

Decolonizing Cultural Knowledge: Identity Construction and Cultural Resilience of the Mentawai Indigenous Community from a Critical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines epistemic challenges and decolonial strategies within the Mentawai indigenous community in West Sumatra, focusing on the construction of cultural identity and cultural resilience in the face of modern socio-political assimilation. The aim of this research is to examine the hegemony of the Eurocentric paradigm and national homogenization policies that marginalize indigenous Mentawai knowledge. Research Methodology: This qualitative study employs a critical ethnography design combined with critical discourse analysis. The critical ethnography approach positions the researcher not merely as a passive observer, but as an emancipatory partner striving to dismantle asymmetrical power relations in the field. The findings of this study explore how contemporary Mentawai communities actively resist epistemological subalternity. The resurgence of adapted local practices – such as the role of the Sikerei (spiritual leader and healer) and the performance of major cultural rituals – operates not merely as a passive preservation of heritage, but as a deliberate emancipatory strategy. These practices foster a sustainable, inclusive economy and a robust local identity. This article offers a nuanced, non-Western model for the broader discourse of critical humanities, emphasizing that the epistemic decolonization of indigenous cultural knowledge is central to achieving structural, ecological, and cultural justice in postcolonial contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The dominance of Eurocentric epistemology and post-colonial structurally homogenizing cultural politics have triggered a profound crisis of recognition for indigenous communities across the Indonesian archipelago. One of the indigenous communities most visibly experiencing this epistemic marginalization is the indigenous people of the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra. Under the banner of economic modernization, formal religious standardization through state regulations, and a land-centered national education system, the Mentawai indigenous knowledge system—rooted in the Arat Sabulungan philosophy of life—is often subjected to extreme subordination. These hegemonic patterns reduce cosmological rituals, traditional medicine, and indigenous linguistic expressions to mere myths, primitive superstition, or exotic tourism commodities.

This process of cultural alienation has directly eroded the collective memory of the younger generation of Mentawai and threatens the extinction of the autonomous customary order. In the past, government policy interventions have forced the Mentawai people to abandon their traditional cultural attributes. Despite massive assimilationist pressures, a countercurrent of critical awareness has begun to grow organically within the community. The Mentawai indigenous people exhibit a strong dynamic of agency. Contemporary phenomena demonstrate the revitalization of traditions, reinterpreted as instruments of survival and local political emancipation.

Previous anthropological research on the Mentawai Islands has tended to focus on documenting exotic rituals or merely describing static prehistoric lifestyles. This research aims to fill this academic gap by applying critical humanitarian analysis. This article examines how the Mentawai indigenous people decolonize cultural knowledge through adaptive identity reconstruction to foster cultural resilience. Amidst the challenges of the era of capitalist disruption, this paper traces how the revitalization of local rituals is strategically positioned to construct an inclusive economic foundation and restore marginalized epistemic rights, for the sake of realizing ecological justice and pluralistic humanity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To examine the complexity of cultural movements in Mentawai, this study integrates Critical Theory, the Coloniality of Knowledge Theory developed by Walter D. Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano, and the concept of Cultural Resilience. The Coloniality of Knowledge Theory asserts that despite the administrative end of physical colonialism, Western epistemic power structures continue to maintain hierarchical control over the mindsets of Third World peoples. Consequently, modern perspectives deny the ontological legitimacy of indigenous peoples' spiritual-ecological relationships with their natural environment.

In the Mentawai context, this dismantling of colonialism is achieved through the restoration of the subaltern through the tactic of epistemic disobedience. Local wisdom is no longer viewed as an artifact of the past, but rather as a living paradigm that actively critiques modernity's destructive impact

on the environment. The concept of cultural resilience here is understood not as self-isolation or blind rejection of external change, but rather as a community's capacity for resilience in renegotiating noble traditional values to align with the demands of modern economic justice without losing its core identity.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research employs a critical ethnography design combined with critical discourse analysis. The critical ethnography approach positions the researcher not as a mere passive observer, but as an emancipatory partner seeking to dismantle asymmetrical power relations in the field. The research focused on the Mentawai Islands, specifically among communities that still maintain local belief systems and practice traditional healing and rituals on Siberut Island, the Mentawai Islands Regency.

Primary data was collected through intensive participatory observation techniques within the Uma (Mentawai traditional house) and in-depth interviews with Sikerei (spiritual leaders and traditional healers), traditional elders (Rimata), the Mentawai youth organization, and local teachers who act as mediators of historical knowledge. Secondary data was explored from colonial archives, local government policy documents, and reputable international scientific journals. Data analysis was conducted interactively, moving from coding raw findings in the field to drawing a theoretical synthesis in dialogue with global decolonization discourses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Epistemic Imperialism of the Arat Sabulungan Philosophy

Before dissecting the form of imperialism, it is necessary to understand what is being attacked. Arat Sabulungan is not simply a religion in the Western institutional sense (which separates the profane from the sacred). Arat Sabulungan is a holistic ontological-cosmological knowledge system. This philosophy believes that everything in the universe—humans, animals, plants, rivers, even rocks—has a Simagere (soul/spirit).

The consequence of this epistemology is the birth of a very strict environmental ethic: humans may not take anything from nature excessively without performing rituals of forgiveness and permission (as in hunting or cutting down sago palms). Nature is positioned as an equal subject, not an object to satisfy needs.

Field findings indicate that for decades, the Mentawai traditional knowledge system has experienced multiple layers of epistemic violence. In the past, religious uniformity and repressive modernization forced the destruction of ritual tools and the prohibition of Sikerei healing practices. In the contemporary era, this threat has mutated into a shallow cultural commodification in the name of the tourism industry. Mentawai culture is often positioned merely as a visual-photographic object for foreign tourists, stripping its noble originality and sacred cosmological order from people's daily lives.

Epistemic imperialism occurs when one system of knowledge (in this case, Western rationalism and hegemonic modernism) positions itself as the absolute,

universal truth, while simultaneously erasing the authority of local knowledge systems. In Mentawai, this epistemic violence mutated in three main phases:

- Colonial Phase (Historical Imperialism): Western missionaries and colonial authorities labeled Arat Sabulungan practitioners as pagan, idolatrous, primitive, and uncivilized. This triggered restrictions on cultural expression in the name of "saving souls" and "humanity."

- Modern Post-Colonial Phase (State Structural Violence): After independence, the state adopted this hegemonic structure of thought through policies of cultural homogenization. Through the policy of standardizing official religions, enshrined in formal regulations, Arat Sabulungan is not recognized as a legitimate belief system or culture. This resulted in forced conversions to formal religions and the widespread destruction of sacred ritual instruments in the upper reaches of Siberut. Sikerei were arrested or forced to cut their long hair (a symbol of spiritual ties with the Simagere of nature) and prohibited from practicing traditional medicine.

- Phase of Capitalist Globalization (Cultural Commodification): Today, epistemic imperialism manifests itself in the form of an exploitative neoliberal tourism industry. Mentawai culture is experiencing a shallowing of meaning (exoticization). Sacred rituals are shortened in duration and staged at luxury resorts solely for the visual documentation needs of foreign tourists. Deep knowledge of nature is uprooted from its ontological roots and reduced to mere aesthetic spectacles that generate profit for foreign corporations, while indigenous communities remain marginalized.

Epistemicide: The Murder of Knowledge and the Alienation of Generations

The most deadly impact of this epistemic imperialism is epistemicide – the systematic murder of local knowledge. Formal authority separates knowledge from the daily lives of Mentawai people. When the formal national education curriculum entered the Mentawai interior without incorporating the local ecological context, the younger generation of Mentawai people were taught to memorize texts of mainland modernity.

They were encouraged to regard their elders' knowledge (medicinal botany, forest navigation, local toponymy, and Uma philosophy) as archaic, shameful, and unscientific. This triggered a severe cultural alienation, in which the younger generation lost the ability to read natural signs and experienced identity dislocation, standing at the intersection of a modernity that rejected them and traditions they had forgotten.

From the perspective of critical humanitarian theory, this sub-chapter asserts that the greatest oppression is not always physical violence, but rather the destruction of ways of thinking. Epistemic imperialism perpetuates the view that to become "fully human," indigenous peoples must abandon their cultural authenticity and merge into the Eurocentric current of universal modernity.

Facing this marginalization, the Mentawai indigenous people exhibit a subtle yet robust form of epistemic resistance by repositioning the role of the Sikerei and reactivating fundamental rituals, such as the traditional coming-of-age ritual and the rite of natural balance. The internal structure of the Sikerei

functions not merely as a healer of physical ailments, but also as a guardian of oral archives, an ecological philosopher, and a determinant of the community's moral boundaries. Through the independent implementation of cultural rites, the community The Mentawai indigenous community has constructed a counter-narrative that rejects the label of backwardness imposed by modern colonial subjects.

This revitalization of local rituals has transformed into a real decolonizing space where the intergenerational transfer of knowledge within Uma is revived. Indigenous communities intelligently utilize these cultural spaces to discuss contemporary issues, including the protection of customary forests from extractive corporations and the development of an independent local content curriculum based on local anthropolinguistics. Thus, the mother tongue and toponymy of the Mentawai customary forests serve as instruments of legal sovereignty and historical memory. These are two Sikerei people in Matotonan village who still practice the ritual formerly known as "arat sabulungan," now known as Lia in their customary rituals.



Figure 1. Sikerei Qoyim and Sikerei Aman (Source: Doc. Zulfa)
Reconstructing the Agency of Sikerei: From "Primitive Shaman" to Knowledge Mediator

In the Eurocentric narrative of modernity and the state's politics of assimilation, the position of Sikerei was forcibly domesticated into mere alternative healers or mystical shamans. One of the ritual events of Lia Pullagajat in Matotonan village, Mentawai Islands Regency, West Sumatra Province.



Figure 2. Lia Pullagajat Ritual (Source: Doc. Zulfa)

This ritual, within the contemporary cultural decolonization movement, re-constructs the Sikerei as local intellectual agents.

- **Living Archive Keepers:** Sikerei are oral librarians who preserve collective memory, clan (tribal) genealogies, and historical narratives of territorial structuring of indigenous areas through toponymy.

- **Ecological Philosophers:** They possess a rich botanical knowledge of hundreds of medicinal plants found in Siberut's primary forests. This knowledge is not practiced mechanically, but rather rests on the cosmological ethical code of Arat Sabulungan – that plant picking must be preceded by spiritual negotiation with the Simagere (spirit) of the plant to prevent disruption of the natural balance.

- **Axis of Customary Legal Autonomy:** Within the Uma structure, the Sikerei, along with the Rimata (traditional elders), act as moral judges. They determine customary sanctions if any community member violates ecological boundaries, such as cutting down sacred trees without permission or disrupting the social order.

Revitalizing Local Rituals as a Counter-Narrative

The revitalization of rituals in the Mentawai interior is not a naive romanticism of the past or merely aesthetic performance art for the tourism industry. From a critical humanitarian perspective, the performance of fundamental rites (such as traditional coming-of-age rituals or rites of balancing nature) functions as a discursive weapon that carries a powerful counter-narrative:

- **Rejecting the Stigma of Backwardness:** When indigenous communities independently hold major rituals within the Uma, they are declaring the legitimacy of their own civilization. This is a direct counter-narrative to neo-colonial claims that label their way of life as "backward" or "non-scientific."

- **Declaring Spatial Sovereignty:** Each time a traditional ritual is performed, the mantras chanted name the rivers, hills, and trees within their territory. This

spiritual act also serves as an informal legal affirmation of customary forest ownership against the threat of extractive corporate expansion.

- **Alternative Educational Space (Desecularization of Knowledge):** Amidst a formal education system that often uproots Mentawai children from their cultural roots, rituals at Uma become a real-life laboratory for humanity. It is in this space that the transfer of anthropolinguistic knowledge, philosophy of life, and environmental ethics is taught directly across generations in a polyphonic manner.

This revitalization demonstrates adaptive agency. Indigenous communities do not isolate themselves completely from modernity; they employ clever tactics. Educated young Mentawai communities marry the spiritual authority of Sikerei with the use of modern technology (such as digital documentation and legal advocacy).

They engage in epistemic disobedience—refusing to submit to external standardizations of value and instead formulating their own future direction for their community. This concept positions tradition not as a burden hindering progress, but as a key axis of cultural resilience to filter out the disruptions of the era of capitalist globalization.

Theoretically, this sub-chapter makes an important contribution to the Humanities Theory course by deconstructing the monolithic concept of Western humanism. The Mentawai counter-narrative movement emphasizes that human agency need not always be shaped by Western secular rationality. Through the integration of Arat Sabulungan's ecological spirituality, indigenous communities offer an alternative way of understanding the essence of humanity: being human means coexisting equally, fairly, and harmoniously with nature and the universal spirit.

Constructing an Inclusive Economy Based on Local Wisdom

The decolonization of knowledge in Mentawai does not stop at the symbolic level, but extends to the engineering of an inclusive economic order. Through the utilization of traditional botanical knowledge, local food systems (such as sustainable sago and taro cultivation), and the development of community-based ecotourism managed directly by indigenous youth, the Mentawai people demonstrate that cultural resilience is positively correlated with economic independence. This model challenges the neoliberal development paradigm that marginalizes local communities, while also providing a concrete contribution to the global humanitarian discourse on a model of human existence in harmony with the universe.

An in-depth analysis of the sub-chapter "Constructing an Inclusive Economy Based on Local Wisdom" is examined through the lens of critical humanitarianism and decoloniality theory, specifically in the context of the adaptation of the Mentawai indigenous people:

Deconstructing Neoliberal Development: A Critique of Economic Exclusion

In the modern capitalist and neoliberal development paradigm, economic growth is often measured quantitatively through large-scale investment, land commodification, and industrialization. For indigenous communities, this development model is often exclusive and destructive.

This system seizes living space and transforms customary forests. into concessions for extractive corporations, and forcing indigenous peoples into manual labor on their own land. Economic exclusion occurs when the cultural capital and local knowledge of indigenous peoples are deemed worthless in modern market calculations.

2. Building an Inclusive Economy Based on an Ecological Philosophy

The inclusive economy constructed by the Mentawai indigenous people rejects such exploitative schemes. Inclusivity here means an economic system that involves all community members, is environmentally friendly, and places local wisdom as the primary asset. This construction is rooted in three practical pillars:

- Sustainable Food Systems (Sago and Taro): Mentawai food security relies on communally managed sago and taro cultivation using traditional botanical knowledge. This management does not damage the structure of Siberut's primary forest. From a decolonial perspective, sago-based food independence is a form of economic sovereignty that breaks dependence on external corporate food supplies.

- Community-Based Ecotourism: Facing the threat of cultural commodification by foreign resorts, the younger generation of indigenous people is reconstructing tourism as a tool of empowerment. Tourists are no longer positioned as "spectators of primitive exoticism," but are instead invited to live within the Uma and learn directly from the Sikerei. Economic income is managed transparently by customary institutions for the benefit of the collective, not for a single capitalist.

- Utilization of Non-Timber Forest Products: Handicraft production, wild honey cultivation, and medicinal plants are developed without commercial logging. These economic activities are controlled by customary law, which prohibits excessive exploitation in order to maintain the harmony of the Simagere (soul) of nature.

Distributive Justice and Communal Ethics (Uma Collectivism)

In contrast to the principles of capitalism, which focus on the accumulation of individual wealth, the Mentawai local wisdom-based inclusive economy centers on distributive justice and collective well-being, mediated by the institution of the Uma (traditional house). Forest products or profits from tourism management are not enjoyed individually by one family head, but rather distributed socially through shared rituals. The role of indigenous youth and local educators is crucial here as knowledge mediators, translating past communal values into accountable modern economic governance.

From the perspective of Critical Humanitarian Theory, this sub-chapter provides a valuable conceptual contribution. As the modern world teeters on the brink of a global ecological crisis due to capitalist greed, the Mentawai people's inclusive economic model offers a concrete solution. Economic construction based on local wisdom demonstrates that humans can achieve material sufficiency (economic independence) without destroying spirituality, social justice, and the natural ecosystem. This is a concrete manifestation of emancipatory humanism, where sustainable economic justice is achieved by

honoring the relationships between humans, their communities, and the natural environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the decolonization of cultural knowledge in the Mentawai indigenous community is not just a romantic movement of the past or a naive effort to isolate oneself from the flow of modernity. Rather, this phenomenon is a critical defense strategy and a deliberate act of emancipatory agency to reclaim epistemic authority that has long been usurped by colonial hegemonic structures, post-colonial state homogenization policies, and the commodification of the capitalistic tourism industry. Through the reactivation of Arat Sabulungan's philosophy of life and the repositioning of Sikerei's role as an organic intellectual guiding the community's morals, the Mentawai indigenous people succeeded in breaking the shackles of epistemic violence and epistemicide. The revitalization of sacred rituals has been proven not only to function spiritually, but to transform into a space for discourse (counter-narrative) to emphasize the spatial sovereignty of customary forest territories as well as becoming a laboratory for critical humanity in transferring collective memory across generations. This built cultural resilience is the main driving force in constructing an independent, inclusive economic order through a sustainable food system (sago and taro) and communal-based ecotourism. As a result, these findings undermine the dominance of monolithic Western humanism by offering an alternative "knowledge ecology" that is polyphonic, emancipatory and equal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- For Public Policy Authorities and Regional Governments: It is hoped to reorient the development approach in the Mentawai Islands by stopping assimilative standardization that discriminates against local belief systems, as well as starting to legitimize legal rights over customary forests and areas managed by the Uma institution.
- For Knowledge Mediator and Formal Educational Institutions: The educational curriculum in the interior of Mentawai must be decolonized through the integration of traditional botanical knowledge, anthropolinguistics, Arat Sabulungan's environmental ethical philosophy, and local toponymy into contextual local content material, in order to prevent cultural alienation in the younger generation.
- For Traditional Institutions and Youth Communities: It is recommended to continue to strengthen the synergy of transparent communal economic governance and utilize digital technology as an instrument of legal advocacy as well as documenting oral archives in order to maintain the originality and sacredness of traditions from outside capitalist exploitation.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

As part of the outcomes of the Theories of Humanity course at postgraduate level, future studies need to expand the conceptual horizons of this study through the following further research directions:

1. Comparative Anthropolinguistic Analysis of Toponymy: An in-depth interdisciplinary study is needed that compares the cultural identity construction of the Mentawai people with other indigenous communities in Indonesia (for example the South Minahasa or Minangkabau people) in maintaining collective memory of living space through a critical linguistic perspective.
2. Effectiveness of Humanitarian and Human Resource Training Policies: It is necessary to carry out a critical evaluation of the policy implementation of training centers or sectoral training centers in West Sumatra to see the extent to which inclusive humanism and cognitive justice perspectives are integrated in local human resource strengthening programs.
3. Political Economy of Locality-Based Welfare Policies: Future research must empirically dissect how large-scale social welfare programs or modern food aid policies can be remodeled to be adaptive and based on local food wisdom (such as communal sago/taro clusters), in order to avoid sociocultural clashes at the site level.

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