

ETNOSIA: JURNAL ETNOGRAFI INDONESIA

Volume 10 Issue 1, June 2025

P-ISSN: 2527-9319, E-ISSN: 2548-9747



Stories, Myths and Rituals: Life in the Mentawai Archipelago in a Globalism Analysis

Maskota Delfi^{1*}, Johan Weintré², Zainal Arifin¹, Sidarta Pujiraharjo¹, Yetty Oktayanti³, Ade Irwandi¹

¹ Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Andalas, Indonesia.

² James Cook University, Australia.

³ Cultural Anthropology Study Programmed, Institute Seni Indonesia Padang Panjang, Indonesia

* Correspondence author: mdelfi@soc.unand.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Mentawai; Myths; Ritual; Stories.

How to cite:

Delfi, M., Weintré, J., Arifin, Z., Pujiraharjo, S., Oktayanti, Y., & Irwandi, A. (2025). *Stories, Myths and Rituals: Life in the Mentawai Archipelago in a Globalism Analysis*. *ETNOSIA: Jurnal Etnografi Indonesia*, 10(1), 56–73.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31947/etnosia.v10i1.32370>

Article history:

Received: Dec 18, 2023

Revised: June 23, 2025

Approved: June 26, 2025

ABSTRACT

Myths, rituals and life stories are interconnected and conveyed through long-standing oral traditions, making them important cultural assets of indigenous peoples around the world. In the Mentawai Islands, myths and rituals are inseparable from the daily lives of the people. The myths are not only communicated within the community but also revealed to outsiders. This research deviates from earlier literature as it aims to explore the relationship between traditional rituals, life stories, myths and modern dynamics in the different valleys to trace the ancestral claims of land ownership. The study employed a qualitative approach. Data was collected through observation and in-depth interviews with *Sikerei* (shaman), clan elders and notable clan individuals in the thinly populated watersheds in south Siberut Island, complemented by a literature review. The findings show that various rituals and myths about the life journey of the Mentawai people are important to current values. Extended with a unique culture of body tattoos, botanical knowledge, sago staple food consumption combined with animal protein feasts. It can be concluded that myths have a relationship with their living practices they lived, the formation and strengthening of their cultural identities, belief systems and clan land claims in Mentawai. It suggests their indigenous knowledge can opens up a power to see what is not evident to the average mind and contributes to different shades of feeling and experiences.

1. Introduction

It is impossible to escape the fact that in the early beginnings, our ancestors lived a very basic lifestyle and bound by strong indigenous traditions. Our forbearers were devoid of mechanical means, electricity, and without saying, the use of electronic communication or to apply sophisticated tools to improve their welfare. In early times the knowledgebase was limited to what mostly discovered, invented and organically produced in communities. It was merely due to the capacity to learn, memorise and incorporate over time by synthetic means to advance the sum of human know-how. This process of knowledge gathering has been carried forward during uncountable generations. Assisted by knowledge generated external from the community, the accumulated progression has brought communities to the current level of advancement. What once developed as a “novelty” in the early human progression, accumulated to an expanded human tradition, such as encountered in Mentawai. It is complemented by new applications of the younger generations with advanced manifestations such as employment of drones and cost-effective global communication. The development described above with continual change are part of the human cultural dynamics (Tanjung & Santosa, 2023).

Those dynamics raises questions: (1) what historical ancestors believed in or what myths or what stories were born in the Mentawai communities and the current applications; (2) what is the effect of an overflow of cross-cultural interaction?; (3) How did and do they explain the world around them and find their meanings in it?; (4) What past belief systems have influenced current modern spirituality?; (5) How do the origin stories of their ancestors relate to their local beliefs? And 6) Why have the myths of their ancestors’ origin increased in their current discussion?

By discussing the stories, myths and rituals of the Mentawai people, it aims to improve the understand of their relationship in the current globalization and its impact to strengthening the Mentawai cultural identity. In addition, it is also hoped for to provide an understanding of how the tradition preservation of myths, stories and rituals which are challenged by external influences. In this paper we hope to create a better understanding of how these narratives have shaped the community’s values and social cohesion.

Belief systems are a set of community values and become personal commitments that shape communal life, knowledge and action (Wray-Lake et al., 2014:243). It is certainly one of most observable and interesting features of public and private ideology. Without actual strong individual commitments, belief systems would not have remained resilient with social consequences in small communities or for that matter societies at large. Exploring these questions and more, in this essay we touch on discovering notable traditions, figures, and legends that figure prominently in existing traditional faiths, mythology and ritual of customary communities, including those in Mentawai (Rozi & Taufik, 2020).

Myths of the origin of their Mentawai ancestors have long been mentioned by Mentawai researchers. Among others, they can be found in various writings

(Coronese, 1986; Delfi, 2005, 2012; Hammons, 2010; Henley, 2001; Reeves, 1999, 2009; Rudito, 2013; Schefold, 1991; Singh, 2020; Singh et al., 2021; Spina, 1981; Tulus, 2012, 2013) which show that the myth of origin is important in discussing the Mentawai ethnic group and their culture. As myths, stories and rituals feature prominently in this article, a definition is required. Myths are defined as symbolic narratives, perhaps of unknown origin and at least partly traditional, that ostensibly relate to events. It is often associated with regional cultural belief systems. Myths are distinguished from a symbolic behaviour such as cult or ritual that may take place in certain symbolic places or physical objects (Tulus, 2012:106). Myths are a specific account of superior entities. Gods, demigods or legendary heroes of a particular community group and explored in rituals, that have involved in extraordinary manifestations or circumstances. It takes place at a time that is unspecified, unless driven by a particular calendar period. Place and time are important to be able to trace communal clan land and remains understood as existing in an ordinary human society. Distinguished philosophers have pondered over these social experiences which will be followed up in the next paragraphs.

The outline of myths and rituals that originate from a past period or from a society other than one's own, can usually be seen quite clearly, and recognized or compared as myths that are dominant in one's own time. Societies are always presented as a place of tribulations and human emotions. This is not surprising, as myths accompanied by rituals have its own authority, not by proving itself, but by presenting itself. In this manner the authority of a myth and the ritual applications are indeed seldom questioned. The myth can be outlined in detail only when its authority is no longer unquestioned or has been rejected or overcome in some manner by another such as a more detailed and comprehensive myth.

Myths and rituals are connected with the human passage of life (Devi & Roibin, 2023:74). They indicated how humans in traditional or *adat* communities in modern times, perform rituals to prepare for the next stage in life. Individuals in their natural life cycle, advance in age and create altered perspectives. It requires an audience to initiate those perspectives in the community to reflect or prepare on future challenges, tribulations and pleasing moments in life. In Mentawai, it is often accompanied with dance, music, festive food and lead by a *Sikerei* (see Figure 1 below). He or she initiate simple or elaborate procedures with mystical manifestations as tradition prescribes. Cultures provide some sort of ritual at the birth of a child, union in marriage, coming of age, and in a final send-off as a realisation that humans are merely mortal. These events can be in a close knit gathering of family and friends or in a large clan celebration attended by hundreds or thousands of people.

Figure 1. Sikerei at the Muntei settlement on Siberut Island



Source: Private collection of Maskota Delfi, 2023.

In a marriage ritual, strong cultural sanctions might be issued for not following community guidelines. Depending on the culture, it limits marriage partners to only certain classes of people. In current times we can see also in traditional communities that particular taboos are being modified in a response to a wider community social adjustment. This is a leap change from former times, where in mutual amorous attraction between projected wedding partners of different backgrounds would have been historically rejected. Those natural attractions were previously a matter of little or no importance to bring at heart lovers together. In comparison with post-industrial countries, marriage rites are often a simple gathering and often secular in nature. But still a selection of sanctions, including the force of positive law, operate similarly to foster and protect a lasting union of partners.

Those gatherings, especially those that attract many guests and spectators, are important as it is an opportunity to meet with rarely encountered individuals or unknown to each other. It enables to exchange ideas of mutual interest, which can lead to cooperation in work or leisure in Mentawai. Those clan gatherings are truly excellent networking events to encounter fresh opportunities and exchange important information for a beneficial life enhancing effects.

The study of myths and ritual life is closely intertwined with the aging process of community members that take place at different milestone stages in life. The shapes and forms of ritual expressions show remarkable similarities between

societies. The essential similarities from Mentawai, Dayak communities and Hindu cultural life in Bali Indonesia, are striking. It reflects a close similarity in human thought and needs of inhabitants from New York to as far as to places in the heart of Borneo. Although we might speak different languages and eat different food, we are much more similar than what we think. Attempts to understand rites of passage, the myths and life stories have generated a range of sociocultural interpretations. It views those variables as part of a larger sociocultural system, of the "human" being, being connected to their resource capacity combined with the natural environment, in other words, the production of natural and human resources. The rites of passage and myths are thus an element in a larger sphere, that facilitate the means of; gain food and shelter combine with a social livelihood and advance human procurement. In this process it is related to a system in which communities are aligned in compact sub-groups in efforts of exploration and performance.

The creative, inventive matters and symbolic capabilities of humankind are viewed as a constantly humming human energy factor. An analysis is provided of the differences and similarities of sociocultural activities in this essay. In understanding why marriage sometimes an extremely elaborate rite is and on the other hand a simple ritual in another cultural settings, is perhaps depending on the cultural need. The requirement of a large but relatively weak human network to maximize the number of acquaintances for perhaps ambitions of a long distant future cooperation. It is contrasted by a very strong but small network of connectivity, to gain a social livelihood relative to the importance of an enduring unions of spouses.

Studies on myths have long been conducted by social scientists. For example, Malinowski wrote about the sacred tales of the Trobriand People (Coleman, 2017). With his perspective, Malinowski found that the sacred tales of the Trobriand People served as a medium and means to unite their lives in the Southwest Pacific. Levi-Strauss (1955) also conducted extensive studies on myths, focusing on the myths of the American Indians to understand how human ideas and thoughts can be used to interpret myths. Levi-Strauss even emphasized that the writing of history is a myth of our time because, like oral myths, it is based on an ideological interpretation of a limited set of past facts (Doja, 2006:86). This suggests that there will always be interpretations of past history, including oral histories, about the origins of the ancestors or forefathers of each group.

The stories of the ethnic group also caught the attention of Ahimsa-Putra (2001), who conducted a study on the tales of the Bajo People. These stories contain maternal contradictions, as the Bajou People live at sea but still rely on those people on land. The narratives about "us" a continuously retold in origin stories, as seen in this study of the Mentawai indigenous people. The stories of this ethnic group hold the power to be perpetuated for the purpose of gaining recognition from those outside it. This aligns with Mirza & Warwick (2024) assertion that the existence of an ethnic group must be socially and ideologically affirmed through general recognition, both from its own members and outsiders, as unique aspect of its culture.

Discussions about the uniqueness of culture or identity can be built through narratives, stories, or myths. Narratives are a form of discourse that is shaped by the way they are presented (Van Hulst et al., 2025). Exploring myths can help us understand the construction of the Mentawai identity discourse that has existed for generations. On the other hand, the process of forming this identity is believed to involve internal struggles among the Mentawai people themselves. They are not only divided based on islands, but also based on the main river valleys, which Pampus has identified as giving rise to various dialects (*nganga*) (Catapan, 2024:137). This language plays a significant role in the Mentawai identity struggle in how they perceive themselves and others. This means that the Mentawai people are not a monolithic group, but rather a diverse community variation in dialect and historical origins. This is important for current land claims. Encounters with other identities lead to a process of “negotiation” and “resistance” among the Mentawai people. This is crucial in understanding how “Mentawainess” is shaped through negotiation and resistance between different groups within the Mentawai community and external forces (*sasareu*).

Discussion of Mentawainess mythology in this myth reveals important aspect related to the reproduction of various origin myths in the daily life of the Mentawai people. This phenomenon is also observed in Leach's study of the Kachin people in Burma (Myanmar) (Robinne & Sadan, 2010:84), where myths contribute to instability due to conflicting interpretations of myth and rituals (Frog, 2018). So, why are myths necessary? According to Ahimsa-Putra (2001:77), myths are stories or fairy tales that stem from human imagination and fantasy, reflecting their daily experiences. This suggests that humans, including the Mentawai people, are free to create and reproduce any myths they desire, including origin myths that imagine the history of their ancestors (Delfi, 2013a). Consequently, there are variations in the origin myths they construct. The discourse of identity or “Mentawainess”, constructed by the Mentawai people, and possibly by outsiders, is crucial in understanding their current relationship with external identities (other groups) perceived as threats to them.

Stories that involve identity or Mentawainess, as told by the Mentawai people today, are significant. This is especially through for historical narratives, particularly those that detail the origins of the Mentawai people, known locally as *pumumuan*. The relationship between the retelling of *pumumuan* and identity can be likened to the concept proposed by Madan Sarup (Tulius, 2012:72), which suggests that identity has a historical context and is always understood in relation to space and time. Additionally, myths are considered a form of history, as explained by Girard in Hammons (Tulius, 2012:177). Therefore, recounting the origins of a group is a way of exploring and understanding their identity.

2. Method

Ethnographic research has been utilised in various social research, fields such as applied science, socio-cultural anthropology, sociology, human geography, organizational studies, educational research and cultural studies. According to Atkinson and Hammersley (1994:329), the fundamental principle of ethnography is centred around diversity rather than consensus. In practice, ethnography

typically refers to a type of social research that focuses on capturing the essence or fundamental nature of specific social phenomena. The approach adopted in this study is holistic. This approach aims to systematically understand the perpetuation of myths or stories regarding the origins of the Mentawaiian ancestors in order to generate results that stem from the perspectives of the local community and align with the factual reality of the community under investigation. The communities studied in this research is located in the villages of the three main watersheds of Rereiket, Sabirut, Sila'oinan in South Siberut.

According to Lim (2025), the holistic approach assumes that every socio-cultural element in a society is interrelated, leading to a complete understanding. This also aims to understand the socio-cultural symptoms that develop in various aspects of society, including technical, normative, political, economic, environmental, socio-cultural, institutional, legal, and stakeholder aspects.

The number of informants interviewed is not strictly limited. Interviews have been adjusted according to the information needs and categories of informants. The following are some of the groups that were interviewed: (1) Sikebbukat Uma (elders in the patrilineal exogamy clan), (2) traditional figures such as *Sikerei* (shaman), *Sibakkat Laggai* (hamlet founder) in the valleys mentioned above, (3) NGOs (Non-Government Organisations) that focus on Mentawai Cultural Development (YPBM) (4) community government officials, and (5) qualified community members, included *kalabai* (mothers), *ukkui* (fathers), youngsters, (*siokkok-silainge*) and immigrants (*sasareu*), as can be seen in Table 1.

Tabel 1. Research Informants

No	Name	Gender	Age	Status	Contextual Note
1	Rawai	M	57	<i>Sikebukat Uma</i>	Practice of Belief
2	Kinoi	M	60	<i>Sibakkat Laggai</i> (<i>Hamlet Founder</i>) or <i>Sikerei</i>	Practice of Belief and History of Myth
3	Bulug	M	67	<i>Sikebukat Uma</i> or <i>Sipaniti Kerei</i>	The History of <i>Sikerei</i> , Beliefs, Myths and Context
4	Rou	M	48	<i>Sibakkat Laggai</i> (<i>Hamlet Founder</i>)	Social and Cultural Conditions of the Community
5	Bajak	M	55	<i>Sikerei</i>	The History of <i>Sikerei</i> , Beliefs, Myths and Context
6	Oinan	M	45	<i>Sikerei</i>	The History of <i>Sikerei</i> , Beliefs, Myths and Context
7	Baga	M	41	<i>Sikerei</i>	The History of <i>Sikerei</i> , Beliefs, Myths and Context

8	Saila	F	36	YPBM	Practice of Belief Today
---	-------	---	----	------	--------------------------

The data collection techniques utilized in this study are participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants to explore the myths of origin that are still being created and shared today. By employing these data collection techniques, we aim to uncover the reasons behind why the Mentawai Siberut People continue to propagate their myths of origin and why these myths still hold such significance today.

In terms of research ethics, the researchers obtained permission from the village head and coordinated with the clan leader (*Sikebukat Uma*). Researchers ensured that meetings, interviews, or observations were conducted with the consent of informants and that data confidentiality and integrity were maintained. All interviews with informants were recorded with the consent of all informants. Given the sensitive nature of traditional knowledge and conflict history, we established protocols to protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous peoples. Participants retain the right to withdraw information they consider to be culturally restricted. All interviews were conducted with cultural sensitivity, respecting local customs and traditional protocols surrounding knowledge sharing. Some names have been altered. Data storage follows strict confidentiality measures, with access limited to the research team. Research findings are verified through a peer-review process, allowing participants to review and verify their contributions before finalisation.

3. Result and Discussion

• Mythical Content in Ritual Practices

Of all the rituals the marriage creates relationships between clans or outside the family. This can be of importance in relation to the clan's claim on sago groves, which was traditionally the main staple food, and orchards as part of their communal land territories.

The importance of marriage in Mentawai with respect to spouses, other kin and future children, are in part the orderly maintenance of society. Rites of marriage provide a sanction on the union of the marriage. Thus, serves as both a means of instigating an orderly life in an enjoyable relationship as a couple and in relative harmony with local society.

The Mentawaians, as one of the ethnic groups that adheres to the patrilineal lineage withdrawal system, applies the guidelines of providing dowry (*alat toga/alak toga*) from the groom's family to the bride. Regarding the type and number of dowries, this results on the negotiations between the two extended families. In many villages in South Siberut, pigs are usually the main dowry, combined with a quantity of sago and yam gardens, durian trees, cauldrons and mosquito nets. These negotiations precede the wedding ceremony itself.

According to Mr. Oinan, Rou & Baga "the wedding ceremony in the Mentawai consists of several stages in receiving blessings from the Mentawaian *Ulau Manua* (the creator)". Among these rituals there are certain prohibitions not to be

violated by both the bride and groom, the chief, the parents of the bride and groom and members of the clan. The most important ritual is the "*lok pangurei*" or *loket pangureijat* the provision of providing drinks to the brothers who participate in the ceremony, while consuming food at the feast. The concoction for the *lok pangurei* are taken from the *gojoh* plant or torch ginger (*Etlingera elatior*) which is mixed with the grated turmeric and called *kiniubet*.

A little bit is often added to the head decoration of the bride and groom's mother at a spot located at the back of their head gear. The *kiniubet* is cut from the head ornament and mixed with the boar's meat cooked liquids, that was previously roasted on a fire inside bamboo sticks. Arriving at the groom's house, the *kiniubet* is mixed with the cooked meat liquids and only provided to the male family members who take a sip in turns. The groom's sisters are prohibited from drinking the *lok pangurei*. While giving the liquid, the drinker utters the saying "*taipangorik, ikop puurei mai taipangorik*", while the person serving the liquid answers, "*taipangorik, kukoop uureira, taipangorik*". The series of words is a mantra that is believed to have supernatural powers to cure diseases that may occur.

Thus, the purpose of the ritual and mantra is to prevent misfortunes during the wedding ritual. And when the relatives of the two brides consume the prepared food types at the wedding banquet. The *lok pangurei* is not required to be assisted by the *Sikerei* as the *uma* leader or tribal elders are versed in this ritual. The Mentawaians in the Rereiket watershed at the southern part of Siberut Island, believe that if this process is not carried out, relatives who eat the boar animal protein contained in the wedding banquet might experience an itchy throat or cough. In the Mentawai tradition, if the groom's family gives a share of meat slaughtered during *pangurei* first to his siblings, they consider if it is suitably and tasty to be eaten. Usually, when serving a meat dish, it is accompanied with a dish to alleviate any possible less attractive flavours at the wedding feast. This tradition has been kept alive till now, especially in the Sarereiket watershed area in the Madobak community. Nearby traditional Mentawaian settlements in the Sarereiket watershed have similar traditions although the *Sikerei* may have implemented some variations (Nur, 2019).

- **The Reproduction of Myth**

One of the significant stories in this study is the myth of the origin of the Mentawai people. This myth is often mentioned by the Mentawaians in Siberut in regard to the ancestral lineage of their patrilineal clan. This myth was later called "Pumumuan Retdenan". Especially in the Siberut area, the existence of the pumumuan in the origin myth of the Mentawaian ancestors has become very relevant. It is often used in a significant argument that explains the indigenous to be a patrilineal group which emphasizes the lineage of the male ancestors. On the other hand, this identity or "Mentawainess", is often associated with the myth of their ancestors coming from Nias. Regardless of which version is voiced, their "Mentawainess" is shown by legitimizing the myth that one of their ancestors came from Simatalu. This is to emphasize the importance of the village of origin in Siberut. This is also in line with Schefold's (1985:85) statement that Siberut is

the center of the world, showing that the Mentawai people with their origins in Siberut are not "peripheral".

This also demonstrates that the Mentawai people challenge the legitimacy of outsiders (sasareu) who view the Mentawaians as marginal, because Siberut (also known as Simatalu) is the center of the world (Delfi, 2005). The legitimacy of Mentawai identity is also reflected in the stories or *pumumuan* of the *uma* (patrilineal clan). For example, as mentioned by our informant in the *Pumumuan Retdenan* of Sakukuret. Mr. Rawai. declared that the name of his *uma* (patrilineal clan) when in Simatalu was Satoleuru, not Sakukuret. Additionally, when he shared the story of his *uma* moving to different locations in the Siberut river valley, he connected it with the establishment of the *uma* building as a key aspect of his Mentawai identity.

In Mentawai Siberut, the term *uma* is used to refer to the patrilineal clan groups that are exogamous (wives chosen from outside the clan) and to communal buildings that serve as the center of tribal activities and rituals.

Moreover, from a genealogy perspective the *Pumumuan Retdenan*, is also linked to other identities. Such as those associated with the practice of domesticating pigs and the food served during ceremonies. For instance, in *Pumumuan Retdenan* of Satebburuk. Mr. Bulug. stated that as his clan moved from one settlement to another in the Sabirut Valley, they continued to raise pigs. Even during the time of this research, he chose to reside in his *uma* at Bad Maopu because of his pig-raising activities. Mentawaians from Puro or Muara Siberut often purchase pigs from him. As a Mentawaiian, he takes pride in not only having a large *uma* in Bad Maopu but also in his abundance of raising pigs. This is similar to Mr. Rawai and Mrs. Saila, who, although not raising pigs in Bad Mara (river Mara), shared that the ancestors of the Sakukuret Clan had pigs and successfully bred them, especially during their settlement in Madobag.

The legitimacy of the exogamous patrilineal clan system in Mentawai society as seen in the story of *Pumumuan Retdenan* and linked to mythological figures like Pageta Sabbau. It carries the message that Mentawai people are not inferior. Pageta Sabbau, an extraordinary mythological figure with supernatural powers, taught the Sikerei in Mentawai how to cure various diseases. Through this story, individuals like Mr. Rawai & Bajak. whose father is a Sikerei, and Mr. Kinoi & Oinan, who is also a Sikerei, are portrayed as possessing great powers, albeit not as immense as Pageta Sabbau (mystical figure).

These origin myths are shared with slight variations in storytelling style and content, sometimes adding humour and colour to the tales. Over the past two decades, the Mentawai people have begun to take pride in their heritage, particularly since gaining partial autonomy as a region. Muntei Village, one of the villages in Mentawai has been designated as a tourism village, showcasing the "uniqueness and authenticity" of their art and culture, further enhancing their sense of Mentawai identity. As a result, the narratives of their ancestors and *Pumumuan Retdenan* are increasingly valued as a means of shaping their identity.

Young people in villages across the Siberut Valley and other river valleys take pride in their traditions, bolstered by connections with indigenous groups once marginalized by mainstream society. The continuous production and transmission of identity through myth remains a vital aspect of their culture. The importance of the stories produced by the Mentawai people, especially those on parts of the Rereiket watershed area, were also a concern for Singh (2020; 2021). Especially related to the stories on the river spirits, one of which is known as Sikameinan in Rereiket area.

- **The Reproduction of Life Stories**

It has to be noted that cultural expressions of the past have been adjusted to meet with current expectations in society. Also, the *Sikerei* has become aware that strict historical applications might disengage some members away of the proceedings. The dynamics of culture has allowed to apply flexibility to move with the majority of the community from historical to the current different times. The dynamics of cost-effective mobile communication has influenced all of us. The communities on Siberut Island have developed their own individual perspectives. They have brought new capacities to people formally so close to nature. In 2023 one of the sons of the *Sikerei* from one of the hamlets in the Rereiket River Valley on Siberut Island, has successfully completed studies in Padang on the mainland of West Sumatra and was awarded a nursing qualification.

The *Sikerei's* views have also changed from the pure past shamanistic ideas of life. An animistic *Sikerei* worldview in which not only breath-ing beings and plants have souls, but also objects, natural or artificial. In this manner he created from ordinary objects attractive object itself, in order to support its desire to function "properly". The view that humans must make their lives beautiful, by way of decoration and ritual festivities. Thus, their souls enjoy life on earth and do not stray away to the ancestral realm or heaven. Beauty is considered necessary for harmony. It is granted by both immaterial beings, foremost the ancestors, and material entities. An example of that are the "toys for the souls" as noted by Schefold (1991). They refer especially to the carved wooden birds that are also present when the kerei summons the ancestors and" toys for their souls" as well as other woodcarvings and flower decorations used in ritual events (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2. Sikerei in Gathering



Source: Personal Collection of Maskota Delfi, 2010

On the Mentawai islands, the cosmology is Mentawai-centric. In one of their myths, according to Schefold, their original ancestors are a woman and a dog whose raft was washed up on the shore of Siberut. The pair had been expelled from somewhere because of a sexual relation and the woman's pregnancy. Later on, their son searched for years for a woman to marry, in vain. Unknowingly, finally he married his own mother, and their children became the first Mentawaians. Another traditional indigenous myth speaks of the origins of the Pleiades, a Greek mythology in regard to the daughters of the Titan Atlas, and the eight orphans who sailed far away and became the star sign that marks two important seasons. The illuminating background material drawings on comparisons across the Indonesian archipelago and the recognizable versions of these two myths. Such as the descendants from a woman and dog in West Java and secondly people as star sign and orphan ancestors in Flores (Schefold, 1998, 2001).

Yet, the traditional animistic culture continued in the interiors of Siberut. What seemed like a hopeless cultural fight has since changed rapidly when regional autonomy was introduced and the Mentawai archipelago became a self-governed district in 2000. There is now a revival of culture that finds support in more enlightened government policies. In contrast, the *Sikerei* is now featured on government publication, present at the opening of the local events with ritual dance and music. It is one of the pinnacles of tourist promotions to witness the song and dance event of the *Sikerei* in a short, adopted version.

In Mentawai the *uma* refers to a traditional clan unit of 5 to 10 families and the communal long-house where they live and hold religious events (see Figure 3 below). The *uma* emphasizes cultural cohesion and belongs to all its members. They also have field houses or *lalep* for family privacy and huts near to their kept livestock, mainly boars, which are prestigious and slaughtered for rituals (Delfi, 2005). The Mentawaians are in principle food self-sufficient and obtain all they need from the planted gardens and as hunter-gatherers from the river, the sea, and the forest. They have no institutional rules that forces them to create surpluses. Life can thus be lived according to their motto of *moile, moile* or slowly, slowly. It is a signpost to show respect for soul, body and be pleasant with good

manners (Delfi, 2005). The Mentawaians, can be argued, to display us an alternative way of life as one of the global ideologies.

Figure 3. The Uma or Clan Longhouse.



Source: Personal Collection of Maskota Delfi, 2019.

One of the fascinating markers of the Mentawaian culture are their distinctive body tattoos. They serve as an identity card as every valley has different markings and has created life stories for the bearers of tattoos (see Figure 4 below). In Mentawaian tradition, care for one's own soul is central. Accordingly, when a person's soul does not find life attractive, it might be tempted to leave the body and joins the ancestors which marks that their earthly body expires. An un-tattooed body might not bear the approval of the ancestors, which is why the body tattoos are of high significance in almost all religious rituals of the Mentawaians. The elaborate tattoos on their skin have historically been seen as a cultural enticement for the soul. Besides that, it also serves also as a point of recognition or identity of what Mentawai subgroup they belong and their hunting capacity. In this manner every tattooed Mentawaian is unique (Delfi, 2013b).

Figure 4. Sikerei tattoo



Source: Personal Collection Maskota Delfi, 2019

Mentawai cultural rituals are often associated with the *Sikerei*-led beliefs that are the practices of traditions and values that have been passed down from generation to generation. Whether this ritual will continue to be witnessed or ritual practices from small communities for a long time are not seen in the interior of Siberut Island. An ethnographic museum dedicated to Mentawai culture has been opened not so long ago at Andalas University in Padang. Students and visitors to the island can now visit the museum at the Andalas campus, allowing for closer cross-cultural interaction. This has led to a better understanding and greater acceptance in Indonesia of indigenous beliefs systems, including the practice of tattooing.

Some Indonesians from other places and foreign visitors consider tattooing a unique art form and take it home with them on their skin. As with all cultural systems, the younger generation readily adopts or assimilates new systems or spiritualities, especially in this era when mobile phones have made communication easy.

We can understand that since the beginning of this century Mentawai became an autonomous region with limited rights to determine their own destiny, the strengthening of local culture has increasingly emerged. This condition is also made possible by the development of global communication which plays an important role in the production and reproduction of locality (De Zoysa & Appadurai, 1998). It also provides space to adopt and imitate the ways of other cultural actors. Likewise, the reproduction of stories, especially in oral form that contains the origin of the Mentawai people and the distribution stories of clans to various valley areas in Siberut (Delfi, 2013a). It emphasises that the origin story plays an important role in the life of the Mentawaians in the southern part of Siberut Island.

4. Conclusion

Stories about the origin of an ethnic group are always interesting to study, not because they contain mystical value, but many people still ask where he came from, because it is a mystery. Mysteries always want to be unravelled or uncovered. When asked where they come from, they will usually refer to a place in the southwestern part of Siberut Island or mention Simatalu. If we look at its position, Muara Simatalu is in a difficult place to land by sea. As the waves directly from the Indian Ocean are very high and sometimes unpredictable. Mystical elements are always presented in myths. Even though the place is dangerous to land, it is the place their ancestors came on land. Patriotic values are an important thing that gives flavour to the origin of their ancestors.

In South Siberut, in the settlements of the Rereiket River Valley, the Sabirut River Valley and the Sila'oinan River Valley, the myth of their origin is continuedly retold. There are at least 4 versions of *pumumuan* (myth) related to the origin of the ancestors of the Mentawai people, namely "Amantawe", "Sabaigua", "Orang Tanah Tepi", and "Pageta Sabbau". This story has been told by the elders in Muntei village for a long time, but the stories are getting stronger now. The reason is that people are increasingly connecting their knowledge and experience

with knowledge and experience from other groups, including cultural experiences.

Due to current mobile phone and digital technology use people easily get to know about new techniques and adopt to new ways of living. Pride in cultural wealth, especially in the Mentawai youth, is increasingly noticeable. One of those renewed interests are the old stories of the origin of their ancestors. The strengthening of the desire to know those is to strengthen their locality in the midst of other localities that they feel will marginalize them again, like in the past. Locality will be meaningful if it is juxtaposed with others outside of it. It appears their desire is reproducing the Mentawaiian culture, heritage and ownership of Siberut to drone out the other claims. In addition, having cultural knowledge about the origin story of ancestors is also "cultural capital" that can be accumulated and can be converted into economic capital. Young people in Muntei and other indigenous settlements need cultural capital to stay and remain a force to be considered.

The *Sikerei* is aware that they perform a function that is perhaps less serious or culturally intense, but nevertheless important to stimulate a pride in the Mentawaiian community. The *Sikerei* image has created favourable self-image among the Mentawai people, instilling essence of belonging to a worthy, culture. It is further enhanced by foreigners who are attracted to their Mentawai cultural experience.

Global effective communication has reached even the most remote locations and a curious young generation is venturing further from home to explore matters not imagined within the last generation ago. The result is a blended traditional culture of Mentawai. Cross-cultural interactions have led also to an evolution of the Arat Sabulungan belief system enriching their spiritual practices with worldviews. Historically belief systems have played a significant role in shaping global spirituality and how individuals interpret their existence and the universe.

It appears that, myths and rituals are interconnected and collectively form the cultural identity and values of the Mentawai community. Myths provide the narrative framework underlying the Mentawai rituals, while personal life stories often reflect and reinterpret these myths. This dynamic interaction ultimately strengthens the beliefs and traditions of the Mentawai people and their social cohesion.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgment

This paper is the result of DIPA funded research made possible by Andalas University in 2023. This research was made with the assistance of the Department of Anthropology and Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of Andalas University.

Our deepest gratitude is to the indigenous Mentawai people and the Mentawai Islands Regency government. Especially community members; Pak Jonas, Aman Serjius, Aman Lepon and Bai Lepon, Aman Agus and Bai Agus, Aman Dion and Bai Dion, Frans Satebburuk were our primary informants. Our foremost gratitude is also to the Mentawai communities who made it possible to carry out this research, especially those living on Siberut Island, particularly the clans along the Sila'oinan, Rereiket and Siberut River valleys. They became almost like our extended family.

We would have been lost without the fantastic support from our academic assistants from Andalas University, who were recruited from the students at the anthropology department. In particular we need to mention the Andalas student Muhammad Zaki Ramadhan. There are many other individuals who should be noted by name, but unfortunately, it is impossible to acknowledge everyone one by one.

References

- Ahimsa-Putra, H. S. (2001). *Strukturalisme Levi-Strauss: Mitos dan Karya Sastra*. Yogyakarta: Galang Press.
- Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (1994). *Ethnography and Participant Observation* in Denzin, K.N. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 248-261). US: Sage Publications, Inc., 248-261.
- Catapan, D. (Ed.). (2024). *Approaches to Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance. Brazilian Journals*. <https://brazilianjournals.com.br/ebooks.php?bk=AEHh0Wx6JmQ6n8Zwb9Vsa247537lR7L8>, accessed on December 3, 2024.
- Coleman, L. (2017). Functionalists Write II: Weird Empathy in Malinowski's Trobriand Ethnographies. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 90(4), 973-1002. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26645932>, accessed on 3 January 2025.
- Coronese, S. (1986). *Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai*. Jakarta: Grafidian Jaya.
- De Zoysa, D. A., & Appadurai, A. (1998). Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. *International Migration Review*, 32(4), 1073. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547675>, accessed on February 14, 2025.
- Delfi, M. (2005). *Dari desa ke Laggai: Resistensi dan identitas orang Mentawai di Muntei, Siberut Selatan, Sumatera Barat* [Tesis, Gadjah Mada]. <https://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/penelitian/detail/27616>, accessed on December 11, 2024.
- Delfi, M. (2012). Sipuisilam Dalam Selimut Arat Sabulungan Penganut Islam Mentawai Di Siberut. *Jurnal Al-Ulum*, 12(1), 1-34, <https://journal.iaingorontalo.ac.id/index.php/au/article/view/88/72>, accessed on March 4, 2025.
- Delfi, M. (2013a). Islam and Arat Sabulungan in Mentawai. *Al-Jami'ah*, 51(2). <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2013.512.475-499>, accessed on February 14, 2025.
- Delfi, M. (2013b). *Kaipa Pulaggajatnu?: Wacana Kementawaian di Bumi Sikerei* Disertasi, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta.

- http://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/home/detail_pencarian/66571, accessed on January 10, 2025.
- Devi, A. D., & Roibin, R. (2023). The Role and Function of Myths for Religion in Everyday Life. *Mimbar Agama dan Budaya*, 40(2), 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.15408/mimbar.v40i2.36918>, accessed on January 5, 2025.
- Doja, A. (2006). The shoulders of our giants: Claude Lévi-Strauss and his legacy in current anthropology. *Social Science Information*, 45(1), 79–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018406061104>, accessed on 12 March 2025.
- Frog. (2018). Myth. *Humanities*, 7(1), <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7010014>. Access on March 1, 2025.
- Hammons, C. S. (2010). Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and the Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands, Indonesia [Doctoral Dissertation]. University of Southern California, accessed on January 2, 2025.
- Henley, T. (2001). *Living legend of the Mentawai*. Thailand: Ban Thom Pub.
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1955). The Structural Study of Myth. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 68(270), 428. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>, accessed on March 12, 2025.
- Lim, W. M. (2025). What Is Qualitative Research? An Overview and Guidelines. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 33(2), 199–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14413582241264619>, accessed on February 14, 2025.
- Mirza, H. S., & Warwick, R. (2024). Race and Ethnic Inequalities. *Oxford Open Economics*, 3(1), i365–i452, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ooec/odad026>, accessed on April 14, 2025.
- Nur, M. (2019). Sikerei Dalam Cerita: Penelusuran Identitas Budaya Mentawai. *Jurnal Masyarakat dan Budaya*, 21(1), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336480801_SIKEREI_DALA_M_CERITA_PENELUSURAN_IDENTITAS_BUDAYA_MENTAWAI_SIKEREI_IN_THE_STORY_TRACING_MENTAWAI_CULTURAL_IDENTITY, accessed on April 2, 2025.
- Reeves, G. (1999). History and ‘Mentawai’: Colonialism, Scholarship, and Identity in the Mentawai, West Indonesia. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 10(1), 34–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.1999.tb00011.x>, accessed on March 13, 2025.
- Reeves, G. (2009). *Village, Cosmos, People in the Anthropology of the Mentawai Island* in *The Anthropology of the Mentawai Island* in *The Anthropology of the Mentawai Island*. www.mentawai.org, accessed on February 7, 2025.
- Robinne, F., & Sadan, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Social Dynamics in the Highlands of Southeast Asia: Reconsidering Political systems of Highland Burma* by E.R. Leach. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004160347.i-331>, accessed on February 10, 2025.
- Rozi, S., & Taufik, Z. (2020). Adaptation of Religion and Local Wisdom in Global Environmental Issues in Indonesia. *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama*

- Dan Lintas Budaya, 4(3), 191-203, <https://doi.org/10.15575/rjsalb.v4i3.9593>, accessed on February 12, 2025
- Rudito, B., & Sunarseh. (2013). *Masyarakat dan Kebudayaan Orang Mentawai*. Padang: UPTD Museum Nagari.
- Schefold, R. (1985). *Kebudayaan Tradisional Siberut*. In G. Persoon & R. Schefold, Pulau Siberut. Jakarta: Bhratara Karya Aksara.
- Schefold, R. (1991). *Mainan Bagi Roh: Kebudayaan Mentawai*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Schefold, R. (1998). The domestication of culture; Nation-building and ethnic diversity in Indonesia. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 154(2), 259-280. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003898>, accessed on January 12, 2025.
- Schefold, R. (2001). Three Sources of Ritual Blessings in Traditional Indonesian Societies. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia*, 157(2), 359-381. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003812>, accessed on February 13, 2025.
- Singh, M. (2020). *The Foundations of Shamanism and Witchcraft*. Dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, <https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37365897>, accessed on April 20, 2025.
- Singh, M., Kaptchuk, T. J., & Henrich, J. (2021). Small Gods, Rituals, and Cooperation: the Mentawai Crocodile Spirit Sikameinan. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 42(1), 61-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2020.07.008>, accessed on April 15, 2025.
- Spina, B. (1981). *Mitos dan Legenda Suku Mentawai*. Jakarta: Balai Pustaka.
- Tanjung, D. R., & Santosa, A. (2023). People, Technology, and Culture: Relationship Transformation in the Digital Era. *International Journal of Students Education*, 1(2), 271-274. <https://doi.org/10.62966/ijose.v1i2.428>, accessed on February 14, 2025.
- Tulius, J. (2012). *Family Stories: Oral Tradition, Memories of the Past, and Contemporary Conflicts over Land in Mentawai-Indonesia*. Disertation, Universiteit Leiden, Leiden, <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2959595/view>, accessed on March 14, 2025.
- Tulius, J. (2013). Family stories Oral tradition, memories of the past, and contemporary conflicts over land in Mentawai - Indonesia. *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*, 15(1), 180. <https://doi.org/10.17510/wjhi.v15i1.110>, accessed on March 10, 2025
- Van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., De Vries, J., Van Bommel, S., & Van Ostaijen, M. (2025). Discourse, framing and narrative: Three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis. *Critical Policy Studies*, 19(1), 74-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2024.2326936>, accessed on April 9, 2025.
- Wray-Lake, L., Christens, B. D., & Flanagan, C. A. (2014). *Community Values*. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being*.

Research Springer Netherlands, 1102–1107, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_482, accessed on March 8, 2025.