



Socio-Economic History of the Mentawai Islands in West Sumatra Province

**Muhammad Nur Bagindo^{1*}, Maizufri Ilyas Chaniago¹,
Herwandi Herwandi¹, Syafrizal Sirin Saga¹, Hanafi Hussin²**
*Corresponding Author

¹ Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Andalas, Limau Manis, Padang 25163, Indonesia

² Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia

mhdnur@hum.unand.ac.id, maizufri@hum.unand.ac.id, herwandi@hum.unand.ac.id, syafrizal@hum.unand.ac.id, hanafih@um.edu.my
Tel. *: +62082289751501

Abstract

This study describes the socio-economic history of the population in the Mentawai Islands Regency, West Sumatra, Indonesia. Residents of the area engage in different socio-economic activities. The purpose of this study is to explain the socio-economic life of the majority in agriculture. The research methods used are historical methods, for example, heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Mentawai Island residents have been active in the world of agriculture and plantations since the 16th century. At the time when Dutch traders arrived there, the Mentawai Islands were already in contact with ethnic groups who came from the west coast of Sumatra and the surrounding islands.

Keywords : Archipelago; Economy; Island; Social

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2023. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8iS116.5222>

1.0 Introduction

The Mentawai Islands Regency consists of 52 islands, so the regency area is lined up with large and small islands. Only four islands are dominantly populated, namely Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai. The sea waters of the Mentawai Islands are part of the Indian Ocean. It is as if the Indian Ocean is sprinkled with large and small islands on the west coast of West Sumatra. The majority of the Mentawai Islands is sea water, and only a small part is land. The Mentawai Islands frequently experience social conflicts due to a variety of factors, such as the issue with logging and forestry, economic inequality, socio-cultural diversity, the spread of religion, the mixing of ethnic groups, and other social phenomena after regional autonomy. There are even some entrepreneurs who take advantage without developing the Mentawai Islands. Meanwhile, in accordance with the progress of reform and regional autonomy, there have been changes in various aspects of life in the Mentawai Islands, but the movement is very slow, the construction of land roads is minimal, the cost of sea transportation is expensive, the sea transportation fleet is still rare, economic resources are not evenly distributed, and others. The development of the Mentawai Islands is also progressing slowly, both physically and mentally, because of its geographical location, which is quite far from the capital city of West Sumatra Province.

The Mentawai Islands Regency has a fairly large area in the form of islands, so not all islands get an even portion of "development". To overcome this inequality, it was felt necessary to expand the Padang Pariaman district area by reducing the area of the Padang Pariaman main district. The Mentawai Islands became a new district called the Mentawai Islands Regency as a result of division. Narrators about the past of the Mentawai Islands have their own characteristics, namely prioritising animism, legends, myths, and the cult of a person or group. As it is known that one of the characteristics of a legend is that it is a story that seems to be believed, then it is considered history because they are still unfamiliar with understanding this history. In general, the people of the Mentawai Islands think that the history of the Mentawai Islands is not part of the history of Minangkabau or West Sumatra in the Land of the Edge because their perspective focuses on islands that are separate from mainland Sumatra. On the other hand, many observers and scientists say that the Mentawai Archipelago is an asset of West Sumatra with all its diversity, tradition, legends, and myths, so that very little can be used as a historical source. Although on the Minangkabau mainland, such a thing also happens (Mansoer, 1970).

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2023. The Authors. Published for AMER & cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v8iS116.5222>

The people of the Mentawai Islands, as an administrative part of the people of West Sumatra, know their history through an understanding of traditional speakers, which is still ongoing today. However, most of this history is still hidden, requiring the help of researchers so that the Mentawai Islands are truly clear in various aspects, or multi-dimensional. After 18 years of being a district on its own, the Mentawai Islands district should have been able to create welfare for its population, at least increasing the economic resources of the population. However, this hope has not yet been realised, and there are still a great number of remote villages that have not been touched by the government. Indeed, certain villages have never been visited by subdistrict officials. The historical method, comprising the phases of heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography, was utilised in this investigation. The field and library resources have been combined into a single entity. Internal and external criticisms were then levelled at it in order to compare the facts and construct a narrative.

2.0 Literature Review

It is critical to document the Mentawai Islands' socioeconomic history in writing so that future generations can benefit from it. All developmental movements—educational, economic, social, political, and security, among others—will continue to be guided by historical values during the Reformation era. In accordance with the promotion of regional autonomy in the lives of the nation and state, and linked with accurate and scientific ethnic history to become a regional asset, which eventually becomes a requirement in the context of efforts to improve the quality of human resources in the Mentawai Islands District. It is necessary to conduct a more in-depth historical study of the Mentawai Archipelago Regency on both islands and archipelagos. Studies on the history of the Mentawai Islands are limited to popular reports and publications (Muhammad Nur and Buchari Nurdin, 2002), with a few other writings. The works that discuss the Mentawai Islands' history are only cursory and focus on specific themes, such as Forest Tenure Rights (HPH), Timber Management Permits (IPK), post-disaster humanitarian assistance, and so on.

According to Stefano Coronese, Vornelis Vietersz was the first to discover Pagai Island in 1600 AD. Westerners have travelled from Bengkulu to North Pagai. They are more familiar with this island than the others. The situation and condition of Pagai Island have been studied by Portuguese, British, and Dutch ships. J. R. Logan assesses the nature of the Mentawai people, claiming that the native Mentawai people are kind and friendly, like to respect newcomers, and do not want to go to war. They adore jewellery and simple customary requirements. J.R. Logan's opinion was confirmed by Albert C. Kruyt. He describes the Mentawai people as cheerful and friendly. They quickly make friends with people who are newly arrived from other countries. In the 18th century, an Englishman named Christie got along so well with the Mentawai people that he became an idol for the people of North Pagai Island. The works in the form of reports from foreigners are very interesting to examine, so learning about Mentawai's history is a pleasure in and of itself. Starting with the Mentawai Islands' development issues, this is the impetus for further research on the Mentawai Islands Regency. It is necessary to limit the scope of space and time when writing the history of the Mentawai Islands. The scope of space as a spatial boundary covers the boundaries of the administrative area of the Mentawai Islands Regency, which consists of 10 districts. While the temporal boundaries are from the New Order Era to the Reformation Age, this limitation is based on the fact that since the New Order era, the Mentawai Islands have been part of the Padang Pariaman Regency. The Reformation Period was a very decisive period for the development of the Mentawai Islands Regency because the post-reformation milestones that occurred in 1998 resulted in the division of Padang Pariaman Regency and the Mentawai Islands breaking away from the main regency (Muhammad Nur, 2010).

Other issues discussed in this work are the geographical conditions of the Mentawai Islands Regency, the dynamics of society and government, both during the New Order and the Reform Order, and the problem of village development in the Mentawai Islands Regency. Each of these issues consists of very important sub-subjects, including Siberut Island, Sipora Island, North Pagai Island, and South Pagai Island, population, and mental recovery from fear of earthquakes and tsunamis. A regency is a territory or area with an independent government and a regent in charge. According to Sartono Kartodirdjo, regency history is included in local history. Events that occurred at the local or district level were very interesting because they revealed specific humanitarian issues. The local history approach is through a structural historical approach, such as agrarian structures, social structures, and other structures found in the Regency Area (Kartodirdjo, 1993). Local history is generally defined as the history of ordinary people and everyday life. Local history has a very important educational and social role. Aspects of local history include general history and thematic history. Thematic history is local history with special themes, including social history, political history, economic history, culture, inter-ethnic relations, struggles, local heroism, and maritime activities (Leirissa, 2006).

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Concept

The social history approach emphasises the aspirations of social groups in society, giving rise to the concepts of farmers, labourers, students, ulama, entrepreneurs, youth, traders, fishermen, ship captains, and the social structure that exists in society (Pranoto, 2010). According to Kuntowijoyo, social history is related to economic history, so that it becomes socio-economic history. Social history also discusses social stratification, social elites, rural communities, poverty, banditry, violence, crime, disasters, and so on (Kuntowijoyo, 1994). Meanwhile, economic history is a study that discusses humans' efforts to meet their living needs and spend them to obtain other needs. Economic studies of farmers and fishermen are part of socio-economic history (Kuntowijoyo, 1994). Social history includes social change, for example, in the history of farmers and agrarian history (Kartodirdjo, 1993).

3.2 Theory

According to Williams F. Ogburn, the scope of social change includes social change in cultural elements, one of which is socio-economic change, as well as political change (Ogburn, 1922). See also Soekanto (1982). Meanwhile, according to Selo Soemardjan, social change is any change in social institutions, including the values contained in community groups (Soemardjan, 1962). Several concepts of socio-economic change are very helpful in analysing the history and socio-economic changes of the Mentawai people and the Mentawai Islands Regency.

4.0 Findings

The Mentawai Islands are a group of islands stretching from northwest to southeast, between the Mentawai Strait and the Indian Ocean. The group of islands is located west of Sumatra and is included in the administrative boundaries of West Sumatra (Ministry of Information, Republic of Indonesia, 1954). These islands are scattered along the west coast of West Sumatra, which is part of the Indian Ocean. Since 1999, the Mentawai Islands have become a regency of their own, apart from the main district of Padang Pariaman. This district was formed based on the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 49 of 1999 and was inaugurated as the Mentawai Islands Regency on January 4, 2004 (BP2KSS Team (Badan Preparatory Expansion of Sawahlunto Sijunjung Regency), 2005: 43). The Mentawai Islands Regency has a land area of approximately 6,011.35 square kilometres, consisting of 10 districts, 43 villages, and 202 hamlets. The length of this archipelago reaches approximately 300 kilometres, with a coastline length for the entire island of about 758 kilometres, and it consists of 252 islands (Hatisama Hura, November 15, 2010). Among them are four major islands, namely Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai. The other islands are relatively small, totaling 248 islands. The islands have bays and headlands. The number of bays in the Mentawai Islands is 76 bays with a coastline of 758 kilometres. The sea area of the Mentawai Islands is around 78,018.43 square kilometres, so the total area is 84,029.43 square kilometres. The four main islands in the Mentawai Islands are Siberut Island, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai. The Nasau Archipelago, which consists of the final two islands, is located between them (Marsden, 1999). The other islands in the Mentawai Islands are relatively small and uninhabited. In general, these islands still grow tropical forests and have not been cultivated as agricultural land. Many of them are still primary forests that have never seen human logging or haven't seen it in a very long time. Rows of hills that stretch in the middle of the island also flow several small rivers, not wide and not deep. When viewed from the middle of the sea and looking at the islands, it is as if the island is uninhabited because you can only see the beaches and coconut trees without human settlements. Villages are usually located not at the mouth of a river but at a stream or headwaters in inland areas. Villages in the hinterland are also located around rivers, such as Muntei village in South Siberut (Christyawaty, 2007).

The inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands are not familiar with megalithic culture and wet rice farming. Their staple foods are sago and taro, with only a little rice (Danandjaya, 1999). The inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands are not familiar with the skills of making pottery, weaving, and chewing betel nuts like most Malay people (Marshall, 1966). The art that developed in the Mentawai Islands is the Mentawai Dance, which is called Turuk Laggai. This dance is a combination of several other ethnic dance movements, such as Nias dance, Batak dance, and so on. They are mostly Christians, especially Catholics and Protestants. Then they also entered the religion of Islam from mainland Sumatra, especially from Minangkabau. Islam spread at the beginning of the independence of the Republic of Indonesia (Abidin, 1997).

The inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands have been active in inter-island shipping since the 16th century. They have carried out shipping activities to the farthest islands, for example, Nias Island. In addition, they also catch fish along the river. Rivers are the main means of water traffic in the Mentawai Islands. One of the livelihoods of the Mentawai people is gardening. Each family has a piece of land in the forest to cultivate into a garden. Then the vacant land was planted with nutmeg, cloves, breadfruit, sugar palm, copra, bananas, taro, and so on (Van Buuren, 1937). Apart from gardening, the inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands are also fond of hunting and fishing (Borger, 1932). In general, men and women look for fish, shellfish, and crabs on the beach, swamps, and rivers. Apart from using fishing rods, spear nets, or traps, the Mentawai people also often catch fish by poisoning the water. They wait for the tide to rise so that the fish can enter the rivers and swamps. Then they made dams and narrow channels and put poison in the water, so that when the water receded, the fish would return to the sea through the poisoned channels.

Siberut Island was developed in 1970 after the Indonesian government guaranteed forest management permits on several islands. The forest on Siberut Island is designated as a National Park Forest. However, recommendations were still given to process forest wood (logging), covering an area of approximately 500 km². Siberut Island is the largest island in the Mentawai Islands. During 1969–2008, there were at least seven companies holding forest management rights (HPH) and six companies holding timber concessions (IPK) operating on the island of Siberut. The Indonesian government issued a permit for Forest Concession Rights (HPH) in the North Siberut Biosphere Reserve area to the Salaki Summa Sejahtera Company, with an area of around 49,000 hectares, around 4,000 of which are biosphere reserves.

Sipora Island is one of the larger islands in the Mentawai Islands. This island is south of Siberut Island. The capital of the Mentawai Islands Regency is in Sipora Utara District. Several sea ports on Sipora Island are Sioban and Tua Pejat. Sioban is the capital of the South Sipora District. Some of the villages on Sipora Island are Bosua and Berulou, on the west coast. There are hamlets all around the villages, such as Katiet, Nemnemleleu, and so on. Both passenger ships and boats still provide transportation to Sipora Pulusa. Sikakap is the district capital in the southern part of the Mentawai Islands. The city is located on North Pagai Island, facing South Pagai Island through a narrow bay that also serves as a pier. North Pagai Island consists of five villages, namely Saumanganya` village, Matobe village, Silabu village, Taikako village, and Betumonga village. On October 25, 2010, a tsunami struck North Pagai and South Pagai. The weather conditions did not allow sailing with a temple engine. Even though there is a land route belonging to the HPH

company, the volunteers who are struggling to distribute aid through the ferocious sea route were not informed. North Pagai's Mapinang and Mabulau Buggei hamlets were both affected by the tsunami.

5.0 Discussion

The village administration system in the Mentawai Islands has been in order since the 20th century, during the reign of the Dutch East Indies. During the Reformation period, the government system in the Mentawai Islands had become the Mentawai Islands Regency, with Tua Pejat as its capital and Sipora Island as its capital. The Archipelago Regency consists of 10 districts. However, the settlements are still arranged according to the traditional community settlement system. Residents' houses are built in rows along the beach facing the sea. Usually, beach villages are located at the mouths of rivers as well as facing the sea (Dobbin, 1992).

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The socio-economic condition of the Mentawai Islands population is generally agricultural. They grow nutmeg, cloves, bananas, taro, and other perennials. Herbs and garden produce are sold to intermediary traders and finally transported to Padang to be traded. Other activities are hunting and fishing. The social life of the population takes place naturally and preserves Mentawai cultural values. In addition, residents also raise pigs, which are consumed to fulfil the need for meat. The shaman figures known as sikerei play a role in the Mentawai Islands' way of life and culture. He plays the role of a person helping to cure illnesses, performing various magical techniques to ward off evil spirits, and curing illnesses. Sikerei performs the Turuk Laggai dance and leads animistic beliefs. The uniqueness of the Mentawai Islands is that they consist of various ethnic groups, each of which is relatively small. Each of these ethnic groups has its own language and its own group tradition. Community life is closely related to the Sikerei tradition, which is the spiritual leader.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a study of the socio-economic history of the Mentawai Islands in West Sumatra Province, Indonesia, and is the original work of the writing team.

Paper Contribution Related to Field of Study

This paper contributes to the fields of study of History, Geography, Sociology, and Anthropology

References

- Abidin, M. (1997). Islam Dalam Pelukan Muhtadin Mentawai, 30 Tahun Perjalanan Da'wah Illa'lah Mentawai Mencapai Cahaya Iman 1967-1997. Padang: Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, 157.
- Borger, F. (1932). "Wie ein Punen Bei den Mentaweiern". *Berichte der Rhenischen Missionsgesellschaft*.
- Buuren, J.E. V. (1937). "Huwelijks en Erfrecht op de Mentawai Eilanden". *Adat-rechbundelst*, XXXIX.
- Christyawaty, E. D. (2007). Sistem Peladangan Suku Bangsa Mentawai di Muntei Siberut Selatan. Padang: Depbudpar, BPSNT, 9.
- Danandjaya, J. D. (1999). "Penduduk Kepulauan Sebelah Barat Sumatra", dalam Koentjaraningrat, ed. Manusia dan Kebudayaan di Indonesia. Jakarta: Djambatan.
- Dobbin, C. (1992). Kebangkitan Islam Dalam Ekonomi Petani Yang Sedang Berubah, Sumatra Tengah 1784-1847. Jakarta: INIS, 55.
- Hura, H. (2010). "Kecamatan Sipora Selatan Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai". Sioban: **Laporan Kinerja Camat Sipora Selatan Tahun Anggaran 2010** pada 15 November 2010, 1.
- Kartodirdjo, S. (1993). Pendekatan Ilmu Sosial Dalam Metodologi Sejarah. Jakarta: Gramedia, 157.
- Kuntowijoyo (1994). Metodologi Sejarah. Yogyakarta: Tiara Wana Yogya, 33-35.
- Kruyt, A.C. A. "Der Metawaiers Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal, Land, en Volkenkunde", I, XII.
- Leirissa, R.Z., ed. (2006) Pedoman Penulisan Sejarah Lokal. Jakarta: Direktorat Nilai Sejarah, Direktorat Jenderal Sejarah dan Purbakala, Departemen Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 1-6.
- Mansoer, M.D. (1970). *Sedjarah Minangkabau*. Jakarta: Bhratara, 38.
- Marsden, W. (1999). Sejarah Sumatra. Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya, Terjemahan A.S. Nasution, and Mahyuddin Mendim.
- Marshall, W. (1966). Sind die Kulturen von Mentawai Altindonesisch. *Mitteilungen zur Kulturkunde*, I, 128-135.
- Palm, H. N. (1968). "The Culture of the Pagai Islands and Sipora, Mentawai". *Tropical Man*, I.

Penerangan, Kementerian (1954). Republik Indonesia, Sumatra Tengah. Bukittinggi: 1005.

Pranoto, S. W. (2010). Teori dan Metodo Sejarah. Yogyakarta : 72.

Rosenberg, H. von. "De Mentawai en Hunne Bewoners". "Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal, Land, en Volkenkunde", I.

Sihombing, H. (1979). *Mentawai*. Jakarta: Pradnja Paramita.

Tim BP2KSS (Badan Persiapan Pemekaran Kabupaten Sawahlunto Sijunjung). (2005). "Sejarah Berdirinya Kabupaten Dharmasraya". Sijunjung : *Naskah*, tidak diterbitkan, 43.