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The Transformation of the Surau's Function in Minangkabau as a Traditional Malay Educational Institution in the Modern Era

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines the transformation of the surau as a traditional Minangkabau educational institution, tracing its historical roles and its contemporary functions. Historically, the surau served as a multifunctional center for religious instruction, cultural transmission, social interaction, and character formation for young men. It played a significant role in teaching the Qur'an, Hadith, Minangkabau customs, and martial arts, while also functioning as a communal space and temporary residence. However, modernization, the development of formal education, and broader socio-cultural changes have contributed to the decline of these traditional functions. Using a qualitative library research method, this study analyzes historical, ethnographic, and sociological sources to explore the internal and external factors driving this transformation. The findings indicate that institutional reforms, colonial influences, Islamic modernist movements, and evolving community needs have reshaped the surau into a more limited space focused primarily on worship and basic Qur'anic instruction. Nevertheless, the surau remains essential for cultural preservation and character education. This study emphasizes the need to revitalize the surau by integrating traditional values with modern educational demands to strengthen cultural identity and social resilience in the contemporary era.

1. Introduction

Surau is one of the traditional educational institutions that continues to exist within Minangkabau society. In the Minangkabau customary system, the surau is owned by a clan or lineage and functions as a complementary space to the *rumah gadang*, serving as a place for receiving guests, communal gatherings, and accommodation for male adolescents who have reached puberty as well as elderly men. In addition, the surau plays an essential role in shaping the Islamic character of the younger generation in Minangkabau. Since the arrival of Islam, the surau has also functioned

as an informal Islamic educational institution for the dissemination of religious teachings.

In the past, the surau served as the center of social, educational, and religious life within the community, both before and during the early arrival of Islam in Indonesia. Young men often spent much of their time in the surau, including staying overnight for learning purposes. Today, however, the surau is less attractive to the younger generation, who tend to be more interested in modern activities, resulting in the surau being predominantly occupied by older people. Nevertheless, the surau remains important as a place of worship and as a guardian of cultural identity in Minangkabau society. In order to sustain its function, the surau needs to adapt to contemporary developments so that it remains relevant within the community (Samad et al., 2024).

The functions of the surau are highly multifaceted, including its role as a center for religious education where children learn to read the Qur'an, understand Hadith, and apply Islamic values in their daily lives. The surau also serves as a place of worship, a center for customary deliberation, and a site for the preservation of Minangkabau culture, such as traditional proverbs (*petatah-petitih*) and traditional martial arts like *silat*. In addition, the surau functions as a space for character formation, instilling values of politeness, proper conduct, and discipline among the younger generation. In the past, the surau also served as temporary accommodation for young men during their transitional period into adulthood. Overall, the surau constitutes a distinctive and significant institution in Minangkabau social, cultural, and religious life, serving as a symbol of the continuity of Islamic and customary values within the society (N. Putri & Haryanto, 2025).

The development of these traditional educational institutions has been marked by various dynamics and challenges. These challenges arise both internally, such as the need to reform curricula to remain relevant to changing times, and externally, including the influences of colonialism, modernization, and the development of the national education system. These conditions have triggered significant institutional transformations. For example, there has been a shift from informal learning models conducted in the surau to more formal instructional systems in madrasah. Madrasah also play a role in instilling religious values and character in student (Nurlaili et al., 2026). In addition, efforts to integrate religious curricula with general curricula have emerged in various Islamic educational institutions, reflecting a dynamic adaptation to contemporary educational demands (Iqbal et al., 2023).

The process of modernizing Islamic education cannot be separated from the commitment to responding to contemporary challenges while simultaneously preserving the originality of Islamic values embedded in traditional educational systems. This transformation demonstrates that traditional Islamic educational institutions in the Indonesian archipelago are not static entities, but rather dynamic and highly adaptive to changing times. On the one hand, they continue to uphold the spiritual and cultural values that form the foundation of their existence. On the other hand, they have undertaken reforms in various aspects, including teaching methodologies, institutional management, and curriculum development. This

approach reflects a balance between preserving heritage and adapting to contemporary needs (Fajrin & Taufikurrahman, 2021).

Previous studies have tended to examine the surau in a partial manner, either as a traditional Islamic educational institution, a place of worship, or as part of Minangkabau cultural history. However, most of these studies have primarily focused on historical or normative-descriptive aspects and have not sufficiently explored the transformation of the surau's functions within the framework of contemporary socio-cultural dynamics, particularly in relation to the integration of Malay customary values, character education, and the demands of modern education. Moreover, studies that systematically map the internal and external factors driving the functional shifts of the surau and that propose a framework for revitalizing its role in the modern era remain relatively limited. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of the transformation of the surau's functions and its relevance as a traditional Malay educational institution amid the currents of modernization.

This article seeks to explore in greater depth how the surau has undergone a functional transformation as a traditional Malay educational institution in the modern era. In the past, the surau functioned as a center of informal education where children and male adolescents acquired religious knowledge, customary norms, and life skills rooted in local culture. Over time, social changes and the demands of the era have encouraged the surau to adapt and expand its role, not only in the realm of religious education but also as a space for character development, the reinforcement of customary values, and the cultivation of creativity among the younger generation. The objective of this study is to comprehensively analyze the transformation of the surau's functions in Minangkabau as a traditional Malay educational institution, from its historical roles to its contemporary forms and relevance, as well as to identify the internal and external factors influencing these changes within the contexts of education, culture, and community character formation.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method. This method is chosen because the study focuses on conceptual, historical, and theoretical analyses of the transformation of the surau's functions as a traditional Malay educational institution in Minangkabau, without involving direct field data collection. The research data are derived from relevant and credible literature, including scholarly books, accredited national journal articles, international journals, and other academic works that discuss the surau, traditional Islamic education, Minangkabau culture, and the dynamics of Islamic educational modernization. The selection of literature is based on several criteria, namely the relevance of the content to the research focus, the academic credibility of the authors and publishers, the currency of publications to capture recent developments, and the historical value of the sources to understand the evolution of the surau over time (Hidayattullah et al., 2023).

Data analysist was conducted using a descriptive-analytical approach through systematic stages. The initial stage involved data inventory and classification by grouping the literature according to key themes, such as the functions of the surau in the past, the process of transformation, the driving factors behind these changes, and the role of the surau in the modern era. This was followed by data reduction through the selection of relevant and significant information in accordance with the research objectives. The selected data were then critically analyzed and interpreted to identify patterns of functional change in the surau as well as the interrelationships between the internal and external factors influencing these transformations. The final stage involved synthesis and conclusion drawing by integrating the analytical findings into a coherent scholarly narrative to address the research objectives and to emphasize the contribution of this study to a deeper understanding of the surau's role as a traditional Malay educational institution in the modern era.

3. Results and Discussion

The Function of the Surau as a Traditional Educational Institution in the Past

Quality education is a fundamental right of every citizen (Khalifah & Santosa, 2025), the surau is the oldest educational institution in Minangkabau and existed even before the arrival of Islam. After Islam was introduced, the surau underwent a process of Islamization without changing its name or core functions. It continued to serve as the center of Minangkabau community life. Within the surau, people performed acts of worship such as prayer and engaged in the study of the Qur'an, Hadith, and various other forms of knowledge. In addition, the surau functioned as a venue for customary deliberation and the teaching of adat norms and proper conduct. It was also used as a place for training in Minangkabau traditional martial arts, known as *silat*. The surau held important social functions, particularly as a place of residence for young men and older men who were divorced. In Minangkabau society, parental homes did not provide separate rooms for adolescent males or widowers, leading them to stay overnight in the surau. This practice played a significant role in shaping the character of the younger generation. Overall, the surau contributed to the cultivation of religious knowledge, practical skills, and social life, and remains a vital institution in the formation of Minangkabau societal character (Juliwansyah & Iswantir, 2022).

In the traditional surau educational system, there were no formal levels or classes based on the number of years students spent in the surau. Students accessed knowledge directly from the *syeikh*, who taught without the use of desks or blackboards. The learning process was simple and traditional, with students recording lessons on paper made from cloth. The primary instructional methods employed were lectures, reading, and memorization. The *syeikh* did not apply approaches that encouraged critical thinking or in-depth analysis. Lessons were typically conducted in a circular arrangement, where students sat cross-legged on the floor while listening to the teacher or *syeikh* recite specific lessons. This method is known as *halaqah*, a learning model that emphasizes direct interaction and learning through repetition and memorization (S. Putri et al., 2022).

Advances in digital technology have significantly transformed educational practices, particularly in the development of innovative learning media (Destyani et al., 2026). As a traditional educational institution, the surau implemented the *halaqah* educational system, which taught basic materials such as the Arabic alphabet (*huruf hijaiyah*) and Qur'anic reading, as well as other Islamic disciplines including faith (*iman*), morality (*akhlaq*), and worship (*ibadah*). Educational activities were typically conducted in the evening. Over time, the existence of the surau as an Islamic educational institution developed further with the emergence of two levels of education: (Mukhlis, 2017).

1. The first level was elementary education, which emphasized understanding the pronunciation of Qur'anic letters and developing the ability to read the Qur'an. In addition, students learned the procedures of ablution (*wudhu*) and the performance of prayer through practical instruction and memorization methods. Instruction in matters of faith primarily focused on learning the Twenty Attributes, which were taught through memorization using rhythmic chanting, while moral education was conveyed through stories about the prophets and pious figures.
2. The second level was advanced education, which included learning to recite the Qur'an with melodic intonation, *qasidah*, *berzanji*, *tajwid*, and the study of *kitab parukunan*. Through this structured approach, education in the surau was conducted in a gradual and comprehensive manner, equipping learners with a deep understanding of religious knowledge as well as the ability to recite the Qur'an properly and accurately.

The surau is not merely a place for communal activities; rather, it represents an important symbol of Minangkabau society, which is also part of the broader Malay ethnic group. Furthermore, historical records indicate that communal activities among the Malay people were already conducted in buildings with concepts similar to the surau as early as 1356 CE, during the reign of King Adityawarman, as evidenced by findings in the Bukit Gombak area (Samad et al., 2024). In the past, the concept of the surau was derived from Hindu-influenced architectural traditions. After Islam spread widely among Minangkabau society, this structure was repurposed as a communal gathering place for people of all ages, both young and old. However, during the early transitional period from Hinduism to Islam, the surau also became a site for mystical practices that deviated significantly from Islamic teachings, prompting prominent scholars such as Shaykh Abdurrahman to strive to eliminate these *bid'ah* (unwarranted religious innovations).

Thus, in the past the surau fulfilled multidimensional functions, including religious education, the transmission of customary values, character formation, the strengthening of social solidarity, and the maturation of Minangkabau men. By highlighting the *halaqah* system, educational levels, and social functions such as serving as a residence for young men, the author implicitly critiques modern perspectives that reduce education solely to cognitive aspects and formal institutional frameworks. The author concurs with the view that traditional surau-based education possesses distinct strengths in character and values formation, which are, in fact, difficult to replace within modern educational systems.

The Transformation of the Surau's Functions

Sidi Ghazalba explains that the surau, or *langgar*, originally formed part of Malay cultural traditions closely associated with local belief systems. However, after the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago, the surau evolved into a structure functioning as a place of Islamic worship. In the past, the surau was not only used for prayer but also served as a space for gathering, social interaction, and even as a sleeping place for young men and older men, particularly widowers. Structures similar to the surau are not found exclusively in Minangkabau but also exist in various other regions under different names. In Mentawai, such a building is known as *uma*; in East Toraja, it is referred to as *lobo*; in Aceh, it is called *meunasah*; and in Java, it is commonly known as a *langgar*. Thus, the surau and similar structures have become integral components of the social and religious life of communities across different regions of the Indonesian archipelago (Afdayeni, 2017). The functions of the surau have undergone a fundamental transformation, shifting from a multifaceted institution in the past to one that is now more narrowly focused on religious worship, particularly within the context of Minangkabau society. While these practices preserve moral alignment and institutional values, they sometimes limit objective competency assessment and professional standardization (Sopiulloh et al., 2026)

Muhammad Yunus describes the traditional educational system in the surau, which developed between approximately 860 and 1900, as consisting of two main levels, namely Qur'anic instruction and the study of classical texts. Each of these levels was further divided into beginner and advanced stages (Alfurqan, 2020).

1. At the level of Qur'anic instruction, learning focused on developing the ability to read the Qur'an through the introduction of the Arabic alphabet (*huruf hijaiyah*) and the rules of *tajwid*. In addition, students were taught aspects of worship (*ibadah*), Islamic creed (*tawhid*), and morality (*akhlaq*), which were conveyed through storytelling methods. The beginner level was typically attended by children around seven years of age. They began their learning by recognizing the letters of the Qur'an, followed by the study of *Juz 'Amma* and the practice of religious rituals, such as performing the five daily prayers in congregation with the teacher at the surau.
2. At the advanced level, students not only studied the Qur'an, worship, *tawhid*, and morality in greater depth but were also taught additional subjects. These included Qur'anic melodic recitation, *qasidah*, *barzanji*, and the study of *kitab perukunan* written in the Malay language. In the study of *tawhid*, students learned the Twenty Attributes (*sifat dua puluh*) and the rational categories (*hukum akal*), which encompass the concepts of necessity (*wajib*), impossibility (*mustahil*), and contingency (*jaiz*). In terms of moral education, surau teachers employed narratives about prophets and pious individuals as pedagogical tools to instill ethical and moral values among learners.

Thus, the educational system in the surau did not merely emphasize reading and studying religious texts, but also strengthened spiritual understanding and character formation through a structured and integrated learning process.

In this discussion, the author does not view the transformation of the surau as a purely neutral or natural process, but rather as the result of tensions among modernization, colonialism, and changing social needs. The author's argument demonstrates that the shift in the surau's functions is not merely an institutional evolution, but also entails ideological and cultural consequences, particularly the narrowing of the meaning of Islamic education. By comparing the functions of the surau across different regions—such as the *meunasah*, *langgar*, and *uma*—the author situates the surau within the broader framework of Malay–Nusantara culture, while simultaneously emphasizing that the loss of the surau's functions signifies the erosion of one of the pillars of local civilization. The author's position here is explicitly critical of modernization processes that tend to homogenize educational institutions.

The Shift in the Functions of the Surau in the Contemporary Era:
Social change, the introduction of modern educational systems, and broader developments over time have eroded the communal and educational functions traditionally performed by the surau.

1. The Loss of the Residential Function: The function of the surau as a mandatory place for boys to stay overnight has almost entirely disappeared in many areas. Male children now generally sleep in their family homes, resulting in the discontinuation of the customary processes of character formation and maturation that were traditionally regulated through life in the surau (Historis & Malang, 2019).
2. Reduction of the Educational Role: The role of the surau as a formal educational institution that taught customary values and martial arts has declined significantly. Formal education in schools, madrasahs, and universities has taken over broader educational functions. Contemporary surau institutions now tend to transform into *mushalla* or Qur'anic Learning Centers (*Taman Pendidikan Al-Qur'an*, TPA), with their primary focus limited to basic instruction in Qur'anic reading and the performance of congregational prayers.
3. Emphasis on Functional Worship: At present, the surau is more commonly recognized as a *mushalla* or a small place of worship. Its function has become more utilitarian and confined mainly to routine religious practices, such as the five daily prayers and light religious gatherings. It no longer serves as the central hub of complex social and educational activities as it once did. In other words, the surau has shifted from a multifunctional and central institution in shaping Minangkabau societal character into a more specialized religious facility that complements mosques or modern educational institutions (Sabri et al., 2022).

In this discussion, the author adopts a firm argumentative stance that the shift of the surau's functions toward *mushalla* or Qur'anic learning centers (TPA) represents a structural and functional reduction rather than merely a technical adjustment. The author demonstrates that the loss of the surau's roles as a residential space for youth, a center for customary education, and a venue for traditional martial arts has disrupted community-based processes of character formation. The argument put forward rejects the assumption that formal schooling is fully capable of replacing

the role of the surau. Accordingly, the author critiques the modern educational paradigm that positions formal institutions as the sole centers of learning, while marginalizing community-based educational practices. Table 1 shows the trajectory of the transformation of the surau's functions over time, the surau's roles across the traditional period, the transitional phase, and the modern era.

Table 1. The Transformation of the Surau's Functions in Minangkabau

Aspect	Traditional Surau	Transitional Period	Surau in the Modern Era
Primary Function	Informal Islamic educational institution and center of social life	Begins to share roles with madrasahs and schools	Place of worship and basic religious education
Educational Role	Teaching the Qur'an, Hadith, *tawhid*, *akhlaq*, customary law (*adat*), and *silat*	Focus shifts primarily to religious education; customary instruction declines	Qur'anic learning centers (TPA) and basic Qur'an reading instruction
Learning System	*Halaqah* system, without formal classes or levels	Introduction of a more classical system	Non-formal, limited, and incidental
Social Function	Residence for young men, customary deliberation, and character formation	Social functions begin to decline	Nearly absent; predominantly individual in nature
Cultural Role	Preservation of Minangkabau customs and Malay-Islamic values	Cultural values gradually marginalized	Cultural values no longer dominant
Relation to Formal Education	No formal education system	Emergence of madrasahs and schools	Synergistic but complementary
Institutional Orientation	Communal and holistic	Adaptive but fragmented	Functional and ritualistic
Institutional meaning	Symbol of cultural identity and community-based education	Experiences a narrowing of meaning	Equated with a *mushalla*

Factors Driving the Transformation of the Surau

Changing times have led to the gradual abandonment of the surau as a center of learning, primarily because it does not offer subjects considered relevant to the demands of the labor market and is often perceived as producing religious scholars without professional skills. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, surau-based education continues to hold a distinct and important role compared to modern educational institutions. Within the surau, individual character is cultivated in a profound manner, shaping personal readiness and maturity in facing future challenges, whereas modern education does not necessarily provide strong mental or moral foundations. Therefore, surau-style education should not be abandoned; rather, it needs to be modified so that it can complement and support modern educational systems, particularly in terms of character formation, the preservation of cultural values, and community empowerment (Ilyas, 2022).

The paradigm of Islamic modernization had already emerged in Minangkabau with the rise of puritan movements that sought to challenge the syncretic understanding of Islam among the Minangkabau people. However, as religious reformers became more active, Islamic modernization developed further in the early nineteenth century through the establishment of modern Islamic schools and the replacement of the traditional surau system with a classical, certificate-based educational system supported by formal curricula (Satria, 2019). The modernization of Islamic education in Minangkabau has been influenced by two main factors, namely internal and external factors (Barat et al., 2021).

1. Internal Factors
   Changes in Islamic education in Minangkabau have been influenced by several key internal factors originating from within the community itself. One major factor was the impetus to resist Dutch colonial rule, in which Islamic education was viewed as a means of fostering national consciousness and supporting the struggle for independence. Dissatisfaction with the colonial education system also emerged, as the community perceived Dutch education to be incompatible with Islamic values and local wisdom, prompting the search for more relevant educational alternatives. Furthermore, disillusionment with customary practices (*adat*) that were considered increasingly divergent from Islamic teachings encouraged efforts to integrate Islamic education with local culture so that both could coexist harmoniously. Finally, younger generations sought to purify Islamic teachings from practices they regarded as inappropriate by reforming the curriculum to make it more responsive to contemporary challenges.
2. Eksternal Factors
   External influences have also played a significant role in shaping the development of Islamic education in Minangkabau, particularly through the reformist ideas of figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Their thought emphasized the importance of educational reform that integrates religious knowledge with modern sciences and promotes rational approaches to understanding Islamic teachings. Their critiques of conservative practices within Islam inspired greater openness to progressive and innovative interpretations. In addition, government policies, the forces of globalization that have facilitated the flow of information and technology, as well as support from Islamic organizations and international institutions, have all contributed significantly to the strengthening of Islamic education and religious thought within Minangkabau society.

The development of the surau as a traditional Islamic educational institution requires comprehensive collaboration and intensive communication among the government, customary leaders, *syaikh*, and the wider community. These efforts include strengthening the institutional framework of the surau by establishing clear leadership mechanisms, as well as developing effective organizational management. In addition, appropriate educational programs need to be designed so that the surau can function as a community-based educational institution. Such development should also encompass the establishment of sustainable funding sources to support the long-term viability of the surau (Iswadi et al., 2021).

The modernization of education initiated by the older generation in Minangkabau marked the end of the surau's existence as a distinctive traditional Islamic educational institution. This process of change shifted educational patterns from long-established traditional methods toward more modern and structured approaches. As a result, the function of the surau no longer centers on comprehensive Islamic education but is instead limited to Qur'anic recitation and ritual practices such as prayer. Consequently, the surau has lost its distinctive character as an educational center and has become comparable to ordinary *mushalla* found in various locations, functioning primarily as spaces for worship without a deep educational dimension (Satria, 2019).

The surau functions not only as a place of worship but also as a center for customary and cultural education by optimizing the roles embedded within both the surau and the surrounding community. Furthermore, the surau has the potential to act as a catalyst for community economic development through various activities integrated into the institution. Through this approach, the surau is expected to transform into a form of Islamic educational institution that remains relevant and exerts a broad and meaningful impact on society. By introducing local culture, students not only understand their identity as part of the nation but also learn to appreciate and preserve existing cultural heritage (Husna et al., 2025)

In this section, the author acknowledges the limitations of surau-based education, particularly its constraints in preparing professional skills, yet rejects the narrative that portrays the surau as entirely obsolete. By categorizing the driving forces of transformation into internal and external factors, the author emphasizes that the transformation of the surau cannot be attributed solely to internal shortcomings, but is also shaped by structural pressures such as colonialism, globalization, state policies, and discourses of Islamic modernization. The author's position here is reconstructive in nature, advocating for the renewal of the surau without erasing its fundamental identity as an institution of character education and cultural formation.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the transformation of the surau's functions in Minangkabau represents a complex historical process shaped by social change, educational modernization, and intertwined internal and external dynamics. Historically, the surau functioned as a holistic traditional educational institution that integrated religious instruction, customary education, character formation, and communal life. In the contemporary era, however, its role has largely narrowed to that of a place of worship and basic religious education. This shift reflects not merely a technical institutional adjustment, but a broader paradigm change from community-based, value-oriented education toward more formalized and functional educational systems.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the discourse on Islamic and Malay educational traditions by emphasizing that traditional institutions such as the surau are inherently dynamic and adaptive, yet vulnerable to functional

reduction when modernization processes are not managed in a culturally grounded manner. The findings reinforce the view that traditional education should not be examined solely as a historical legacy, but as a living institution situated within the interaction of cultural values, social structures, and educational policies.

Practically, the findings imply that efforts to revitalize the surau should focus on strengthening its role as a community-based educational institution that integrates Islamic teachings, Minangkabau customary values, and contemporary educational needs. Such revitalization requires synergy among government institutions, customary leaders, religious scholars, and the wider community in developing sustainable management models and relevant educational programs. Through this approach, the surau has the potential to reclaim its strategic role as a space for character formation, cultural identity preservation, and the reinforcement of social resilience within the Malay-Minangkabau community in the modern era.

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