

# ISLAM AND ARAT SABULUNGAN IN MENTAWAI

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## Abstract

*The remoteness of the Mentawai Islands has contributed to an almost autonomous development, unaided by mainland Sumatra. As a result of a well endowed environment and supported by staple local foods such as sago, taro and bananas, as well as an abundance of wildlife including wild boars, a finely tuned self-sufficiency was realised. In this space the management and distribution of food, including animal protein, is an important aspect of the culture of Arat Sabulungan. As the result of the compulsory state sanctioned religions program introduced in 1954, some Mentawaians have converted to Islam or Catholicism as their formal religious identity. However, a remarkable adaptation occurred in which the layers of Mentawai identity were not lost in the adaptation to the Islamic faith. Islam with its teachings, and other formal religions, are considered as the sasareu (outsiders). The prohibition of consuming boar as part of Islamic rules is a sasareu rule that contradicts the Mentawai Arat.*

*[Kepulauan Mentawai yang terisolasi telah berkembang secara mandiri tanpa bantuan dari pulau induknya, Sumatra. Lingkungan yang subur dan mendukung ketersediaan sumber makanan pokok lokal seperti sago, talas, dan pisang serta berlimpahnya satwa liar, termasuk babi hutan, telah mendorong terciptanya swasembada pangan. Manajemen dan distribusi makanan merupakan aspek penting dalam jalinan budaya dan sistem kepercayaan lokal, Arat Sabulungan. Sebagai hasil dari kebijakan pemerintah untuk menerapkan agama resmi bagi orang Mentawai pada tahun 1954,*

*orang Mentawai kemudian masuk Islam atau Katolik. Namun demikian, adaptasi yang luar biasa juga terjadi, sehingga lapisan-lapisan identitas Mentawai tidak hilang dalam adaptasinya dengan keyakinan Islam. Islam dengan ajaran-ajarannya, juga agama-agama dunia lainnya, dipandang sebagai ajaran asing. Larangan mengkonsumsi daging babi sebagai bagian dari ajaran Islam, misalnya, dipandang sebagai ajaran asing yang bertentangan dengan Arat Mentawai.]*

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## A. Introduction

Some might recall the Mentawai archipelago when it was splashed on the front page of newspapers and across television screens when the devastating tsunami hit at the end of 2010. For the author it brought back memories of Siberut Island and its everyday village life. Many lives were lost in the tsunami, but for the Siberut indigenous population who still adhere to the teachings of their ancestors to refrain from living on the coast, few lives were lost. Siberut Mentawaians in the southern part of the island generally live together along the inland Rereiket watershed. Their simple way of life provides many revelations about how to live from what is offered by the forests and the ocean, but also with a life full of rituals.

Siberut is one of the larger islands in the Mentawai archipelago that stretches along the west coast of Sumatra. It is located approximately 130 kilometres from Padang, the capital city of West Sumatra. Access to the mainland is by wooden vessel that can be boarded about twice a week or by steel hulled ship every week, subject to weather conditions. For the deep-pocketed, a speedboat can be taken when the ocean waves allow a smooth passage. On the island, travel is mostly on foot, though nowadays there are a few concrete paths for motorbikes and small motorized canoes traverse the rivers between the *umas* (clans) and villages. Much of the island is covered in lush water logged areas with native sago trees (*Sago metroxylon*) and some planted taro (*Colocasia esculenta*) which make up most of the staple food for the indigenous population on Siberut.

One day, I asked a friend who had visited Siberut several times what came to his mind when he thought of Mentawai. My friend replied instantly, “boars”! At first I wondered why he opted for an animal, but it was obvious. In general, people will associate a geographical area by what has been seen or what is part of the local food. It turned out my friend’s visit to Siberut coincided with the ceremonies that are part of *Arat Sabulungan* and the *uma* offerings and sharing of animal protein.

Boars (*Sus scrofa*) are an integral part of life in Mentawai as they are cared for daily and play an important role in ritual practices.<sup>1</sup> Gerard Persoon has indicated that boars are well liked and loved by Mentawaians and are definitely not an ordinary consumption item.<sup>2</sup> Other sources of protein are obtained by fishing and hunting forest animals like squirrels (*Tupaia chrysogaster*), anteaters (*Manis javanica*), bats (*Cynopterus brachyotis*), deer (*Cervus unicolor*), primates such as the Joja Mentawai monkey (*Presbytis potenziani*), small gibbons or bilou (*Hylobates klossi*), short-nosed monkeys or simakobu (*Simias concolor*), the Mentawai macaque or bokkoi (*Macaca pagensis*) and various types of grubs and caterpillars, in particular sago grubs locally known as batra or tamra (*Rhynchophorus ferrugineus*).

The boars are not only important for their protein and as offerings at ritual feasts, they are used in the payment of *alake togba* (bride-price) or *tulou* (customary fines), in healing rituals by the *Kerei* (Mentawai shaman) and in *paabad* feasts to celebrate the end of longstanding disputes. The relationship between faith and food traditions in Mentawai culture raises several questions. If boars are of cultural importance in Siberut, Mentawai, what about those people who have embraced Islam? Is boar

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<sup>1</sup> See Reimar Schefold, “Keseimbangan Mentawai dan Dunia Modern,” in Michael R. Dove, (ed.), *Peranan Kebudayaan Tradisional Indonesia dalam Modernisasi* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia dan Penerbit Gramedia, 1985); Reimar Schefold, *Mainan Bagi Roh, Kebudayaan Mentawai* (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1991); Ermayanti, “Fungsi *Kerei* dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat Mentawai, Case study in the village of Matotonan, South Siberut,” *Undergraduate thesis presented in Andalas University, Padang, 1988*; Jhonri Roza, “*Uma* Dalam Kehidupan Masyarakat Mentawai di Sumatera Barat,” *Master thesis presented at Padjadjaran University Bandung, 1997*; and Maskota Delfi, “Dari Desa ke Laggai: Resistensi dan Identitas Orang Mentawai di Muntei, Siberut Selatan, Sumatera Barat,” *Master’s Thesis presented in Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, 2005*.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Persoon, “Pentingnya Perekonomian yang Cukup untuk Pulau Siberut,” in Gerard Persoon dan Reimar Schefold (eds.), *Pulau Siberut* (Jakarta: Bhratara Karya Aksara, 1985), p. 75.

consumption subject to proscriptions? How do Siberut Mentawai Muslims perceive and interpret boars in their lives? This paper discusses the Islamic and religious commitments to the cultural practice of *Arat Sabulungan* in Siberut Mentawai.

I will start with the background of *Arat Sabulungan*, a traditional custom that has been practiced for generations by Siberut Mentawaians. This will be followed by a discussion of the introduction of Islam in Sumatera and the role of the Minangkabau people in the spread of Islam. I will then discuss how some Islam converts known as Sipuisilam on Siberut Mentawai view boars, their association with some customary practices in Siberut and the “truth claims” that are being respected through these traditions.

## **B. *Arat Sabulungan*: Legacies of the Ancestors**

The traditional *Arat Sabulungan* culture plays a significant role in the life of the Mentawaians. Siberut people often refer to the culture that incorporates their faith in everyday language as *Arat* (custom). This expression refers to the local belief grounded in the teachings of their ancestors, *Arat Sabulungan*. *Sabulungan* is derived from the word *bulug* that refers to plants leaves.<sup>3</sup> The additional prefix *sa* and suffix *an* refer to an arrangement of leaves or a plant collection used in ritual practices. The ritual use of leaves combined with enchanting dance and songs are the main elements in ceremonial rituals. The leaves (and flowers) also act as an intermediate in the offerings to the spirits of the *uma*. According to Juniator Tulus, *Sabulungan* is understood to be part of human behaviour and it is believed that spirits see *buluat* (offerings) as a medium of veneration through which those making the offerings gain good fortune and avoid harm.<sup>4</sup>

Their faith is based on the knowledge of their ancestors—a collection of values that maintain the balance of life commonly called *puaranan*

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<sup>3</sup> See Herman Sihombing, *Mentawai* (Jakarta: Pradnya Paramita, 1979); Stefano Coronese, *Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai* (Jakarta: Grafidian Jaya, 1986); Ermayanti, *Fungsi Kerei dalam Kehidupan*; and Roza, *Uma dalam Kehidupan*.

<sup>4</sup> Juniator Tulus, “Simatak Siagailaggek dan Simabesik: Hubungan Sosial dalam Sistem Pengobatan Masyarakat Mentawai di Pulau Siberut,” *Undergraduate thesis* presented in Andalas University, 2000, p. 64.

Mentawai (Mentawaian customary system).<sup>5</sup> As *puaranan* Mentawai, *Arat Sabulungan* is the charged philosophy of Mentawaian life. *Arat* is regarded as a sacred legacy and the basis of human life in the family and the *uma*. Hence, *arat* signifies harmony with the world and a means to unite the *uma* in the larger community with many *uma* members in Mentawai.<sup>6</sup> Harmony with the world includes agreeable relations among humans, in their relationship with nature, their relationship with biotic matter (flora and fauna), with inanimate objects, natural occurrences and with the spirit world. *Arat* as a guidance system handed down by the ancestors and is considered a vital directive in life, especially for those who are engulfed in the communal life of the *uma*.<sup>7</sup> In Mentawai, *uma* represents a strong affiliation firstly with an intimate cluster of inhabitants or clan, and secondly their principle communal longhouse which is the centre of group activities in a variety of practices and rituals.<sup>8</sup> The *uma* doesn't only serve in group deliberations, but also as a place of congregation when calling for spiritual guidance to heal sick community members.

*Arat Sabulungan* considers that objects in nature contain a spirit. Spirits are considered to have lives similar to humans, it's just that not everyone has the ability to be able to see and communicate with the visible and invisible in the spirit world. In Siberut, those with a strong ability to

<sup>5</sup> Delfi, "Dari Desa ke Laggai", p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Stefano Coronese, *Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai* (Jakarta: Grafidian Jaya, 1986), p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> See Edwin M. Loeb, "A Mentawai Religious Cult," in *American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Berkeley: University of California Press. 1929, pp. 185-247; Coronese, *Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai*, 1986; Reimar Schefold, "Kebudayaan Tradisional Siberut," in Gerard Persoon and Reimar Schefold (eds.), *Pulau Siberut* (Jakarta: Bhratara Karya Aksara, 1985); Schefold, "Keseimbangan Mentawai," 1985; Reimar Schefold, *LLA, Das grosse Ritual auf den Mentawai-Inseln (Indonesien)* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1988); Ermayanti, "Fungsi Kerei," 1988; and Yando R. Zakaria, "Pembangunan yang Melumpuhkan: Pelajaran dari Kepulauan Mentawai," in *Kisah Dari Kampung Halaman Masyarakat Suku, Agama Resmi dan Pembangunan* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1996); Roza, "Uma dalam Kehidupan," 1997; Glenn Reeves, "Village, Cosmos, People," in *The Anthropology of the Mentawai Island. Home Page: The Anthropology of the Mentawai Island*, 2000; and, Bambang Rudito. "Fungsi Upacara Bebeitei Uma Pada Orang Mentawai," *Ph.D. Thesis*, Depok: University of Indonesia, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Hammons, "Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis, and The Cultural Economy of Tradition in Siberut, Mentawai Islands Indonesia," *Ph.D. Thesis* presented at The University of Southern California. 2010), p. xvii.

communicate with the spirit world are known as *Kerei* or *Sikerei*. The *Kerei* is a spiritual leader whose role is not only in personal healing rituals but also in a variety of *uma* rituals. The *Kerei* is an intermediary between the *uma* human world and the spirit world,<sup>9</sup> as he can speak to both worlds. According to the local belief system, almost all places on earth have a certain set of rulers or multiple guarding spirits. Therefore, numerous guardians or supernatural rulers exist, such as the spirits in the sky who are known as *Saikamanua*. The spirits that are in the forest domain are called *Saikalelu* or *Sibarakalelu*. The spirits that dwell in and around the rivers are called *Saikaoinan* or *Sibarakaoinan* while the spirits who dwell around the sea are called *Saikabagakoat*. The most important spirits are the ones who take care of the land, known as *Teten* and *Sigegeugen*. Every human being has a relationship with the spirit world too, and humans try to establish a good relationship to keep life smooth. A relationship with the spirit world is maintained through various rituals and worship practices. Rituals are not only to fulfil the psychological needs of individuals but also to maintain harmony among members of the *uma*.

Ritual worship in Mentawaiian life covers various activities. Firstly, having the power to enchant, and secondly, to perform rituals --two significant tasks in Siberut. Both are requisite to being able to influence the spirits that exist in all places, especially where human activity takes place. They are also much needed to influence the human soul because humans and their soul ought to feel cheerful in life. Besides this, it is nice that favourable spirits desire to make an abode in a human body. If the soul does not feel pleasant with the beneficial spirits then it would go out of the body which could result in someone's death. Unhappy spirit-influenced souls can also leave the body for a while with the result that the individual will fall ill.

According to the Mentawaians, there are two ways to positively influence the spirits. Firstly, through ritual veneration, and secondly, by means of spirit enchantment through rituals that require certain objects. Mentawaians use certain plants, flowers and herbs as enhancers and decorations that act as liaison agents, intermediaries or gaud to enchant spirits. For example, flora such as *mumunen* (*Mussaenda sp.*), are a favourite gaud used in many ceremonies. *Mumunen* in the Mentawai language has

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<sup>9</sup> See Ermayanti, "Fungsi Kerei".

the root-word *umun* which means praise. *Mumunen* is the gaud used in the naming ceremony of a child. It is used in order that they too can become mature adults who can partake in ceremonies. Hammons refers to gaud as the magical collection of mediators and gifts to non-human spirits.<sup>10</sup>

Each liaison agent has a specific function in Mentawai culture. The Mentawaians distinguish between *Simaeru'*, who strengthen events which are good in nature, and *Sikataa'*, who deal with overcoming unpleasant events. The *Simaeru'* task is to extend desirable events and enchant all that is necessary to bring about an increase in events that are pleasant in nature. The *Sikataa'* task is to lessen the impact of undesired events or to soften the impact of matters that are deemed disastrous or evil. Normally all gaud types are plants that have different characteristics such as smooth, velvety, thorny and sharp. The physical appearances of the commonly used gaud indicate the tasks they can assist in.

Events in life can be pleasant, neutral or unpleasant not only for the individual, but also for the *lalep* (nuclear family) as well as the *uma* (clan). In *Arat Sabulungan* it is believed that living, moving objects such as waterfalls, rivers and the wind, and inanimate, stationary objects such as rocks and soil, have a *simagre* (soul). This includes natural phenomena such as rainbows, thunder and lightning. In addition, each object has a spiritual force, comparable with a beam of power called *bajou*.<sup>11</sup> It can result in the emission of power in an object or event that is not desired in case of sudden contact between *bajou* and an event or object and its *bajou*. Therefore, sudden or impulsive contacts are to be avoided; this is because the Mentawai people might cause pain to someone if their *bajou* has a different strength to that of a counterpart *bajou*.

The *bajou* is not regarded as something that is good or bad, but a *bajou* can cause things that are not desirable in the event of meetings that are brisk. Even failing to give gifts can cause taboo violations and lead to the emission of a *bajou*<sup>12</sup> force that in turn can disturb harmonious life. A sudden meeting could lead to inter-*bajou* confrontation with undesired consequences.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is best to prevent inter-*bajou* confrontations even though it is sometimes an immensely difficult task. If it cannot be

<sup>10</sup> Hammons, "Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis," p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Schefold, *Mainan Bagi Rob*, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Hammons, "Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis," p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Delfi, "Dari Desa ke Laggai," p. 65.

avoided and an unpleasant feeling occurs, a *Sabulungan* ritual is helpful to restore an original balanced state.

With regard to the belief that all objects and natural phenomena have souls or spirits and the emission strength of the *bajou*, the Mentawai people are observant of natural events and are always attentive to maintaining stability and preventing unpleasant circumstances. This is due to the belief that human intervention in nature and other objects has certain consequences. It happens when human intervention in the environment leads to a state of excessive imbalance or disturbance.<sup>14</sup> Many human activities, especially those related to seeking livelihoods, such as clearing forests for taro or hunting, influence the environmental balance and ought to be undertaken with care. If there is significant damage to the natural environment, then humans must restore balance through ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> The performance of a ceremony is an attempt to heal and restore balance to not only the natural environment, but also in relation to any interference that has taken place in the relationships among humans. Human relationships with the object and spirit world may also require healing. A ceremony is a medium in which a request is submitted through spells. The primary function of a ceremony is to act as a means of recovery.<sup>16</sup>

The Mentawai belief in the existence of spirits that inhabit natural objects and phenomena of *Sabulungan*, combined with a supreme power, have become people's identity marker. Some might consider this as a backward or primitive expression, but from a Mentawai perspective it is a situation of misled or misinformed *sasareu*. Religious conversion programs enter Mentawai through individuals and religious projects undertaken by *sasareu*. The common *sasareu* view is that national faiths such as Islam or Christianity ought to replace the traditional faith and Mentawai culture.

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<sup>14</sup> Schefold, "Keseimbangan Mentawai" ; Schefold, *Mainan Bagi Rob*; Erwin, "Perubahan Ekologi Terhadap Kepercayaan Tradisional Mentawai," in *Jurnal Pembangunan dan Perubahan Sosial Budaya* No. 3-4, Padang: Study Centre for Socio-Cultural Changes Andalas University, 1997; Bambang Rudito and Maskota Delfi, *Peranan Pengetahuan Tradisional Wanita Mentawai dalam Manajemen Sumber Daya Alam dan Konservasi* (Jakarta: Research Report UNESCO, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Rudito and Maskota Delfi, *Peranan Pengetahuan Tradisional*, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Hammons, "Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis," p. 22.

### C. *Arat Islam: Non-Indigenous Regulations or Puaranan Sasareu*

There are various views on when Islam was introduced to Mentawai. Whilst there are no precise recorded dates of when merchants began trading in and visiting Mentawai regularly, it is certain that the exchange of goods<sup>17</sup> was accompanied by the introduction of Islam. From oral history records it can be assessed that awareness of Islam entered the Mentawai archipelago before other world religions. Bugis and Minangkabau traders came to the islands trading items such as cloth, tobacco, machetes and salt. Long before the Dutch government or the VOC came to this area, Muslim merchants from the west coast of Sumatra had associated with Mentawaians to buy palm leaf, rattan and others goods by way of barter.<sup>18</sup> Veth, cited by Coronese, mentioned that the French Commander Boileau received information about the presence of the two islands to the west of Sumatra, whilst Dutch navigators called these islands Nassau and Zuid-Pora.<sup>19</sup> The Mentawaians are noted to have had a trading relationship with the town of Tiku in the district of Pariaman on the west coast of Sumatra since 1621. They traded freely although they observed that a different language was spoken by the Mentawaians.<sup>20</sup> Another plausible way Islam entered Mentawai could have been through the Malays during the 18th century. In one of the earliest documented accounts of the islands, John Crisp (1792) noted that there was a different kind of Malay people living near the Strait of Sikakap who make good quality canoes due to the type of wood they used.<sup>21</sup> The Malays who first came to Mentawai appear to have also influenced the spread of Islam to the small archipelago. Muslims from Bengkulu who also came to Mentawai were initially considered to be closer to the Mentawaians compared with the Minangkabau people because they could more easily relate to the Mentawaians.<sup>22</sup> According to Abidin, Islam was certainly

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<sup>17</sup> Mochtar Naim, "Kehidupan Agama di Mentawai," in *Majalah Bulanan Mimbar Ulama*, No. 8, Vol. 1, Jakarta: Dewan Pimpinan Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 1977, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> B. Karang and Harun Yunus, "Partisipasi Umat Islam dalam Pembangunan Masyarakat Mentawai," in Gerard A. Persoon and Reimar Schefold (eds.), *Pulan Siberut* (Jakarta: Bhratara Karya Aksara, 1985), p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Coronese, *Kebudayaan Suku Mentawai*, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

the earliest of the world religions to have entered the Mentawai Islands because in one place in North Pagai Island, the population can count back five generations of Islam in their family. They initially arrived from Piaman, currently called Pariaman, and travelled to Mentawai on a trade mission. After having set up camp for a while it was decided to make a permanent base. It indicates that in this regional context Minangkabau people assisted in bringing Islam to Mentawai.<sup>23</sup>

Before Indonesian independence, religious teachers generally from the West Sumatran mainland also made visits to Mentawai. During the Japanese occupation it was forbidden to spread any religion in Mentawai. Islamic conversion activities did occur in some villages, but conversion numbers were low. Other literature sources mention that Islam has been taken up in Mentawai in large numbers since the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Islam was introduced by traders of that era and in subsequent development of the Minangkabau people Islam spread through pilot programs that were tailored to Mentawai. In that era<sup>25</sup> Islamic religious activities grew significantly. Some of the Mentawai local people who adopted Islam were awarded scholarships to study Islam in the Sumatra towns of Padang Panjang, Bukittinggi, Pariaman and Padang. Successful students returned to Mentawai to teach in villages while other Mentawaians who moved to the mainland have embraced Islam.<sup>26</sup>

Karangan and Yunus note that preachers on the Dakwah Council reported a significantly high number of converts since 1975.<sup>27</sup> In the 1980s, many were converted by preachers who came from Padang and Siantar.<sup>28</sup> In South Siberut preachers in several villages received financial support from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in collaboration with the Indonesian Dakwah council.<sup>29</sup> Fund-raising efforts in Mentawai also

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<sup>23</sup> Mas'ood Abidin, *Islam dalam Pelukan Muftadin Mentawai, 30 tahun Perjalanan Da'wah Ilallah, Mentawai Menggapai Cabaya Iman*, (Jakarta: Biro Khusus Dakwah Mentawai, Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, 1997), p. 98.

<sup>24</sup> See Sihombing, *Mentawai*, 1979; and Wanda Avé and Satyawan Sunito, "Medicinal Plants of Siberut," *A World Wide Fund for Nature Report*, WWF International CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> Sihombing, *Mentawai*, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> Delfi, "Dari Desa ke Laggai," p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Karangan and Yunus, "Partisipasi Umat Islam," p. 116.

<sup>28</sup> Delfi, "Dari Desa ke Laggai," p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> Roza, "Uma dalam Kehidupan," p. 51.

enabled farming and carpentry skills to be introduced to the Mentawaians. Financing was mainly possible from the contributions of Minangkabau Muslims in Padang and West Sumatra.<sup>30</sup> Giving aid and health education was a medium to attract the sympathy of the Mentawai people. Similar skills programs were also promoted through Christian missions as a way to spread religious views.

Islamic *dakwah* activities continued through financial support from the Arabian Gulf Region, demonstrating that the spread of religion is associated with a global model, or in other words, Islamisation has entered Mentawai through globalization. Those activities are not only by dedicated propagators of Islam but also through government officials who served in Mentawai. In the Matotonan village, located inland in South Siberut, many residents were converted due to the role of the village chief Ahmad from Java who introduced Islam to many villagers.<sup>31</sup> It was mentioned that in 1950 only one person in Matotonan had converted to Islam. During Abdullah's time in office as *camat* (sub-district chief), 105 people converted.<sup>32</sup> It was reported that the sub-district chief also encouraged people to wear Islamic clothing in the middle of the jungle.<sup>33</sup> He introduced how to be polite and well-dressed Muslims and introduced the notion of feeling uncomfortable when not dressed in the prescribed way. The Islamic civilisation process became more intensive through the state initiated "Meeting of the Three Religions" in 1954 which was an attempt by the authorities to eliminate *Arat Sabulungan*. In a series of meetings that comprised the "Meeting of the Three Religions", a virtual ultimatum was given to the Mentawaians to choose one of the two most prevalent official religions on the island, Islam or Christianity.<sup>34</sup> This instigated a series of further meetings and is tangible evidence that *Arat Sabulungan* was not regarded by the authorities as a proper faith for people who wished to advance in modernity.

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<sup>30</sup> See Abidin, *Islam dalam Pelukan*; and Roza, "Uma dalam Kehidupan".

<sup>31</sup> See Roza, "Uma dalam Kehidupan"; Abidin, *Islam dalam Pelukan*, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> Abidin, *Islam dalam Pelukan*, p. 236.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See Sihombing, *Mentawai*, p. 103; and Avé and Satyawan Sunito, "Medicinal Plants of Siberut," 1990; and Reimar Schefold, "The Domestication of Culture; Nation-building and Ethnic Diversity in Indonesia," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Globalization, Localization and Indonesia* 154, no: 2, Leiden, 1998, pp. 259-80.

The two alternative dominant religions suggested at the time may be explained by the fact that the main *sasareu* ethnic presence at that time was Minangkabau and Batak. A two religion option would at least be more manageable for the state in Mentawai through its servant agencies, Muslim Minangkabau and Christian Batak. Both ethnic groups have been instrumental in the development of world religions in the Mentawai archipelago. With the government implementing the decision of the “Meeting of Three Religions”, the ritual practices of *Arat Sabulungan* became more difficult to practice. Mentawaians of *Arat Sabulungan* faith and tradition had to pay dearly for practicing what they believed and were subsequently punished, either through public burning of their ritual equipment or imprisonment.<sup>35</sup> Both Roza and Schefold described threats of harsher treatment including military force against supporters of Mentawai *Arat Sabulungan*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the elimination of *Sabulungan* was achieved by means of repression. Intimidation was also used by linking *Arat Sabulungan* with the followers of the banned Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). According to elders interviewed, many Mentawaians remained faithful to *Arat Sabulungan* although they were labelled as PKI. A *Kerei* stated that people conducted their rituals in remote forests to prevent jail terms. In regard to political affiliation such as with the PKI, in reality many island inhabitants had no understanding of national politics and even less understanding of what the communist party was all about. Many elders in the villages at the time of raids on *Arat Sabulungan* ritual equipment and practices were often asked where the real ‘PKI’ were. They were interrogated about PKI information and whether the PKI were “Indonesian” or “*imabulau mata/tubul*” (Caucasian). Their ignorance in regard to the whereabouts of PKI members only frustrated the interrogators.

The repression that took place in Mentawai by means of the “Meeting of the Three Religions” in 1954 is evidence of a national homogenisation of identities through religious intervention. It was proposed that localised traditional practices be eradicated, such as the earlier mentioned healing practices by the *Sikerei*, traditional tooth

<sup>35</sup> Zakaria, “Pembangunan yang Melumpuhkan,” p. 108; and Delfi, “Dari Desa ke Laggai,” p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> Reimar Schefold, “The Domestication of Culture,” pp. 259-80; Roza, “Uma dalam Kehidupan”.

sharpening, tattooing of the body and the practise of long hair for men.<sup>37</sup> Not only were there clear attempts to eliminate local traditions and practices, but Mentawaians who lived in *umas* scattered around the river valleys were resettled. As part of a national relocation program in Mentawai, rules had to be observed that within the settlement boundaries, boars were not to be kept and places of worship were limited to only Islamic or Christian houses of worship.

Aside from a place of worship, the Mentawaians were encouraged to have other signifiers of their religion. In particular, Islamic (Arabic) or Christian words were added to personal names. This involved the expanded entry of *sasareu* rules and *sasareu* names for Mentawai people, as an identity could be attached to an individual rather than an inherited identity, including *Sipuisilam*.

#### D. *Arat Sabulungan and Sipuisilam*

Islam is my religion but not my body.

(Interlocutor in Siberut Mentawai, February 2008)

Prior to the entry of official religions, particularly Islam *sasareu*, Mentawaians did not have a special name such as *Sipuisilam*. Usually Mentawaians have only one name in Mentawai (*oni ka Mattawai*), apart from a special designation when the parents have children or grandchildren. The assertion to distinguish in names is an idea that came from outside the community (*oni ka sasareu*) which they referred to as baptised name (*nama baptis*) in which water is poured on a person in a cleansing ritual (Christianity). After the ritual of being given a new Islamic or Christian name, a person's second name would be the clan name (*oni uma*). Before a Mentawaian is ever named by his or her *oni ka Mattawai* or *oni ka sasareu*, he/she already has an *oni uma* or clan identity.

In the villages on Siberut, besides having a name based on a *sasareu* religion (*oni ka sasareu*), there are many who have a given name. This is rarely used when dealing with *sasareu* because there is still a perception by most that the Mentawaian name is 'backwards'. However by some youngsters who are encouraged by global indigenous awareness it is perhaps 'modern', because they use a Mentawai based name. This

<sup>37</sup> Schefold, *Mainan Bagi Rob*; and Zakaria, "Pembangunan yang Melumpuhkan".

assumption is possibly deliberately constructed by the *sasareu* who feel themselves more advanced. Therefore, Mentawai people often refrain from mentioning their Mentawaian name in front of a *sasareu* in Mentawai.

Accepting Islam often means the receipt of a new name. However, in an interesting Mentawaian warp, distinctively Islamic or Christian given names do not always reveal religious denomination. Stephanus, Carlo, and Jonas, for example, are sometimes adopted by Muslims, whilst Akbar and Salim are just as easily taken up by Christians. At the same time they also retain their own Mentawaian descriptive or nick name and the clan name.

### E. Introduction of Islam in the Mentawai Community

The introduction of Islam in Mentawai is seen as the entry of new values offered by outsiders. The existence and activities conducted by outsiders through the group of Muslim missionaries in the past involved government officials, and might be perceived as repression by society, through the “necessity” of adopting a religion. It is difficult for *sasareu* to comprehend the teachings of *Sabulungan* as an inherent Mentawaian identity in their life. Therefore, the existence of Islam *puaranan sasareu* (outsider’s rules) contains the values of outsiders. The use of the concept *sasareu* here means ‘the other’ as opposed to what is indigenous Mentawai. Therefore, *Arat sasareu* is difficult to equate to *Arat* Mentawai.

This is different from the Baha’i religion that was also introduced by the outside world, on which only recently in 2000 a government ban was lifted.<sup>38</sup> Most of the Mentawaians who have been introduced to Baha’i, consider it comparable to the teachings of *Arat Sabulungan*. When people in Siberut were asked about Baha’i, it is often said to be *makerek kapuaranan* Mentawai, or similar to the values of Mentawai.<sup>39</sup> It illustrates that most of the Mentawaians are selective of the values that are being presented to them by the *sasareu*.

In Siberut the Baha’i religion is sometimes also called the Baha’i religion with Islam, because previous Baha’i leaders in Indonesia called it the Baha’i religion of Islam, without mentioning its connection.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> R.H. Stockman, *The Baha’i Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Delfi, “Dari Desa ke Laggai,” p. 104-9.

<sup>40</sup> Sihombing, *Mentawai*, p. 115.

Though Baha'i is a recent entry into Mentawai culture compared to Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, it is treated equally to *kapuaranan Mentawai*. In 1963 the government declared a number of religions unrecognized.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, it was forbidden to receive spiritual guidance or practice these faiths in Indonesia. People who wished to engage in the Siberut community activities had to do so in secrecy. Nowadays, Siberut people who are still loyal to the teachings of Baha'i keep their religious books in their huts in the fields. For example, in a village in South Siberut there were a significant number of followers of the Baha'i faith.<sup>42</sup> In another village in North Siberut, although previously banned by the government, individuals are still inspired by their new religion and are active in their faith.<sup>43</sup> In the era of regional autonomy Baha'i is not officially banned, but it is still not possible to receive Baha'i marriage or birth certificates. Therefore, many officials still consider Baha'i to be excluded from official state recognition.<sup>44</sup>

Since the introduction of regulated religions, the lives of Mentawai people have been under the supervision of government officials. Those who practiced *Arat Sabulungan* were previously threatened with jail. Since regional autonomy was introduced more respect has been shown for local culture. Psychologically, intimidation and restriction have resulted in trauma for many Mentawaians as these are contrary to the *simagre* or soul. While followers of state-recognised religions are considered modern, modernity can be considered a force against the principles of freedom. Freedom of the soul requires being free spirited in the Mentawai cosmology. The soul is to experience something which it desires and cherishes as well as be in harmony with the natural and socio-cultural environments.

According to the Mentawaiian world view, readiness to accept Islam

<sup>41</sup> Roza, "Uma dalam Kehidupan," p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Tarida Hernawati, *Uma Fenomena Keterkaitan Manusia dengan Alam* (Padang: Yayasan Citra Mandiri, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Fitrawati, "Patumbak Salah Satu Bentuk Perkawinan Pada Masyarakat Mentawai: Case Study of the people of Mongan Poula village, North Siberut sub-district, Padang Pariaman region," *Undergraduate Thesis* in Andalas University, 1997, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> R. H. Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), and Melissa Crouch, "Decision No 140/Puu-Vii/2009: Constitutional Court, Republic of Indonesia," in *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1, No. 2 (October 1): 527-28. 2012.

is based on the willingness of a person's soul. In addition, many Siberut Mentawaians feel committed to a relationship with the spirits of their ancestors even when at the present time they have become committed to *Sipuisilam*. The ancestor's debts against others in the past are yet to be paid by current and future generations. The teachings of *Arat Sabulungan* are the conventions of the ancestors or *teten siburuk*, those who have passed on the conventions of their ancestors and those who have passed away and still want to be followed by the next generation. There is a feeling of attachment with the spirits of the living, therefore, it can be said that the Mentawaiian earthly life is not only attached to the life of the ancestors, but also connected with the future, with the lives of children and grandchildren that have been born and are yet to be born.

Through the *puaranan sasareu* (outsider's way of life) some people on Siberut Mentawai have accepted *Sipuisilam*. Siberut Mentawai people who have accepted the Islamic faith do not always abstain from consuming boars. If there was no regulation in Islam to prohibit eating boars, it is likely more Mentawaians would follow Islam. Due to this dietary prohibition some Muslims converted to the Catholic faith. Although there are some people who understand that for *Sipuisilam* boar meat consumption is *ḥarām* (unclean/forbidden), their understanding of the word *ḥarām* is different from the understanding in *sasareu Sipuisilam*. Those who have claimed *Sipuisilam* in Siberut often said that pigs are indeed unclean but nevertheless on the other hand they are *mananam* (delicious). As one person put it:

*Sasareu Sipuisilam* says that boars are *ḥarām* (unclean). *Teten siburuk* (early ancestors) also mentioned that *sasareu* always said that boars are unclean and therefore they did not want to eat it. But we see also that some *sasareu* eat boar --both the people from Nias (Sainias) and Batak (Saibatak) like to eat boar just as many others do. So there are *sasareu* who eat boar and others who don't. *Sasareu Sipuisilam* do not eat boar, but especially here in Mentawai on Siberut we all love boar. Our religion (*Arat*) is Islam. We have our Islamic names, and we have been told also that boars are *ḥarām* far too long. So, boars are forbidden, but they are also *mananam* (tasty). We do not eat the unclean (*ḥarām*) boars, we eat only 'the tasty boars'. It's a pity, if we do not eat 'the tasty boars', as *sasareu* said, we should not throw away the blessings that we have already received. If we do that, it would be called *mubadhir* (misuse). It is not good to do something unnecessarily,

so that means, please do not throw away ‘the tasty boars’.

It’s interesting to analyse this understanding that has been offered by one of the *Sipuisilam* in Siberut. Similar reasoning has often been offered by other interviewees in the villages on Siberut. People are not hiding and fully admit that they love eating boar even though they profess *Arat Islam*. Syafei (pseudonym), for example, was a man who professes to be a Muslim, but he and his family all consume boar, and whenever there is a big party at his *uma* they always kill a boar and all members of the *uma* eat it. He said:

Indeed, I follow *Arat Islam*. Here in Siberut, we call the people who follow *Arat Islam Sipuisilam*. I eat boar, my children do as well. All my family eat boar and my father who is old still likes to eat boar meat. We keep boars, and we look after them. We enjoy our daily sago but we also wish to eat meat. It would be unfortunate if we do not wish to eat it. If we did not want to eat boar meat, why do we look after the little piglets? Sometimes we sell piglets when someone wants to buy them. Usually someone wants to buy one when they hold a *lia* (ritual ceremony) for their clan or family. I eat boar because I really like the meat though my religion (*Arat*) is Islam. *Arat Islam* is my faith, but my body is different. My body is a Mentawaiian body, so I eat boar. Boar is needed by my body. My body is not my *Arat* (religion).

These comments show culturally that boars and the consumption of boars are strongly bonded to the habits of Siberut Mentawai people who follow Islam, although Islam has been introduced in Mentawai by *sasareu* a long time ago.

It is especially the *sasareu simagbarau daro* (Minangkabau) who discouraged consuming boar. The prohibition of boar consumption to followers of Islam in Siberut is difficult to understand, but to practise the food regulation, is even more difficult because it is contrary to the eating habits of the Mentawaians. The Siberut Mentawai people even consider the consumption of boars as a customary part of the Mentawai identity.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned in the introduction, food is often associated with a place, person or ethnic specific group. What follows was stated by a *Sipuisilam*, *Aman Ledo* (pseudonym):

<sup>45</sup> Juniator Tulus, “Family Stories: Oral Traditions, Memory of the Past and Contemporary Conflicts over Land in Mentawai-Indonesia,” *Ph.D. Thesis*, Leiden University, 2012, p. 168.

For us in Mentawai boars are very important. From birth to adulthood, at the time of illness or death, Mentawaians need boars. For weddings it is also needed to have boars, to make *punen paabad* (reconciliation ritual) we also need boars. Since I was a little baby, Mentawaians have put boar into my mouth. For every *punen* (celebration) we Mentawaiian always kill boar and treasure that we are able to eat slivers of boar. Although the boar might be small it is okay, as we are still able to share the meat among us. The important thing is that we have a boar for our *punen* feast. The children, even though they are young, have already been fed boar. For our baby's with no teeth, parents chew the meat first, particularly boar's liver which is soft, not tough like meat. The liver and heart is perceived as the mother's love for her child. Livers are first chewed by mothers. Once soft like porridge it is then inserted into the baby's mouth. So we Mentawai people, although our teeth have not grown yet, we already consume meat. How can we be prohibited from eating boar? We are able to eat boar before we have teeth. How could we then prohibit it once we have teeth? We know that there are rules that we should not raise boars in the *barasi* (village). It's okay, our boars can be domesticated and raised *ka silak* (across the river), but if it was forbidden to eat boar, that would be hard. Everyone loves eating boar, it is also hereditary, it's so hard to stop[...]. We have already told our bodies not eat boar but our bodies ask continuously for boars. Our body is Mentawai, it wants boar meat.

Aman Ledo and Syafei narratives both admit that their religion is Islam, but not their body. Their body is considered more important than their religion (*Arat Islam*). It is the *Arat* which requires boars. Identity here is also associated with a person's body, therefore what is spoken by a *Sipuisilam* above that their body is the body of Mentawai, consequently boar remains important.

Analysing the ideas and opinions on boar meat consumption in relation to the bodies of *Sipuisilam*, it is comprehensible how Siberut Mentawai people equate and position themselves with *sasareu*. The body for Mentawai people is similar to the body for Nias people (Sainias) who eat boars. This is shown in the Nias expression, *simagharau sainak* or *siobak sainak* (the person or people who love boar). Mentawaiian bodies, similar to Sainias bodies, favour boar meat. The custom of boar consumption is considered a part of the Mentawai identity marker, so rules that prohibit that particular consumption are contrary to the reality of being a Mentawaiian. It can also be explained to be one of the identity markers

of Mentawaianness referred to as their ‘*Arat*’.

The identity may change its meaning according to space and time, and identity of the user because it is a discursive construction.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the identity markers attached to a Mentawai can also be transformed. As Michael Foucault states:

Relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without certain economy of discourse of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the object of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.<sup>47</sup>

In the villages on Siberut usually there is one mosque for worship of *Sipuisilam* and one church for *Sipukatolik* worship. The author rarely saw the mosque in several villages visited. Although the people of Siberut have taken on a world religion as indicated on their national ID card, some ritual practices of *Arat Sabulungan* are undertaken whether Islam or Christianity is their stated faith. Further, some people have become *Sipuisilam* and some *Sipukatolik*, very few make the *sasareu* religion their identity. According to Eindhoven, some Mentawaians have made Christianity the identity on their ID cards while those who converted to Islam adopt a variation of Minangkabau (*sasareu*) identity.<sup>48</sup> From what is understood, there are still many Mentawaians who do not treat formal religion as an identity even if they have a baptised name or have been ‘washed’ into Islam and it is listed on their ID card. Similarly, the *Sipukatolik* identify as Mentawaiian who faithfully hold on to the *Arat Sabulungan* ritual practices of their ancestors. Their true inner feelings remain faithful to the ritual practices of *Arat Sabulungan* and the identity of their soul.

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<sup>46</sup> Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Teori & Praktik* (Yogyakarta: Kreasi Wacana, 2005), p. 171.

<sup>47</sup> Micheal Foucault, *Power/ Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Phanteon Books, 1980), p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> Myrna Eindhoven, “New colonizers? Identity, Representation and Government in the post-New Order Mentawai Archipelago,” in Henk Schulte Nordholt and Gerry van Klinken (eds.), *Renegotiating Boundaries, Local Politics in Post-Subarto Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV-Press, 2007), p. 71.

## F. Conclusion

The Islamic faith for the people of the Mentawai Siberut is regarded as a new belief system introduced by outsiders. Mentawaians are still given a common name, *mu'allaf*, even if they became followers of Islam several decades ago. In the villages on Siberut, especially along the watershed Rereiket, as in Matotonan, some families became *Sipuisilam* a long time ago.

The principle of freedom of religion is favoured in Mentawai, as can be seen in some families. Not all family members follow the same religion, and the *ukkui mae* (head of household) cannot force family members to follow his chosen religion.

Being *Sipuisilam* as an option based on the principles of freedom that exist in *Arat Sabulungan* for the Mentawaians. In Siberut, the Mentawai Islamic groups have already established their own identity. The custom of boar consumption is strong, not only because the animal plays an important role in a variety of ritual and communal practices, but also because of the handed down myths of ancestors and spirits associated with boars. Besides the understanding that every object has a soul and *bajou* (radiant magic power), it is difficult to stay away from boars according to the Mentawaians, let alone say it is a dirty animal as it is commonly interpreted in conformity with the Quran.

The customary consumption of boars by *Sipuisilam* in Mentawai Siberut has created new expressions for them. The term "Matotonan Islam" is intended to identify the adherents of Islam inclusive of the favoured affiliation with boars. On the one hand, the Matotonan village is known to have a Muslim majority but has people known as *Sarereiket*. The term *Sarereiket* does not merely signify the Rereiket river valley inhabitants, but also the practices of *Sarereiket Arat Sabulungan* or *kunen Sarereiket* (custom of the Rereiket) inhabitants. *Kunen Sarereiket* is associated with the practice of *Arat Sabulungan* and animal offerings.

Another expression along the same lines as Islam Matotonan is *Islam Padang/Sipuisilam Padang*, who refrain from consuming boars. Conversely, when returning to the Mentawai they normally return again to the habits of Mentawai. Though there may be some *Sipuisilam* Matotonan or other Mentawai *Sipuisilam* who do not consume boar, Islam Matotonan or Padang Islam are labels that are open to be accepted or rejected.

For some people, *Arat Sabulungan* remains a symbol of backwardness and for others a marker of an honourable Mentawaian identity. The images show us that the identity of religious or cultural identity will be fluid in Mentawai for a while. Generally for *Sipnisilam* Mentawai, avoiding boars is in contradiction to the nature of the boars itself. So intrinsic is the consumption of boar meat to Mentawaian ritual practice and daily life that to not raise, nurture and eat boar is against the natural minds of the Mentawaians. To state that boars are dirty or *ḥarām*, is regarded by many Mentawaians as an insult to the existence and creation of the animal. In the Mentawai mind, to cause insult may cause a danger to the existence of the Mentawai identity.

Can Mentawai Muslims be blamed if they do not hide or change their practice of eating boar flesh which is considered contrary to the rules of Islam external to Mentawai? Is it wrong for them not cover up their custom? Should they hide it and pretend not to adore boar meat, and act as hypocrites in order to be able to be labelled as obedient? It is correct for a group of people who have differing views from the majority to be excluded because they are “the Other?” Is not every person trying to build their own truth claims in their own interests? If our identity expression tends to exclude “the Other”, then it could be constructed that our identity has limited reality in this country. It is possible to move away from an issue of us and them and create a unity in us-ness at least in a Mentawai context?

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