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# Minangkabau Language and Change in People's Political Orientation

Gusti Asnan<sup>1</sup>, Oktavianus Oktavianus<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History, Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Department of Linguistics, Universitas Andalas, Padang, Indonesia

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## CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: [oktavianus@hum.unand.ac.id](mailto:oktavianus@hum.unand.ac.id)

## A B S T R A C T

This article discusses the change in the Minangkabau political orientation from the Dutch colonial era to the present. They pose the Minangkabau language as a political issue in the national interaction. This study employs content analysis and qualitative historical research methodologies. The content analysis approach is used to determine the accuracy of information gathered from many sources, as well as to describe and analyze the Minangkabau language's politicization by the Minangkabau people, Dutch colonialism, and the government of The Republic of Indonesia. This paper shows how Minangkabau people view their mother tongue as a part of national identity, how they make it as the ammunition for the movement of resentencing to fight against the central government, how Minangkabau people make their mother tongue a part of ethnic identity politics; and how language policy of the Dutch colonial and Republic of Indonesia government influenced the change in Minangkabau political orientation. The analysis proves that language has become inseparable from regional history dynamism and Minangkabau regional-political life. The language attitude of the Minangkabau people in the colonial era showed a high national spirit. Language has the capacity to foster emotional connections among its proponents, whereas history can offer a comprehensive glimpse into the evolution and progression of language throughout time.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The political situation of Minangkabau people, the ethnic group in West Sumatera, Indonesia, is sufficiently dynamic. The historical experiences in the various eras show this fact. Minangkabau people underwent colonialization from the third decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It became the object of political penetration, economic exploitation, and cultural penetration by Dutch colonialists. Up to the commencing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, Dutch colonialism was already perfect in Minangkabau.

Minangkabau people showed various responses to Dutch colonialism. One response was the emergence of consciousness to resist and oust colonialism from their region and Indonesia. Furthermore, such the response made the Minangkabau people the leading proponent

of nationalism. It posed several Minangkabau figures as the nation's founding fathers who laid the foundations of this state and country.

After the Declaration of Independence, especially in the 1950s, many Minangkabau public figures, for example, criticized the central government due to injustice in the politics of national development. Their protest, then, brought about the regional movement. It is the movement demanding the central government to pay greater attention to the regions outside of Java. The idea underlying this movement is called the regionalism.

Some historians and socio-political experts have studied the political dynamism of *Urang Awak* referred to as Minangkabau ethnicity. The researchers have proposed approaches and perspectives expressing numerous Minangkabau people's historical experiences. As a result, they

have published the books and the articles about Minangkabau ethnicity – the ethnic group with a matrilineal kinship system.

Unfortunately, the researcher did not find the study related to the Minangkabau people's historical experiences through the analysis of the language politics of the colonialist. The language attitude of the colonies reflected their language politics. In Minangkabau, the two languages that became the center of attention of the Dutch colonial government were Minangkabau and Malay.

Minangkabau language is grouped into Austronesia languages (Hutri, 2019). It is the local language spoken by Minangkabau ethnic group in West Sumatra and other regions in Indonesia. Minangkabau language is also the mother tongue of Minangkabau people. The *Ethnologue* lists Minangkabau language as one of local languages with a large number of speakers (Florey, 2005).

Minangkabau language is spoken widely along Batang Hari River in Jambi Province, Kampar River in Pekanbaru, Muko-Muko in Bengkulu Province, Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia, Natal and Barus in North Sumatra Province, Tapak Tuan and Anak Jamee group in Aceh Province (Nadra, 1997). Linguists have studied Minangkabau language for a long time. It covers all aspects both on the level of micro and macro linguistics (Jufriзал, 2012; Oktavianus, 2022).

Minangkabau language is rich of the politeness markers and systems (Oktavianus & Revita, 2013). Politeness markers are dominantly realized through the indirect use of utterances, the integration of particular lexicons into sentence structures, and metaphorical expressions. Minangkabau language is rich in metaphorical expressions (Fanany, 2003). The richness of metaphorical expression within this language leads to the typical Minangkabau people, who are not straightforward in expressing ideas in general (Errington, 1984). The language styles of Minangkabau people can be the evidence for such a language phenomena.

Minangkabau language has the roles and functions as a medium of communication of the Minangkabau ethnic group, interethnic communication, the marker of local cultures and identities, as well as the language of instruction at schools, especially in the early stage of learning activities (Isman, 1978). These roles and functions of Minangkabau language have been

going on since the Dutch colonial administration. The government has indeed set Indonesian as the language of instruction in schools but the Minangkabau language still has a strategic role, especially in explaining things that cannot be done using Indonesian or to emphasize certain aspects of the learning process to the students.

Language symbolizes and expresses culture (Kramsch, 1998). In line with this idea, Minangkabau language reflects and expresses Minangkabau culture and political orientation of Minangkabau people. The use of Minangkabau language in political and cultural contexts is an indicator of these phenomena. Names of various local foods are examples of how Minangkabau language reflects Minangkabau culture (Oktavianus & Khairil Anwar, 2022).

In the colonial period, two local languages played a vital role. They are Minangkabau and Malay language. These two languages are the language that functioned as the medium of interethnic communication, the language of trade, and Islam (Steinhauer, 2005). Steinhauer also noted that the Malay language is also used as the medium of instruction in school at the initial stage of the learning process. As part of the colonial government's educational policy, the Malay language, named *Melayu Revolusioner*, was used because it was regarded as the language that could unite regional nationalism (Anderson, 1990).

Minangkabau and Malay language are two languages that are closely related to each other linguistically. If Malay is the language of politics (Anderson, 1990), then the Minangkabau language can also be regarded as the language of politics. Therefore, the political roles of Minangkabau language and its effects on the political orientation of the Minangkabau people need to study.

This study is essential and exciting to do to prove that language does not only act as a means of communication but more than that language also has a vital role in carrying out political missions. Therefore, the researchers choose to discuss three main themes, namely (1) Dutch language politics and Minangkabau Nationalism; (2) Jakarta's injustice and the Minangkabau people's regionalism; and (3) Minangkabau language and identity politics in the Reformed Era.

This study aims to provide an overview of the three main themes as proposed. Besides, this

study also aims to trace the Minangkabau language journey and read the socio-political situation of the *Urang Awak* from the Dutch colonial to the Reformed Era. This study will be beneficial and positively impact the development of historical and language studies, two fundamental aspects of human life.

## II. METHODS

This research uses qualitative historical research methods and content analysis. There are four stages used in conducting this study and writing this article. The four stages are collecting references and sources, critical analysis of the sources, interpretation, and historiography. This study used qualitative data consisting of primary and secondary data (Salevouris et al., 2015). The content analysis method is used to find out the accuracy of information from the sources collected and to describe and analyze the politicization of the Minangkabau language by the Minangkabau people, the Dutch colonialism, and the government of The Republic of Indonesia (Krippendorff, 2004).

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Dutch Language Politics and Minangkabau Nationalism.

In general, the Dutch government and the linguists began paying attention to Minangkabau language in the fifth decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of such attention is closely related to establishing the *Nagari* School in the Minangkabau region. Minangkabau language became the focus of attention, for it functioned as the medium of instruction at the *Nagari* School established in 1843 (Steinmetz, 1924).

The use of the Minangkabau language as the language of instruction in *Nagari* School was motivated by three reasons. *Firstly*, the pupils of the *Nagari* School could only speak the Minangkabau language, so it was easy for them to understand the lesson. *Secondly*, the *Nagari* School graduates only worked in the Minangkabau region, so their communication space is mainly in Minangkabau. Generally, they were the clerks at the government's coffee warehouses. *Thirdly*, the Dutch colonial policy restricted the Dutch language teaching to the native people.

The use of the Minangkabau language as the language of instruction at government

schools only took place briefly. In the 1850s, the colonial government's officials began questioning the Minangkabau language as the language of instruction at the government's schools. Then, at that time, the Dutch government established *Kweekschool* in Bukittinggi. The graduates of this school would become a teacher or government workers to post in other regions in Sumatra. Thus, the language for the instruction medium is the one that people use widely. Therefore, the choice fell into Malay as the medium of instruction. Malay was chosen for it has become the *lingua franca* among almost ethnicities across Sumatra in particular and all over Dutch East Indies in general (Gedenboek et al. 1856-1908, 1908). Later on, Malay as the language of instruction spread almost over all schools allocated to the native people in Minangkabau such as School of Class 2, School of Class 1, and Advanced School (*Vervolg School*).

The colonial education politics divided the Indonesian people by differentiating the language of instruction in the schools they founded. The government expected unity would never evolve among the Indonesian learned group if they used different languages. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch colonial government came to decide on language-based school groups in Dutch East Indies (Daftar Goedang Kitab Gubernemen in Betawi, 1892). The school groups are Malay Speaking School, Javanese Speaking School, Sundanese Speaking School, Madurese Speaking School, Balinese Speaking School, Batakese Speaking School, Niasser Speaking School, Tunbulune Speaking School, Makassarese Speaking School, Bugise Speaking School, Bayakse Speaking School, Baweanese Speaking School, and Sangihese-Speaking school.

In general, using Malay as the language of instruction at numerous government schools did not bring about any problems for Minangkabau people. There was no protest among the *Urang Awak* against the policy. Minangkabau language belongs to the Malay cognate so there are few differences among them. It was easy for Minangkabau people to understand Malay.

Modern Islamic Schools, such as the Thawalib School, founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, used Malay as the language of instruction (Audrey, 1999). Besides, Malay was also the language of the newspapers and magazines published by the Minangkabau people. Both Islamic newspapers

and magazines using this Malay were widely welcomed by readers across Sumatra and Javanese Island (Darwis, 2013).

Minangkabau people used Malay as the official language of various social-political organizations. Malay became the official language of *Jong Sumatranen Bond*, an organization where many Minangkabau people became members and held important positions (Hatta, 2011). Malay became Indonesia's Unitarian language as decided in the Youth's Oaths in 1928, and Muhammad Yamin was one of the crucial figures making the Youth's Oaths come about (Hatta, 2011).

Dutch colonial government wanted to change this situation, where Malay became increasingly vital. This condition might awaken Minangkabau people's nationalism. The appearance of Indonesian nationalism endangered and threatened the intact power of Dutch colonialists in this country. Therefore, they attempted to decrease the power of Malay among Minangkabau people. In addition, some Dutch writers started finding discrepancies between Minangkabau and Malay. They started complimenting the Minangkabau people's prominence compared to Malay ones. Lekkerkerker, for instance, wrote that Malay in the Riau and Johor language and Minangkabau are different. Malay in Riau, Johor, and some regions on the East Coast of Sumatra are coastal Malay.

Minangkabau is the inland Malay. The Coastal Malay, such as Riau, Johor, and some regions on the East Coast of Sumatra has long become the object of colonization. In comparison, Minangkabau became the colonizer and had much influence in Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia (Lekkerkerker, 1916). Minangkabau language is a part of Malay and closer to Riau Malay, the special Malay, the independent language equal to Riau Malay (Joustra, 1923). Minangkabau language is even the mother of Malay since the trustworthy Malay people originated from Minangkabau (Loeb, 1974).

The colonial government made a new policy. They decided to decrease the power of the Malay language among the *Urang Awak*. Such a policy, then, was practiced at the government's schools. The government set up to make Minangkabau language the medium of instruction at schools. In the beginning, this idea was brought up by Welming, a Folk School Teaching Inspector in the Congress of All Sumatra Assistant Teachers in Bukittinggi in 1928.

It was stated in the congress that the regional language as the means of instruction at schools would, then, be established. Minangkabau language would be used in West Sumatra. Unfortunately, West Sumatra delegates severely refuted the proposal. Then, West Sumatra Delegates said they wanted Minangkabau language to use as something other than the means of instruction at schools in their regions. They wanted to keep using Malay as the medium of communication. Welming ignored the refusal of West Sumatra delegates, and he even called them and compelled them to agree to his ideas (Asnan, 2007). What is interesting to observe here is how the rulers argue about the language to use as the medium of instruction but their hidden agenda is a political mission.

After the congress, several West Sumatra educational figures proposed a resolution to annul the policy of using the Minangkabau language as the means of school instruction. After the consultations and demonstrations, the government finally reached a compromise stance. Minangkabau language was still a medium of instruction only for the pupils of year one until year three at the Elementary School for Native Children (Folk School) (Asnan, 2007).

The Minangkabau educators and even politicians kept disagreeing with the government's compromising response. They kept inhibiting any government's effort to use the Minangkabau language as the means of instruction at the Elementary School. The government published the teaching book titled *Lakeh Pandai* 'quick learner' and *Kinilah Pandai* 'now is already smart' for a reading lesson. Minangkabau leaders strongly protested the publication of the books. Through *Minangkabau Raad*, they proposed a motion to stop the publication of the books. The ones already distributed were drawn out of circulation.

Unfortunately, the government took no care of such a protest. Thus, Minangkabau educators committed defiance in other forms. They pun the books entitled *Lakeh Pandai* into *Lakeh Pandia* 'Quickly of being stupid' and *Kinilah Pandai* into *Kinilah Pandia* 'Now (is) Already Stupid' (Suryadi, 2006). The responses of Minangkabau educators and politicians to use Malay as the medium of instruction at schools showed that *Urang Awak* nationalist attitude toward the Malay language was part of Indonesian nationalism at that time.

Language creativity of Minangkabau people to weave their linguistic capacities of Minangkabau

language into puns and language plays to criticize the existing inequalities have been going on since the colonial period.

### 3.2 The Jakarta's Injustice and The Minangkabau People's Regionalism

The 1950s were one of the most exciting periods in the history of contemporary Minangkabau. Right in the era, there were lots of important events in Minangkabau. One of them was the formation of the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia, which is well known by the abbreviation of PRRI (*Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia*).

Nowadays, the presence of PRRI still triggers a historical debate. Jakarta viewed it as a separatist movement. In the history books published by the central government, the incident was named the PRRI rebellion (Onghokham, 1965). Then, among the PRRI proponents, this movement was called a corrective movement to Jakarta. They said PRRI was to warn Jakarta of its unjust treatment of the region. Jakarta was blamed for paying too much attention to Java Island. Jakarta was said to focus too much on developing physical and human resources on Java Island. The PRRI proponents wanted to warn Jakarta to be fair because most of the finance used for the development of Java Island was sent from the region outside Java Island, including from Central Sumatra, the Center of PRRI (Yusra, 1998).

The allegation that Jakarta was unfair to the region, including Minangkabau, indeed appeared far before the burst of PRRI in 1958. Such an accusation was based on Jakarta's unfairness in sharing the *Kue Pembangunan* 'cake of development' – a metaphor used at the time - and its injustice in posting the State Dignitaries, Civil Servants, and the Army. Jakarta prioritized the Javanese as the regional citizen to occupy the structural occupational position in the regions or prioritized more Javanese to become civil servants and army than the ones from the region. Other than that, such injustice was also in Jakarta's policy in nourishing the national culture, including lesson content on the history and development of the Indonesian language.

Since the beginning of the 1950s, to develop national education, the government of the Republic of Indonesia has prepared the content of history lessons whose material was suitable for

both situation and condition of the Republic of Indonesia, having proclaimed its independence. While preparing the teaching book, historical events on Java Island dominated the book's content. The historical stories on Java Island also predominated the history books intended to support teaching material. It made Minangkabau people envy. The Minangkabau people published history books about various events in Minangkabau regions (Klooster, H.A.J., 1985) and (Asnan, 2004).

As the newly free country from colonization, the Indonesian government attempted to formulate a national culture. Ki Hajar Dewantara's conception of the national culture as the regional components of the highest excellence seemed acceptable to the central government. However, Jakarta tends to pay more attention to the Javanese culture and those available on Java Island. This situation can reduce the sense of unity.

Similarly, it is also applied to national language policy. At that time, Indonesian was still being developed, and many vocabularies came from foreign languages (Anderson, 1990). Besides, there were still many Dutch vocabularies used by Indonesian language speakers. Thus, it was necessary to find out the correspondence. The government made a policy to search the new vocabulary from local languages in Indonesia to add new vocabulary and substitute the Dutch vocabulary. However, most of vocabularies adopted were the ones from Javanese origins.

The tendency to adopt the Javanese vocabulary has been eyes-bare seen in the first years of the 1950s. Hamka mentioned tens and even hundreds of Javanese vocabularies having made the Indonesian language in 1951. This quantity was much higher than the other regional languages, including Malay in general and Minangkabau in particular (Haluan, 1951). The central government's unfairness was also in Jakarta's treatment which only constitutes three language sections in Cultural Division, namely Java, Sunda, dan Madura (Gema Udara, 1956).

The injustice of Jakarta eventually became an ignitor for Minangkabau people to ask that the vocabularies of their regional language were also given equal opportunity as languages existing on Java Island in enriching the vocabularies of the Indonesian language. Minangkabau people also demanded that Jakarta set up Minangkabau or Malay Section in Cultural Division. Besides,

Minangkabau public figures also requested Minangkabau language as additional examination material at Senior High School and the medium of instruction in the first years of Elementary School in Central Sumatra (Gema Udara, 1956).

As mentioned above, the demand of Minangkabau leaders became the embryo of the regional movement and finally broke up into PRRI. The linguistic factor was one of the issues underlying the regional movement. Language has the power to trigger the movement. After the PRRI, the Minangkabau people carried out language politics which was unique and interesting to observe. They adopted Javanese names or self-Javanese to avoid pressure, intimidation from the central government and as the survival strategy (Asnan, 2007).

### 3.3 Minangkabau Language and Identity Politics in The Reformed Era.

The Reformed Era is named for a time in Indonesian political history in 1998. It was marked by the Soeharto's stepping down from his presidency of the Republic of Indonesia and the end of the New Order power. As the name implies, the Reformed Era is designed to change what has been there before and reform something new. More significantly, the Reformed Era was formulated to present the newer order in Indonesia's political, social, economic, and cultural aspects. Therefore, the reformed era is signified by drastic changes in Indonesia's political, social, economic, and cultural aspects. The changes are supported by Law Number 22 of 1999 on regional autonomy.

The most prominent political change was the presence of a democratic and decentralized government. It was also seen in the constitution that there are several new administrative regions at the provincial, regency, and municipal levels. The political change was also seen in strengthening the political role and participation of social groups whose political rights were previously restricted. Social changes also marked the Reformed Era. The most prominent was the appearance of social groups previously marginalized from the stage of national history.

The fortification of identity politics also accompanied the social-political changes. The strengthening of this identity politics was, among others, due to the similarity of administrative and cultural regions. A particular ethnicity also

predominates an administrative region. The majority group in such an administrative region wanted to make themselves the regional representation.

In the first years of the Reformed Era, four new regencies emerged, namely (1) the Regency of Mentawai Islands; (2) the Regency of West Pasaman; (3) the Regency of Dharmasraya; and (4) the Regency of Southern Solok. Furthermore, since the Reformed Era, many Chinese, Batakse, Tapanulians, Niassers, and Javanese got positions on the regional political stages. They became legislative members, and even among them became the head of the region. It was a phenomenon that had never happened before.

As a majority social group in this region, Minangkabau welcomed the Reformed Era with the cultural movements. The social-political changes foster identity politics. Regional elites wanted to strengthen Minangkabau's identity in the regional socio-political life by reviving *nagari* and *surau*, well-known with the slogan of *Babaliak ka nagari* and *Babaliak ka surau*.

In Minangkabau, *nagari* is a group of regions headed by a *wali nagari*. The *nagari* administrative system existed even before the Dutch came to Indonesia (Asnan, 2007). In the New Order Era, the authority converted *the nagari* administrative system into a village administrative system through Law Number 5 of 1979 on village administrative systems. The central government uniformed the system, pattern, and control of developing all regions under the name *desa* 'village'. Culturally, the concepts of *desa* 'village' and *nagari* are different.

The regional government regulation of the Province of West Sumatra Number 9 of 2000 supported the spirit of *Babaliak ka nagari* and *surau*, 'reviving to *nagari* and *surau*'. The movement aims to improve the understanding of Minangkabau youth about Minangkabau *adat*. Besides, the movements also aim to establish the *Nagari Adat* 'the *Nagari* colored by Minangkabau *Adat*'. The idea to change the name and status of the Province of West Sumatra into *Daerah Istimewa Minangkabau* 'Special Territory of Minangkabau' emerged. However, the central government has not approved this movement.

The other prominent change was the revitalization of both *adat* and cultures. One is the commitment to strengthen the use of the

Minangkabau language continuously. These were, among others, seen in the effort of the *Kepala Daerah*, 'the regent,' to use toponyms such as names of *nagari* or geography in the Minangkabau language.

Baharuddin R, West Pasaman Regent (2010-2015), proclaimed to use the names of *Simpang Ampek* instead of *Simpang Empat*, *Aia Bangih* instead of *Air Bengis*, and *Sungai Aua* instead of *Sungai Aur* on 19 September 2010. Minangkabau writer, Darman Munir, suggested that *nagari* and region names should use the Minangkabau language. He criticized the "Indonesianization" of *nagari* and geographical names. He preferred *Iku Koto* instead of *Ikur Koto* and *Sungai Sariak* instead of *Sungai Sarik* (Notulen of Seminar Bank Indonesia, 2014).

Translating the toponym of *nagari* and regions may shift and change the meaning. Translating *Iku Koto* into *Ikur Koto* and *Sungai Sariak* into *Sungai Sarik* is inappropriate. A good translation is a translation that can reach the closest natural equivalent in meaning, and it is sometimes difficult to achieve because of the cultural differences underlying the source language and the target language (Larson, 1984).

Going back to pure Minangkabau is the central theme of identity politics. The presence of identity politics under the idea of returning to pure and original Minangkabau among *Urang Awak* is closely associated with the change of political and social aspects.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

At the end of this writing, the researchers can conclude and highlight six main points related to the Minangkabau language and the change in people's political orientation from the Dutch colonial government to the Reformed Era.

*First*, during the Dutch colonial period, language was essential in carrying out the political agenda. On the one hand, the policy of the language-based school groupings and the shifting of the Minangkabau language to Malay and back to Minangkabau as a medium of instruction was to regulate the use of language in the education domain. However, on the other hand, it also contains political agenda.

*Second*, the Dutch government carefully read and observed the language situation in society at

that time. The Dutch government has a dynamic language attitude toward Minangkabau and Malay. The Dutch colonial government had a language political strategy that could benefit them. However, the language-based school grouping policy during the colonial era were not only benefited the Dutch government in terms of weakening the unity of Indonesians but indirectly strengthened the identity of local people.

*Third*, Indonesia's independence could have brought better socio-political conditions to Indonesia, particularly Minangkabau. The injustice of the central government sparked the enthusiasm of the Minangkabau people to demand fair treatment from all aspects. PRRI was formed. Then, the PRRI rebellion was over. Again, language played a vital role at the time. Some Minangkabau people adopt Javanese names at least to obscure their identity.

*Fourth*, in the New Order era, the role of the Minangkabau people in politics, government, and various other sectors grew stronger. However, central government's policy to uniform the system of government at the lower levels in villages eroded local identities. The place names in Minangkabau regions are also Indonesianized. The government even rolled out the policy of prohibiting using foreign terms for the place names.

*Fifth*, the Reformed Era significantly changed Minangkabau's social and political life. Minangkabau people chant the slogan and movement of *Babaliak ka nagari* and *Babaliak ka surau*. The central government then agreed to the proposal.

*Sixth*, what is interesting to observe now is the language politics of the Minangkabau people, which is identical to the language politics of the Dutch colonial government. Politicians, government, and community leaders use Minangkabau language to pursue their interests.

The banners containing the slogans, expressions, appeals, and prohibitions in the Minangkabau language are scattered in public spaces. On political campaign banners, for example, Minangkabau people are proud and confident to put their *gala adat* rather than academic titles after the names. Besides, they also prefer to use Minangkabau expressions and phrases on the campaign banners.

This strategy was developed in such a way as to knit emotional bonds between the leaders,

politicians, government, and society in general so that what they planned and wished could be achieved. Language can build emotional bonds among its speakers, while history can provide an overview of the dynamics and journey of language itself across time. This phenomenon becomes a good turning point for history and Minangkabau language studies at this time and in the future.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Gusti Asnan** is a lecturer and professor of History, Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia. He has published books and chapter books and articles in national and international journals. He is a reviewer of some national and international journals related to history.

**Oktavianus** is a linguistics professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University. His research interests are in semantics, pragmatics, and linguistic landscape. He has published books, some chapter books, and articles in national and international journals. He is a reviewer of some national and international journals. He is also a member of the Indonesian Linguistic Society.