manage leadership responsibilities.
- d. The relationship between *penghulu* and their kinship network.
- e. In cases of disputes, resolutions are sought through a hierarchical decision-making principle known as *bajanjang naiak batanggo turun* (ascending steps and descending ladders).

Musyawarah, Mufakat: Deliberation for Concession

Musyawarah mufakat, or consensus-based deliberation, is a defining characteristic of Minangkabau society. This process is fundamental in the selection of the Karapatan Adat Nagari (Customary Council) leader and various community representatives, facilitated through collective discussions (Bahari et al. 2022). It is essential to note that direct elections are exclusively reserved for the appointment of the *Wali Nagari* (village head). In scholarly literature, *musyawarah* is depicted as a traditional Minangkabau practice characterized by consensus-building through extensive discussions. This approach involves gathering community members, including respected figures such as *Ninik Mamak* and other elders, to engage in dialogue and reach a collective agreement on significant community matters (Firdaus 2017). *Musyawarah* serves as an inclusive forum for open discussions, ensuring that diverse perspectives and opinions are acknowledged and considered. This practice reflects the principles of inclusivity, active participation, and mutual respect within the Minangkabau community, fostering consensus and unity for decisions made in the best interest of the community as a whole. The values of cooperation and communal decision-making are deeply embedded in Minangkabau culture (Abdullah 1966).

Leadership Selection through Musyawarah

The selection process for the Karapatan Adat Nagari (KAN) leader in Nagari Sumpur exemplifies the practice of *musyawarah* among the *datuak* (local leaders or respected elders) (S1). This traditional method of decision-making highlights the Minangkabau commitment to inclusivity and consensus-building. Similar *musyawarah* practices are observed in Nagari Taram and Pasilihan for selecting the KAN leader, emphasizing community participation in decision-making (T1, P1).

In Nagari Taram, a selection committee is formed by the 24 *Ninik mamak* before the incumbent KAN leader's term expires. These *Ninik Mamak* play a crucial role in various community affairs, including leadership selection (T1). Potential candidates for the KAN leader position are identified based on their experience, wisdom, and standing within the community. The final decision is made through a *musyawarah*, where the merits and qualifications of each candidate are discussed openly. The emphasis is on inclusivity and respect, ensuring that all voices are considered in the collective decision-making process (T1).

Collective Decision-Making and Community Engagement

The leadership selection process based on *musyawarah* underscores the Minangkabau commitment to preserving cultural traditions and ensuring collective decision-making that respects the perspectives of all community members. This practice fosters unity and harmony while promoting community engagement and participation. *Musyawarah* is also applied in the leadership selection processes of other constituent institutions, such as *Alim Ulama* (Islamic scholars), *Cadiak Pandai* (intellectuals), and *Bundo Kandung* (female elders). In these contexts, voting is not utilized (S2) (S4) (P4) (T4), with the members of these institutions selected by the Karapatan Adat Nagari (KAN) and subsequently engaging in *musyawarah* to choose their leaders (S2).

Consensus and Community Regulation

Decisions made within the KAN framework stem from *musyawarah* and do not involve voting (S1) (T1). Issues are addressed through consensus-building, and if consensus cannot be reached, discussions are postponed until agreement is achieved. Lobbying may also occur to facilitate consensus (T1) (P1). This approach extends to community-level decisions, where *musyawarah* guides the establishment of regulations, such as those related to fishing rights, ensuring they are aligned with community interests and environmental protection (S6).

For instance, in Nagari Pasilihan, regulations allow fishing in designated areas on specific days while prohibiting harmful methods such as using bombs or poison (P1). In Nagari Sumpur, community feedback led to a reduction in the amount of meat allowed for wedding feasts, illustrating responsiveness to community aspirations (S1).

The *musyawarah* process involves listening to the opinions of each participating institution, with aspirations communicated by the *Ninik Mamak* of each clan (S1). In Nagari Taram, tiered discussions culminate in meetings with *Ninik Mamak*, ensuring a comprehensive decision-making approach (T6).

Resolving Community Issues

One notable instance of *musyawarah* in action is the resolution of issues surrounding *nikah siri* (informal marriage) in Nagari Taram. Although discussions began with the *Wali Nagari* (village chief), the ultimate resolution emerged from deliberations among the *Ninik Mamak* (T1). Two specific venues facilitate this dialogue: the *balai koto*, where all *Ninik Mamak* gather, and the *Balai Tengah*, designated for particularly challenging discussions (T1).

In addressing family-related issues within the Nagari, traditional leaders from the affected clan are initially consulted (S1) (T1) (P1). If necessary, the issue escalates to the KAN, particularly for matters related to *adat* (customary law) (S1) (T1) (P1). Community matters are addressed within the Nagari itself, with ongoing communication between the *Wali Nagari* and the KAN (T1).

During larger forums like *Musrembang* or when addressing Nagari issues, all institutions have opportunities to share their perspectives. Disagreements may arise, but input is sought from various community layers, including institutions such as *Bundo Kanduang*, whose suggestions can influence decisions, such as identifying recipients of financial aid (BLT) (P4).

Elaboration on Nagari as an Indigenous Institution

The concept of *Nagari* as an indigenous institution within Minangkabau culture carries profound significance, representing a complex system of governance and social organization that has evolved over centuries. The aphorism "*Cupak salingka batuang, adat salingka nagari*" [translation in English] captures the essence of this institution, emphasizing the uniqueness of each Nagari's customs and practices. This reflects the deeply rooted belief that each Nagari is distinct, governed by its own set of traditions and laws, which are inseparable from its identity and existence.

Central to the governance of Nagari is the notion of *Adat Salingka Nagari*, which recognizes the autonomy and individual character of each Nagari, as articulated by scholars such as Asrinaldi and Yoserizal (2020). This autonomy allows each Nagari to establish its own regulations, ensuring that the customs are tailored to the specific needs and values of the local community. Moreover, the assertion that "*lain lubuak lain ikannyo*" reinforces the idea that the practices of one Nagari cannot be imposed on another, further highlighting the cultural diversity within the Minangkabau society (Azwar et al, 2018).

The structural organization of Nagari, encompassing elements such as kinship ties and territorial integrity, fosters a sense of unity among its members. As Sasmita (2010) noted, the Nagari serves as a self-governing entity, embodying a comprehensive set of customary laws that dictate communal life. This self-governance is exemplified through various institutions, including the *Kerapatan Adat Nagari* (KAN) and *Majelis Ulama Nagari* (MUNA), which play crucial roles in articulating community aspirations and facilitating governance based on the values of ABS-SBK (*Adat, Basandi Syarak, and Syarak, Basandi Kitabullah*).

The intertwining of Islamic principles with local customs further influences the governance of Nagari. The *Tungku Tigo Sajarangan* model illustrates the tripartite leadership structure comprising *Niniak Mamak*, *Alim Ulama*, and *Cadiak Pandai*. Each of these leaders contributes to the decision-making process by addressing both social and spiritual matters, reinforcing the integration of Islamic values into traditional governance.

Conclusion

Nagari serves as a vital institution within the Minangkabau community, reflecting a unique blend of customary law and Islamic principles that governs public life. Its structure fosters a robust decision-making process grounded in *musyawarah*, promoting collective deliberation and consensus-building among community members. This approach not only reinforces the cultural identity of each Nagari but also ensures that governance aligns with the needs and aspirations of its people. The evolution of Nagari governance, particularly in the context of institutional dualism, highlights the adaptability of this indigenous institution amid changing political landscapes. The foundational principles established in the Marapalam Agreement, emphasizing the compatibility of *adat* and Islamic law, remain a guiding force in the administration of community affairs. Despite the challenges posed by contemporary governance structures, the Nagari's enduring principles of autonomy and communal participation serve as a model for effective governance. By upholding the values of *musyawarah*, the Nagari exemplifies how traditional institutions can continue to thrive and maintain their relevance in modern society, contributing significantly to the broader discourse on governance and cultural preservation in West Sumatra. Future research may build upon these insights, exploring the dynamics of Nagari governance in the context of globalization and its implications for the Minangkabau community.

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