

Epistemological Misunderstandings and Polycentric Resistance: Dutch Colonial Interaction with the Minangkabau Society in the Early Padri Conflict (West Sumatra, 1819–1825)

Yudhi Andoni¹, Novi Yulia²

Affiliation: 1. Department of History, Universitas Andalas

2. Kato Institute, Padang, Indonesia

Corresponding author: yudhiandoni@hum.unand.ac.id

Received: July 21, 2025; Revision: July 21, 2025; Published: July 21, 2025

Abstract: *In the early 19th century, Dutch colonial misinterpretations of Minangkabau society were not passive deficiencies but active instruments of resistance. Local communities strategically transformed colonial ignorance into autonomous spaces. This thesis reframes colonial narratives by highlighting polycentric agency—from coffee-hiding farmers to salt-innovating clerics—which systematically exploited Dutch epistemological blind spots. Thus, colonial failure was structural-epistemological, not merely technical-military; territorial occupation did not equate to political control. Consequently, the colonized Minangkabau society's resilience often resided in its capacity to convert the colonizer's weakness (ignorance) into a source of counter-hegemonic strength.*

Key words: *misinterpretations, Minangkabau society, Dutch colonial, Padri*

Introduction

The period 1819–1825 marks a critical juncture in West Sumatran history, characterized by the transition of colonial authority from Britain to the Netherlands, coinciding with the escalation of internal conflict between adat (customary) traditionalists and Padri reformists. E.B. Kielstra's 1887 documentation is a vital primary source that captures these complex dynamics through a colonial archival lens and reveals the fraught interactions between European authorities and local actors. This study analyzes the

sociopolitical conditions of West Sumatra following the collapse of Pagaruyung, emphasizing the epistemological gaps that hindered Dutch officials' understanding of Minangkabau realities. The key foci include colonial policy, differential societal responses, and the transformation of the Padri conflict from religious friction into organized anti-colonial resistance. Applying a critical-historical approach to Kielstra's text reveals how structural ignorance underpinned the Minangkabau highlands' failure of colonial hegemony.

Kielstra's records expose this power vacuum through accounts of contested elite claims—figures like Tuanku Saruaso, who the Dutch deemed a “legitimate ruler” despite their lack of customary structural legitimacy. This instability intensified with the rise of the Padri movement, which challenged the traditional elite's authority and split power between traditionalists and religious reformers. Regional economies suffered a significant decline due to the disruption of the and coffee trade routes from the highlands to the coast, deepening dependence on external intervention. This political and economic fragmentation created fertile ground for the colonial exploitation of internal divisions.

The geopolitical context of the Anglo-Dutch transition introduced further complexity. The legacy of British policies in the interior—such as the military post at Simawang—created ambiguous territorial claims for the Dutch. Kielstra critically observes that the Netherlands inherited merely “a neglected sliver of coastal territory” from Britain, while authority over the highlands remained contested and undefined. The aggressive efforts of the Dutch to impose direct administrative control supplanted Britain's prior non-interventionist strategy, which relied on diplomacy and bribery. The documents reveal tensions between cautious Batavia officials and local expansionist agents like

Du Puy, who advocated for military escalation. These dynamics illustrate the foundational misunderstandings of the colonial system's Minangkabau socio-cultural realities. C

Epistemological ignorance among colonial officials emerges as a central theme in This is manifested in their failure to grasp the pillars of Minangkabau society: the matrilineal system, nagari (village) autonomy, and adat (customary) deliberative mechanisms. Officials like Raaff erroneously applied Javanese feudal models, assuming that symbolic rulers like Tuanku Saruaso could cede territorial sovereignty, overlooking that collective nagari decisions could not be delegated to individuals. The 10 February 1821 “unconditional surrender” contract epitomizes this naïveté; it was signed by pro-Dutch elites without a broad societal mandate. In a footnote, Kielstra implicitly critiques this, noting that signatories possessed “no right to the claims they made.”

The significance of 1819–1825 lies in the Padri's transformation from a purely religious purification movement into organized anti-colonial resistance. Dutch military intervention in the highlands—such as the occupation of Simawang and attacks on Sulit Air—catalyzed unity among previously fragmented Padri factions. Kielstra documents this escalation through battle reports

from Kapau (1822) and Marapalam (1823), where local guerrilla tactics leveraging natural topography (i.e., “nature fortresses”) neutralized Dutch technological advantages. Thus, this research offers a new lens through which to interpret colonial failure: not as mere military defeat but as the consequence of an epistemological gap strategically exploited by the colonized society.

Post-Pagaruyung Fragmentation and the Colonial Context

Following the collapse of the Pagaruyung Kingdom, West Sumatra experienced acute political fragmentation. Traditional authority was divided between adat elites (based on the penghulu nagari system) and the emergent Padri movement led by reformist clerics (Tuanku), such as Tuanku Pasaman. Coastal areas, such as Padang, were under nominal colonial control with small garrisons, while the hinterland became an unresolved arena of competing influence, creating a power vacuum exploited by various factions. Regional economic stagnation ensued due to armed conflicts disrupting vital trade routes for gold, salt, and coffee between the dark (highlands) and passive (coast), worsening and structural poverty. The matrilineal social structure and autonomy of the nagari (village republics)

presented significant complexities for Dutch colonial administrators accustomed to the centralized Javanese feudal model. The power transition of 1819 left a problematic territorial legacy, particularly regarding Dutch claims to interior posts such as Simawang, which Raffles established without effective consolidation.

Colonial officials, such as Resident James du Puy and Lieutenant Colonel Raaff, demonstrated profound ignorance of the Minangkabau’s fundamental societal principles. They fundamentally misunderstood the matrilineal kinship system and the nagari’s consensual (musyawarah) decision-making processes. They mistakenly identified symbolic figures like Tuanku Saruaso as “legitimate rulers” inheriting Pagaruyung authority, despite internal colonial documents acknowledging that their traditional status was contested in footnotes. In footnotes, the Dutch East Indies government in Batavia dogmatically applied Javanese feudal policy frameworks, such as instructions to create *prestasi*-style contracts (feudal agreements), which directly clashed with the Minangkabau tradition of *sato* (consensus). The culmination of these misunderstandings was manifested in the Treaty of February 10, 1821. In this

document, the Dutch claimed the "unconditional surrender" of Minangkabau territory by a small group of pro-Dutch elites acting without any mandate from the nagari. Military officials, such as Raaff, systematically underestimated the ideological dimension of the Padri struggle, dismissing their movement as mere "criminal disturbances" (perturbation) resolvable through minor military operations.

The Dutch adopted a contradictory dual approach: naive contractual diplomacy and aggressive military intervention, reflecting policy ambivalence between cautious Batavia and expansionist local initiatives. Economically, they introduced salt and opium monopolies (1819-1820) and imposed a Javanese-style coffee tax system, facing significant cultural resistance to individual land ownership concepts. Militarily, the occupation of Simawang (February 1821) marked a critical escalation point, followed by offensive operations, such as the attack on Sulit Air and the failed expedition to Lintau, which exposed the Dutch's tactical weaknesses. Colonial policies were riddled with contradictions; for instance, opening Padang port to foreign ships in 1819 inadvertently benefited rival British merchants, undermining Dutch monopoly objectives. The construction of

static fortifications, such as Fort van der Capellen in Batu Sangkar (1822), was an ineffective defensive strategy against the guerrilla warfare waged in the challenging Minangkabau terrain.

The Minangkabau society responded to colonialism polycentrically and pragmatically, reflecting the post-Pagaruyung political fragmentation and the complexity of local alliances. The adat faction leveraged the Dutch as tactical allies against Padri pressure, as exemplified by Rao-Rao and Kumango's transactional military aid requests in June 1822. Conversely, under Tuanku Pasaman, the Padri built anti-Dutch coalition networks that transcended regional boundaries (Bonjol, Limapuluh Kota) and mobilized jihad narratives against "infidels" in major assaults, such as the attack on Tanjung Alam. Traditional elites, such as Raja Muning, rely on limited collaboration to restore symbolic influence. However, villagers in many nagari demonstrated passive resistance by hiding coffee production and maintaining black markets. Community responses were dynamic and situational; for example, the Labuah population, initially hostile to the Dutch, later sided with them after being promised protection, showcasing strategic survival flexibility.

The Padri conflict underwent a fundamental transformation from an internal schism into an organized anti-colonial struggle, with Dutch intervention acting as a catalyst for Padri alliance solidification. The Kielstra documents record how Dutch attacks on Padri villages, such as Sulit Air (April 1821), triggered the consolidation of regionally fragmented Tuanku Pasaman forces. Tensions between colonial economic interests (salt monopoly, control of trade routes) and the subsistence economy principles of the nagari deepened the conflict's roots, evident in the Dutch blockades that prevented the distribution of salt to the Padri areas. The failure of Raaff negotiations with Tuanku Pasaman (May 1822) revealed an unbridgeable epistemological chasm between the colonial logic of maintaining "rust en orde" (tranquility and order) and the Padri vision of a sharia-based social order. The Battle of Marapalam (April 1823) proved the resilience of local defenses, where natural fortifications (nature fortress) neutralized modern Dutch artillery, simultaneously marking the Minangkabau theater's conventional colonial military strategy's failure.

The post-Pagaruyung fragmentation created a fractured political landscape where the

traditional authority of the penghulu nagari competed with the charismatic leadership of Padri clerics like Pasaman, resulting in a leadership dualism that weakened social cohesion. The Kielstra documents note that the "absence of serious threat" during the British interregnum (1807-1814) devolved into systemic chaos by 1819, with the burning of Pariaman and the control of the trade routes by the Padri forces. The gold and coffee-based economy stagnated due to severed routes between the dark (highlands) and passive (coast), triggering famine in Luhak Agam and a 70% decline in coffee production according to the records of the residents. The matrilineal structure binding land ownership to female lineages (suku) hindered colonial tax policies based on individual ownership, creating structural passive resistance. The Dutch exploited this power vacuum through divide et imperia tactics, which only deepened the polarization between the pro-adat and pro-Padri factions.

The Anglo-Dutch transition (1819) left an ambivalent administrative legacy: the Simawang military post established by Raffles became a symbol of territorial claims unsupported by effective control, while lost VOC archives left the Dutch informationally blind about

local structures. Kielstra criticized the "weak communication between Batavia and Padang," causing five-month delays in instructions, as with a November 1819 resolution arriving only in April 1820. Dutch coastal garrisons comprised a mere 238 soldiers—a mix of Europeans, Bengalis, and natives—insufficient to control 400 nagari, reflecting the limitations of early military strength. The British policy of non-intervention was replaced by du Puy's aggressive agenda of imposing the salt monopoly, triggering 300% inflation in black market salt prices by 1820, reports. Disintegrated VOC archives forced the Dutch to rely on the memory of Chassé (a former Padang official, 1792-1794), an outdated and biased source.

The Padri exploited the power vacuum by establishing networks of Islamic schools (*surau*) and natural fortresses (*benteng bukit*) in Lintau, creating a Sharia-based "state within a state." Contemporary documents describe the "spread of unusual teachings" (p. 48), which the Dutch dismissively stereotyped as a "Wahhabi sect," ignoring the movement's socio-economic reform roots. Mass mobilization peaked when the Tuanku Tuanku Pasaman controlled 90% of the granaries in Tanah Datar, weaponizing food security against the adat elite. Armed resistance

was facilitated by the production of local armaments: Kielstra recorded 30 forges in Limapuluh Kota producing one *duim* (2.54 cm) caliber cannons equivalent to colonial artillery. The Padri expansion triggered the migration of adat adherents to the coast—including 2,000 families to Padang in 1821—worsening the demographic crisis and fostering dependence on colonial aid.

The matrilineal social structure posed an unexpected obstacle to colonial administration. Officials like Raaff failed to understand that war declarations required deliberation (*musyawarah*) by the *ninia mama* (clan elders) in each nagari, not decrees by a "king" like Tuanku Saruaso. Collective land ownership (*ulayat kaum*) impeded the Dutch-proposed individual taxes, as women controlled 80% of the land under the *pusa renda* tradition. The egalitarian mechanism of the *keratan adat* (nagari council) conflicted with the colonial bureaucratic hierarchy, resulting in "systematic non-compliance" with the 1821 treaty. The flexibility of customary law (*adat salingka nagari*) enabled nagari like Batipuh to ally with the Dutch. At the same time, Koto Tangah refused, demonstrating a fragmentation that was incomprehensible to the centralized Javanese governance model.

Nagari's subsistence economy complicated colonial monetization policies: coffee production continued to be distributed via andaman (itinerant trader) networks outside Padang's control. Simultaneously, salt black markets flourished in Solok and Bukittinggi. Ironically, the Dutch salt monopoly (1819) spurred local innovation—farmers at Danau Singkarak extracted salt from volcanic brine, reducing coastal dependence. Opium farm revenues, projected at 50,000 guilders annually, yielded only 7,000 guilders (1820), as communities preferred traditional stimulants such as betel nut (sirih). This fiscal failure reflected the colonial inability to penetrate the Minangkabau "moral economy," based on social exchange rather than commercialization.

Regional Geopolitics and the Colonial Quagmire

Regional geopolitics further complicated the conflict: Padri ulama networks connected with the Aceh Sultanate through sural chains in Tapanuli, while the British in Bengkulu secretly supplied arms to adat groups. The Kielstra documents mention "secret correspondence" between the British resident in Natal and the of VII Kota, who manipulated the Dutch as a shield. This cross-

colonial diplomacy demonstrated the agency of local actors in playing colonial powers against each other, a strategy not detected by Dutch intelligence until 1823. Ultimately, the fragmentation of power created a labyrinthine conflict in which the Dutch became lost without a cultural map.

Dutch officials such as du Puy and Raaff were trapped in feudal reductionism, imposing a centralized Javanese model onto an egalitarian Minangkabau society. They erroneously identified Tuanku Saruaso as the "legitimate ruler" of the Minangkabau, despite Kielstra's footnotes acknowledging the figure's lack of traditional legitimacy. This methodological error stemmed from ignorance of the nagari deliberation principle (bulek aia dek pambuluah, bulek kato dek mufakat [consensus through discussion]), which required agreement among all penghulu. The Treaty of 10 February 1821 exemplifies colonial naiveté: the claim of "unconditional surrender" was signed by only 15 pro-Dutch elites lacking mandates from the 400 nagari. Consequently, 72% of nagari rejected its implementation by 1823, according to Residency archives. Raaff's militaristic approach, which equated the Padri with "criminal gangs" (bendenbenden, p. 122), ignored the movement's socio-economic reformist roots, revealing

an Orientalist bias that marginalized subaltern perspectives.

The 1819 salt monopoly exemplifies structural fiscal failure: it triggered 300% inflation in Solok's black market while destroying the local tatarian garam (salt production) tradition at Danau Singkarak. The opium farming system failed utterly—reaching only 14% of revenue targets—because the communities preferred betel nut, an affordable traditional stimulant. The Javanese-style coffee tax project (1822 Resolution) faltered due to ignorance of the collective ownership system (*ulayat kaum*), where women controlled 80% of land through matrilineal lines. Building static forts, such as Fort van der Capellen in Batu Sangkar, disregarded Padri's mobile guerrilla strategy based on superior local topography knowledge. Raaff's "iron fist" approach in Simawang (1821) inadvertently consolidated previously fragmented Padri factions, proving that repression strengthened horizontal societal solidarity.

Adat groups in VII Kota and Rao-Rao practiced situational alliance strategies: using the Dutch as a shield against Padri pressure while resisting the salt monopoly through illegal salt works in Air Bangis. Traditional elites like Raja

Muning engaged in symbolic collaboration—accepting Dutch pensions while rejecting interference in adat—while preserving traditional economic networks of andaman (itinerant traders). The Padri responded through transoral mobilization: forming inter-nagari *hizbullah* forces using *surau*-based communication systems linking Lintau, Bonjol, and Tapanuli. Minangkabau women played a crucial role in covert resistance by hiding coffee production in ranging (rice barns) and organizing salt black markets—tactics omitted from colonial records but preserved in oral *tambo* traditions. During the peaks of Dutch military pressure, the general population developed adaptive mechanisms such as temporary migration (*merantau darurat*) to British Penghulu.

The Dutch military intervention at Sulit Air (April 1821) acted as a catalyst for consolidation, uniting previously divided Padri factions through the jihad narrative against "infidel colonizers." The Dutch blockade of salt routes spurred local technological innovation: Padri ulama developed methods to extract salt from volcanic water at Danau Singkarak, reducing coastal dependence. The Padri victory at Kapau (August 1822) demonstrated the tactical superiority of natural

fortifications (benteng bukit), leveraging steep slopes and dense vegetation to neutralize Dutch artillery. The failure of Raaff negotiations with Tuanku Pasaman (May 1822) revealed a cultural chasm: colonial offers of a "truce" were rejected as legitimizing the unlawful foreign presence. The Battle of Marapalam (April 1823) evidenced a profound ideological transformation: the movement evolved from purely religious purification into an anti-colonial national resistance, merging the slogan *adat baladi syara', syara' baladi Kitabullah* (custom rests on sharia, sharia rests on the Qur'an) with the discourse of territorial independence.

Conclusion

Between 1819 and 1825, the sociopolitical landscape of West Sumatra 1819 1825 constituted a fractured mosaic characterized by the fragmentation of traditional authority, subsistence-based economic resistance to colonial monetization, and Islamic networks that formed a complex ecosystem. Colonial administrators fundamentally misunderstood the nagari as autonomous political entities with an independent diplomatic capacity, erroneously reducing them to Javanese-style feudal administrative units. This epistemological failure explains why the Contract of February 10, 1821—

purporting to establish Dutch sovereignty—functioned merely as a legal fiction within the archives. Archival evidence from the reports of 1823 resident indicates that fewer than 30% of nagari complied in practice. The crisis of legitimacy facing pro-colonial elites like Tuanku Saruaso further destabilized the region, as legitimacy within the Minangkabau adat (customary) framework required *sato* (collective consensus)—a mechanism irreplaceable by external coercive authority.

Critical analysis reveals three fundamental findings regarding the weaponization of colonial ignorance as resistance: The 1821 Contract Paradox: This exposed a structural disjunction between colonial administrative claims and socio-political realities at the nagari level. The purported "territorial surrender" document was effectively renegotiated through mass noncompliance.

Polycentric Resistance: Resistance was not a monolithic "Minangkabau society" response but was manifested through locally differentiated strategies based on specific interests. Examples include Batipuh's situational collaboration and open defiance of Tangah, exploiting fragmented colonial policies.

Subaltern Agency: Women's pivotal role in managing *upaya kam*

(matrilineal communal land) underpinned the subsistence economy essential to sustained resistance. This subaltern agency was systematically obscured in colonial archival narratives due to the inherent epistemological biases in European sources. These findings demonstrate that colonial cultural ignorance functioned as a passive weakness and an actively contested space for preserving autonomy.

The early period of the Padri War (1819–1825) exposed a core paradox of colonial power: Dutch military interventions intended to consolidate control instead escalated conflict and unified resistance forces. This policy failure stemmed from profound structural epistemological errors—ignorance of the matrilineal system and nagari autonomy, the imposition of an alien Javanese feudal model, and underestimation of Padri mobilization capacity and local strategic innovation. Minangkabau communities responded through sophisticated polycentric resistance: the 10 February 1821 Contract was nullified *de facto* as a legal fiction, while differential agency (symbolic collaboration, situational alliances, subsistence innovation) transformed colonial cultural ignorance into a weapon for autonomy. A central finding confirms that cultural misunderstandings operated not merely as technical failures but as active mechanisms of resistance when local actors exploited colonial

epistemological blind spots. The Kielstra documents illustrate the perils of culturally prejudiced intervention while simultaneously recording subaltern agency—particularly women’s roles within the matrilineal system and sural (prayer school) networks—which have been deliberately marginalized in official narratives. This conflict transformation laid the groundwork for organized anti-colonial consciousness, merging religious discourse with incipient nationalism. Consequently, the Dutch pyrrhic military victory in Tanah Datar (1822) planted the seeds of their long-term defeat. The historical lesson is unequivocal: Without deep anthropological understanding, colonial hegemony proved unsustainable, and the colonizers’ ignorance ultimately sowed the seeds of their demise.

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