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Ecological ethics in the theological teaching of Arat Sabulungan in Mentawai Island Indonesia

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Abstract

Arat Sabulungan is the local belief or religion of Mentawai community. The fundamental teaching of this religion emphasizes the harmonious relationship between humans, spirits, and nature. This religion believes that every single space and place is inhabited by spirits. They are bound everywhere, so it is necessary to uphold good and ethical behavior in the surrounding nature. Corrupt acts against nature will disturb the peace of the spirits, which will in turn bring calamities and disruptions to life. Viewed as the dwelling place of the spirits, nature should be well kept through ecological ethics taught by *Arat Sabulungan*. In addition, since nature is the center of this religious teaching, corrupting it means corrupting the body and life itself. The global world today is experiencing an environmental crisis caused by the disappearance of ecological ethic due to exploitation of nature for the greatest benefit of materialism. Unlike most modern people, the Mentawai people treat nature as treating themselves to maintain harmony because nature is a dwelling place of the spirits. The principle is that harming nature is similar to harming yourself. In the present context, such theology has obvious implications for the preservation of the environment, nature, forest, so that global environmental crises can be minimized. Therefore, the theology of the Mentawai people in maintaining the forest should be appreciated and maintained.

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Introduction

The Mentawai is one of the tribes living in West Sumatera, Indonesia. The Mentawai tribe practices a patrilineal descent system with several nuclear familes living in a single house. The traditional house of the Mentawai people, *uma,* is a longhouse constructed with the pillars made from the wood and the roof from sago leaves. The bottom part of the house is used for pig pens.

The Mentawai tribe also has its own local religion called *Arat Sabulungan* founded upon the teaching for the balance of human action with nature. It emphasizes that all materials are possessed by spirits that should not be disturbed. It is also believed that nature consists of an array of spirits to which humans must act ethically in order to avoid their anger, hatred and vengeance. Calamities are

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regarded as the consequence of disharmonious relationship between humans and the spirits. Therefore, humans must exhibit undisruptive behaviors and good ethics to build a good relationship with the spirits. To that aim, corrupting the places where the spirits dwell is strictly forbidden. Seen from such view, *Arat Sabulungan* establishes ecological ethics requiring its adherents to build a good relationship with nature as the dwelling place of the spirits.

The word *local* is derived from *locus* meaning the place where something grows and exists. Such definition of *local* affirms and clarifies its existence in a smaller and specific context. Another related word is locality, which manifests in the form of culture, identity and even religion or belief like a local religion. The local religion is a religion constructed and practiced by the local community. The topic of local religion in sociology studies is included in the sociology of religion. It usually comes with several terms such as traditional religion, traditional beliefs, primitive religious communities and the likes, which are found in certain communities.

A study on religion and society has largely been undertaken by sociologists and anthropologists. The local or traditional religion is more related to the spirits that can be manipulated with shamanic practices. For modern people, such things are considered irrational and unreasonable. Modern society with positivist thinking always relies on scientific nature that can be proven and is measurable. In other words, rationality is a determinant factor in formulating beings in society. In light of this matter, the more rational a religion becomes, the more obvious is the society as its adherents.

Literature Review

Strongly associated with spirit, myth, and magic, local religion according to Bellah (2000) is similar to that of primitive religion in its social convention and provides limited opportunities for individual thought and freedom of action. The consequence is that its adherents are more likely to accept the status quo than to reject it. Therefore, it is clear that the local religion also contributes to the values strongly embraced by its adherents, in this case, in their relationship to nature and its creator. Giddens (1989) in his modernist view proposed that both traditional and modern religion is a set of meaningful and intriguing symbols of reverence and solemnity associated with the various practices of rituals and ceremonies performed by the community adherent. Durkheim (Ritzer & Goodman, 2005), who said religion is a system of belief and practice of sacred matters, supports this definition. He stated belief and its practice constitute the moral community of its adherents, which serves as social cohesion between one another that integrates humans in a collective moral bond.

In any religion, both traditional and modern world religions, there is an action guideline that outlines how humans should relate with others, the environment and god(s). However, each religion has different rules and teaching in guiding such behaviors. The fundamental differences in each religion are the personification of god(s) (Delfi, 2012). However, social-human relationship almost has universality seen from morality, action, and behavior through which interreligious people can live in harmony. Viewed from the obedience of its adherents, Durkheim's analysis can be used to see the locus of this religious belief. The primitive people, who are still concentrated in mechanical solidarity, are more obedient in upholding their religious teaching compared to those already in an organic social situation. Therefore, the primitive tribes are more comfortable and more submissive to their traditional religious teaching even though modern believers find them irrational and unreasonable. Similarly, the primitive tribes also find modern religions irrational because these religions do not provide protection for them in maintaing their relationship with the spirits. In light of the previous notion, Geertz in Bellah (2000) mentioned that religion is a symbol of system that plays a role in building influential feelings and motivations by formulating conceptions about a common order of existence and encapsulating those conceptions with a feeling and motivation that is uniquely visible in reality.

Referring to the essence of religion, *Arat Sabulungan* represents the religious definition put forward by Durkheim, Giddens and Geertz, who defined it as a rule and the existence of symbols of relationship and conceptions constructed in that religion. Rudito (1999) etymologically defined *Arat Sabulungan* as the arrangement of *arat* meaning custom, *sa* meaning a bunch and *bulungan* meaning a leaf, so it means a custom of a bunch of leaves. He said that *Arat Sabulungan* was a custom of belief in supernatural entities, such as souls and the spirits that inhabit this whole nature, whether plants, animals, or artificial objects. In addition, it is also a cosmology of the Mentawai people who believe in the existence of a supernatural world in the form of the spirits inhabiting the sky, forests, earth, homes, and even trees (Rudito, 1999). This religious system, which has been passed on from generation to generation, also builds human relationship with nature as the main emphasis of its teaching. *Arat Sabulungan* seeks to harmonize human life with nature including the spirits. For example, as a sign of their respect to these spirits, the Mentawai tribe provides special storage in *uma* to keep the skulls of the animals they hunted

(Persoon & Schefold, 1985). The main concern of *Arat Sabulungan* is to maintain a balanced action toward nature. These people define nature as their body. If it is tarnished by their deeds, it is the same as tarnishing and harming their own body. Nature is also full of spirits, so destroying nature means destroying their existence, which make them angry and hateful toward humans resulting in various calamities. This is the fundamental difference in how traditional people, especially the Mentawai tribe, view the world compared to that of modern people.

To keep the harmony with the spirits, the Mentawai tribe performs worship and ritual. This worship and ritual require the medium that mediates humans with the spirits they worship (Rosyani, 2013) The objects serving as the medium can be leaves, roots, or other parts of a plant. The worship in this Mentawai belief system is interpreted as achieving harmonius life by maintaining good relations with nature for both the dead and the living (Schefold, 1991). The relationship of the Mentawai people as followers of *Arat Sabulungan* with nature is that of between spirit power and humans behavior. Therefore, everything that happens is an incarnation of the power of the spirit. If humans act in accordance with the spirit, harmony will be achieved. If they maintain good relations with them, it will result in the good condition of nature. Conversely, if they maintain bad relations with them, it will result in the bad condition of nature, which sometimes can lead to catastrophic calamities brought by the anger of the spirits.

Arat Sabulungan is a religious system of the Mentawai community who practice it in their daily life as the guidilines on how they should act and behave as well as on how they should live their lives harmoniously with both their fellow Mentawai people and their cosmology (Tatubeket, Agustina, & Efi, 2019). These people also adhere to this belief system in order to try to understand their surrounding environment to achieve harmonious relation between humans and nature. (Krissandi, Widanarto, & Utami, 2019). According to Sihombing, there are at least three classess of spirits in the teachings of Arat Sabulungan including spirit of the sea called *Tai Kabagat-Koat*, spirit of the forest and mountains called *Tai Kaileleu*, and spirit of the sky called *Tai Ka-Manua*. This present article aimed to demonstrate how Arat Sabulungan serves as living guidelines for the Mentawai people to preserve nature.

Methodology

This research was a qualitative analysis study. It was conducted in the Mentawai Island, West Sumatera. The island itself consists of four main islands including Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai. The focus area of this research was Siberut considering the similarity on understanding Arat Sabulungan as a belief system by these people.

Participants

Five informants were involved in this research. They were the *sikerei* as the important figures in the belief system of the Mentawai community. The informants were selected based on their level of seniority. 2 *sikerei* were unable to speak Indonesian language, so an interpreter was needed. Meanwhile, the other three were able to speak Indonesian language despite their lack of fluency in this language, so the interview was conducted without an interpreter.

Data Collection

The data were collected through interview and observation. The interview was conducted to gather information on the teachings of Arat Sabulungan practiced by this community in preserving the harmony of nature. Meanwhile, observation was conducted to explore how the Mentawai people treated and showed respect to nature.

Data Analysis

The collected data were then analyzed using three stages of analysis: data reduction, data display, and data conclusion.

Results and Discussion

Theology has always been associated with divinity. It is a basic concept in a religion as Ferm (1995) put it: "theology is the discipline which concerns God and God's relation to the World." In this context, theology is used to explain how theology can be internalized and understood by its adherents in order to maintain the salvation of the universe on the basis of the teaching in a system of belief or religion.

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes theology as "Science of religion, dealing therefore with God, and humans in their relation to God". Therefore, it can be seen that theology not only talks about the problem of God but also explains the relationship between God and His creation. Such relation is directly or indirectly contained the balanced meaning of theology, the balance of human's action in relation to God and other humans (Eindhoven, 2007). Through such definition, theology is always associated with the divine faith and teachings that guide humans. It gives guidance, reference, and order in enacting life. Theological approaches become intense after the birth of postmodern critical social theories

(Singh, Ted, & Joseph, 2019). The world community requestions the attitude, ideology, and norms given the increasing emergence of factual and phenomenal paradoxes in the modern community. For example, in a global era with more modern humans, there is still the crisis of food, economy, and environment. Finally, the theological approach once again becomes a necessity to be examined. Functional humans' relationship with God is again elaborated in viewing reality. The theology of primitive society also has the concept of such relations. In that relationship, there are ethics associated with the presence of God. Hence, the theology of nature salvation is a relation between God and humans that contains the ethics of humans' relationships with the nature and God.

The theological approach always gives birth to the piety of the creature because it relates to the obedience to divine laws. Piety is seen from the way of thinking, acting and behaving. In this context, the theology of nature salvation means "presenting" God in every aspect of humans' activity, including in the activities of natural resource utilization and environmental management. In relation to nature, there are three ethical relationships built by humans: the relationship with other humans, God, and environment. According to Koentjaraningrat, such relations are preserved in the religions of the isolated society. In fact, this relationship is very real in their daily life because the isolated society or primitive tribes are very dependent on nature (Koentjaraningrat, 1993).

The dependence on nature distinguishes tribal people from modern people and their ethics to it. Modern people, due to their materialistic natural logicity and rationality, uncontrollably exploit nature to the interests of their hedonism. This leads to the emergence of ecological crises that affect many aspects of life. The loss of the dynamic balance of nature brings various disaster threats: drought, floods, landslides, and others. In Indonesia, for example, forest exploitation has contributed to the increasing occurence of flooding leading to material and life losses. Consequently, the country has become a disaster-prone nation. One of the causes of such disasters is clearly ecological and environmental ethics that are not observed by humans resulting in their action damaging the environment. For example, the occurrence of flood and landslides is strongly connected to human forest destruction which does not consider ecological ethics, especially from the theological point of view. In contrast, tribal communities live their lives highly dependent on nature, so they have ecological ethics on their own theological basis, like with the Mentawai people with *Arat Sabulungan*. As said by the senior Sikerei "The environmental ethics are strongly oriented with the theology they believe with the aim to keep the harmony between humans, environment, and God the spirits"

The existence of a balanced relationship among these aspects is sought. If one is disturbed or nature is harmed, there will be an imbalance, which may result in disasters and other damage. Therefore, the primitive tribes have various traditions in maintaining the balance of nature. In this contetx, the teaching of *Arat Sabulungan* has a direct contribution to the knowledge of the Mentawai tribe to preserve nature (Lucky, 2014).

Arat Sabulungan provides knowledge and guidance for the Mentawai tribe, which allow them to build life in harmony. This harmony is not only in maintaing relation with the spirit world, but also in controlling their behavior not to harm nature (Persoon & Schefold, 1985). This teaching has led to the establishment of an environmentally friendly community. If this knowledge and theological concept are kept and preserved, living harmoniously with nature will be achieved. Nature should not be destroyed by humans' egocentric focus. There must be a behavior built so that the relationship with nature is harmonious. For example, society should not do illegal logging or hunt animals brutally. However, different ways of viewing nature raise the differences of interaction and relationships with nature. In other word, belief and faith are needed to guide people to act properly toward nature. Theology cannot be separated from the rituals and habits it controls. The Mentawai tribe has the theology of nature salvation. Essentially, the existence of the divine construction that powers life is believed to be the basis for behaving. In this case, the existence of the spirits who inhabit nature must be well respected by maintaining good relationship withnature. As described by junior Sikerei *"Arat Sabulungan* dominantly regulates humans' behavior toward the forest and nature because they are believed as a dwelling place of the spirits. The spirits becomes the ruler and occupy every entity in the forest, including the trees, the water, the land and the animals within".

Logging Rituals

In the Mentawai belief system, wood cannot be felled in vain; it must be carefully selected and well-purposed. Logging is perfomed to build an *uma* (house) (Arman, Afrizal, Asrinaldi, 2018). The number and shape of logged timber must be adjusted to the needs of the house pillars and construction. Prior to the logging, they should first do mutual deliberation, from determining which part of the wood is to be logged to how many pieces of log are needed as well as their length. The logging is done through deliberation and mutual cooperation. People in the atmosphere of mechanical solidarity live with strong social ties and obedience to the doctrines and rules that shape them. This way of life distinguishes this community from modernist urban societies

who have grown and developed in organic solidarity. Before and after the logging, there is a ritual to be carried out. The ritual before logging is to ask permission from the spirits attached to the wood or controlling the forest. This ritual is called *panaki,* the ritual before going into the forest to log the wood that will be used to build the house. For Mentawai people, entering the forest has its own customs in accordance with the purpose to be done in it. If they want to open a new farm, they must obey the provisions that have been outlined. The farm should not be in a dense forest or in cliffs followed by rituals to be perfomed for farming (Hammons, 2016). In this context the senior sikerei said "In the religious teaching of the Mentawai people, there are sacred forest sites called *lakokaina*, areas where the spirits dwell. This area is guarded and cannot be treated arbitrarily. If it is treated poorly, it will bring bad things or imbalance that will create various forms of disaster".

To maintain and keep this balance, a ritual is always carried out. One of the rituals is *Punen Pasibuluakek*, a feasting ritual (Latief, 2012). The purpose of this ritual is togetherness to remind and keep each other in harmony. In addition, it is also a form of agreement in life to keep the togetherness with the spirits. Thus, the sense of shared consciousness and consensus arises to keep the surrounding nature in harmony.

Nature Rituals

Basically, the Mentawai tribe does not practice modern medicine. Local people have their own way of treatment and healing by using herbal medicine. It is based on nature and on the relationship with the spirits because any disaster, illness or torture is a form of punishment from the spirits as rulers of nature. The conflicting humans' actions with the spirits are the cause of the disease. The Mentawai tribe's healing treatment is done through two approaches, approaches to nature and the restoration of the relationship with the spirits. Therefore, the healing exists in nature and in harmony with the spirits. The treatment with nature is done through a person who can interact with the spirits. In this treatment ritual, this person is called *sikerei*. The healing treatment from *sikerei* is a mix of the leaves and spells that relate to the spirit.

Based on field observations *Sikerei* prepares herbs and leaves as part of the healing process. The ritual is performed in the form of dances accompanied by reading the spell in each dance movement. This ritual clearly represents the strong perception of the Mentawai tribe to nature and their dependence on it. Due to their perceptions and dependence, they are very appreciative and have the theological understanding towards nature. Nature can provide torture and prosperity depending on their action.

Crop Rituals

The Mentawai people consume all natural products, that have not been processed with modern technology. The staple food is sago grown in forest swamps with the side dishes such as fish, meat from hunting and others, which are all taken from nature. According to junior Sikrei "in their belief, all that is picked from the earth cannot be eaten individually. It should be shared among all the family members in *uma*. Therefore, eating together has become an integral part of the living tradition of the inhabitants of *uma*. This feasting ritual is one of the rituals taught by *Arat Sabulungan*. The common eating ritual is called *punen"*.

In addition, there is also a special *Punen* as gratitude in order for the benefit of the worship. *Punen* is basically a form of ritual of gratitude for nature, that has given life to humans. The function of this *Punen* is to get the blessings of food from the produce. The blessing in the concept of their lives is that all can be used in accordance with the purpose and to keep good harmony with the spirits of the food. Junior Sikeri said, there are several kinds of *punen* practiced by the Mentawai people "*Punen Puotuat, Punen Sinuba and Punen Masiaro Sikatai"*

Punen Puotuat is a feasting ritual with crabs as the maindish. This offering is followed by all the inhabitants of *uma*. The purpose of the ritual is to awaken humans in order to have a character like a crab. Eventhough their shell is removed, they do not die and remain resilient despite the strong crashing waves and the scorching sun. Crabs become a symbol of hard work, toughness, and tenacity for Mentawai people, not giving up quickly in the circumstances. Therefore, crabs become a dish in the feast. The hope is that all members of *uma* are strong, determined, and tenacious in their work.

In addition to the rituals with crabs, the people of Menawai also practice *punen sanabu*, the feasting with fish as the main offering. Usually, the Mentawai people catch fish by using *tuba* (poison root). If it is put in the water, the wood will poison the fish making them dizzy and inactive. Because of such catching method, the Mentawai people feel guilty in catching the fish by poisoning the river. The regret must be resolved in the form of offerings and prayers for the salvation of the fish.

Punen Masiaro Sikatai, the purpose of this ritual is to prevent evil by using the leaves and the flower called *slot lagai*. In this ritual. the people pray for their prosperity and for protrection from evil. This ritual is the same as the natural crumb ritual because the leaves are treated like spices. From those rituals, it can be understood that *Arat Sabulungan* has theology with nature perspective, which is strongly obeyed by its adherents. Therefore, the theology of nature has given birth to an ecological order to nature, forests, sea, river, and environment. The ecology is built on the supernatural forces that are believed to be the rulers.

This nature theology is basically what makes the Mentawai tribes friendly with nature, forests, rivers and sea. They believe in the reciprocity of deed if they do not comply with the rules of balance in acting with the nature. The action of humans in nature cannot be arbitrary as it invokes torment now or later. Such theology binds the sphere of action and thought of the *Arat Sabulungan* adherents. For them, the bond with the spirit attached to the space and place is implicated in the maintenance of harmonious action with the nature. Junior Sikerei explained everything in life according to the teaching of *Arat Sabulungan* is dependent on the behavior towards nature.

Such condition certainly occurs as a result of the loss of ethics in treating the forest or nature in the world community. However, traditional societies such as the Mentawai tribe still profess and preserve ecological ethics, which is reinforced by the teaching of their religious belief. In this belief, there is a theological association of human life and the nature. An ethic must be nurtured in the treatment of the nature.

For the Mentawai people, nature theology becomes the balance of life between nature and their survival. They believe perfectly that without nature they cannot live. The dependence on nature makes them very subservient and obedient to the rules of their belief. The preservation of nature is like maintaining their physical and metaphysical lives. Here is the locus of the teaching or theological implications of *Arat Sabulungan*.

Conclusion

Arat Sabulungan as a local religion of the Mentawai tribe teaches its adherents to treat nature through its theology and natural ethics. With this theology, humans and their environment maintain balanced dimension. If the balance is violated, then the ruler or the spirits will be angry, bringing calamities. All bad luck is a mansifestation of the anger and wrath of the the spirits for the mistreatment of nature, which is incompatible with the theology they profess.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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