

**DR. ALEXANDER STARK**

## **NUMBERS AND HEALING: EXPLORING THE MINANGKABAU TRADITIONAL MEDICAL SYSTEM**

Numbers hold significant meaning in many cultures. This presentation outlines the traditional Minangkabau healing system and explores the role that numbers play within it. The Minangkabau are one of the largest matrilineal societies in the world. Surprisingly, however, their traditional healing practices have received little scholarly attention. Some areas of research have highlighted the central role of numbers in Indonesian culture—for example, the 4–5 scheme of the Leiden School of Structuralism, or the adat (customary law) framework emphasized by local scholars. Other researchers have noted that the numbers three and four carry particular cultural significance within Minangkabau society. This presentation examines that claim, focusing on its implications in the context of traditional medicine. The Minangkabau healing system incorporates elements of both folk religion and Islamic belief. One notable intersection of these traditions is found in the use of the four medicinal plants known as Tawa nan ampek, which are employed across all local healing traditions. Additional examples further demonstrate how the numbers three and four play a central role in Minangkabau medical practices. For instance, the treatment of 'supernatural' illnesses may require more intensive forms of intervention. Typically, there are three levels of treatment for such disorders. Throughout the presentation, various examples will illustrate how traditional Minangkabau medicine is deeply rooted in local philosophy—and how numerology shapes its methods and meanings.



Dr. Alexander Stark studied anthropology at the University of Heidelberg (Germany) and Universiti Sains (Malaysia). His main research interests focus on traditional healing methods in Sumatra and Malaysia.



**Date:**  
**Tuesday - 25 November 2025**



**Time:**  
**6.15 - 7.45 PM**

**Location: Big Seminar room,  
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen**

**Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>**



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