

Article

Negotiating the Sacred: Esoteric Traditions and Pluralism in Minangkabau Society

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Abstract: Esotericism often refers to exclusive knowledge that only a few people possess. This field can encompass several disciplines, such as astrology, magic, and other forms of knowledge. Some social scientists stress that it is a rejected form of knowledge. The main objective of this research was to describe the esoteric traditions in one Minangkabau village community. It intends to show that there are multiple esoteric ideas in such a community. In this ethnographic research, the researcher observed and interviewed esoteric practitioners. For the analysis, two approaches were included, namely semiotics and the phenomenological idea of the life-world. The semiotic approach was used to analyse texts like incantations, while the concept of the life-world considers the levels that influence the thinking and perception of the local population. It was discovered that there are two major esoteric traits, particularly Islamic mysticism and a type of folk religion conveyed by traditional healers known as *dukun*. It was also detected that the people in a remote village community follow ideas of their cultural heritage. The esoteric concepts that are widespread on social media are still not relevant. The results reveal several significant implications. Esoteric knowledge in the Minangkabau context cannot be regarded as rejected knowledge, particularly in regard to traditional healing. The findings further demonstrate the multifaceted nature of traditional esoteric knowledge. Future research could look at an urban context and the emergence of new ideas.

Keywords: Esotericism; life-world; Minangkabau; Sufism; traditional healers

Introduction

The attraction of esoteric knowledge to a growing number of people has been observed in recent years. Often, it is referred to as Western esotericism with manifold backgrounds. There is a belief in Tarot cards, the influence of aliens, and ‘modern’ interpretations of shamanism that focus on some elements and neglect others. However, the term ‘esoteric’ has Greek roots (Hanegraaff, 2013). It is derived from the Greek adjective *esoterikos*, which means ‘belonging to an inner circle,’ and this literal definition refers to groups that have their own secretive knowledge that is only accessible to their adherents.

In all regions of the world, some groups have their own knowledge that will not be divulged to outsiders. There are many reasons for that. These groups occasionally faced persecution because they were thought to be heretics. Therefore, they taught their knowledge only to people whom they could trust. Within the academic study of Western esotericism, there is a discussion about esotericism as a type of rejected knowledge that integrates deviant and heterodox knowledge (Asprem, 2021). This discussion is still ongoing, and this research article will examine the situation in a non-Western society.

In the 1920s, Sir Richard Olaf Winstedt (1925) wrote about the so-called Malay Magician, and he described the influence of different historical periods. There was an animistic past that formed many of the

contents of folk beliefs (Osman, 1989). The idea that plants and other natural elements have a vital force (*semangat*), or that some invisible entities reside in specific places, was widespread. Subsequently, other religions emerged, such as Hinduism and Islam. New belief systems gained popularity and were assimilated, such as the belief in *jin* (genies). In the traditional medical system, some healers incorporate elements of pre-Islamic ideas. Such healers are called *dukun*.

West Sumatra's circumstances matched Winstedt's descriptions. Prior to the arrival of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism had an impact on the Minangkabau civilization (Loeb, 1935; Marsden, 2005). In the interior of West Sumatra, there was a well-known kingdom under the leadership of Adityawarman (d. 1375). However, centuries before that period, there was an animistic culture with megalithic features (Miksic, 2004).

One of the largest matrilineal communities in the world is the Minangkabau society. They reside throughout Negeri Sembilan (Malaysia) and West Sumatra, parts of Riau, and West Aceh in Indonesia. Numerous researchers have found it fascinating, and it has an impact on anthropological theory (Josselin de Jong, 1985). Remarkably, studies on the ancient medicinal and esoteric systems of the Minangkabau people are scarce. Nonetheless, some unique features could be expected. There is a co-existence of a matrilineal social structure and an orthodox interpretation of Islam. It may be anticipated that even the esoteric system is organised in a similar way.

In West Sumatra, Islamic orders like the *Syattariyah*, *Naqsybandiyyah*, *Qadariyyah*, or *Samaniyyah* are quite influential. They became the study subjects for various researchers (Archer, 1937; Bruinessen, 1999). However, it appears that their influence seems to be waning. Some scholars have passed away, and there is no successor. Nevertheless, the Sufi orders remain significant in West Sumatra, and in some places the *Naqsybandiyyah* has become the major Sufi order. Particularly, their practice of seclusion (*suluk*) can still be observed.

The Islamic groups and traditional healers, such as the *dukun*, were examined by the colonial authorities and their researchers. They quickly came to understand how influential they were in the local communities. The challenge faced by the governments of Indonesia and other post-independence nations was to address the shortage of Western-educated physicians. Therefore, the WHO (World Health Organization) made an unusual decision. It was decided in 1978 that traditional physicians ought to be included in the healthcare system (Porath, 2008). In some regions, this approach was promising (Hoff, 1992). The esoteric knowledge of the *dukun* and other medical practitioners, like the midwives, became more recognized. However, the *dukun* are not only medical practitioners. They also offer their help in economic affairs, finding a suitable partner, and matters regarding careers (Bruinessen, 1988).

Esoteric knowledge has been disseminated through TV shows and social media in recent years. A good example is the former *dukun santet* (practitioner of black magic) Ria P., who regretted her behaviour and spoke about her experience (Abbas, 2022). Many other people also share their stories. However, in this research, the researcher focuses on a remote village community with limited access to social media. The type of esoteric knowledge that predominates in such a rural society will be investigated. Furthermore, the Minangkabau society is intriguing due to its matrilineal social structure. It might be interesting to see whether there are gender-specific elements. The following research objectives were formulated:

1. To describe the esoteric traditions of one village community (nagari) in West Sumatra. A nagari is an independent unit (Josselin de Jong, 1980). Therefore, it is possible to focus on one community only.
2. To discuss the metaphysical dimension of the esoteric traditions.
3. To detect whether there are elements that can be considered as a kind of intersection amongst all esoteric traditions.
4. To examine whether esoteric knowledge among the Minangkabau can be regarded as “rejected knowledge.”

Perspectives on Esoteric Traditions

Scientists with different perspectives examined esoteric traditions. Ngadeni (2018) and the authors of the foreword of his book *Falsafah dan prinsip asas perubatan Melayu* emphasize that, in the case of traditional Malay healing methods, a distinction must be made between *perubatan Melayu* (Malay treatment) and *perbomohan Melayu*. The second term refers to the traditional Malay healer and shaman. In the context of Indonesia and West Sumatra, the term for a traditional healer is *dukun* (Purwardi, 2004). The *dukun* focuses not only on healing methods but on other elements as well.

The *dukun* captivated the attention of numerous researchers throughout the colonial era. Kleiweg de Zwaan, a member of a Dutch-German research expedition at the beginning of the 20th century, made detailed descriptions of parts of their healing methods (Kleiweg de Zwaan, 1912). He went so far as to draw parallels with other conventional therapeutic techniques. Traditional healing methods were an interesting research topic for other authors, too, like Stark (2018, 2019). He wrote about healing methods and mentioned that some *dukun* offered other services. They might be contacted to find lost items or auspicious days.

The previously mentioned author, Winstedt (1925), wrote about traditional healers at the start of the 20th century and shared his opinion that various healing traditions had an impact. His book is highly significant because it shows how a certain form of esoteric pluralism was produced by the historical process itself. Some researchers focused more on elements that could be considered animistic. Trees and other elements of nature were considered to possess a life force. A good example is the *beringin* tree (Beratha et al., 2018), which can be found in many areas of Indonesia and is considered to be the abode of spirits and other entities. Therefore, some esoteric practitioners use techniques that can be related to pre-Islamic periods. Such practices continue to exist in West Sumatra within certain magical traditions (Ikhwan, 2025). However, research on these topics remains limited.

Knowledge of esoteric practices is not exclusive to the *dukun*. The Sufi orders are influential and teach esoteric knowledge and practices to their followers. The history and customs of the *Syattariyah* order in West Sumatra are explained by Fathurrahman (2008). This *tarekat* (order) has a long history in the region, dating back to the seventeenth century. Another important Sufi order is the *Naqsybandiyyah*. Martin van Bruinessen (1999) gives an excellent overview and also takes into account the situation in West Sumatra. Local followers of these Sufi orders had to defend their practices after being criticized by orthodox groups. Therefore, there were scholars who defended their practices. A good example is the thesis by Nafis (1988). These publications help to gain an understanding of religious practices that are usually difficult to obtain from outsiders.

Old texts authored by healers and Sufi scholars have received increasing scholarly attention (Firdaus & Chairullah, 2020; Masfalinda et al., 2021; Ghazali & Sabjan, 2024). One of the main interests lies in identifying their potential therapeutic or medicinal value.

Methodology

Over an extended duration, the researcher has undertaken fieldwork in a single village community, albeit with brief stays. It was possible to collect data from different healers (Stark, 2019). Nonetheless, the data are still not evaluated in all detail. There are still many notes of the *dukun* that are not yet analysed. During the research process, one *dukun* told the researcher that he had around 30 teachers. Therefore, it will be interesting to consider his notes. All of these notes were written in *Jawi* (Malay/Minangkabau in Arabic letters). The research was exploratory, with no initial hypothesis. The researcher paid the esoteric practitioners a visit and had casual conversations with them. For a few of them, it was crucial to choose the precise moment when they wanted to provide information.

This study involved 15 informants (9 males and 6 females), all of whom were healers consulted by members of the local community. All of them gave their verbal consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The investigation was carried out in compliance with the ethical principles set forth by the American Anthropological Association. The researcher pledged to use pseudonyms due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Furthermore, the researcher promised to write in a "general way" to prevent readers from

identifying the informants. Prior to publication, the individuals involved in the research process were given the opportunity to read the text and express their criticisms.

In this research, it was considered that the people who teach esoteric knowledge are part of their life-world of everyday life. It can be defined as follows: "The everyday life-world is the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which can change while he operates in it by means of his organism" (Schutz & Luckmann 1974, p. 3). There are different components of how the surroundings are experienced. There is our direct environment that is easily reachable, and there is a life-world that is potentially accessible. These are not fixed units. For example, if a person moves to another place, then the whole perception changes. In this research, the concept of a life-world might be interesting, as the student of esoteric knowledge gets a totally new perspective that he or she did not know before.

Additionally, a semiotic perspective was chosen to be examined. Frederick Errington (1984) argues that Minangkabau society is sign-oriented, which was the reason behind this. This assumption is quite controversial. It is interesting to see whether the esoteric traditions are sign-oriented, as Errington assumes. Therefore, it makes sense to look at the features of a sign, according to Errington: 1) Signs require a little, but certainly not a deep interpretation (Errington, 1984, p. 32), and 2) A sign is an abbreviated expression of a known thing. A symbol is always the best possible expression of a relatively unknown fact (Jung in Turner, 1967, p. 26).

In the field of semiotics, the ideas of Ferdinand Saussure (2001) and Edmund Leach (1976) are significant. According to Saussure, the sign consists of the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*) (Chandler, 2007; Saussure, 2001). The first one is the form that the sign takes, and the second one is the concept it represents. The sign is the whole, which comprises both. Saussure additionally emphasized the interpretation from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, which is beneficial for the investigation of spells. Edmund Leach stresses that a sign has certain features. Signs will not appear 'alone' but belong to a group of distinguishable signs of a certain cultural context (Leach, 1976).

In this research, the patterns used for divination and the accompanying incantations were analysed from a semiotic perspective. These patterns, recorded in the healers' notebooks, contained specific forms. Frederick Errington's theoretical views about signs were linked by the researcher to the phenomenological concept of the life-world. The life-world is not a static unit. The teachings of an esoteric specialist are likely to alter a person's perception. A concrete example illustrates how the life-world shaped the understanding. A medical condition characterized by a mild fever was initially interpreted as a disturbance caused by *jin* and was referred to as *keteguran*. However, as new concepts entered the village. One of the healer's students suggested that the patient's illness should now be diagnosed as typhus. This suggestion prompted the *dukun* to revise the initial diagnosis.

The Findings

In this section, the main content of esoteric practices is illustrated. There were two major esoteric groups, each with its own subgroups. One group can be described as Sufis. In general, these are the followers of one of the major mystical orders (*tarekat*). In the village where the research was conducted, some elderly men were adherents of one or more Sufi *tarekat*. However, their *surau* was in very poor condition, and they had only a few followers. The *Naqsybandiyyah* Sufi order was by far the most influential Sufi group. One of the reasons was that three centres were nearby. The local *surau* stressed the importance of its members performing a spiritual retreat (*suluk*). Another major esoteric group were traditional healers (*dukun*). They were more secretive as their knowledge was often regarded as being deviant.

Esoteric scripts

Some esoteric books are of importance. A few *dukun* refer to the book *Tajul Muluk*, which was written in the 19th century by the Acehnese scholar Syekh Abbas and compiled by Haji Ismail (Syekh Abbas, n.d.; Wardani, 2010). It contains different books by Syekh Abbas with various kinds of knowledge. One big part comprises the way to detect good omens, whether a day is good or bad, and so on. Wardani (2010) asserts that there is a historical context. During the time when the book was compiled (at the end of the 19th century), the rulers in

Aceh were in confrontation with the Dutch. Therefore, the knowledge of good versus bad days was considered to be useful. However, in later years, many scholars have questioned the content of the book and have considered it problematic. Nonetheless, some esoteric practitioners in the village use it as a kind of reference book. There is even an abridged version on the market (Zahwan, 2006). However, this version does not include a medical part.

The book *Tajul Muluk* also contains traditional medical knowledge. It should be demonstrated how the author Syekh Abbas and compiler Haji Ismail mention it. One approach is for the author to list the characteristics and medicinal properties of herbs. For example, ginger aids in boosting lust, helps to remove phlegm, and improves memory. So, the reader of *Tajul Muluk* can use this knowledge to prevent certain illnesses. On the other hand, the book also mentions many treatment methods. Sometimes, even more than one way of treatment is described. For instance, if an individual experiences pain. One way that is described is to use a handful of ginger leaves, leaves of the wax gourd, and leaves of the *rempaki* plant. Then the healer should take vinegar and put all the mentioned ingredients on the place of sensation (Wan Hasan Ibni Syaikh & Ishaq al Fathani, n.d., p. 115).

Other books that are influential are those that were written by local Sufi *syekhs*. In the area of 50 Koto (West Sumatra), there is the famous Sufi centre in the village of Belubus. The most significant Sufi scholar in that area was Syekh Abdul Kadim Belubus. He wrote some small treatises that were intended to be studied by his students (Belubus, n.d.). Through his family connections, his information was shared with the village involved in this investigation. Nowadays, the books are in the *surau* of the *Naqsybandiyyah* order, and they teach the understanding of the subtilities (*lataif*) in the body. These points are interrelated and connected to a particular way of *zikir* (remembrance). The *zikir* stresses the importance of remembering Allah frequently, and as a consequence, this will help to avoid committing sins. Furthermore, such a person has an optimistic and positive attitude (Hasibuan, 2023).

The inexpressible

People can gain knowledge not only by studying. Sometimes they get a kind of inspiration, or some would say that they read with the 'light of the heart.' Occasionally, a dream may provide insight into the cause of a health issue. It is possible that this kind of knowledge is not related to the content itself. One healer told the researcher that if someone dreams about food, then this has a negative meaning.

When esoteric specialists recite various passages from the Qur'an, they may experience a kind of emotion. For example, the opening Surah of the Qur'an can be recited while the patient lies on the floor. Each verse has a secret meaning that is known to the healer. The *dukun* might recite it, and suddenly, a kind of inspiration comes up. Now, he or she must check at which verse this feeling arises. An example can illustrate this. The *dukun* suddenly gets this feeling when he recites the Arabic word *iybaka* (only you) (Stark, 2018). Now, esoteric knowledge emphasizes that this word stands for 'the head'. This means the problem must be in the head. Some healers say that this is a type of *ilham* (intuition).

How to gain Esoteric knowledge

There are various paths to esoteric knowledge acquisition. The most typical way is for someone who wants to learn more about this kind of *ilmu* (knowledge) to get in touch with an experienced scholar or *dukun*. In the village community, the people know who is a healer or a member of a Sufi order. However, not everyone is qualified to teach. In the case of the Sufis, there is a clear distinction between a *syekh* and his students. Such a *syekh* is associated with special features (Frager, 1999). He can see the temptations and help the student.

The student of a *tarekat* has to follow the instructions of the *syekh* without questioning his instructions. The main aim is to clean the heart of the student. Some students might get angry soon, some might be impatient, and so on. The *syekh* sees such deficiencies and gives certain instructions that must be followed. Sometimes, he might even reject that a particular person studies with him. During the research, this was witnessed more than once. When the researcher asked the *syekh* why he rejected a specific person to become one of his students, he answered that he was not ready to get that knowledge. The *ilmu* gives the person a kind of power that could be misused.

After some time, the *syekh* organises a spiritual retreat (*suluk*). The retreat typically takes place in the *surau*, and lasts for forty days. It is important to note that some elderly men in the area were followers of various Sufi orders. However, only the *Naqsybandiyyah* is still influential, as they have their own *surau* in a remote location. The interior can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Interior of the *Surau* of the *Naqsybandiyyah*.
Source: Private property of the author (2023).

In general, the *suluk* is organised on a large scale in the regional centres. However, in rare cases, it might be organised in the small *surau* of the Sufi order in the village. It is necessary to mention that the specific branch of the Sufi order (the *Naqsybandiyyah-Khalidiyah*) organises so-called group retreats. This means a specific number of people will gather in the *surau*, and some clothes will be formed as a kind of square. The situation during a retreat is quite special, and there are many rules that must be followed. For instance, the students are not allowed to eat meat, and they are not allowed to leave their small place. The local *syekh* stressed that the *suluk* is very significant as some of the students will get spiritual experiences, and they might become pious Sufis or even *syekhs* themselves. In an anthropological context, the *suluk* can be considered a kind of *rite de passage* (rite of passage) (Gennep, 1960). The student becomes a full-fledged member of the Sufi order after he has undergone the retreat. There are three typical phases (Turner, 1977). There is the original situation: In this case, there are students who want to become full-fledged members of the Sufi community. Therefore, they enter the *suluk*, which is a kind of separation from the original way of living. In this phase, the normal structure cannot be found. Finally, after the seclusion, the Sufis continue with their usual way of life. However, they might be more respected by the local community.

It is possible that some people in the village community want to learn esoteric knowledge, which is part of the knowledge of a *dukun*. The student approaches and enquires about the possibility of studying esoteric knowledge. However, mere studying without a kind of initiation would be ineffective. For instance, even if the student knows a particular spell, it cannot be used if he or she is not initiated. Therefore, the *dukun* organises a ritual. The students usually wear black clothes and give a certain amount of gold to the teacher. After that, the different forms of *mantra* might become effective. Some people acquire esoteric knowledge without studying with a *dukun* or Sufi *syekh*. Invisible entities that surround the world choose a particular individual to become a medium. Sometimes, the medium does not want to be 'chosen' as it is often related to a specific kind of illness. Such a medical disorder is widespread among future shamans (Turner et al., 1995). In the village, the 'chosen' person became sick and had a fever for a long period of time. After she recovered, a *jinn* (genie) couple began to visit her and asked for permission to enter her body. However, she did not allow this, as she was scared. Another lady who was 'chosen' acted in a completely different way. Every Thursday night, many visitors go to her place, and in an altered state of consciousness, different entities manifest themselves when the medium talks.

Types of Esoteric knowledge

There are different types of esoteric knowledge. The people of the village might be interested in one type, and so they contact one of the experts. In this part, the different kinds of esoteric knowledge are outlined. These types are displayed in Table 1. The table provides background information on aetiology and healing practices, which will be explained in detail in the next section.

Table 1. Types of esoteric knowledge

Esoteric Knowledge	Explanations
Martial Arts – <i>Pencak Silat</i>	<i>Pencak silat</i> is a local form of martial art. Often it is related to mystical elements (Farrer, 2009). Some teachers teach that <i>jin</i> can assist the warrior or that a fighter can become invulnerable. However, in the research setting, the <i>pencak silat</i> fighters were few, and they did not meet on a regular basis. Therefore, it can be argued that the knowledge regarding <i>pencak silat</i> is decreasing.
Spells	Many people want to study healing or even magical spells. In the past, some of these magical spells were taught in certain <i>surau</i> (Radjab, 1995). Occasionally, mystical wisdom includes information about developing invulnerability. This knowledge was widespread during the conflicts with the Dutch. Moreover, there are many other spells. Some have healing properties, while others are employed to combat magic. Some Sufis know how to make talismans (<i>azimat</i>). Another form of spells is used to fight magic like the famous <i>sjundai</i> . This is a kind of magic that is used to take revenge.
Comprehending the World and the Body	The Sufi scholars and the <i>dukun</i> provide an understanding of the world. For Sufis, it is essential to understand Allah and His attributes. This kind of knowledge is called <i>ma'rifat</i> . Only Allah has the power to heal and change the given situation. It is noteworthy that there is a Minangkabau saying that is closely related to the authentic narrations (<i>ahadith</i>) of the Prophet Muhammad. The saying is as follows: “ <i>Tiok panyakik ado ubeknyo</i> ” [For every disease, there is a cure] (Yatim, 2015, p. 158). This saying is probably derived from a narration that was mentioned in the famous collection of Sahih Bukhari (Hadith no. 5678). The esoteric experts also impart knowledge on the body's composition. All esoteric teachers in the region agree that the body consists of four elements: air, water, earth, and fire. Sometimes the body can be in a condition that is not balanced. In such a case, the medical component has the task of restoring the ideal balance.

Aetiology and healing

There are many students who want to gain knowledge about healing methods. A few of them even spend years studying with the *dukun*. Some of them are specialists in healing methods or the treatment of particular medical disorders. An example is a specific skin disease that is related to the sap of the *rongeh* tree. Many people said that the Western-educated physicians were unable to treat it. The reason is that there is a kind of esoteric understanding: The *rongeh* tree is inhabited by a *jin* (Stark, 2018). If someone causes harm to the tree and comes into contact with its sap, then the victim gets a skin disease. Therefore, the *dukun* can provide a kind of remedy. People from different areas intend to study that. They must become students of the specialists and examine the ingredients and the different forms of skin disease. Understanding the components of plants alone is insufficient; one must also learn how to get in touch with the *jin*. The *dukun* claims that it is possible to encounter him in a dream. The healing process can only be successful if the *jin* is persuaded to cease ‘torturing’ the victim.

The *dukun* have a unique idea about healing. One theory is that there is a self-healing component in the body known as *sirr*. This concept is also held by Sufi healers, who refer to it by a different expression, *ma-ul hayat* (the water of life). The term has a connection to Prophet Khidr. Khidr met Prophet Musa, and there is the idea that he is still alive. One of the secrets is the ‘water of life’ that is within ourselves. Both ideas are similar, and the place of *sirr* is close to the physical heart. The healer must recite a specific *zikir* to activate its healing properties. Certain practitioners have stated that there is an innate significance. The patient lies on the ground as the healer recites the particular *zikir*. The *dukun*'s or Sufi's right hand is positioned near the heart. Now, there is the idea that the hand of the teacher and angel *Jibril* is also present.

Divination can be found in many societies and is used as a form of aetiology. In a simple way, divination can be defined as “[...] an act which tries to foretell the future or discover the situation – usually of a calamity or illness.” (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 185). It was mentioned that it was important for the ruler of Aceh to know which days were good and which days were bad. In the village community, there are many different ways to use divination. The students of an esoteric practitioner had to learn the specific method. For example, there is a method that uses a spell that must be learned by the students. This is a typical example of esoteric knowledge that was not accessible to the researcher. It was said that only the students could get it. Nonetheless, the technique itself was explained. The esoteric expert takes a kind of rope and fixes the Qur’an with it (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Asking Questions and the Balance of the Qur’an.
Source: Private property of the author (2018).

In Figure 2, it can be seen that there is a small metal ring. The *dukun* takes this metal ring with two fingers. Thereafter, specific queries may be raised. The Qur’an can move to the right or left. It indicates "yes" if it moves to the right and "no" if it moves to the left. There are other divinatory methods. The *dukun* might use eggs and recite a spell before breaking the eggshell. Following that, specific patterns with distinct meanings will emerge (Stark, 2019). However, only the initiated students of the *dukun* can see them. For each of these patterns, there is a specific meaning.

Discussion

In this research, it became obvious that there are two major esoteric traditions, the Sufi tradition and the concept of the *dukun*. However, there are different Sufi orders (*Naqsybandiyyah*, *Syattariyah*), and they have their own *zikir*, methods of invocation, and so on. The *dukun* form another diverse group with a range of approaches. Therefore, it is possible to use the term esoteric pluralism. Pluralism can be understood as an organization of difference (Stuckrad, 2005). Additionally, it was observed that esotericism rooted in Western esotericism did not attract the local population. In the Minangkabau society, the scientific community described the co-existence of an Islamic and matrilineal way of life. In relation to esotericism, there is a similar situation. There are esoteric traditions that are founded on religious sources, while others are part of the folk religion.

The esoteric practitioners are part of the life-world of their community. However, many of them live in remote places. This might indicate that they are connected to the world of the *alam ghaib* (invisible world). Different kinds of *jin* live there. If someone decides to study esoteric knowledge, then the life-world of the student changes. Suddenly, he or she comes into contact with this invisible world (in an emic understanding). The viewpoint shifts. Maybe the students can detect medical disorders caused by invisible entities, or they can learn about the background and even the local history of certain places.

A crucial component of the life-world is the element of time. Normally, if someone grows older, the perception changes. For example, a child might consider a toy to be alive, but when he or she gets older, this idea disappears. In the esoteric understanding, there is the idea that the teacher (who already passed away)

attends a ceremony in which the self-healing force is strengthened. The concept of time is not the same as what is generally understood. The Sufi and *dukun* have their specific esoteric concepts. In Table 2, it is shown that there are similarities. Though not the same, they are comparable. For example, a *mantra* might contain verses that are problematic from an Islamic point of view. Nonetheless, both specialists use a specific language that can alter the environment.

Table 2. Similarities between the two major Esoteric Traditions

	<i>Tawa Nan Ampek</i>	Invocations / Spells	Self-healing Force	Invisible Entities	Medicinal Plants	Islamic Terminology
<i>Dukun</i>	✓	<i>Mantra</i>	<i>Sirr</i>	Many Types	✓	✓
Sufi	✓	<i>Doa</i>	<i>Ma-ul Hayat</i>	<i>Jin / Malaikat (angels)</i>	✓	✓

Table 2 mentions that there are similar concepts. However, there are also major differences (see Table 3). *Tawa nan ampek* are four healing plants that grow in the village and are well-known by all healers. Usually, these plants are used to treat fever, like measles.

Table 3. Differences between the two major esoteric traditions

	Black Magic	Divination	Become 'possessed'
<i>Dukun</i>	Some <i>dukun</i>	✓	✓
Sufi	-----	-----	-----

The distinctions between the esoteric and Sufi worldviews are displayed in Table 3. Given that the Minangkabau are a matrilineal society, it is important to note that there are male and female *dukun* when talking about esoteric specialists. But there isn't a single female Sufi scholar in the village community. There are only female *dukun*, who serve as a medium. This is impressive. The women and the matri-clan are the landowners in the matrilineal society. The women who are *dukun* are bound to their ancestral land. Furthermore, the mediumship probably already existed before the emergence of Islam.

Errington's claim that the Minangkabau are primarily sign-oriented is only partially applicable to the area of esoteric knowledge. The divinatory patterns are signs, in the sense of Errington, as they do not require 'deep' thinking. However, there are some esoteric practitioners who interpret dream symbols. A good example was the dream about food. Leach (1976) emphasized that signs would appear in a group of distinguishable signs, and so they would make sense. However, the mentioned dream content appears without other signs and can be classified as symbols.

Conclusion

In this research paper, the esoteric traditions of a remote Minangkabau village community were described. It was detected that so-called modern esoteric traditions, like the New Age movement and other ideas were not significant in the analysed community. There might be some reasons, like the lack of access to the Internet, among others. In this article, it was also shown that an esoteric pluralism that existed over a long period of time is still influential. However, there were changes. The *Naqsybandiyyah* Sufi order became the most important Sufi group in the village community. On the other side, the *dukun* and their teachings are still significant. One of the primary causes may be that certain medical conditions are beyond the scope of practice for doctors with Western training. In this article, the magic of *sijundai* and the skin disease of *rongeh* served as examples.

The results of this research imply that there are esoteric traditions in a traditional village community. Many researchers have focused on forms of Western esotericism and the interconnectedness of its forms. However, in this article it is shown, that there is a plurality of non-Western esoteric traditions in a Minangkabau village

society. The healers are still an important part of the village, and their role is not rejected by the majority of villagers. Therefore, this research contributes to the discussion of esotericism as rejected knowledge. This research focused on a relatively isolated village community. However, future research could look at the situation in an urban context and show whether there are new types of esotericism. Studies in Jakarta have found 'new' types of esoteric practices (Pradipta & Stark, 2025). For the Minangkabau, it would be useful to explore how these practices appear in an urban setting in West Sumatra.

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