



Mentawai Forest and Tradition: Maintaining the Balance of Nature and Culture

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ABSTRACT

Tropical forests in the Mentawai Islands have a very important role in the lives of the Mentawai people, both as natural resources and as a center of culture and spirituality. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between forests and the traditions of the Mentawai people, and how the sustainability of nature and culture are maintained in their daily lives. This research method is qualitative with an approach to oral tradition, ethnography, sociological anthropology. Data collection techniques are observation, interviews, documentation studies. Data analysis techniques using reduction, data presentation and data verification or drawing conclusions. The results of this study are: The Mentawai people utilize forest resources in a very wise way, based on local wisdom that has been passed down from generation to generation. However, the Mentawai forest is currently facing various threats, such as deforestation and land conversion, which have an impact on the sustainability of their culture. By exploring the importance of Mentawai traditions in forest management and the challenges faced.

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1. Introduction

The Mentawai Islands, located on the west coast of Sumatra, are inhabited by the Mentawai tribe who have traditions and cultures that are closely related to their natural surroundings. The Mentawai tropical forests are the main source of life for the local community, providing everything needed to survive, from food, medicine, to building materials. However, along with the progress of the times and increasing pressure on the environment, the Mentawai forests are now facing major threats that not only impact the ecosystem, but also the sustainability of the traditions and culture of the Mentawai people. Therefore, it is important to analyze how the relationship between the forest and Mentawai traditions in an effort to maintain the balance of nature and culture.

Uma as a traditional community group, has an important role in the development of the Mentawai people's civilization. The dynamics of daily life are influenced by the uma environment which is the central point of their civilization, both spiritually and physically. The arat sabulungan which is believed and guided, is a guide for their life process in Uma. The values of Arat sabulungan are manifested as the basis for them to carry out activities such as farming, raising livestock and other livelihood activities (Sabaggalet, 2022).

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The social structure of the Mentawai community adheres to a patrilineal lineage system. Strategic roles in the uma are dominated by men, such as Sikebbukat uma (the elder in the uma), the Sikerei profession (who has the ability to communicate with the spirit world and healing). The prerogative rights over uma assets including customary land and its contents belong only to men, while women only have the right to use it and even then must have the permission of the men (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012). The principle used is that women will later become the responsibility of their husbands in other uma and will work on the customary land of their husband's uma. However, when they separate, women still return to their father's uma.

The concept of ownership of customary land while still alive is believed to be the same as ownership of customary land after a person dies. Regarding the forest and its contents, not only the living members of the uma own it, but those who have died also have the right to own and cultivate it in a transcendental form (Tresno, 2017). The customary ownership by ancestors is known as the umanda sa-ukkui area. In this area, it cannot be entered by living people, wood, leaves, and game animals cannot be disturbed, anyone who violates it will experience disaster, disease, and even sudden death.

2. Method

This research method uses a qualitative method by conducting research to explore or understand the meaning of a number of individuals or groups of people originating from social or humanitarian problems (Creswell, 2010). The approach used is a study of oral traditions, ethnography and anthropology-sociology of the Mentawai community with a social order system known as 'Uma'. This study describes the Uma phenomenon which is influenced by external culture, then analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are made of the data obtained. The method used to analyze content with content/data analysis by concluding what becomes a finding (Ary et al, 2005).

In collecting data, researchers use triangulation techniques (combination), namely analyzing data inductively and the results prioritize meaning rather than generalization (Sugiyono, 2015). The data criteria in the research used are seen in the real data that occurred when this research was taking place. In other words, data that contains meaning behind what is seen and said by research informants (Rhee, 2008).

The data collection process is carried out through observation, interviews, and documentation. Primary data were collected in the form of words, facts, or documents of the Mentawai community with the Uma settlement. Researchers recorded from informants who knew the life of the Mentawai community and directly with the Mentawai community in detail and clearly presented or described. In line with Orong's opinion (2017) who stated that the descriptive method is carried out by describing the facts which are then continued with analysis. After that, the data collected, the researcher analyzed the data with an interactive analysis model that started from data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and ended with drawing conclusions. In line with Sugiyono's opinion (2015) who said that data analysis in qualitative research is carried out continuously, starting from before entering the field, while in the field, and after finishing in the field. Analysis has begun since formulating and explaining the problem, before going into the field, and continues until writing the research results.

3. Result and Discussion

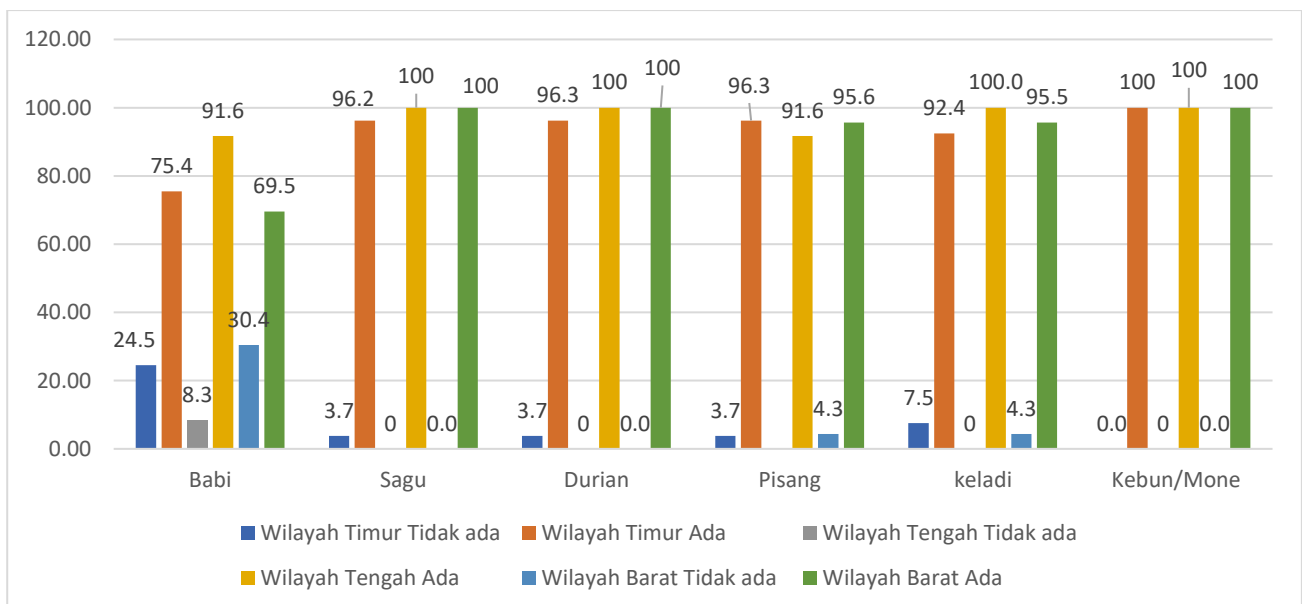
Sibakkat Laggai

Mentawai people use the word Sibakkat Laggai which refers to ownership of a territory. Bakkat has several meanings, it can mean the base, origin, and absolute owner of rights to something (Tresno, 2017). Sometimes Sibakkat Laggai can be interpreted as people with many customary lands compared to other people. Uma who have many customary lands in a certain area, can be said to be sibakkat laggai in that area. This is used to refer to the recognition of ownership and management rights over a certain territorial area, to uma. Territory is understood as a unity of land, forests, wood, rivers, animals, mountains, hills, valleys, plains and swamps (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012). Sibakkat Laggai, is also interpreted as uma who have a lot of customary land which is a residential area for uma-uma in a modern village. For example, in Madobag village, the Sibakkat Laggai is the uma Sabaggalet, because almost all residential areas occupied by other uma are the property of the uma Sabaggalet. For more details, see below:



Figure 1: Mentawai Forest (Source: Yudas Sabagalet Documentation)

There are times when the restlemen settlements built by the government consist of various uma who live there, and the customary land owners consist of several uma, thus Sibakkat Laggai is not dominated by just one uma. They deliberate to determine the area to be cultivated by each household (Lalep) within the scope of one uma. The nuclear family (Lalep) who is not in the category of uma sibakkat laggai, may cultivate up to 100 m around their house (Sabaggalet, 2022). The types of plants that are allowed are only young plants such as; bananas, taro, and vegetables. While Sibakkat laggai can plant old types of plants such as: durian, sago, and larger gardens. Management of customary land can be carried out together or individually by members of the uma who are still known and agreed that they are of the same patrilineal lineage. For more details, see Graph 1 below:



Graph 1: Overview of residential areas and dominance of agricultural businesses, (Source: Sabaggalet Research, 2021)

The graph shows that the three areas that are lowland forest areas, land ownership, forests, and rivers, have been divided between uma. While the remaining highland forest is customary forest or sibakkat leleu. Bakkat leleu is a place where game animals such as deer, wild boar, monkeys, and other reptiles develop, as well as wood and plants are primary forests. Usually this area is ravine and steep so that humans find it difficult to reach it. In addition, this area is rarely disturbed by humans, because it is believed to be a location (Hill) where the supernatural world connects which is still tied to one montogat or sangateteu in the patrilineal lineage (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012). The montogat network as a kinship system is very important for the Mentawai people, this is useful for them to trace the same ancestral lineage, when there are internal problems of the uma, about customary law and wealth of the uma as common property (Reevers, 2004). Or there was a war between uma, where the sangamontogat group gathered to attack other montogat as their opponents (Sabaggalet, 2022). It is even believed that even the spirits of ancestors still adhere to such a kinship system. This can be seen from the division of forests which include ancestral forest areas, residential areas, food areas, fields and livestock areas (Darmanto, 2006; Febrianto & Fitriani, 2012; Tresno, 2017; Sukma, 2018; Fatima & Nisyawati, 2019).

The Concept Of Arat Sabulungan

Mentawai people have a harmonious relationship with their natural surroundings. Arat sabulungan which is their way of life teaches that every living creature or what is considered a living creature has a spirit, thus excessive forest destruction that results in the extinction of living creatures around it can be avoided, because they influence each other in the form of anger that causes disaster for humans (Schefold, 1991). Thus the forest (leleu) becomes a warehouse for the stock of human needs that are still alive, such as; medicines, leaves for ritual needs, building materials for houses, and places where they hunt. The concept of Arat sabulungan, the forest (leleu) is also related to the area where the supernatural world of the Mentawai people is called Sabulungan. After the ancestors of the uma died, it is believed that leleu becomes the residence of the ancestral spirits or lelengan sa-ukkui (invisible thing), or umanda sa-ukkui (ancestral house). Animals that live in the forest and in trees such as monkeys, birds, pythons, wild boars, and deer are considered to be the pets of the ancestors who live in the forest (Tresno, 2017).

Fulfillment of Life Needs

On the other hand, leleu as a realm of fulfilling the needs of life and the environment of the Mentawai people. For example; collection of non-timber forest products, and wood forests with various types of plants and animals such as; rattan (sp. *Daemonorops*), mancemi wood, katuko (*Dipterocarpaceae* family) which are the main types of commercial wood on the global market. In addition, mixed forests are overgrown with types of wood from the *Myristicaceae*, *Euphorbiaceae*, and *Dipterocarpaceae* families (Whitten et.al, 1999). All types of wood are used as building materials for houses, boats, boards, and ritual needs held in uma.

Forests (leleu) as a means of fulfilling the needs of the Mentawai people in the form of fields (pumonean). Pumonean from the word mone which means field (Saguntung, 2023). For the Mentawai people, in the fields many old plants are planted, such as durian, mango, rambutan and jackfruit, they call this type of plant mone. Mone can also be interpreted as fruits.

Pumonean is divided into two types, old fields left behind by ancestors, and fields cultivated by the nuclear family (lalep) in one uma. Old fields are also often called pumonean leleu, which means fields left behind by male ancestors who have been in the forest for a long time and far away. This field, in addition to meeting the need for fruit, is also a sign that this forest (leleu) belongs to the uma of the male descendants of the ancestors. This type of field is usually still intended for one large uma family, or siberi kabaga but is not converted. When the fruit season comes, it can be consumed together as one uma family, even family and in-laws and grandchildren from patrilineal descent (Sabaggalet, 2022).

Influence of new culture

Since the involvement of outsiders in the forest area, there has been a shift in the culture of forest utilization for the Mentawai people. Initially, the Mentawai people were involved in global trade with outsiders. They exchanged forest products in the form of rattan and manau for basic necessities, including tobacco. Since the Soeharto era, the management of leleu was transferred to the state as part of the Mentawai economic development plan under the Padang Pariaman Regency government. Since the top-down development system was implemented, forest areas began to be converted into concession areas for

timber companies. As a result, the forest areas on Sipora Island and South Pagai Island have experienced a lot of degradation due to timber concession permits. In 1969-1973, 4 large companies were recorded as having concession permits on Siberut Island (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2014).

The influence of this new culture on Siberut Island, environmental observers at the international, national and local levels, began to worry and pay attention to the remaining forest areas. Siberut Island is currently considered an area with biodiversity, which includes; the discovery of 4 types of endemic primates and the uniqueness of the Mentawai people's culture. Finally in 1980, with the assistance of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) fund, Siberut Island was made a biosphere reserve area. In 1993 environmentalists again proposed protection for the remaining area as the Siberut National Park (TNS) area.

However, in 1999, concession permit activities were resumed with the issuance of two timber concession permits, PT. SSS, and continuing the concession permit of PT. Minas Pagai Lamber, all of which are still operating today. Overlapping forest areas have occurred, between logging concessions and TNS, so that gradually the Mentawai people were transferred control of their forests through social housing programs and integrated nature conservation programs (PKAT). This PKAT program lasted for 25 years, three uma in three areas, namely; Muntei, Madobag, and Sagulubbeg, received social housing programs along with economic development through seed assistance and livestock assistance. Since then, the involvement of indigenous communities has begun, through assistance from international and local NGOs, such as WWF and YCM. In 2017, the Indonesian Government issued a forestry partnership program through KLHK regulation no. 83 concerning social forestry. The presence of this regulation was utilized by various institutions to encourage the recognition of uma as customary areas. Thus, the Mentawai Islands Regency government issued regional regulation (Perda) no. 11/2017, concerning the recognition of uma as customary law community units. Then followed by Regent Regulation (Perbub) no. 12/2019 as the implementing regulation, as well as the Regent's Decree regarding 16 uma, to be accommodated and submitted to a higher level.

4. Conclusion

Mentawai forest is not only a vital natural resource for people's lives, but also an integral part of their culture and traditions. Sustainable forest management and respect for nature are key to maintaining the balance between human life and the environment. Therefore, the preservation of Mentawai forests and culture such as Sibakkat Laggai, Arat Sabulungan, which are part of Mentawai culture. As well as the fulfillment of new life needs must be a priority in efforts to maintain the sustainability of nature and cultural heritage for future generations. However, the influence of new cultures sometimes destroys the Mentawai forest.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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