

# Transformation of Culture: Modernization and the Existence of *Sikerei* in Mentawai West Sumatera Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

*Sikerei* or also known as *dukun* (a shaman) is a man who have the highest knowledge in the social system in a patriarchal society level of Mentawai, Sumatera Barat. The knowledge is the accumulation of behavior patterns, historical, and beliefs that are oral and sacred, also passed down mystically to the next generation. Only *Sikerei* can orally convey the secret or knowledge about community or the truth of community beliefs, which is only mentioned to him, to his followers in community. Moreover, as in many mystic traditions, such as special knowledge is not and cannot be opened to the disciples before certain mystical and ritual processed are fulfilled. *Sikerei* is a special person, he is naturally the central figure or authority in the traditional culture, the important figure of the ethnic, transmission and continuity of tradition, and the charisma and authority the position of *Sikerei* holds in the traditional world. *Sikerei* are believed as representative or liaison media between humans and ancestors of Mentawai peoples. The ancestors then transfer their knowledge to *Sikerei* through a communication system which is only understood by the *Sikerei* and occurs in possessed or *surup*. However, acculturation, modernization, and the spread of religion the existence, function and meaning of *Sikerei* in society to shift. In this context, the study aims to elucidate that the traditional *Sikerei* has been transformed during modernization and the spread of religion the existence during the Orde Baru's Rezim in Indonesia, especially with development process in 1970s, and thus the *Sikerei* identity has taken the form of *fective* construction.

**Keywords:** *Sikerei, Mentawai, oral tradition, modernization, religion.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Arat Sabulungan* is system of knowledge, value, norm, and rule of life that are strongly held by Mentawai society, West Sumatra in order to understand and interpret the environment around. Narrowly, it can be regarded as forms of religious system-it is not a religion- for Mentawai people who believe in the existence of the supernatural power, such as spirits that are in heaven, on earth, soil, forests, wilderness, and water.

Political policy during the old order, *Orde Lama*, which only recognized five religions in Indonesia, force the Mentawai people to choose one of the religions and abandon their belief system. In addition, National Development symbolic discourse which bring by *Orde Baru* becomes political capital of government to make

regulations to achieve development success, including transmigration program, family planning, education, and infrastructure development. The policies are legitimized and have a symbolic power to construct and define the reality to suit with taste and ideology of the ruling namely Indonesia is ready to take off. As a result, ethnic groups who do not have same view with will be marginalized, even eliminated [1].

Mentawai people with their Sabulungan Arat belief system is being one of the groups that get the impact. Changes in social and economic structure of the society lead to transformation at the end [2]. Because of that, this study intends to describe the effects of modernization and symbolic discourse carried by the Indonesian government, *Orde Baru* in particular, for the existence of Mentawai ethnic culture. This article will be focused on oral cultural transformation performed by

*Sikerei* as the highest level in knowledge Mentawai people. *Sikerei* states clearly and transfers the knowledge orally from generation to generation.

## 2. RESEARCH FOCUS

Based on the exposure in the background, there are some assumptions those oral traditions of Mentawai society in West Sumatra in friction. The shift is due to changes in the social structure and migration of the majority population from the traditional Mentawai settlements to the downtown. It forces *Sikerei*'s position and role as owner of the knowledge and the process of knowledge transferring to change. Based on the assumptions, this research has focused on oral cultural transformation that occurs in the community of Mentawai, West Sumatra. In context, it is through *Sikerei* as the owner of the highest knowledge is as a result of modernization and the power of symbols in society.

## 3. METHOD

This research was conducted by using a qualitative approach and explanation to reveal the reality for the truth. A qualitative approach with the study of explanation is used to obtain an explanation and understand the factors that inherent with the phenomenon. It is namely the transformation of oral culture, in line with modernization and power which be seen from the shift of *Sikerei*'s position, function and role as the owner and the one that transfers the supreme knowledge in Mentawai society, West Sumatra.

## 4. SIKEREI IN MENTAWAI SOCIETY CULTURE

Mentawai people believe in the existence of the real and the supernatural realm. Both must be kept in harmonious, compatible, and balanced. The condition of supernatural realm is a reflection of their real life; also forests became the center of public cosmology [3]. Therefore, people maintain exceedingly the forest as the abode of ancestors' spirit. That belief system then becomes background of the emergence of various traditions in society; later it evolves into a belief system.

The belief system bases and happens as a life reference; also become cultural forms they created. This is called *Arat Sabulungan*. The traditions occur in traditional ceremonies, such as during the ceremony of an opening-land, building *uma*, affixing tattoos, hunting, and so on. The aim of those all ceremony

intend to ask for permission to the ancestors and the spirits of universe. Because of the continuance of community life, it is very dependent on the blessing from the spirits.

Regarding to Mentawai society, the traditional ceremonies has three functions. They are: (1) attempt to restore or seek for harmony, orderliness to the universe, both real and supernatural, (2) purification process for system which is damaged or contaminated previously, and (3) reminder that the souls still have a place in which people's lives. Therefore, the ceremony has very important position in the beliefs and culture of the Mentawai people. Every aspects of life always begin and end with a ceremony.

Any kind of ceremony is led by one *Sikerei*. The *Sikerei* becomes intermediary between the world of human and the spirit. His role is as the bridge in communication between the two worlds; a desire or intention from individual or groups who celebrate the ceremony will be communicated through *Sikerei* to the spirit, and vice versa. Thus *Sikerei* has the power that is both magical and sacred. Even in everyday life, it was always surrounded by symbols of sanctity and grandeur. Beside as the liaison, *Sikerei* also serve as elders in the traditional community. They are regarded as people who have the knowledge, which is largely owned just by them. They are able to view the world of spirits, communicate and dominate it. They can protect people from evil spirits, and heal the sick. That ability and knowledge make *Sikerei* as the holder of the highest knowledge in the Mentawai society.

*Sikerei* is man and in the line of duty is assisted by his wife who called *Rimata*. He is originally ordinary people who study the science of medication, but not all of the people who master traditional Mentawai medicine can be *Sikerei*. Only those chosen were crowned become *Sikerei* in a ceremony.

In addition to helping the community in various ceremonies and medicine, *Sikerei* also plays a role in transferring knowledge to candidates for become next *Sikerei*. Transferring process occurs orally, and generally those are in *job-shadowing* through ceremonies or treatment performed. A lot of knowledge possessed by *Sikerei* is in form of *tacit knowledge* and delivered through oral tradition or spoken.

## **5. MODERNIZATION, POWER OF SYMBOL AND ROLE OF SIKEREI**

*Orde Baru* government made a national development as a symbolic discourse which initiated in March 1970. As Bourdeui states the symbols that are formed contain the power to shape the face of reality. The power stored in the process of categorization, assessment and imposition of ideas to objects which then interprets symbols.

National development and support to the practices of modernization is the political capital of government to make various regulations for successful development. These regulations are reflected in the transmigration program, educational equity, increasing agricultural output, infrastructure development, as well as regulations relating to beliefs and religions of Indonesian people.

Many standards on matters that support and hamper the development programs are determined by the authorities; in this case it is government. Consequently, ethnicities or groups who do not have the same view with the policies and regulations will be marginalized in the development process, obtain constraints in the economy, even political pressure. One of those happens with the Mentawai people.

Prohibition or annulment of *Arat Sabulungan* cannot be separated from government policy that relates to the elimination of ideologies that are considered disturbing public and religious life. Actually, this movement is already started during the reign of Soekarno, through the Prime Minister, Ali Sastroamidjojo (1953-1955). It is the establishment of an Interdepartmental Review of Beliefs Committee (*Panitia Interdepartemental Peninjauan Kepercayaan-Kepercayaan* that is abbreviated as *Panitia Interdep Pakem*) in the society by Decree No. 167/PROMOSI/1954. Based on that decree, the government through its prosecutor conducts surveillance investigation, and prohibition against all forms of beliefs that exist and develop in the society.

Three religions meeting or *Rapat Tiga Agama* which was experienced by Mentawai society in 1954 essentially ordered the people who still profess *Arat Sabulungan* to leave the belief and choose one of the religions that recognized by the government within three months. For people who do not obey or ignore the orders, the government through *peace-maintenance* will do the destruction and arson against any proposition of worship including all accessories (symbols) that are primitive. The pressures and threats continued until the 1970s.

Decree No. 167 / PROMOSI / 1954 do not stand alone. The decision letter is a follow-up to the provisions of Article 18 and Article 43 UUDS 1950 which states that, "The controller gave the same protection to all associations and recognized religious communities". Whereas Article 43 states that, "The controller monitors all religious communities and associations to obey the law, including rules unwritten law".

Sociologically and juridical, the establishment is firstly as a means to control many emerging forms of beliefs in communities, along with various forms of marriage in some areas carried out by each followers in accordance with their own rules. However politically, the presence of diverse beliefs with their local components that are viscous raises its own concerns for the authorities. It will be the emergence of a threat to the stability and integrity of the state and power.

In 1958 to make the effort be effective, the Attorney General forms Board for Society Movement and Trust (*Bagian Gerakan dan Kepercayaan Masyarakat*). Then in 1960 this institute was upgraded to *Biro Pakem* with the task for coordinating the control of the flow of the beliefs for the benefit of religion and public order. Later, it expanded its reach in every province and district through Circular Letter (*Surat Edaran Departemen Kejaksaan Biro Pakem Pusat*) No.34/Pakem/S.E/61 on April 7, 1961. Its task is to observe, monitor, and analyze various movement or motion including the development of all belief cult and also study all of text that relate with both from within and outside the country.

The matters that relate with purification of the religious teachings have pushed Indonesia into a country that ignores social discrimination or persecution against minority religious groups. The discrimination is evident through government policy, which only recognizes five major religions in Indonesia. Also it prohibits and eradicates all forms of belief systems that exist in community, either persuasively or by violence.

The majority of Indonesian people, especially those in institutions legislative and executives who embrace a particular religion (which is recognized by the state), use democratic process to make their values become national values, through policies that are created and practiced in society. Problems of controlling the subordinate groups of nationalities order in Indonesia should be seen in a broader perspective, that actually agents outside of the group involved in the dominant, in this case the owner of power. The parties concerned

then feel the need to perform a variety of actions that are political and non-political in order to preserve the power under the pretext of continuity of national life [4]. The groups of majority which has control over a variety of capital in society, especially economic capital, led to the birth imbalances that increasingly conspicuous. The imbalance was no exception in terms of political access which gave birth to the dominance of one or several groups. The groups then get the *previlese* of the various social agencies, especially the government.

Although in the process, sub-ordinate group has consciousness and wider identity also begins to consider the boundaries of ethnicity. However, all efforts related to the return of *cultural boundary* on the physical and geographical margins are clearly felt in vain. That is because the social and political systems are not able to guarantee the balance of political power by one or any groups and specific interests [5]. Government is unsuccessful to play its real role as a structure in ensuring the survival of democracy.

Standardization process that undertaken in the social life of politics is assessed that it exceeds the limits of cultural tolerance because the ruling party no longer conduct an awareness process. As an integral part of the larger social system with a shared identity and disregard the interests of certain groups, it has reached the denial the existence and identity however. Excessive nationalization has been denying the values and local institutions.

The indigenous leaders, *Sikerei* in this case, loss own role and legitimacy caused by the policies that determined by minority. The *Orde Baru* government policies systematically disengage the role and position of local luminaries as the "spokesman", such as traditional leaders and other informal figures. That absence impacts on the disruption of the communication process and the continuity of culture and knowledge contained in the communities [6][7].

Transmigration program that makes *Mentawai* as one of the destination regions participate in donating effect to shift of the oral culture in the society. The migrants, who mostly came from Java Island, bring their social system, culture and society they believe in [8]. The process of meeting and mixing of cultures is indirectly changed the social structure of society.

Schools are established and any kind of knowledge that is universal is introduced. It is open horizons of *Mentawai* people and begins to question the mystical cultures they believe. Building of health centers and

sending doctor or spell-paramedics to the Mentawai islands also shift the function and position of *Sikerei* in the *Mentawai* social structure.

Society unconsciously begins to adopt the new cultures. This is in accordance with the proposed of Gramsci, that the ideas that created by the authorities determine the cognitive structure of society. National Development and modernization have brought the Mentawai society into the framework which state desired. Changes in the structure of society will affect cultural change, even a belief system. People are starting to leave the mystical culture, *Arat Sabulungan* [9]. Also *Sikerei* has been difficult to find in the community. This can only be found in some areas that still adhere to *Arat Sabulungan* as a belief system and *Sikerei* as an intermediary with the ancestors [10].

## 6. CONCLUSION

*Sikerei* as the most important part and which cannot be separated in the *Mentawai* public belief system get a shift in the social structure. The most dominant factor influencing the existence of *Sikerei* is government policy that requires people to choose one of the five recognized religions. This policy has forced people to abandon their beliefs and ignore *Sikerei* functions as the owner of the highest knowledge. In addition, development programs that serve the symbolic discourse in *Orde Baru*, forcing society to accept other forms of change.

The developments of education, indirectly, build awareness of the majority in community about the presence of the mystical world which they work on. Health and transmigration projects have given rise to new cultures in society and hold in health care way which is good and right. As well as it become the clash and fusion of cultures is happening with the migrants. The developments also take forest and lands that belongs to Mentawai people believed as the cosmology community center.

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