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1 The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how the belief systems of indigenous peoples influence everyday conservation practices and examine how these beliefs can be integrated into modern conservation policies. This study employed an ethnographic qualitative approach. Data collection involved participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and secondary sources from academic publications, government reports, and media archives relevant to the research topic. Interpretative analysis was conducted within cultural and historical contexts to gain a deeper understanding of how religiosity shapes the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai people. The study provides new insights into the crucial role of local religiosity in environmental conservation and highlights the potential for integrating traditional and modern beliefs in nature conservation efforts. This research has significant implications for developing more effective and sustainable conservation policies. The study suggests that environmental conservation strategies should integrate local communities' religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying solely on scientific and technological approaches. This study can be a foundation for developing more effective and sustainable conservation strategies by incorporating indigenous peoples' cultural and belief systems.

Keywords: Ecology, Cosmology, Indigenous Peoples, Religiosity.

The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

Deforestation in Indonesia, a country recognised for holding the third-largest tropical forest area worldwide, has become a critical issue affecting both ecosystem sustainability and the social fabric of communities, especially indigenous groups reliant on natural resources. Tropical forests serve as vital terrestrial carbon sinks, essential for mitigating CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions and providing a broad range of crucial ecosystem services. These services include biodiversity preservation, food security, livelihood stability, and carbon and nutrient cycling, all of which significantly influence global climate stability (Muluneh, 2021). Despite Indonesia's report of an 8.4% reduction in net deforestation rates from 113.5 thousand hectares in 2020-2021 to 104 thousand hectares in 2021-2022, deforestation continues to pose a substantial threat to the resilience of these valuable ecosystems (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia, 2023).

Beyond severe ecological impacts, deforestation in the Mentawai Islands disrupts indigenous communities' cultural values and spiritual practices. The Mentawai people, most of whom follow the Arat Sabulungan belief system, regard nature as a spiritual entity that must be balanced. This belief system holds that spirits residing in nature support ecosystem health, embedding environmental respect deeply into their daily lives. However, modernisation, the influence of world religions, and external economic pressures have accelerated the erosion of these traditional values. Consequently, many Mentawai people are losing their spiritual connection to nature, leading to shifts in their approaches to natural resource management (Desriyeni & Primadesi, 2021; Schefold, 1985, 1991). Examining this phenomenon is critical not only for understanding environmental conservation but also for preserving a cultural identity rooted in ecocentric values, which could offer alternative perspectives on addressing the global environmental crisis.

Research on the Mentawai people and their spiritual traditions has yielded several significant findings, which can be grouped into three main categories. The first category examines religious rituals within Arat Sabulungan, demonstrating how this belief system profoundly shapes the spiritual lives of the Mentawai people. Studies such as those by Derung et al., (2022) and Desriyeni & Primadesi (2021) reveal that Arat Sabulungan is not merely a set of ritual practices but a repository of indigenous knowledge that governs human-nature interactions. These rituals honour guardian spirits of nature and promote practices considered sacred to indigenous conservation

1 efforts. Hanani & Nelmaya (2022) further assert that this belief system is essential for sustainable
2 hunting practices and resource management. However, these studies primarily focus on the
3 spiritual dimension without fully examining how such beliefs might integrate with modern
4 ecological conservation strategies.

5 The second category focuses on acculturation and social harmonisation, exploring how the
6 Mentawai people adapt to the influences of world religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and
7 Catholicism, as well as the forces of modernity. Delfi (2013) and Hammons (2016) suggest that
8 the Mentawai have selectively incorporated elements of these religions, achieving a balance with
9 their traditional beliefs. These studies also examine the impacts of acculturation on local social
10 and political structures, highlighting the development of a distinctive religious identity. However,
11 they generally overlook how acculturation may shape perspectives on ecological conservation.
12 Sabaggalet et al. (2023) contribute insights on the economic and social dimensions of the
13 interaction between tradition and modernity. However, like prior studies, the contribution of
14 acculturation to environmental conservation remains poorly explored.

15 The third category investigates the role of religion within the political and educational
16 contexts in Mentawai. Studies in this area emphasise the utilisation of world religions as political
17 tools and the influence of formal education on identity and governance in Mentawai. Delfi &
18 Weintre (2014) and Eindhoven (2007) illustrate how religion is a powerful political force, shaping
19 community identity and influencing local policy. While these studies illuminate the interactions
20 between world religions and political structures, they do not explore how traditional and modern
21 religious cosmologies might contribute to conservation policies or culturally grounded
22 conservation practices.

23 This research aims to address these gaps in the literature by examining how the cosmology
24 of Mentawai Indigenous religiosity, particularly the integration of Arat Sabulungan with world
25 religions, supports ecological balance. By exploring the relationship between Mentawai spiritual
26 practices and environmental conservation, this study seeks to bridge knowledge gaps and provide
27 insights into the role of local religiosity in conservation efforts. Through an ethnographic approach,
28 this research investigates how the Mentawai belief system shapes daily conservation practices and
29 its potential alignment with modern conservation policies. The findings are expected to enrich the
30 understanding of local religiosity's role in ecosystem conservation strategies relevant to local and
31 global contexts.

The primary argument of this study is that the cosmology of Mentawai religiosity, which encompasses the integration of Arat Sabulungan with world religions, is central to fostering sustainable ecological conservation practices. The study draws upon ecocentrism theory, which posits that human-nature relationships are not purely utilitarian but spiritual and moral, viewing nature as a living entity worthy of respect and preservation (Naess, 1989). In Mentawai society, Arat Sabulungan embodies this ecocentric perspective, considering nature spirits as guardians of ecological balance, upheld through rituals and environmental ethics. Supported by spiritual ecology, this research suggests that both traditional and modern religions can inspire environmentally responsible behaviour (Taylor, 2001). The study concludes that Mentawai religiosity offers a robust spiritual framework for ecological conservation, proposing that integrating these values into contemporary policy could significantly enhance conservation efforts in Mentawai while also serving as a model for other Indigenous communities.

Method

This research employs an ethnographic qualitative approach, focusing on two strategic locations in the Mentawai Islands: Siberut Island and Sipora Island. These sites were selected to provide insight into the differing dynamics of religiosity and environmental conservation practices between two islands with distinct cultural and social characteristics. On Siberut Island, the community maintains robust ancestral traditions. On the other hand, on Sipora Island, modernity and the influence of world religions are more prevalent. The choice of these two islands facilitates an exploration of variations in how indigenous communities preserve traditional beliefs and adapt to external influences within ecological conservation.

Primary data for this study was gathered from five selected strategic villages: Matotonan in South Siberut; Tuapejat, Sipora Jaya, Goisooian in North Sipora, and Saureinu in South Sipora. Data collection involved participatory observation, enabling involvement in daily life to directly observe community interactions with the environment and the performance of religious rituals. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with various key informants, including traditional leaders, religious figures, community elders, and environmental practitioners, who offered perspectives on the cosmology of religiosity and ecological conservation practices. Secondary data from academic publications, government reports, and relevant media archives complemented the primary data.

1 Data processing followed six stages: First, raw data from observations and interviews were
2 organised. Second, a holistic data review was conducted to identify an overview of the trends.
3 Third, data was systematically coded to uncover relevant patterns and themes. Fourth, these themes
4 were categorised to clarify the relationship between religious cosmology and environmental
5 conservation practices. Fifth, narrative reports were constructed using these thematic categories to
6 describe observed phenomena. Finally, interpretative analysis was conducted, incorporating
7 cultural and historical contexts to understand better how religiosity influences environmental
8 conservation practices among the Mentawai people.

9 **Religiosity-based Environmental Conservation Practices in Mentawai**

10 In the cosmology of the Mentawai people, the universe is divided into two interconnected
11 realms: the visible natural world and the invisible spiritual world. The visible world comprises the
12 tangible, physical environment that can be directly observed and experienced, including humans,
13 plants, animals, and various landscapes such as rivers, mountains, seas, and rocks. In contrast, the
14 invisible world is viewed as a spiritual domain inhabited by numerous spirit entities. According to
15 Mentawai beliefs, these spirits can inhabit in diverse locations—from the depths of the earth to the
16 sky—and are present in oceans, rivers, forests, hills, and natural objects like large stones or ancient
17 trees. Different spirits are believed to build specific elements within this spiritual realm, such as
18 the sky (*Taikamanua*), the sea (*Taikabagatkoat*), the land or forest (*Taikaleleu*), and the
19 underworld (*Taikapolok*).

20 The Mentawai people perceive the natural and spiritual worlds as intrinsically connected.
21 For example, they believe in visible and invisible trees, perceptible and tangible and beyond
22 ordinary human perception. While the spiritual world is inaccessible to human sight, it can be
23 perceived by the *Sikerei*, or traditional healer, through a form of transcendental vision during
24 rituals. This ability establishes the *Sikerei* as an essential mediator between the human and spiritual
25 realms in Mentawai society.

26 In Mentawai's belief, every entity in the universe has an essence called *Simagere*. While
27 often translated as "soul," *Simagere* has a more complex meaning. *Simagere* is believed to be the
28 life force that allows humans, plants, and animals to move actively and grow. In addition to
29 *Simagere*, there is another element called *Ketsat*, which is understood as the spirit inhabiting the
30 bodies of living beings, distinguishing them from inanimate objects. Upon death, both *Simagere*
31 and *Ketsat* are believed to have returned to the spiritual realm, where they get new designations:

1 *Ukkui* or *Kalimeu*, referring to the deceased's spirit. For the Mentawai, death is not the end but
2 rather an entry into the invisible spiritual realm, reinforcing the view that the human spirit is
3 immortal, even though the physical body no longer exists.

4 Besides believing in human spirits and other invisible spirits in the spirit realm, the
5 Mentawai people also recognise a supernatural entity called *Ulaumanua*, derived from the words
6 *Ulau* (outside or light) and *Manua* (sky), perceived as a powerful light. Its influence is believed to
7 transcend the boundaries of the universe. Although it does not possess a specific personality,
8 *Ulaumanua* is believed to have power over everything in both the spiritual and physical realms.
9 Its influence in the daily lives of the Mentawai people is tangible, though difficult to articulate.
10 The Mentawai believe that *Ulaumanua* sustains all life on earth, and even natural death is
11 considered to be the will of *Ulaumanua*. It is seen as the only entity capable of maintaining or
12 ending the lives of humans, animals, and plants. In essence, *Ulaumanua* serves as the ultimate
13 caretaker of all beings in both the spiritual and physical realms.

14 The Mentawai people's belief in the existence of spirits has fostered a deep respect for
15 nature. They see themselves as an integral part of the environment, fostering a profound spiritual
16 connection with nature that influences their treatment of it. Decisions on how to care for nature
17 are grounded in their spiritual beliefs. By combining environmental knowledge, sustainable
18 practices like forest conservation, and spiritual values, the Mentawai people demonstrate a
19 sustainable approach to life. They not only protect the ecology in which they live but also preserve
20 their cultural heritage. This lifestyle, which constantly respects and adapts to nature, ensures that
21 the Mentawai people's way of life remains sustainable and can be passed down to future
22 generations (Tulius & Burman-Hall, 2022). This view reflects how the Mentawai respect and care
23 for the environment in a way that integrates all aspects of life, from spirituality to daily practices
24 (Munandar et al., 2022). The Mentawai perspective aligns closely with the concept of ecocentrism.

25 The lives of the Mentawai people are closely tied to nature, which is evident in their
26 continued use of wood to construct homes. Additionally, they cultivate land to grow sago, durian,
27 and other crops to meet their daily needs. The Mentawai utilise natural resources wisely and
28 sustainably, preserving the forest. One traditional leader in Siberut explains:

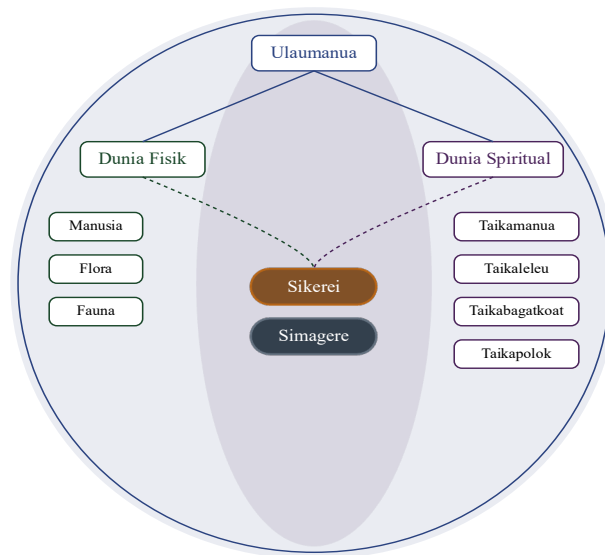
29 *"If there is an open field, we cultivate it carefully. Any trees or vegetation we clear are*
30 *replaced by planting durian, rambutan, lakcek, or other crops. We ensure the removed*
31 *trees are replenished with new plants such as rambutan, lakcek, durian, kerambi, sangkole,*

or banana. In this way, we make sure that any cleared vegetation is renewed. If we don't replant, the area will be overtaken by grass, and the land will not thrive as we intend. So, in a way, we protect nature by preparing and maintaining the land. When planning to plant something, we ensure the area is cleared and cared for." (Interview with Aman Alangi, Matotonan, Siberut)

The Mentawai people have strict regulations against logging activities, restricting natural resources, such as wood, solely for essential purposes like building houses or making canoes. They are committed to replanting efforts to maintain ecological balance, ensuring that natural resources can be utilised sustainably for future generations. Forest preservation, as a vital source of life for the Mentawai people, also involves the role of the *Sikerei*, who serve as crucial guardians of nature.

In Mentawai culture, human responsibility towards nature is closely tied to traditional rituals. These rituals, led by the *Sikerei*, express the Mentawai people's gratitude toward nature and guide the responsible use of resources, strictly adhering to customary rules. The following chart illustrates the structure of the Mentawai community in performing nature conservation rituals.

Figure 1 Structure of Mentawai Indigenous People in Environmental Conservation Rituals



Based on Figure 1, the Mentawai people believe that *Ulaumanua* holds the highest authority over the spiritual and physical realms. In the spiritual realm, it is believed that certain spirits govern various domains: *Taikamanua*, the ruling spirit of the sky; *Taikababagatkoat*, the spirit of the sea; *Taikalelu*, the spirit of the land and forest; and *Taikapolok*, the spirit of the underworld. These spirits are thought to endow each element in nature—such as oceans, rivers,

forests, and hills-with souls known as *Simagere* and *Ketsat*. For the Mentawai people, preserving and maintaining ecosystem balance are deeply connected to traditional rituals led by the *Sikerei*. These rituals, integral to environmental conservation practices within the Mentawai community, honour and sustain the harmony between humans and nature. The specific rituals related to environmental conservation include:

Table 1 Traditional Rituals of the Mentawai People

Ritual	Implementation Time	Ritual Purpose
<i>Forest Clearance</i>	When opening new land	Seek permission from the forest guardian spirits so that land clearing does not disturb the balance of the forest.
<i>Tree Felling</i>	When cutting down a large tree	Asking the tree spirit for permission to avoid nature's wrath
<i>Sikerei Medicine</i>	When there are people who are sick	Exorcise evil spirits that cause illness and summon the souls of the sick to find out the cause of their illness.
<i>Before the Hunt</i>	When you want to go hunting	Honouring animal guardian spirits to succeed in hunting and avoid bad luck or illness.
<i>Magri Simaeruk</i>	Done before staying in a new <i>uma</i>	Purify the <i>uma</i> and its inhabitants
<i>Magri Sikatai</i>	Conducted in conjunction with <i>Magri Simaeruk</i>	Drive away evil spirits from the <i>uma</i> and protect its inhabitants
<i>Pasibitbit</i> <i>(traditional house)</i>	<i>Uma</i> Performed in the evening before inhabiting the <i>uma</i>	Exorcising evil spirits from within the <i>uma</i>
<i>Lajo Simagre</i>	When performing rituals in the <i>uma</i>	Summoning spirits

<i>Lia Powder</i>	Performed after establishing the <i>uma</i>	A form of honouring the ancestral spirits who guard, and sanctify the <i>uma</i>
<i>Gaut and Kekei in Pig Farming</i>	When starting pig farming	Ask for protection to prevent the pig farming process from failing
<i>Sapo Saina'</i>	First-time pig farming	A place where pig farmers stay to bond with their pigs.

The practices shown in Table 1 highlight the deep and respectful relationship between the Mentawai people and nature, embodied through various traditional rituals. Each ritual—whether related to medicine, land use, plant cultivation, or animal husbandry—serves a spiritual purpose and functions as a form of environmental conservation. By respecting ancestral spirits, making offerings, and adhering to specific rules, these practices aim to preserve nature.

The Mentawai people regard nature as an entity that deserves respect. Every tree, animal, and natural element is believed to have its spirit or guardian. This belief, which views nature not merely as a resource but also as a living entity, fosters a respectful attitude evident in traditional rituals designed to maintain ecological balance. According to Mentawai Indigenous beliefs, actions that deviate from these spiritual values can lead to disturbances in human life, manifesting as diseases or natural disasters (Islami et al., 2023; Wahyuni, 2021).

Traditional rituals in Mentawai society also serve as a form of social control, effectively curbing the overexploitation of natural resources. By requiring rituals before engaging in activities that impact nature, the community is reminded to use resources conservatively and sustainably, aligning consumption with needs. This culturally embedded approach to conservation integrates spiritual traditions as a guiding framework for interacting with the environment (Niman et al., 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). Such practices help maintain harmony between nature and humanity, as the *Sikerei* must sanction any activity involving nature.

The *Sikerei*, as ritual leaders, are central to sustaining a balanced relationship between humans and nature. They are seen as figures who can communicate with spirits and interpret natural conditions, ensuring that all interactions with the environment adhere to the ethical and customary procedures passed down through generations. Thus, the *Sikerei* are responsible for the

community's spiritual well-being and play a critical role in Mentawai environmental conservation (Agung W. et al., 2014).

These practices demonstrate how the traditional religious system, such as Arat Sabulungan, has guided the Mentawai people in environmental conservation. This finding underscores the value of culturally based approaches in modern conservation strategies, as these spiritual values actively prevent exploitation that would harm ecosystems. The sustainability concept in Mentawai culture highlights that local wisdom can offer effective solutions for preserving nature.

Adaptation of Religiosity in Mentawai and Its Impact on Environmental Preservation

The Mentawai people, residing on the western islands of Sumatra, Indonesia, have long been subjects of anthropological interest due to their distinctive culture and belief system. Their traditional belief system, Arat Sabulungan, has been their spiritual and cultural foundation for centuries (Wahyuni, 2024). Interpretations of Sabulungan vary: some scholars, like Sihombing (1979) and Rudito (1993, 1999), interpret Sabulungan as a belief system centred on the power of leaves as mediators between humans and supernatural beings. Tulus (2013) offers an alternative view, suggesting that Sabulungan refers to a collective of spirits that receive special offerings or *buluat*. Field observations in Matotonan village lean towards Tulus's interpretation, where Sabulungan is associated with formidable spirits.

With the arrival of external religions, known locally as *sasareu*, such as Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism, Arat Sabulungan began to undergo significant changes (Delfi, 2013; Glossanto, 2019; Markus, 2016). The government's "Meeting of the Three Religions" in 1954 intensified this transformation, as the state urged the Mentawai people to adopt Islam or Christianity. This state-led effort to modernise and replace Arat Sabulungan illustrates how the authorities perceived it as an inappropriate faith (Delfi, 2013).

The state's influence created unique social dynamics within the Mentawai community. Nature, which has always held a central role in Mentawai spirituality, now contends with the influence of modernisation and world religions (Santosa, 2019). Today are faced with the challenges of modernisation and the influence of world religions. In addition to changes in their way of thinking and religious practice, it also affects how they interact with the environment.

Since the early 20th century, the Mentawai people have undergone a notable religious transformation. Islam is thought to have first arrived in the 18th century through traders from West

Sumatra (Delfi, 2012a; Nelmaya & Deswalantri, 2021a), while Christianity was introduced in 1901 by German missionaries under Dutch colonial rule (Tulius, 2013), and Catholicism arrived in 1954 (Rukiyanto, 2019).

The exact date of Islam's arrival in Mentawai remains uncertain, with various theories. However, Islam spread in Mentawai began through interactions with fringe traders from West Sumatra who bartered with the Mentawai people, exchanging goods such as rattan and palm (Nelmaya & Deswalantri, 2021b). Islam is thought to have entered Mentawai as early as the 18th century, primarily through the influence of the Minangkabau people, who played a significant role in its spread (Delfi, 2012b). Through Minangkabau scholars (Islamic teachers), Islamic teachings were introduced to the Mentawai community. This group, associated with Islamic missionaries, presented religious principles in an accessible way, making Islam appealing to the Mentawai people. The spread of Islam was also facilitated through marriage alliances and welfare support extended to the Mentawai (Wirman et al., 2021).

Mentawai people who were successfully persuaded to convert to Islam were also given scholarships to study Islam in the Outer Land, such as in Padang Panjang, Pariaman, Bukittinggi and Padang. After completing their studies and gaining knowledge of Islam, they were sent back to Mentawai villages to teach the knowledge they had gained in West Sumatra to Mentawai people who had not or had just converted to Islam (Delfi, 2012b).

The da'i (Islamic preachers) approach toward the *Sikerei* has been notably gentle, even allowing for the continuation of certain Arat Sabulungan practices. The da'i recognise the strategic importance of the *Sikerei* as guardians of the socio-cultural balance within Mentawai society. While some *Sikerei* have converted to Islam, they may continue to perform rituals that do not align with Islamic law. The da'i generally tolerate and respect the *Sikerei*'s bicultural approach—practising Islam while still engaging in Arat Sabulungan rituals. For the da'i, the *Sikerei* play a significant role in maintaining the stability of their religious preaching (*da'wah*), focusing primarily on educating the younger generation rather than forcing a choice between religions, which could prove counterproductive (Wirman et al., 2021).

Despite some Mentawai people adhering to Islam, many still hold onto beliefs in spirits, and the practice of Arat Sabulungan persists. For example, illness is often attributed to spiritual causes, and even when medical help is sought from the community health centre, it is not unusual for the *Sikerei* to assist in healing. Patients may take medicine from a village midwife while

1 participating in healing rituals led by the *Sikerei*. These rituals often include elements that conflict
2 with Islamic law, such as offerings of pork or other animals, like primates, which are readily
3 available and sometimes recommended by the *Sikerei* for their healing properties (Wirman et al.,
4 2021)

5 Historical records indicate that the first Christian encounter in the Mentawai region
6 occurred in 1901 through German missionaries sent by the Dutch colonial government as part of
7 the Zending effort. Traders and sailors frequently stopped in Sikakap, and Sipora introduced the
8 missionaries to the region (Tulius, 2013). Two pastors, August Lett and A. Kramer, became the
9 primary representatives of the Protestant mission among the Mentawai people, centring their work
10 on North Pagai Island (Sikakap) until 1914. Their mission focuses on providing medical care,
11 education, and training in basic carpentry skills (Glossanto, 2019; Zalman, 2018).

12 The entry of Catholicism into the Mentawai area came later compared to Islam and
13 Protestant Christianity. 1953 Father Aurelio Canizzaro visited the Mentawai Islands, specifically
14 South Siberut, to assess the feasibility of spreading Catholic teachings in the region. Acting on a
15 mandate from Monsignor De Martino of the Diocese of Padang, Father Canizzaro visited several
16 locations, including Siberut Island, Sikabalan, Sikakap, and Sipora. He returned to Siberut on
17 December 18, 1954, with Father Angelo Calvi, and together, they established the first Catholic
18 Church on Christmas of that year, marking the beginning of Catholicism in the Mentawai.

19 The Catholic Church initiated its mission in Mentawai by providing social services in
20 education and health. In addition, the Church pursued inculturation, aiming to harmonise Catholic
21 teachings with Mentawai traditions. Inculturation refers to the Church's effort to present the
22 message of the Gospel in a way that aligns with the cultural expressions of the local community
23 (Rukiyanto, 2019). This practice is not new to the Catholic Church; in the 1985 encyclical letter
24 by Pope John Paul II, titled "*The Gospel and Culture*", inculturation was described as a reciprocal
25 process wherein the Gospel is incarnated into Indigenous cultures and local cultural elements are
26 integrated into the Church's life (II, 1985).

27 The Catholic Church's inculturation efforts introduced a new approach that contrasted
28 with the restrictions following the ban on Arat Sabulungan in Mentawai. By recognising and
29 appreciating Mentawai customs and traditions, the Church fostered mutual understanding and
30 provided space for the continued expression of Mentawai culture. Consequently, the Mentawai

1 people, particularly those on Siberut Island, became more receptive to and engaged with
2 Catholicism.

3 The adaptation of Arat Sabulungan values alongside the teachings of world religions in
4 Mentawai has created a unique blend within the community, especially regarding their perspective
5 on nature. The older generation of Mentawai people continues to uphold local wisdom and
6 traditional environmental conservation practices, passed down through generations. For them,
7 nature is the essence of life—sacred and imbued with spiritual significance. In contrast, the
8 younger generation, who are more exposed to the teachings of world religions through modern
9 education and experience, are increasingly influenced by environmental perspectives rooted in
10 these global religious values. Nevertheless, many among the younger generation still strive to
11 harmonise these perspectives with ancestral principles that emphasise the balance of nature. This
12 generational shift illustrates how Mentawai religiosity has adapted to modern challenges while
13 retaining its cultural roots (Wahyuni et al., 2024).

14 The ancestral religion of the Mentawai people, Arat Sabulungan, incorporates practices
15 that reflect a commitment to environmental conservation, which, upon closer examination, share
16 similarities with teachings in world religions. In Matotonan Village, one informant noted that the
17 concept of *Ulaumanua* in ancestral beliefs closely resembles the concept of God in world religions,
18 such as Allah. The village head of Matotonan explained, "*Yes, Ulaumanua is almost the same as*
19 *God, Allah.*" Another informant also expressed a similar statement, saying:

20 "*Mentawai people believe there is a god, but the term isn't quite the same. For us, it's*
21 *Ulaumanua, the ruler of the sky. In Indonesian, it means the true owner. It is the origin*
22 *of nature, created by that owner.*"

23 "*It's the same. Like in Islam, there is Allah; in Christianity, there is God. But they are all*
24 *one, including Ulaumanua Sabulungan.*"

25 In ancestral religious rituals such as *Punen*, various prohibitions are observed to show
26 respect for nature, aligning with similar concepts in major religions, where certain restrictions
27 guide people to maintain personal purity and honour the sanctity of creation. During *Punen*, one
28 informant explained:

29 "*If we wear beads made from leaves, we cannot sleep with our wives, we cannot go*
30 *fishing, we cannot eat eels, we cannot sleep improperly, and we cannot gossip until the*

1 *flowers used in the ritual have withered, or until a Pulajuk ceremony, or closing*
2 *ceremony, has been held."*

3 These prohibitions, such as abstaining from conjugal relations, gossip, and certain
4 activities until the ritual flowers have wilted, represent a form of respect for the natural
5 environment. This connection between conservation values in ancestral beliefs and the teachings
6 of world religions emphasises simplicity, environmental stewardship, and the treatment of nature
7 as a sacred trust that must be preserved.

8 In Mentawai society, the differences between older and younger generations regarding
9 religious practices and environmental conservation have become increasingly apparent. The
10 younger generation is more strongly influenced by world religions such as Christianity,
11 Catholicism, and Islam. In comparison, the older generation continues to uphold local wisdom that
12 is often rooted in customs and values related to nature conservation. This adaptation of religiosity
13 in Mentawai demonstrates a blend of ancestral religious values with the teachings of world
14 religions in environmental conservation. It underscores the importance of considering religious
15 diversity in conservation strategies, as both world religions and local beliefs play essential roles in
16 fostering behaviours that support ecosystem preservation.

17 **External Pressure on Environmental Conservation in Mentawai**

18 In the last two decades, external pressures on nature conservation in the Mentawai Islands
19 have intensified, leading to significant damage to the ecosystem. Factors such as deforestation,
20 land-use change, and modernisation have disrupted the ecological balance that Indigenous
21 Mentawai communities have sustained for centuries (Supriatna et al., 2017). Forest exploitation in
22 Mentawai has a long history, dating back to the colonial era and extending through the New Order
23 period. Exploitation efforts began in the 18th century during the time of Raffles (Coronese, 1986;
24 Marsden, 2008) and continued during the Dutch colonial period in the early 20th century (Hansen
25 in Persoon, 1997). A new phase in Mentawai's forest exploitation began post-independence. In
26 1952, the first commercial attempt was made by Minangkabau migrant entrepreneurs in Saliguma;
27 however, it failed due to technical and social challenges. Similar efforts by CV Mentawai and PT
28 Bumi Putra in 1957 faced the same outcome (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012). A significant turning
29 point occurred when the government dispatched survey teams of forestry experts, Atmosoedarjo
30 (1969, 1970) and Subagio (1972, 1973), to provide scientific justification for forest management.

1 Although the surveys highlighted the unsustainability of long-term logging, recommendations for
2 limited exploitation were still made. Intensive exploitation commenced in the early 1970s with
3 concessions granted to four major companies: PT Cirebon Agung (70,000 ha), PT Jaya Sumber
4 Indah (70,000 ha), PT CPPS/Kayu Sumber (35,000 ha), and PT Djayanti Group/Inkappa (110,000
5 ha). Data shows a sharp increase in logging volume from 115,239 m³ in 1974/75 to 178,194 m³ in
6 the following two years before a slight decline to 151,650 m³ in 1977/78 (WWF, 1980). However,
7 there remains a significant discrepancy between official data and actual estimates; Mitchell (1982)
8 recorded 57,700 ha of forest being clear-cut in 1982, while Munawar (2004) estimated total timber
9 loss at 1.7 million m³ between 1972 and 1993 (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012)

10 The dynamics of forest management in Mentawai underwent significant changes after
11 1993, marked by the issuance of a Presidential Decree in Indonesia that halted all logging
12 concessions. However, this moratorium proved to be temporary. In 2001, the government reopened
13 forest exploitation by granting permits to two major companies, PT KAM and PT Salaki Summa
14 Sejahtera (SSS), with a combined concession area of 100,000 hectares. Following the
15 implementation of regional autonomy after the reformation, forest governance in Mentawai took
16 on new dimensions. This shift led to the emergence of new actors in forest exploitation, as local
17 authorities, including the regent, issued timber utilisation permits to local cooperatives. Empirical
18 data reveals an alarming intensity of exploitation. Based on data compiled from various sources
19 (YCM, 1996; Suhandi and Anggraini, 2002; BPSD Mentawai Islands, 2006), the volume of timber
20 removed from Siberut Island, Mentawai, by the last quarter of 2006 had reached approximately 3
21 million m³. This figure underscores that, despite the moratorium, exploitation rates have
22 accelerated to meet national and global market demands (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012)

23 Pressure from external parties, particularly companies exploiting Mentawai forests, has
24 significantly undermined the conservation efforts of the indigenous Mentawai people. Although
25 the Mentawai have strong conservation values, external economic and political forces hinder their
26 ability to protect their forests. The indigenous communities lack sufficient power and receive
27 inadequate support from authorities to resist such exploitation. This situation highlights the need
28 for more responsive policies that respect local wisdom and protect ecosystems in areas vulnerable
29 to commercial exploitation.

30

31

Discussion

This study reveals the complexity of interactions between environmental conservation practices, religion, and contemporary challenges in Mentawai society. The first finding indicates that the Mentawai community's conservation practices are deeply embedded in a belief system that fosters a profound respect and spiritual awareness toward nature. It is evident in various customary rituals, which function not only as spiritual practices but also as effective mechanisms for environmental preservation. These rituals encompass multiple aspects of life, including traditional medicine, land and plant use, and animal husbandry, all rooted in the belief that every element of nature has a spirit or guardian deserving respect. This belief system establishes an ethical framework that shapes the Mentawai people's interactions with their natural environment.

The second finding highlights transformative dynamics in conservation practices resulting from encounters between traditional ancestral values and world religions. The study shows notable generational differences in views and practices of environmental conservation. The older generation tends to uphold conservation practices based on local wisdom that reveres nature as sacred. Meanwhile, the younger generation, influenced by modern education and the values of world religions, adopts a more synthetic perspective. Interestingly, rather than leading to conflict, this interaction has fostered a unique cultural adaptation, where traditional and modern values interact dynamically, shaping contemporary conservation practices.

The third finding identifies a critical gap between the robust local wisdom-based conservation system and the external pressures the Mentawai people face. Despite having a sustainable and well-established environmental management system, the Mentawai face serious threats from commercial exploitation by large corporations. Limited political and economic power and insufficient support from authorities create an imbalance in their conservation efforts. These findings underscore the urgent need for a policy framework that not only acknowledges the value of local wisdom but also provides concrete protections for the rights of Indigenous peoples in managing their environment.

This study comprehensively explains the intricate relationship between conservation practices, belief systems, and contemporary challenges in Mentawai society. The traditional Mentawai belief that views nature as sacred aligns with Bookchin (1982) concept of a holistic social ecology approach. Ritual practices integrating spirituality with environmental preservation demonstrate that the Mentawai people had developed a sustainable environmental management

1 system long before modern ecological discourse, such as that proposed by Carson (1962) following
2 the Hiroshima and Nagasaki events.

3 In a global context, the Mentawai belief system parallels the Frankfurt School's critique—
4 particularly Marcuse (1964) argument—against capitalism's instrumentalist view that treats nature
5 merely as a resource for exploitation. Contrary to this capitalistic paradigm, Mentawai society
6 operates within an ethical framework that prioritises respect and sustainability in human-nature
7 interactions. However, as Vasan (2018) observes, the global economic system's focus on unlimited
8 growth presents a significant threat to the sustainability of these traditional practices.

9 The transformation of values within Mentawai society, especially among the younger
10 generation, reflects what Berkes (2012) describes as adapting traditional ecological knowledge to
11 modernity. The unique synthesis of traditional and modern values demonstrates the resilience of
12 local knowledge systems in the face of global change. Yet, as Robbins (2012) argues, the dilemma
13 between economic development and environmental conservation remains a significant challenge.

14 The Mentawai case illustrates the urgency of what Sachs (2015) describes as the need for
15 sustainable technological approaches. However, the Mentawai experience highlights that solutions
16 must go beyond technology to integrate traditional knowledge into modern conservation strategies.
17 It aligns with Bookchin (1982) argument for decentralisation in natural resource management and
18 the involvement of local communities in decision-making.

19 Based on the findings and analysis, several implications and action plans are suggested
20 to preserve the environment and local wisdom. Regarding policy development, it is essential to
21 create policies that integrate local wisdom with modern legal frameworks, strengthen indigenous
22 rights in natural resource management, and establish protections for traditional conservation
23 practices. Community capacity-building can be achieved through empowerment programs that
24 support intergenerational knowledge transfer, dialogue platforms uniting traditional and modern
25 stakeholders, and economic development initiatives based on conservation practices. At a systemic
26 level, alternative economic models should be developed to value traditional conservation practices,
27 integrate traditional ecological knowledge into formal education, and form strategic alliances
28 between indigenous communities and the global environmental movement. This entire action plan
29 should be implemented through a participatory approach involving all stakeholders, emphasising
30 the central role of Indigenous peoples as primary custodians of time-tested ecological knowledge.

Conclusion

This study presents three key findings related to the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai community. Firstly, their conservation practices are deeply rooted in a belief system that integrates customary rituals with mechanisms for environmental preservation. Secondly, a transformative dynamic is observed, whereby the younger generation successfully combines traditional values of ancestral religion with teachings from world religions and modern perspectives. Thirdly, a gap is identified between the local wisdom-based conservation system and the pressures exerted by the global political economy.

These findings have significant implications for developing more effective and sustainable conservation policies. The study suggests that conservation strategies should incorporate religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying exclusively on science and technology. Additionally, this study contributes to academic discourse on the role of religiosity and local knowledge in environmental conservation, offering new perspectives on the interplay between traditional beliefs, world religions, and nature conservation.

Future research should focus on practical and applicable aspects. A deeper examination of concrete mechanisms for integrating Indigenous cosmological values into modern conservation policy frameworks is essential. Further exploration of the adaptability of local knowledge-based conservation models to other indigenous contexts in Indonesia is needed, considering each community's unique socio-cultural characteristics. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to track changes in belief systems over time and their long-term impact on conservation practices.

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25 Hidayatullah.
- 26

**2. Bukti Catatan Koreksi Dari Review Berkaitan
Substansi Dan Hasil Review
(01 Januari 2025)**



Dwi Wahyuni <dwiwahyuni@uinib.ac.id>

[Millah] Editor Decision

1 pesan

Yuli Andriansyah <journal@uii.ac.id>

1 Januari 2025 pukul 21.16

Kepada: Dwi Wahyuni <dwiwahyuni@uinib.ac.id>, Indah Andika Octavia <indahandikaoctavia@uinib.ac.id>, Karen Karista <karenkarista4@gmail.com>, Anjali Sabna <sabnaanjali@gmail.com>, Martalia <martalia845@gmail.com>

Dwi Wahyuni, Indah Andika Octavia, Karen Karista, Anjali Sabna, Martalia:

We have reached a decision regarding your submission to Millah: Journal of Religious Studies, "The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia".

Our decision is: Revisions Required

Reviewer B:

Recommendation: Revisions Required

Originality. Does the manuscript contain new and significant information that is suitable for publication?

"Decent enough"

The aim of the research is presented very clearly, namely to explore how indigenous people's belief systems influence everyday conservation practices and examine how these beliefs can be integrated into modern conservation policies. These findings highlight the role of local religiosity in environmental conservation and its potential to integrate traditional and modern beliefs in nature conservation efforts.

Relationships with the relevant literature. Has the manuscript demonstrated the author's understanding of the relevant literature in the related field and has cited adequate literature sources? Is there any literature that is relevant to the study in the manuscript that was missed?

"Quite relevant"

Authors need to consider using the latest relevant references, and include sources or references in any information or data presented by the author (see comments in marked manuscripts).

Methodology. Are the arguments in the text built on sufficient theory, concept, or idea? Are the methods used adequate?

"Inadequate"

This research uses qualitative with an ethnographic approach. However, several parts of the methods and results have not been presented in a structured manner according to qualitative research.

Some points for authors to consider:

The author mentions one way of collecting data using in-depth interviews. Is this interview structured, unstructured or semi-structured. The author needs to explain it in detail. What aspects were observed (need to be presented in the form of a Table so as not to confuse readers). The characteristics of the informants need to be clarified (key informants and supporters). This will of course have an impact on these findings. In qualitative research, the quality of information/findings from informants is not based on the number of informants, but based on the quality of the informants. How long did this research take?

Then, what model does the data analysis in this research adopt (whether from Spradley, Miles, Huberman and others). I think authors need to consider these things and present them in a structured way so that readers can easily understand them.

Result. Are the results clearly presented and analysed adequately? Are the conclusions drawn in accordance with the discussion in the text?

"Inadequate"

The author needs to summarize and explain how data compression on these findings was carried out, starting from the observed aspects and themes, categorization, quotes from interviews with informants, and compression of data obtained from informants (keep the identity or name of the informant a secret or provide a code from the informant at the end information provided by the informant). This applies to every focus of the research question asked by the author.

- Religiosity-based environmental conservation practices in Mentawai
- Adaptation of religiosity in Mentawai and its impact on environmental conservation
- External pressure on environmental conservation in Mentawai

"The conclusion is adequate"

Implications. Does the manuscript clearly state the implications of the findings for follow-up research or theory development or on society? If it has mentioned implications, are the implications of the manuscript consistent with the results and conclusions?

"Adequate"

The implications of this research are very clear, that it is necessary to develop more effective and sustainable conservation policies. In addition, this research also recommends that environmental conservation strategies should integrate local community religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying on scientific and technological approaches. Of course, this can be the basis for developing more effective and sustainable conservation strategies by incorporating the culture and belief systems of indigenous peoples.

The implications are consistent with the results and conclusions

Clarity of communication. Is the manuscript written clearly so that it is easily digested by journal readers? Is the use of language in the text adequate?

"Adequate"

Comments for manuscript improvement:

I am very grateful for sharing this invaluable knowledge. Indonesia is very rich in diversity, customs, ethnicity, culture and religion, one of which is the Mentawai inland tribe.

While I realize that research is a complex undertaking, I write this comment with respect to the author.

The aim of this research is presented very clearly, and uses qualitative ethnography. This research has 3 focus questions, namely: (1) Religiosity-based environmental conservation practices in Mentawai, (2) Adaptation of religiosity in Mentawai and its impact on environmental conservation, and (3) external pressure on environmental conservation in Mentawai. The implications and recommendations in these findings are also presented very clearly.

Introduction - Every information and data presented by the author needs to be supplemented with sources or references (see comments in the manuscript). Authors need to consider presenting the research objectives at the end of the paragraph (present this so that it is more structured and easy for readers to understand), then complete it with the research focus (research questions to be investigated).

Method - The author uses qualitative research with an ethnographic approach. However, several parts of the methods and results have not been presented in a structured manner according to qualitative research. What kind of in-depth interviews are used to collect data? Is it structured, unstructured or semi-structured. What aspects are observed (need to be presented in the form of a Table so that it is easy to understand and does not confuse readers). The characteristics of the

informants need to be clarified (key informants and supporters). The quality of information/findings from informants in qualitative research is not based on the number of informants, but based on the quality of the informants. How long did this research take? Then, what model does the data analysis in this research adopt (whether from Spradley, Miles, Huberman and others). I think the author needs to consider these things for changes and present them in a structured manner.

Results - The author needs to present them in a structured manner, summarizing and explaining how data compression on these findings was carried out, starting from observed aspects and themes, categorization, quotes from interviews, and data compression in obtaining information from informants. This applies to each research question focus proposed by the author (Religiosity-based environmental conservation practices in Mentawai, adaptation of religiosity in Mentawai and its impact on environmental conservation, external pressure on environmental conservation in Mentawai).

Reviewer C:
Recommendation: Decline Submission

Originality. Does the manuscript contain new and significant information that is suitable for publication?

Inadequate.

This topic discusses the religious cosmology of indigenous people in maintaining ecological balance in the Mentawai Islands (Indonesia), where the aim is to explore how belief systems influence daily conservation practices and examine them in modern conservation policies. Indonesia is a diverse country, one of which is the inland tribes in the Mentawai Islands. This is very interesting to investigate in supporting the development of current relevant studies. Unfortunately, some important parts of this manuscript are not presented well (e.g., methods, data collection, and presentation in the results section).

Relationships with the relevant literature. Has the manuscript demonstrated the author's understanding of the relevant literature in the related field and has cited adequate literature sources? Is there any literature that is relevant to the study in the manuscript that was missed?

Adequate.

Although this research is very rarely done, the author needs to add the latest references related to this topic. In addition, there are several statements presented by the author that are not equipped with reference sources (see page 3, lines 3-7, 14-18). It should be realized that every piece of information presented, both data and statements, needs to be equipped with reference sources; this applies to all contents in this manuscript.

Methodology. Are the arguments in the text built on sufficient theory, concept, or idea? Are the methods used adequate?

Inadequate.

This research is qualitative with an ethnographic approach. However, errors in the method greatly affect the quality of these findings. How long was this research conducted (see page 5, lines 24-25), what kind of in-depth interviews were used to collect data from informants (see page 5, line 26), were the interviews structured, unstructured or semi-structured. Then what are the interview guidelines in general that the author uses. This can be presented in the form of a Table or something similar, so that the presentation of the findings can be arranged based on the indicators that are determined in general. In addition, how is the quality of the informants involved, are there no supporting informants involved in this research (see page 5, lines 26-27). Whose model did the data collection adopt? (Spradley or others). I think the author needs to consider, explain it, and present it in a structured manner so that it is easy for readers to understand.

Result. Are the results clearly presented and analysed adequately? Are the conclusions drawn in accordance with the discussion in the text?

Inadequate.

The author needs to present the results of the conclusions from the information obtained according to the stages of qualitative data collection. Present this in a structured manner (data reduction, categorizing data, displaying, and concluding the information obtained). In addition, arrange it according to the focus of this research (see pages 7-8, lines 29-31, 1-5; page 9, line 6; page 14, lines 20-24).

Implications. Does the manuscript clearly state the implications of the findings for follow-up research or theory development or on society? If it has mentioned implications, are the implications of the manuscript consistent with the results and conclusions?

Adequate.

This study has important implications for developing more effective and sustainable conservation policies. The findings highlight that environmental conservation strategies should integrate local religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying solely on scientific and technological approaches. In addition, these findings can form the basis for developing more effective and sustainable conservation strategies by incorporating indigenous peoples' cultural and belief systems.

Clarity of communication. Is the manuscript written clearly so that it is easily digested by journal readers? Is the use of language in the text adequate?

Adequate.

Comments for manuscript improvement:

First of all I would like to thank you for sharing your knowledge on this topic. This topic is very interesting to investigate, especially in the indigenous people. Studying and presenting this topic is very complicated, especially with a qualitative ethnographic approach. Therefore, I write this comment with full respect to the authors.

This topic discusses the religious cosmology of indigenous people in maintaining ecological balance in the Mentawai Islands (Indonesia), where the aim is to explore how belief systems influence everyday conservation practices and examine them into modern conservation policies. Unfortunately, some important parts of this manuscript are not well presented.

Introduction: The author needs to complete every information or data presented in the manuscript (see page 3, lines 3-7, 14-18). This also applies to all information presented in the manuscript. The purpose of the research and the importance of this research are presented in the final paragraph of the introduction (see page 4, lines 23-31). Structure this paragraph so that it is easy for readers to understand (see page 5, lines 1-12).

Method: The author uses participant observation (see page 5, lines 24-25), how long was this conducted? Then the author mentions in-depth interviews (see page 5, line 26), what kind of interviews (structured, unstructured or semi-structured), what about the interview guidelines in general? I think the author needs to present this clearly (Table or similar), so that it is easy to understand by the readers. In addition, what about the quality of the informants involved (see page 5, lines 26-27). The quality of the informants involved will affect this valuable finding, is there no supporting informant involved? In addition, the data collection used adopts the who model. I think the author needs to consider, explain and present this, because this part greatly affects the quality of the findings.

Findings: Present this section in a structured manner according to the research focus (see page 6, line 9). Present the results of data collection (data reduction, categorization, display, and conclusion) in the form of a Table or similar to make it more structured and easier for readers to understand. In addition, include the code of each informant based on the information obtained (see page 7, lines 29-31; page 9, line 6; page 14, lines 20-24).

Discussion: Structure this section according to the research focus, and report the limitations of this research.

Reviewer D:
Recommendation: Revisions Required

Originality. Does the manuscript contain new and significant information that is suitable for publication?

Yes, but some elements need to be improved.

Relationships with the relevant literature. Has the manuscript demonstrated the author's understanding of the relevant literature in the related field and has cited adequate literature sources? Is there any literature that is relevant to the study in the manuscript that was missed?

One of the most discussed aspects in almost all studies of the Mentawai is religion. It is rare for a Mentawai study not to mention the Mentawai people's belief in Arat Sabulungan and the role of Sikerei in all aspects of their lives. In this study, the author has categorized the spiritual traditions of the Mentawai people into three categories. Unfortunately, the description of the three categories given by the author is very bland because it is merely descriptive and there is no in-depth discourse in each category. Therefore, the author needs to sharpen the discussion on all categories and their relationship with conservation.

Methodology. Are the arguments in the text built on sufficient theory, concept, or idea? Are the methods used adequate?

The author claims to use an ethnographic approach in this research. However, the author's description of how this research was conducted in the field (such as time, setting of data collection, data processing, etc.) does not illustrate that this research was conducted using an ethnographic approach. The author even only writes the research locations in several villages in Mentawai as if everyone already knows the general description of the research locations, such as where it is, how to go there and so on. Not only that, the description of results presented also does not indicate an ethnographic report. Both are need to be improved

Result. Are the results clearly presented and analysed adequately? Are the conclusions drawn in accordance with the discussion in the text?

The research results presented tend to be mere claims without supporting reasons and evidence. As the result of ethnographic research, the author should present a data-based story about the religious practices of Mentawai people related to the way they integrate with the environment. Instead, the author makes claims based on secondary data (existing literature) and poor of data. The discussion presented by the author is interesting, unfortunately the discussion refers to old literature. The author has not referred to the current discourse on conservation from recent literature (see <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10305> or <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2095989> and etc for example.

Implications. Does the manuscript clearly state the implications of the findings for follow-up research or theory development or on society? If it has mentioned implications, are the implications of the manuscript consistent with the results and conclusions?

Yes for future research, but not yet for theoretical implication.

Clarity of communication. Is the manuscript written clearly so that it is easily digested by journal readers? Is the use of language in the text adequate?

Yes

Comments for manuscript improvement:

See the comments on manuscript

Reviewer E:
Recommendation: Revisions Required

Originality. Does the manuscript contain new and significant information that is suitable for publication?

While most of information in the paper are not new at all, but framing it within the cosmology-conservation nexus can be considered relatively new for Mentawai studies (although not new for research in few other places).

Relationships with the relevant literature. Has the manuscript demonstrated the author's understanding of the relevant literature in the related field and has cited adequate literature sources? Is there any literature that is relevant to the study in the manuscript that was missed?

Yes it has demonstrated the author's understanding of the relevant literature. Nevertheless, a specific section for literature review or conceptual framework may be needed. This section may cover some literature missed in the current manuscript, such as study related to indigenous knowledge and cosmology and their relation to conservation in other places in Indonesia.

Methodology. Are the arguments in the text built on sufficient theory, concept, or idea? Are the methods used adequate?

Yes for both questions.

Result. Are the results clearly presented and analysed adequately? Are the conclusions drawn in accordance with the discussion in the text?

Yes for both questions.

Implications. Does the manuscript clearly state the implications of the findings for follow-up research or theory development or on society? If it has mentioned implications, are the implications of the manuscript consistent with the results and conclusions?

Yes for both questions.

Clarity of communication. Is the manuscript written clearly so that it is easily digested by journal readers? Is the use of language in the text adequate?

Yes for both questions.

Comments for manuscript improvement:

Article "The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia" is well written in worthy of publication in Millah. But I suggest a few minor revisions before publication, to enhance the quality of the article. Some of my recommendations are:

- a) Abstract can be enhanced by mention few key findings and discussion, as well as mention about Mentawai where the research took place.
- b) First introductory part (page 3 line 3 until page 5 line 12) should be written under "Introduction" subheading.
- c) A specific Literature Review or Conceptual Framework section is needed to add, to better contextualize the article within particular theoretical discussions. This added section should also discuss clearly the key concepts in the article, such as cosmology, religiosity (both are in the title), and environmental conservation (its general ethics, practices, and politics). This added section

should also discuss other studies outside Mentawai which have covered the relations between indigenous knowledge/cosmology/religiosity and (modern and often external) conservation practices, such as studies of sasi in eastern Indonesia.

d) In Method section, author mentions about 5 research locations (1 Siberut, 4 Sipora), based on a specific reasoning. But the implication of this methodological choice is not seen at all in the findings and discussion. For example, what are the differences between those places (or between Siberut and Sipora) in the context of cosmology and conservation practices?

e) Finding are mostly justified. Minor revision needed: a paragraph (page 15 line 8-16) is somewhat repetitive to other paragraph before it (page 14 line 3-13). Important point of discussion that can be added to better the article's arguments: In their constant interactions with modernity, state, logging companies, world religions, modern conservation practice, and other 'external' actors, how does local/indigenous Mentawai society negotiate their own culture, cosmology, knowledge, belief, tradition, etc.? How can the balance of 'adhering to indigenous cosmology/ belief/tradition' and 'adhering to modernity/global religion values' be achieved in Mentawai?

f) Discussion and Conclusion mostly justified. Minor revision needed: Think about a paragraph in page 18 (line 19-30), maybe more appropriate in the Conclusion section?

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The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the

Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how the belief systems of indigenous peoples influence everyday conservation practices and examine how these beliefs can be integrated into modern conservation policies. This study employed an ethnographic qualitative approach. Data collection involved participatory observation, enabling involvement in daily life to directly observe community interactions with the environment and the performance of religious rituals. In-depth interviews were administered semistructured interviews with various key informants, including traditional leaders, religious figures, community elders, and environmental practitioners. Secondary sources from academic publications, government reports, and media archives relevant to the research topic. Interpretative analysis was conducted within cultural and historical contexts to gain a deeper understanding of how religiosity shapes the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai people. This study presents three key findings related to the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai community. Their conservation practices are deeply rooted in a belief system. Transformative dynamic is observed, whereby the younger generation successfully combines traditional values of ancestral religion with teachings from world religions and modern perspectives. A gap is identified between the local wisdom-based conservation system and the pressures exerted by the global political economy. The study provides new insights into the crucial role of local religiosity in environmental conservation and highlights the potential for integrating traditional and modern beliefs in nature conservation efforts. The study suggests that environmental conservation strategies should integrate local communities' religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying solely on scientific and technological approaches.

Keywords: Ecology, Cosmology, Indigenous Peoples, Religiosity.

The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

Deforestation in Indonesia, a country recognised for holding the third-largest tropical forest area worldwide, has become a critical issue affecting both ecosystem sustainability and the social fabric of communities, especially indigenous groups reliant on natural resources (Van Der Muur, 2018). Tropical forests serve as vital terrestrial carbon sinks, essential for mitigating CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions and providing a broad range of crucial ecosystem services. These services include biodiversity preservation, food security, livelihood stability, and carbon and nutrient cycling, all of which significantly influence global climate stability (Muluneh, 2021). Despite Indonesia's report of an 8.4% reduction in net deforestation rates from 113.5 thousand hectares in 2020-2021 to 104 thousand hectares in 2021-2022, deforestation continues to pose a substantial threat to the resilience of these valuable ecosystems (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan Republik Indonesia, 2023).

Beyond severe ecological impacts, deforestation in the Mentawai Islands disrupts indigenous communities' cultural values and spiritual practices. The Mentawai people, most of whom follow the Arat Sabulungan belief system, regard nature as a spiritual entity that must be balanced. This belief system holds that spirits residing in nature support ecosystem health, embedding environmental respect deeply into their daily lives. However, modernisation, the influence of world religions, and external economic pressures have accelerated the erosion of these traditional values (Delfi, 2013; Yulia et al., 2018). Consequently, many Mentawai people are losing their spiritual connection to nature, leading to shifts in their approaches to natural resource management (Desriyeni & Primadesi, 2021; Schefold, 1985, 1991). Examining this phenomenon is critical not only for understanding environmental conservation but also for preserving a cultural identity rooted in ecocentric values, which could offer alternative perspectives on addressing the global environmental crisis.

Research on the Mentawai people and their spiritual traditions has yielded several significant findings, which can be grouped into three main categories. The first category examines religious rituals within Arat Sabulungan, demonstrating how this belief system profoundly shapes the spiritual lives of the Mentawai people. Studies such as those by Derung et al., (2022) and Desriyeni & Primadesi (2021) reveal that Arat Sabulungan is not merely a set of ritual practices but a repository of indigenous knowledge that governs human-nature interactions. These rituals honour

guardian spirits of nature and promote practices considered sacred to indigenous conservation efforts. Hanani & Nelmaya (2022) further assert that this belief system is essential for sustainable hunting practices and resource management. However, these studies primarily focus on the spiritual dimension without fully examining how such beliefs might integrate with modern ecological conservation strategies.

The second category focuses on acculturation and social harmonisation, exploring how the Mentawai people adapt to the influences of world religions, such as Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism, as well as the forces of modernity. Delfi (2013) and Hammons (2016) suggest that the Mentawai have selectively incorporated elements of these religions, achieving a balance with their traditional beliefs. These studies also examine the impacts of acculturation on local social and political structures, highlighting the development of a distinctive religious identity. However, they generally overlook how acculturation may shape perspectives on ecological conservation. Sabaggalet et al. (2023) contribute insights on the economic and social dimensions of the interaction between tradition and modernity. However, like prior studies, the contribution of acculturation to environmental conservation remains poorly explored.

The third category investigates the role of religion within the political and educational contexts in Mentawai. Studies in this area emphasise the utilisation of world religions as political tools and the influence of formal education on identity and governance in Mentawai. Delfi & Weintre (2014) and Eindhoven (2007) illustrate how religion is a powerful political force, shaping community identity and influencing local policy. While these studies illuminate the interactions between world religions and political structures, they do not explore how traditional and modern religious cosmologies might contribute to conservation policies or culturally grounded conservation practices.

This research aims to address these gaps in the literature by examining how the cosmology of Mentawai Indigenous religiosity, particularly the integration of Arat Sabulungan with world religions, supports ecological balance. By exploring the relationship between Mentawai spiritual practices and environmental conservation, this study seeks to bridge knowledge gaps and provide insights into the role of local religiosity in conservation efforts. Through an ethnographic approach, this research investigates how the Mentawai belief system shapes daily conservation practices and its potential alignment with modern conservation policies. Focus to the questions in this research is: what religiosity-based environmental conservation practices in Mentawai? how adaptation of

religiosity in Mentawai and its impact on environmental conservation? and how external pressure on environmental conservation in Mentawai?. The findings are expected to enrich the understanding of local religiosity's role in ecosystem conservation strategies relevant to local and global contexts.

The primary argument of this study is that the cosmology of Mentawai religiosity, which encompasses the integration of Arat Sabulungan with world religions, is central to fostering sustainable ecological conservation practices. The study draws upon ecocentrism theory, which posits that human-nature relationships are not purely utilitarian but spiritual and moral, viewing nature as a living entity worthy of respect and preservation (Naess, 1989). In Mentawai society, Arat Sabulungan embodies this ecocentric perspective, considering nature spirits as guardians of ecological balance, upheld through rituals and environmental ethics. Supported by spiritual ecology, this research suggests that both traditional and modern religions can inspire environmentally responsible behaviour (Taylor, 2001). The study concludes that Mentawai religiosity offers a robust spiritual framework for ecological conservation, proposing that integrating these values into contemporary policy could significantly enhance conservation efforts in Mentawai while also serving as a model for other Indigenous communities.

Method

To reach the research area, one must take a 4 hours from Muaro Padang Port in Padang City to Tuapejat Port and then 2 hours to Muara Siberut and then 2 hours to Matotonan Village by boat. This research employs an ethnographic qualitative approach, focusing on two strategic locations in the Mentawai Islands: Siberut Island and Sipora Island. These sites were selected to provide insight into the differing dynamics of religiosity and environmental conservation practices between two islands with distinct cultural and social characteristics. On Siberut Island, the community maintains robust ancestral traditions. On the other hand, on Sipora Island, modernity and the influence of world religions are more prevalent. The choice of these two islands facilitates an exploration of variations in how indigenous communities preserve traditional beliefs and adapt to external influences within ecological conservation. Primary data for this study was gathered from five selected strategic villages: Matotonan in South Siberut; Tuapejat, Sipora Jaya, Goisooinan in North Sipora, and Saureinu in South Sipora.

The data collection was conducted in June-July 2024. Participatory observation and in-depth interviews were administered to gain better access than by simply using quantitative techniques.

Data collection involved participatory observation, enabling involvement in daily life to directly observe community interactions with the environment and the performance of religious rituals. We conducted semistructured interviews (approximately an hour and a half for each person) with various key informants, including traditional leaders, religious figures, community elders, and environmental practitioners, who offered perspectives on the cosmology of religiosity and ecological conservation practices. Secondary data from academic publications, government reports, and relevant media archives complemented the primary data.

Data analysis started by listening to the recordings and then transcribing them in a reasonable time. The processing of the interview data began with transcribing and identifying emergent topics and themes in those transcriptions, which in turn were analyzed to create a system for effective data coding (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The results for both the observation and in-depth interviews were recorded digitally. Transcripts were made and distributed evenly to the researchers. Analyze the data that has been done using the recommended stages (Creswell, 2014). First, process and prepare data analysis involving interview, scanning materials, typing, sorting, compiling field data into different types based on the sources of information obtained. Second, read all the data to build a general understanding of the information obtained and reflect on its overall meaning. This general understanding and meaning includes what general ideas are contained in the informant's words; what is the impression of the depth, credibility, and narration of information (by writing down special notes or general ideas about the data obtained). Third, start coding all the data obtained. Fourth, apply the coding process to describe the setting (domain, location), people, categories and themes to be analyzed. Fifth, Presented in the form of a qualitative report (narrative). Sixth, making interpretations or giving meaning to data. Interpretation can be in the form of a comparison between research results and information from literature or theory. In addition, interpretation can also be in the form of new questions from data and analysis.

Result

The researcher summarized the entire series of observations and interviews with research participants. After going through the categorization process, this research got 3 emerging themes which are religiosity-based environmental preservation practices in Mentawai, Adaptation of Religiosity in Mentawai and its Impact on Environmental Preservation, External Pressure on Environmental Preservation in Mentawai. These research themes will be discussed in Tabel 1.

Tabel 1. Emergent Theme The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

Theme	Behavior Manifestations	Results
1. Religiosity-based environmental conservation practices in Mentawai	There are 11 Tradisional Rituals of The Mentawai People	1. <i>Forest Clearance</i> (Seek permission from the forest guardian spirits so that land clearing does not disturb the balance of the forest) 2. <i>Tree Felling</i> (<i>Tree Felling</i> Asking the tree spirit for permission to avoid nature's wrath) 3. <i>Sikerei Medicine</i> (Exorcise evil spirits that cause illness and summon the souls of the sick to find out the cause of their illness) 4. <i>Before the Hunt</i> (Honouring animal guardian spirits to succeed in hunting and avoid bad luck or illness) 5. <i>Magri Simaeruk</i> (Purify the uma and its inhabitants) 6. <i>Magri Sikatai</i> (Drive away evil spirits from the uma and protect its inhabitants) 7. <i>Pasibitbit Uma</i> (traditional house) (Exorcising evil spirits from within the <i>uma</i>) 8. <i>Lajo Simagre</i> (Summoning spirits) 9. <i>Lia Powder</i> (A form of honouring the ancestral spirits who guard, and sanctify the <i>uma</i>) 10. <i>Gaut and Kekei in Pig Farming</i> (Ask for protection to prevent the pig farming process from failing) 11. <i>Sapo Saina'</i> (A place where pig farmers stay to bond with their pigs)
2. Adaptation of Religiosity	The ancestral religion of the Mentawai people, Arat	The adaptation of Arat Sabulungan values alongside the teachings of world religions in

in Mentawai and Its Impact on Environmental Preservation	Sabulungan, incorporates practices that reflect a commitment to environmental conservation, which, upon closer examination, share similarities with teachings in world religions.	Mentawai has created a unique blend within the community, especially regarding their perspective on nature. The older generation of Mentawai people continues to uphold local wisdom and traditional environmental conservation practices, passed down through generations. For them, nature is the essence of life-sacred and imbued with spiritual significance. In contrast, the younger generation, who are more exposed to the teachings of world religions through modern education and experience, are increasingly influenced by environmental perspectives rooted in these global religious values. Nevertheless, many among the younger generation still strive to harmonise these perspectives with ancestral principles that emphasise the balance of nature. This generational shift illustrates how Mentawai religiosity has adapted to modern challenges while retaining its cultural roots.
3. External Pressure on Environmental Conservation in Mentawai.	a. Pressure from Deforestation and Forest Exploitation, b. The impact of modernization and economic change. c. Weakening of traditional conservation systems	Forest exploitation by large companies and local actors has caused massive deforestation, resulting in disrupted ecosystems including the erosion of biodiversity and natural resources that support the lives of indigenous peoples. Apart from that, the pressure of modernization, the modern economic system and government policies that do not support local values also have an impact on the rate of erosion of traditional values. Economic and

		political pressures influence the level of difficulty for indigenous communities in maintaining Arat Sabulungan-based conservation practices. As is the decline in Sikerei's role as guardian of the relationship between humans and nature.
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Religiosity-based Environmental Conservation Practices in Mentawai

In the cosmology of the Mentawai people, the universe is divided into two interconnected realms: the visible natural world and the invisible spiritual world. The visible world comprises the tangible, physical environment that can be directly observed and experienced, including humans, plants, animals, and various landscapes such as rivers, mountains, seas, and rocks. In contrast, the invisible world is viewed as a spiritual domain inhabited by numerous spirit entities. According to Mentawai beliefs, these spirits can inhabit in diverse locations—from the depths of the earth to the sky—and are present in oceans, rivers, forests, hills, and natural objects like large stones or ancient trees. Different spirits are believed to build specific elements within this spiritual realm, such as the sky (*Taikamanua*), the sea (*Taikabagatkoat*), the land or forest (*Taikaleleu*), and the underworld (*Taikapolok*).

The Mentawai people perceive the natural and spiritual worlds as intrinsically connected. For example, they believe in visible and invisible trees, perceptible and tangible and beyond ordinary human perception. While the spiritual world is inaccessible to human sight, it can be perceived by the *Sikerei*, or traditional healer, through a form of transcendental vision during rituals. This ability establishes the *Sikerei* as an essential mediator between the human and spiritual realms in Mentawai society.

In Mentawai's belief, every entity in the universe has an essence called *Simagere*. While often translated as "soul," *Simagere* has a more complex meaning. *Simagere* is believed to be the life force that allows humans, plants, and animals to move actively and grow. In addition to *Simagere*, there is another element called *Ketsat*, which is understood as the spirit inhabiting the bodies of living beings, distinguishing them from inanimate objects. Upon death, both *Simagere* and *Ketsat* are believed to have returned to the spiritual realm, where they get new designations: *Ukkui* or *Kalimeu*, referring to the deceased's spirit. For the Mentawai, death is not the end but

rather an entry into the invisible spiritual realm, reinforcing the view that the human spirit is immortal, even though the physical body no longer exists.

Besides believing in human spirits and other invisible spirits in the spirit realm, the Mentawai people also recognise a supernatural entity called *Ulaumanua*, derived from the words *Ulau* (outside or light) and *Manua* (sky), perceived as a powerful light. Its influence is believed to transcend the boundaries of the universe. Although it does not possess a specific personality, *Ulaumanua* is believed to have power over everything in both the spiritual and physical realms. Its influence in the daily lives of the Mentawai people is tangible, though difficult to articulate. The Mentawai believe that *Ulaumanua* sustains all life on earth, and even natural death is considered to be the will of *Ulaumanua*. It is seen as the only entity capable of maintaining or ending the lives of humans, animals, and plants. In essence, *Ulaumanua* serves as the ultimate caretaker of all beings in both the spiritual and physical realms.

The Mentawai people's belief in the existence of spirits has fostered a deep respect for nature. They see themselves as an integral part of the environment, fostering a profound spiritual connection with nature that influences their treatment of it. Decisions on how to care for nature are grounded in their spiritual beliefs. By combining environmental knowledge, sustainable practices like forest conservation, and spiritual values, the Mentawai people demonstrate a sustainable approach to life. They not only protect the ecology in which they live but also preserve their cultural heritage. This lifestyle, which constantly respects and adapts to nature, ensures that the Mentawai people's way of life remains sustainable and can be passed down to future generations (Tulius & Burman-Hall, 2022). This view reflects how the Mentawai respect and care for the environment in a way that integrates all aspects of life, from spirituality to daily practices (Munandar et al., 2022). The Mentawai perspective aligns closely with the concept of ecocentrism.

The lives of the Mentawai people are closely tied to nature, which is evident in their continued use of wood to construct homes. Additionally, they cultivate land to grow sago, durian, and other crops to meet their daily needs. The Mentawai utilise natural resources wisely and sustainably, preserving the forest. One traditional leader in Siberut explains:

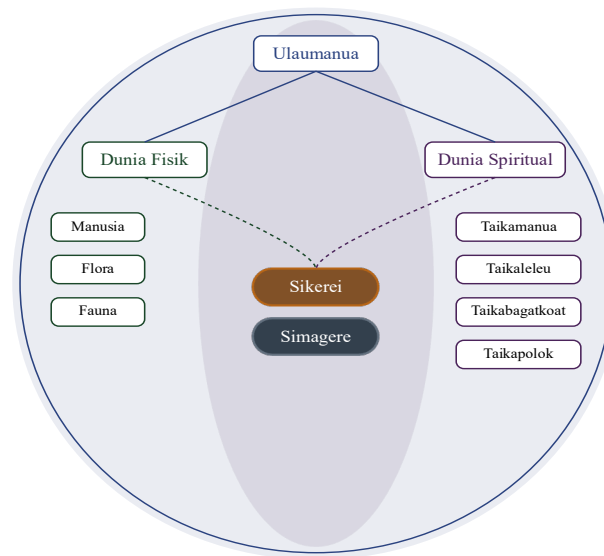
"If there is an open field, we cultivate it carefully. Any trees or vegetation we clear are replaced by planting durian, rambutan, lakcek, or other crops. We ensure the removed trees are replenished with new plants such as rambutan, lakcek, durian, kerambi, sangkole, or banana. In this way, we make sure that any cleared vegetation is renewed. If we don't replant, the area will be overtaken by grass, and the land will not thrive as we intend. So, in a way, we protect nature by preparing and maintaining the land. When planning to plant

something, we ensure the area is cleared and cared for." (Participant Primer 1, Matotonan, Siberut)

Based on data obtained through an interview with a *sikerei* in Siberut, he explained how the community wisely manages land and utilizes natural resources, such as wood, solely for essential purposes like building houses. These findings demonstrate that local values are passed down through generations to maintain ecological balance. The Mentawai people have strict regulations against logging activities, restricting natural resources, such as wood, solely for essential purposes like building houses or making canoes. They are committed to replanting efforts to maintain ecological balance, ensuring that natural resources can be utilised sustainably for future generations. Forest preservation, as a vital source of life for the Mentawai people, also involves the role of the *Sikerei*, who serve as crucial guardians of nature.

In Mentawai culture, human responsibility towards nature is closely tied to traditional rituals. These rituals, led by the *Sikerei*, express the Mentawai people's gratitude toward nature and guide the responsible use of resources, strictly adhering to customary rules. The following chart illustrates the structure of the Mentawai community in performing nature conservation rituals.

Figure 1. Structure of Mentawai Indigenous People in Environmental Conservation Rituals



Based on Figure 1, the Mentawai people believe that *Ulaumanua* holds the highest authority over the spiritual and physical realms. In the spiritual realm, it is believed that certain spirits govern various domains: *Taikamanua*, the ruling spirit of the sky; *Taikababagatkoat*, the spirit of the sea; *Taikaleleu*, the spirit of the land and forest; and *Taikapolok*, the spirit of the underworld. These spirits are thought to endow each element in nature—such as oceans, rivers,

forests, and hills-with souls known as *Simagere* and *Ketsat*. For the Mentawai people, preserving and maintaining ecosystem balance are deeply connected to traditional rituals led by the *Sikerei*. These rituals, integral to environmental conservation practices within the Mentawai community, honour and sustain the harmony between humans and nature.

The data was obtained through direct interviews the Mentawai people, who explained various traditional rituals they practice in their daily lives. In the interview, the Mentawai people described the purpose and timing of each ritual, which is closely related to their respect for nature and the guardian spirits they believe in. These findings provide an in-depth understanding of how the Mentawai people maintain the balance of nature and their spirituality through these rituals. Each ritual-whether related to medicine, land use, plant cultivation, or animal husbandry-serves a spiritual purpose and functions as a form of environmental conservation. By respecting ancestral spirits, making offerings, and adhering to specific rules, these practices aim to preserve nature.

The Mentawai people regard nature as an entity that deserves respect. Every tree, animal, and natural element is believed to have its spirit or guardian. This belief, which views nature not merely as a resource but also as a living entity, fosters a respectful attitude evident in traditional rituals designed to maintain ecological balance. In this observations, it is clear how every tree, animal. and natural element is believed to have its spirit or guardian, and this belief is reflected in various traditional rituals they perform. These rituals are designed to maintain ecological balance and demonstrate the close spiritual connection between the Mentawai people and their surrounding nature. According to Mentawai Indigenous beliefs, actions that deviate from these spiritual values can lead to disturbances in human life, manifesting as diseases or natural disasters (Islami et al., 2023; Wahyuni, 2021).

Traditional rituals in Mentawai society also serve as a form of social control, effectively curbing the overexploitation of natural resources. By requiring rituals before engaging in activities that impact nature, the community is reminded to use resources conservatively and sustainably, aligning consumption with needs. In the observation, it was evident that the rituals required before engaging in activities that impact the environment serve as a reminder for the community to use natural resources conservatively and sustainably. This culturally embedded approach to conservation integrates spiritual traditions as a guiding framework for interacting with the environment (Niman et al., 2023; Wahyuni et al., 2023). Such practices help maintain harmony between nature and humanity, as the *Sikerei* must sanction any activity involving nature.

The *Sikerei*, as ritual leaders, are central to sustaining a balanced relationship between humans and nature. They are seen as figures who can communicate with spirits and interpret natural conditions, ensuring that all interactions with the environment adhere to the ethical and customary procedures passed down through generations. Thus, the *Sikerei* are responsible for the community's spiritual well-being and play a critical role in Mentawai environmental conservation (Agung W. et al., 2014).

These practices demonstrate how the traditional religious system, such as Arat Sabulungan, has guided the Mentawai people in environmental conservation. This finding underscores the value of culturally based approaches in modern conservation strategies, as these spiritual values actively prevent exploitation that would harm ecosystems. The sustainability concept in Mentawai culture highlights that local wisdom can offer effective solutions for preserving nature.

Adaptation of Religiosity in Mentawai and Its Impact on Environmental Preservation

The Mentawai people, residing on the western islands of Sumatra, Indonesia, have long been subjects of anthropological interest due to their distinctive culture and belief system. Their traditional belief system, Arat Sabulungan, has been their spiritual and cultural foundation for centuries (Wahyuni, 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2024). Interpretations of Sabulungan vary: some scholars, like Sihombing (1979) and Rudito (1993, 1999), interpret Sabulungan as a belief system centred on the power of leaves as mediators between humans and supernatural beings. Tulus (2013) offers an alternative view, suggesting that Sabulungan refers to a collective of spirits that receive special offerings or *buluat*. Field observations in Matotonan village lean towards Tulus's interpretation, where Sabulungan is associated with formidable spirits.

With the arrival of external religions, known locally as *sasareu*, such as Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism, Arat Sabulungan began to undergo significant changes (Delfi, 2013; Glossanto, 2019; Markus, 2016). The government's "Meeting of the Three Religions" in 1954 intensified this transformation, as the state urged the Mentawai people to adopt Islam or Christianity. This state-led effort to modernise and replace Arat Sabulungan illustrates how the authorities perceived it as an inappropriate faith (Delfi, 2013).

The state's influence created unique social dynamics within the Mentawai community. Nature, which has always held a central role in Mentawai spirituality, now contends with the influence of modernisation and world religions (Santosa, 2019). Today are faced with the

challenges of modernisation and the influence of world religions. In addition to changes in their way of thinking and religious practice, it also affects how they interact with the environment.

Since the early 20th century, the Mentawai people have undergone a notable religious transformation. Islam is thought to have first arrived in the 18th century through traders from West Sumatra (Delfi, 2012; Nelmaya & Deswalantri, 2021a), while Christianity was introduced in 1901 by German missionaries under Dutch colonial rule (Tulius, 2013), and Catholicism arrived in 1954 (Rukiyanto, 2019).

The exact date of Islam's arrival in Mentawai remains uncertain, with various theories. However, Islam spread in Mentawai began through interactions with fringe traders from West Sumatra who bartered with the Mentawai people, exchanging goods such as rattan and palm (Nelmaya & Deswalantri, 2021b). Islam is thought to have entered Mentawai as early as the 18th century, primarily through the influence of the Minangkabau people, who played a significant role in its spread (Delfi, 2012). Through Minangkabau scholars (Islamic teachers), Islamic teachings were introduced to the Mentawai community. This group, associated with Islamic missionaries, presented religious principles in an accessible way, making Islam appealing to the Mentawai people. The spread of Islam was also facilitated through marriage alliances and welfare support extended to the Mentawai (Wirman et al., 2021).

Mentawai people who were successfully persuaded to convert to Islam were also given scholarships to study Islam in the Outer Land, such as in Padang Panjang, Pariaman, Bukittinggi and Padang. After completing their studies and gaining knowledge of Islam, they were sent back to Mentawai villages to teach the knowledge they had gained in West Sumatra to Mentawai people who had not or had just converted to Islam (Delfi, 2012).

The da'i (Islamic preachers) approach toward the *Sikerei* has been notably gentle, even allowing for the continuation of certain Arat Sabulungan practices. The da'i recognise the strategic importance of the *Sikerei* as guardians of the socio-cultural balance within Mentawai society. While some *Sikerei* have converted to Islam, they may continue to perform rituals that do not align with Islamic law. The da'i generally tolerate and respect the *Sikerei*'s bicultural approach—practising Islam while still engaging in Arat Sabulungan rituals. For the da'i, the *Sikerei* play a significant role in maintaining the stability of their religious preaching (*da'wah*), focusing primarily on educating the younger generation rather than forcing a choice between religions, which could prove counterproductive (Wirman et al., 2021).

Despite some Mentawai people adhering to Islam, many still hold onto beliefs in spirits, and the practice of Arat Sabulungan persists. For example, illness is often attributed to spiritual causes, and even when medical help is sought from the community health centre, it is not unusual for the *Sikerei* to assist in healing. Patients may take medicine from a village midwife while participating in healing rituals led by the *Sikerei*. These rituals often include elements that conflict with Islamic law, such as offerings of pork or other animals, like primates, which are readily available and sometimes recommended by the *Sikerei* for their healing properties (Wirman et al., 2021).

Historical records indicate that the first Christian encounter in the Mentawai region occurred in 1901 through German missionaries sent by the Dutch colonial government as part of the Zending effort. Traders and sailors frequently stopped in Sikakap, and Sipora introduced the missionaries to the region (Tulius, 2013). Two pastors, August Lett and A. Kramer, became the primary representatives of the Protestant mission among the Mentawai people, centring their work on North Pagai Island (Sikakap) until 1914. Their mission focuses on providing medical care, education, and training in basic carpentry skills (Glossanto, 2019; Zalman, 2018).

The entry of Catholicism into the Mentawai area came later compared to Islam and Protestant Christianity. 1953 Father Aurelio Canizzaro visited the Mentawai Islands, specifically South Siberut, to assess the feasibility of spreading Catholic teachings in the region. Acting on a mandate from Monsignor De Martino of the Diocese of Padang, Father Canizzaro visited several locations, including Siberut Island, Sikabalan, Sikakap, and Sipora. He returned to Siberut on December 18, 1954, with Father Angelo Calvi, and together, they established the first Catholic Church on Christmas of that year, marking the beginning of Catholicism in the Mentawai.

The Catholic Church initiated its mission in Mentawai by providing social services in education and health. In addition, the Church pursued inculturation, aiming to harmonise Catholic teachings with Mentawai traditions. Inculturation refers to the Church's effort to present the message of the Gospel in a way that aligns with the cultural expressions of the local community (Rukiyanto, 2019). This practice is not new to the Catholic Church; in the 1985 encyclical letter by Pope John Paul II, titled "*The Gospel and Culture*", inculturation was described as a reciprocal process wherein the Gospel is incarnated into Indigenous cultures and local cultural elements are integrated into the Church's life (II, 1985).

The Catholic Church's inculturation efforts introduced a new approach that contrasted with the restrictions following the ban on Arat Sabulungan in Mentawai. By recognising and appreciating Mentawai customs and traditions, the Church fostered mutual understanding and provided space for the continued expression of Mentawai culture. Consequently, the Mentawai people, particularly those on Siberut Island, became more receptive to and engaged with Catholicism.

The adaptation of Arat Sabulungan values alongside the teachings of world religions in Mentawai has created a unique blend within the community, especially regarding their perspective on nature. The older generation of Mentawai people continues to uphold local wisdom and traditional environmental conservation practices, passed down through generations. For them, nature is the essence of life—sacred and imbued with spiritual significance. In contrast, the younger generation, who are more exposed to the teachings of world religions through modern education and experience, are increasingly influenced by environmental perspectives rooted in these global religious values. Nevertheless, many among the younger generation still strive to harmonise these perspectives with ancestral principles that emphasise the balance of nature. This generational shift illustrates how Mentawai religiosity has adapted to modern challenges while retaining its cultural roots.

The ancestral religion of the Mentawai people, Arat Sabulungan, incorporates practices that reflect a commitment to environmental conservation, which, upon closer examination, share similarities with teachings in world religions. In Matotonan Village, one informant noted that the concept of *Ulaumanua* in ancestral beliefs closely resembles the concept of God in world religions, such as Allah. The village head of Matotonan explained:

"Yes, Ulaumanua is almost the same as God, Allah. Mentawai people believe there is a god, but the term isn't quite the same. For us, it's Ulaumanua, the ruler of the sky. In Indonesian, it means the true owner. It is the origin of nature, created by that owner. It's the same. Like in Islam, there is Allah; in Christianity, there is God. But they are all one, including Ulaumanua Sabulungan." (Participant Primer 2, Matotonan, Siberut)

In ancestral religious rituals such as *Punen*, various prohibitions are observed to show respect for nature, aligning with similar concepts in major religions, where certain restrictions guide people to maintain personal purity and honour the sanctity of creation. During *Punen*, one informant explained:

"If we wear beads made from leaves, we cannot sleep with our wives, we cannot go fishing, we cannot eat eels, we cannot sleep improperly, and we cannot gossip until the

flowers used in the ritual have withered, or until a Pulajuk ceremony, or closing ceremony, has been held." (Participant Primer 3, Matotonan, Siberut)

These prohibitions, such as abstaining from conjugal relations, gossip, and certain activities until the ritual flowers have wilted, represent a form of respect for the natural environment. This connection between conservation values in ancestral beliefs and the teachings of world religions emphasises simplicity, environmental stewardship, and the treatment of nature as a sacred trust that must be preserved.

In Mentawai society, the differences between older and younger generations regarding religious practices and environmental conservation have become increasingly apparent. The younger generation is more strongly influenced by world religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam. In comparison, the older generation continues to uphold local wisdom that is often rooted in customs and values related to nature conservation. This adaptation of religiosity in Mentawai demonstrates a blend of ancestral religious values with the teachings of world religions in environmental conservation. It underscores the importance of considering religious diversity in conservation strategies, as both world religions and local beliefs play essential roles in fostering behaviours that support ecosystem preservation.

External Pressure on Environmental Conservation in Mentawai

In the last two decades, external pressures on nature conservation in the Mentawai Islands have intensified, leading to significant damage to the ecosystem. Factors such as deforestation, land-use change, and modernisation have disrupted the ecological balance that Indigenous Mentawai communities have sustained for centuries (Supriatna et al., 2017). Forest exploitation in Mentawai has a long history, dating back to the colonial era and extending through the New Order period. Exploitation efforts began in the 18th century during the time of Raffles (Coronese, 1986; Marsden, 2008) and continued during the Dutch colonial period in the early 20th century (Hansen in Persoon, 1997). A new phase in Mentawai's forest exploitation began post-independence. In 1952, the first commercial attempt was made by Minangkabau migrant entrepreneurs in Saliguma; however, it failed due to technical and social challenges. Similar efforts by CV Mentawai and PT Bumi Putra in 1957 faced the same outcome (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012). A significant turning point occurred when the government dispatched survey teams of forestry experts, Atmosoedarjo (1969, 1970) and Subagio (1972, 1973), to provide scientific justification for forest management. Although the surveys highlighted the unsustainability of long-term logging, recommendations for

limited exploitation were still made. Intensive exploitation commenced in the early 1970s with concessions granted to four major companies: PT Cirebon Agung (70,000 ha), PT Jaya Sumber Indah (70,000 ha), PT CPPS/Kayu Sumber (35,000 ha), and PT Djayanti Group/Inkappa (110,000 ha). Data shows a sharp increase in logging volume from 115,239 m³ in 1974/75 to 178,194 m³ in the following two years before a slight decline to 151,650 m³ in 1977/78 (WWF, 1980). However, there remains a significant discrepancy between official data and actual estimates; Mitchell (1982) recorded 57,700 ha of forest being clear-cut in 1982, while Munawar (2004) estimated total timber loss at 1.7 million m³ between 1972 and 1993 (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012)

The dynamics of forest management in Mentawai underwent significant changes after 1993, marked by the issuance of a Presidential Decree in Indonesia that halted all logging concessions. However, this moratorium proved to be temporary. In 2001, the government reopened forest exploitation by granting permits to two major companies, PT KAM and PT Salaki Summa Sejahtera (SSS), with a combined concession area of 100,000 hectares. Following the implementation of regional autonomy after the reformation, forest governance in Mentawai took on new dimensions. This shift led to the emergence of new actors in forest exploitation, as local authorities, including the regent, issued timber utilisation permits to local cooperatives. Empirical data reveals an alarming intensity of exploitation. Based on data compiled from various sources (YCM, 1996; Suhandi and Anggraini, 2002; BPSD Mentawai Islands, 2006), the volume of timber removed from Siberut Island, Mentawai, by the last quarter of 2006 had reached approximately 3 million m³. This figure underscores that, despite the moratorium, exploitation rates have accelerated to meet national and global market demands (Darmanto & Setyowati, 2012)

Pressure from external parties, particularly companies exploiting Mentawai forests, has significantly undermined the conservation efforts of the indigenous Mentawai people. Although the Mentawai have strong conservation values, external economic and political forces hinder their ability to protect their forests. The indigenous communities lack sufficient power and receive inadequate support from authorities to resist such exploitation. This situation highlights the need for more responsive policies that respect local wisdom and protect ecosystems in areas vulnerable to commercial exploitation. In the observations, it was evident that although the Mentawai people have strong conservation values, pressure from external parties, such as companies exploiting their forests, has hindered their these conservation efforts, highlighting the need for policies that are responsive to local wisdom and ecosystem protection.

Discussion

This study reveals the complexity of interactions between environmental conservation practices, religion, and contemporary challenges in Mentawai society. The first finding indicates that the Mentawai community's conservation practices are deeply embedded in a belief system that fosters a profound respect and spiritual awareness toward nature. It is evident in various customary rituals, which function not only as spiritual practices but also as effective mechanisms for environmental preservation. These rituals encompass multiple aspects of life, including traditional medicine, land and plant use, and animal husbandry, all rooted in the belief that every element of nature has a spirit or guardian deserving respect. This belief system establishes an ethical framework that shapes the Mentawai people's interactions with their natural environment.

The second finding highlights transformative dynamics in conservation practices resulting from encounters between traditional ancestral values and world religions. The study shows notable generational differences in views and practices of environmental conservation. The older generation tends to uphold conservation practices based on local wisdom that reveres nature as sacred. Meanwhile, the younger generation, influenced by modern education and the values of world religions, adopts a more synthetic perspective. Interestingly, rather than leading to conflict, this interaction has fostered a unique cultural adaptation, where traditional and modern values interact dynamically, shaping contemporary conservation practices.

The third finding identifies a critical gap between the robust local wisdom-based conservation system and the external pressures the Mentawai people face. Despite having a sustainable and well-established environmental management system, the Mentawai face serious threats from commercial exploitation by large corporations. Limited political and economic power and insufficient support from authorities create an imbalance in their conservation efforts. These findings underscore the urgent need for a policy framework that not only acknowledges the value of local wisdom but also provides concrete protections for the rights of Indigenous peoples in managing their environment.

This study comprehensively explains the intricate relationship between conservation practices, belief systems, and contemporary challenges in Mentawai society. The traditional Mentawai belief that views nature as sacred aligns with Bookchin (1982) concept of a holistic social ecology approach. Ritual practices integrating spirituality with environmental preservation

demonstrate that the Mentawai people had developed a sustainable environmental management system long before modern ecological discourse, following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki events.

In a global context, the Mentawai belief system parallels the Frankfurt School's critique—particularly Marcuse (1964) argument—against capitalism's instrumentalist view that treats nature merely as a resource for exploitation. Contrary to this capitalistic paradigm, Mentawai society operates within an ethical framework that prioritises respect and sustainability in human-nature interactions. However, as Vasan (2018) observes, the global economic system's focus on unlimited growth presents a significant threat to the sustainability of these traditional practices.

The transformation of values within Mentawai society, especially among the younger generation, reflects what Berkes (2012) describes as adapting traditional ecological knowledge to modernity. The unique synthesis of traditional and modern values demonstrates the resilience of local knowledge systems in the face of global change. Yet, as Robbins (2012) argues, the dilemma between economic development and environmental conservation remains a significant challenge.

The Mentawai case illustrates the urgency of what Sachs (2015) describes as the need for sustainable technological approaches. However, the Mentawai experience highlights that solutions must go beyond technology to integrate traditional knowledge into modern conservation strategies. It aligns with Bookchin (1982) argument for decentralisation in natural resource management and the involvement of local communities in decision-making.

Based on the findings and analysis, several implications and action plans are suggested to preserve the environment and local wisdom. Regarding policy development, it is essential to create policies that integrate local wisdom with modern legal frameworks, strengthen indigenous rights in natural resource management, and establish protections for traditional conservation practices. Community capacity-building can be achieved through empowerment programs that support intergenerational knowledge transfer, dialogue platforms uniting traditional and modern stakeholders, and economic development initiatives based on conservation practices. At a systemic level, alternative economic models should be developed to value traditional conservation practices, integrate traditional ecological knowledge into formal education, and form strategic alliances between indigenous communities and the global environmental movement. This entire action plan should be implemented through a participatory approach involving all stakeholders, emphasising the central role of Indigenous peoples as primary custodians of time-tested ecological knowledge.

Conclusion

This study presents three key findings related to the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai community. Firstly, their conservation practices are deeply rooted in a belief system that integrates customary rituals with mechanisms for environmental preservation. Secondly, a transformative dynamic is observed, whereby the younger generation successfully combines traditional values of ancestral religion with teachings from world religions and modern perspectives. Thirdly, a gap is identified between the local wisdom-based conservation system and the pressures exerted by the global political economy.

These findings have significant implications for developing more effective and sustainable conservation policies. The study suggests that conservation strategies should incorporate religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying exclusively on science and technology. Additionally, this study contributes to academic discourse on the role of religiosity and local knowledge in environmental conservation, offering new perspectives on the interplay between traditional beliefs, world religions, and nature conservation.

Future research should focus on practical and applicable aspects. A deeper examination of concrete mechanisms for integrating Indigenous cosmological values into modern conservation policy frameworks is essential. Further exploration of the adaptability of local knowledge-based conservation models to other indigenous contexts in Indonesia is needed, considering each community's unique socio-cultural characteristics. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to track changes in belief systems over time and their long-term impact on conservation practices.

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The Religious Cosmology of Indigenous Communities for Maintaining Ecological Balance in the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how the belief systems of indigenous peoples influence everyday conservation practices and examine how these beliefs can be integrated into modern conservation policies. This study employed an ethnographic qualitative approach. Data collection involved participatory observation, enabling involvement in daily life to directly observe community interactions with the environment and the performance of religious rituals. In-depth interviews were administered semistructured interviews with various key informants, including traditional leaders, religious figures, community elders, and environmental practitioners. Secondary sources from academic publications, government reports, and media archives relevant to the research topic. Interpretative analysis was conducted within cultural and historical contexts to gain a deeper understanding of how religiosity shapes the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai people. This study presents three key findings related to the environmental conservation practices of the Mentawai community. Their conservation practices are deeply rooted in a belief system. Transformative dynamics are observed, whereby the younger generation successfully combines traditional values of ancestral religion with teachings from world religions and modern perspectives. A gap is identified between the local wisdom-based conservation system and the pressures exerted by the global political economy. The study provides new insights into the crucial role of local religiosity in environmental conservation and highlights the potential for integrating traditional and modern beliefs in nature conservation efforts. The study suggests that environmental conservation strategies should integrate local communities' religious values and indigenous knowledge rather than relying solely on scientific and technological approaches.

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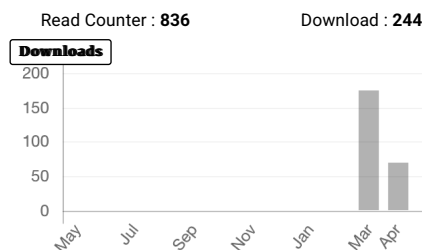
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