

Research Article

“Galeh Babelok” Traders in West Sumatra: The Role of Minang Women in Traditional Markets

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This paper delineates the history and profile of Minang female traders operating within the “Galeh Babelok” system across three traditional markets in the province of West Sumatra, Indonesia. Traditional markets constitute an essential part of daily life, serving as hubs for meeting various socio-cultural needs. The historical presence of Minang women in these markets, particularly under the “Galeh Babelok” system, is undeniable. This study examined the current status of Minang women traders who engage in the traditional practice of “*balai ka balai*” or “*pakan ka pakan*”. Employing a feminist anthropological approach grounded in qualitative methodology, the study presented a case analysis of Minang Women Traders in three traditional markets in West Sumatra. Data collection methods included literature review, interviews, observations, and life stories, subsequently analyzed qualitatively and descriptively. The findings underscored the enduring role of Minang traders within the “Galeh Babelok” system across traditional markets in West Sumatra. Historical documentation revealed the substantial involvement of married Minang women in the traditional market of Minangkabau. Their profile as “*nan tageh*” or assertive women, often characterized by dominant masculinity, is reinforced through their trading practices. Despite averaging in their 40s or older, these traders exhibited adeptness in deploying various strategies to navigate between market dynamics and familial responsibilities, ensuring the continuity of their family’s economic well-being.

Keywords: Galeh Babelok, Traditional Markets, Minang Women, Adaptive Strategies, Balai ka Balai

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Published: 30 July 2024

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the 2nd ICGCS Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

In general, traditional markets play an integral role in the lives of communities, particularly for women who leverage their advantages and flexibility, making trading in these markets a professional choice. Traditional markets serve not only as transactional spaces but also as communal hubs capable of supporting many individuals. Simply put, markets serve as meeting points where sellers and buyers engage in direct transactions through bargaining processes.

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As stated by Geertz (1963), markets form a crucial link in the daily lives of communities, encompassing consumption activities and serving as economic mechanisms embedded within socio-cultural systems. The distribution of goods and services within traditional markets reflects the demand for simple and quickly sellable goods. According to Nasikun (1984), markets hold a particular allure for female workers, with women's dominance in trade, especially within traditional markets, being longstanding. Women's involvement in various aspects of market operations, from providing food and maintaining stall cleanliness to setting prices and fostering relationships with stall owners, underscores their pivotal role in the trading chain.

In Minangkabau society, as noted by Damsar et al. (2016), three distinct concepts define markets: "*pasa*," "*pakan*," and "*balai*." *Pasa* denotes a state of continuous crowds. According to Minangkabau custom, "*pasa jalan dek batampuah*," (the road is accessible because it is trod). This means that the road becomes a market because it is passed repeatedly and continuously. In the Minangkabau and Malay meaning, a road becomes a market if it is continuously passed. *Pakan*, on the other hand, refers to weekly market gatherings held on specific days, such as "*sinayan pakan*" (Monday market) or "*kamih pakan*" (Thursday market). Meanwhile, "*balai*" signifies a meeting place for traditional leaders to deliberate and make decisions for the community. Some markets in Minangkabau are referred to as "*pakan*" or "*balai*."

The historical presence of Minang women as traders in traditional markets, including within the *Galeh Babelok* system, is well-documented. The term *Galeh Babelok* refers to goods or objects for sale that traders rotate between markets weekly around villages in West Sumatra. Minang women adhering to the *Galeh Babelok* system sell their goods according to the scheduled market rotations in each *nagari*, or village.

As society progresses, traditional markets face challenges from evolving dynamics. Government intervention in market management, impacting scheduling systems for market activities, is increasingly evident. Malano (2011) observes a decline in the popularity of traditional markets among the public compared to modern markets.

This article delves into the history and profile of Minang women engaged in the traditional *Galeh Babelok* trade process across three traditional markets in West Sumatra Province. It also analyzes how Minang women traders navigate the current conditions of the traditional market system while adhering to the *Galeh Babelok* system.

2. Research Method

The research relies on feminist ethnographic methods, employing a feminist anthropological approach as outlined by scholars such as Wolf (1992), Gordon (1996), and Reinharz (2005). The study adopts a multisite case study design, focusing on three traditional markets in West Sumatra: Padang Luar Market, Koto Baru Market, and Padang Panjang Market. Informant selection employs purposive sampling techniques, with key informants being Minang women traders operating within the “Galeh Babelok” system, while ordinary informants include family members, traditional leaders, and market stakeholders.

Data collection techniques encompass literature reviews, in-depth interviews, participatory observations, life story narratives, and focus group discussions. Data analysis commenced during fieldwork, utilizing logical framework analysis and management by objectives methodologies to ensure objective analysis. The analytical process follows the interactive model proposed by Huberman and Miles (1994), involving stages such as data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion, which includes depiction and verification. Data are categorized thematically, interpreted through emic and ethical perspectives, and presented in the form of comprehensive reports.

3. Results

A. General Conditions of Minang Traditional Markets in West Sumatra

The exact inception of markets among the Minangkabau people remains uncertain. However, according to *tambo* records, the establishment of a *nagari* (village) traditionally necessitates the presence of a market within it. In the Minangkabau conception of *nagari* life, certain requirements must be met for a village to be considered as such. The first of these is that it is *babalai*, it has a village hall and a market, often situated adjacently. A *nagari* is deemed complete if it fulfills five criteria: it has roads, is edged, has a hall and market, a mosque, and roaming activities. Failure to meet these criteria results in the village being classified as a hamlet or *taratak*, even if it has a chieftain (Dt. Sanggoeno Diradjo, 2009).

Throughout Minangkabau history, every *nagari* has typically been accompanied by a traditional market. Market activities have been ingrained in Minangkabau society for a significant period, evidenced by the existence of market-oriented economic resources that have long been traded. These resources include gold and silver mined products,

agricultural produce such as vegetables, coffee, tobacco, cloves, cinnamon, forest products like rattan, and handicrafts woven from pandan mats and bamboo. Boelhouwer, as cited in Dobbin's notes, documented the existence of 29 markets in the Tanah Datar area, 15 markets in Agam, and 14 markets in Lima Puluh Koto in 1825, with notable markets like the expansive one in Payakumbuh alongside numerous smaller markets.

B. Management System for Three Minang Traditional Markets

Based on the data findings, traditional markets in West Sumatra consist of three main groups of traders:

1. Collectors/Middlemen: These traders purchase goods from farmers and then resell them to sending traders outside the area.
2. Sending Traders: This group directly purchases goods from farmers, collectors, or middlemen and promptly sells them outside the area.
3. Retail Traders, further divided into:
 - (a) *Inpres* Kiosk Traders: These traders operate within buildings established by the regional government to sell daily necessities.
 - (b) *Los* Traders: These traders occupy buildings constructed by regional governments, typically large structures without walls.
 - (c) Street Vendors: These traders set up stalls on the verandas of the market. They lack legal ownership rights and often compete for trading space.

4. Koto Baru Market

Nagari Koto Baru, situated in X Koto District, Tanah Datar Regency, is strategically located at the base of Mount Marapi, bordered by the municipalities of Bukittinggi and Padang Panjang, and directly adjacent to Agam Regency. Blessed with fertile land, Nagari Koto Baru boasts significant potential for agricultural and plantation development. The natural splendor surrounding Mount Marapi, coupled with its abundant Type A vegetables (low in calories and carbohydrates), serves as a major draw, significantly supporting vegetable marketing endeavors.

Market management in Nagari Koto Baru is overseen by the local government, with the *nagari* guardian assuming responsibility for establishing a hierarchical structure to manage market affairs. This structure typically includes roles such as the market chairman, market secretary, parking attendants, fee collectors, and more. The market provides various facilities for traders, including kiosks and market stalls. Each section

of the market offers designated spaces and tables for traders. Fee collection typically occurs on market days, with kiosk fees paid monthly. Revenues collected from traders are channeled to the nagari for the development of market infrastructure.

Koto Baru Market functions as a union market or *nagari* type A market, conducting buying and selling transactions on Mondays and Tuesdays. Mondays are dedicated to the sale of harvested vegetables from surrounding areas such as Koto Baru, Panyalaian, Pandai Sikek, and Singgalang. Vegetable farming is predominantly carried out by women, although men also participate. Harvested produce, including potatoes, carrots, cabbage, chilies, and shallots, is cleaned, packed into sacks, and transported directly to Koto Baru Market. Upon arrival, farmers often engage with brokers or middlemen for sales transactions. Some middlemen even visit farmers' fields to procure harvests. Notably, both men and women serve as middlemen. Goods acquired from farmers are then distributed by middlemen to various destinations such as Padang, Bukittinggi, Padangpanjang, and even provinces like Riau and Jambi. Mondays witness a bustling market environment, with transactions amounting to significant sums, sometimes reaching up to 3 billion IDR (USD 191,000). Tuesdays, on the other hand, see an influx of food and retail traders, primarily comprising middle-aged female traders aged 36 to 50, many of whom hail from areas outside Koto Baru.

5. Padang Luar Market

The Padang Luar Market was established in 1951 through an agreement with the *ninik mamak* (traditional leaders) of the 7 troops in Nagari Padang Luar. Initially, the market utilized 10,000 square meters of land owned by PT. KAI, which was rented and operated twice a week, specifically on Thursdays and Sundays. As the market expanded and the number of traders increased, it began operating four times a week in the early 1970s, adding Wednesdays and Saturdays to its schedule.

In 1985, the Regional Government of Agam Regency initiated an Inpres project for 7 *nagari* in Agam Regency, including Padang Luar, which received Inpres credit. Despite initial community resistance, after extensive socialization and outreach efforts, the Padang Luar Presidential Market was established in 1985 to the north of the PT station. Since the official opening of the Presidential Instruction market by PT. KAI in 1986, trading activities at the Padang Luar market have expanded to six days a week, excluding Mondays.

Market operations are managed with the assistance of several coordinating staff, as per Market Management Decree No. 1 of 2016, pertaining to the appointment of

Nagari Padang Luar market management personnel. These staff members include fee collectors, terminal staff, cleaning staff, and market security staff, each entrusted with specific duties such as collecting market fees, organizing parking/terminal areas, managing street vendors, and handling garbage collection. Daily market management duties are carried out by officers appointed based on a one-year term of service, replaced by another individual from the nagari thereafter.

The Padang Luar market serves as a central hub for locally grown vegetables from areas such as Koto Baru, Kubang Putih, Matur, Ambun Pagi, and Singgalang. Farmers typically bring their harvest directly to the market, engaging in direct transactions with collectors on-site. In addition to vegetables, the market offers various agricultural products including cinnamon, chocolate, cloves, as well as essential commodities such as freshwater fish and seafood.

6. Padang Panjang Traditional Market

The Padang Panjang Traditional Market, situated in Padang Panjang City, is one of the three markets within the city. Historical records indicate that the market was established between 1956 and 1958, with its creation being endorsed by the heads of 23 villages, who agreed to designate the location as a union market. Each village reportedly contributed materials for the market's construction.

Although located within Padang Panjang City, the land on which the market stands still belongs to the four tribes in Gunuang. Originally functioning as a union market, the market buildings suffered extensive damage over time, and due to the management being under the jurisdiction of the nagari, government intervention was limited. In response, around 1983-1984, a letter was issued by the deputy governor revoking the management of union markets in several districts or cities in West Sumatra. The letter clarified that historical rights of *nagari* descendants would continue, entitling them to 30 percent of profits as long as the market remained free of debt, unburned, or under construction, and employees retained their positions.

Following this intervention, the market's status transitioned from a union market to being managed by the Padang Panjang City government after 1984. Nagari entities continued to receive profit sharing until 2001.

The Padang Panjang Traditional Market convenes twice a week, specifically on Mondays and Fridays. This market offers a diverse array of goods ranging from vegetables, fruits, and clothing to various food items and services. Traders from different areas such as Bukittinggi, Batusangkar, Agam, and surrounding regions frequent this



Figure 1: Padang Panjang Market 1890 -1900. Source: Markt te Padangpandjang Between 1890 and 1900 (KITLV 103411) <https://digitalcollections.universiteitleiden.nl/view/item/926124>.

market for trading activities. Vegetable traders typically commence their activities in the morning and continue until noon, with some extending their operations into the afternoon. Meanwhile, street vendors or *Galeh Babelok* vendors, specializing in items such as clothing and bags, typically arrive at the Padang Panjang traditional market in the morning to conduct buying and selling activities that persist until the afternoon.

C. Factors Causing Obstacles for Women Trading in Galeh Babelok

1. Financial Challenges

The frequently high prices of vegetables restrict the ability of traders to purchase goods according to consumer demand. This limitation arises because the capital turnover for the following week is reliant on profits from current trades, which must also cover daily expenses. Consequently, when vegetable prices are elevated, traders can only afford to procure small quantities of vegetables.

2. Time Constraints and Family Responsibilities

Balancing trading responsibilities with familial obligations poses significant challenges, especially for a young mother with six school-age children. The informant expresses feelings of inadequacy in providing sufficient time and attention to her children. Witnessing her young children frequently crying and seeking attention before she departs for work exacerbates these feelings of distress. The demanding

hours of trading, which can extend from as early as 1 AM until as late as 10 PM, leave little opportunity for the informant to attend to her children's needs.

"When I leave home around 1 AM and return around 10 PM, it saddens me to see my children craving attention at home. Sometimes, my second child cries before I leave, wanting to be held."

3. Transportation Limitations

Reliance on personal motorbikes for transporting goods restricts the quantity of merchandise that can be transported for sale. This limitation necessitates the informant to exhibit greater resilience and independence in managing her trading activities, despite the logistical constraints imposed by transportation limitations.

7. Discussion and Analysis

The presence of *Galeh Babelok* traders at the Padang Luar Market is limited, primarily occurring only on Sundays and Thursdays. Additionally, these traders are mostly seasonal, with increased activity observed during Ramadan and before Eid. The predominant merchandise sold by *Galeh Babelok* traders, if included in this category, revolves around food sales. Market management only grants permission for *Galeh Babelok* traders to operate during the day, as the primary focus of the Padang Luar Market remains on vegetable traders. However, with a decreasing presence of vegetable traders during the day, spaces occupied by them are gradually being filled by *Galeh Babelok* traders. Furthermore, the market operates almost daily, except for Mondays, with vegetable trading being the main activity.

The market hosts a diverse range of traders, including small-scale traders, predominantly women, who sell handmade handicraft products in relatively small quantities. Marketing skills are deemed integral to women's education, as parents are tasked with imparting knowledge on assessing price fluctuations to their daughters, as per the cultural norm implied in Rancak di Labuah. These women typically carry limited merchandise for sale. The market also attracts itinerant vendors, known as "*galas* people," who travel within the market network for a specified period until their goods are sold out.

In Minangkabau culture, markets are referred to as "*balai*," a term derived from their proximity to traditional halls. For instance, the Thursday market in Nagari Paninggahan, Solok Regency, is situated close to the traditional hall. "*Balai*" is also known as "*pekan*" or "*pakan*," reflecting the weekly cycle of market days. Almost every day in Minangkabau

culture is associated with a specific market day, showcasing the prominence of markets in daily life. It could be said that in Minangkabau “there is not a day without a market” (Gusti Asnan, 2003: 224-225). Market management thus falls under the jurisdiction of the local autonomous *nagari* government, with market days rotated between neighboring *nagari* to ensure fair distribution and utilization of market spaces.

The proliferation of *nagari* in West Sumatra, totaling no less than 909 as of 2022 (Sumatera Barat Dalam Angka Tahun 2022), underscores the significance of traditional halls (markets) in the Minangkabau traditional conception. It can be inferred that the number of markets aligns closely with the number of *nagari*, reflecting the integral role of markets in community life and economic activity.

8. Conclusion

In much of the literature, culture encompasses all ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and creations of humans or human groups, both tangible and intangible, acquired through the process of learning and adaptation to the natural and social environment. Within cultural practices, elements related to cultural values significantly influence our thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and motivation to engage in daily activities. The market, traditionally known as a venue for transactions between sellers and buyers, holds deep cultural significance and provides insights into social reality. It encompasses tangible and intangible cultural forms, as well as the ongoing processes that constitute a living culture, serving as a safeguard for the nation’s cultural heritage (Harianti, 2013).

Markets have long been recognized as spaces where individuals engage in buying, selling, and transactional activities, closely intertwined with economic endeavors. The dynamic interaction between supply and demand, sellers and buyers, often involves intermediaries facilitating transactions. Goods and services are exchanged for money, or through barter, where buyers swap goods or services for other goods or services. In historical contexts, such as during the Ancient Mataram period, the barter system prevailed, alongside the recognition of currency, typically referred to as “pisis,” serving as a medium of exchange in trade transactions. Within the Minangkabau context, the Galeh Babelok trade system still retains a role within traditional markets, with Minang women serving a unique role to facilitate the trade of goods coinciding with market days in various *nagari* around West Sumatra.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the Faculty of Sosial and Political Sciences of Andalas University for providing the funding for this research.

Declaration of Conflict Interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Yonni Saputra. Served as Secretary of the Taratak Nan Tuo Foundation in Padang, where he conducted research on history, social issues, culture and community empowerment. Yonni completed his undergraduate studies in History at the Faculty of Culture,

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