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## **BABOI: THE TRADITIONAL MOTHER OF SAGULUBBEG MENTAWAI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study discusses the figure of Baboi or Ibu Adat in Mentawai society, particularly in Sagulubbeg Village, Southwest Siberut, as a representation of female authority in the Arat Sabulungan belief system. Using qualitative research methods with ethnography, this study explores Baboi's role in maintaining balance between humans, nature, and the spiritual world through ritual practices, self-symbolism, and ecological knowledge. Baboi acts as a mediator between ancestral spirits and humans, as well as playing a role in maintaining cosmological harmony, which is manifested in Ti'ti Geilat and Sipaggeu. The results of the study show that Baboi holds a strategic function in preserving traditional values and environmental sustainability, especially through the Simatabaik principle, which emphasizes the wise use of resources. In a social context, Baboi also negotiates women's power within patriarchal structures, while also becoming agents of cultural transformation in the era of modernization. This study shows that Baboi is not only a spiritual figure, but also a local feminist ecological symbol that maintains ethical relations between humans and nature. These findings enrich the discourse of feminist anthropology and cultural ecology in the archipelago by emphasizing the importance of indigenous women's knowledge in the social and ecological sustainability system in the Mentawai region.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The life of the Mentawai people, especially in the Southwest Siberut area, Sagulubbeg Village, shows a complex cosmological system, in which humans, nature, and the spiritual world are in an inseparable mutual relationship. In the principle of *Arat Sabulungan*, which is the basis of the belief of the Mentawai people, it emphasizes the balance between the elements of nature (*buluat*), ancestral spirits (*simagre*), and human life. In this system, nature is not just seen as a physical environment, but a living entity that has a soul, so all human activities, whether agriculture, hunting, or rituals, must be carried out within the framework of harmony with the spiritual power of nature.

In the social context, *Uma* as the communal house of the Mentawai community serves as the center of traditional life and a symbol of collective identity. In *Uma*, social values, ecological knowledge, and rituals are inherited between generations through oral and performative mechanisms. As explained by Munandar et al., the form of Mentawai local wisdom includes knowledge about the environment, traditional medicine, the *Uma* residential system, and customary values that ensure ecological and spiritual balance. In this social structure, there are indigenous women figures known as (Munandar et al., 2022) *Baboi* or Traditional Mothers, who participate in playing a central role in maintaining the sustainability of these values.

*Baboi* not only play a role as a guardian of indigenous knowledge, but also as a social and spiritual mediator between humans and ancestral spirits. In this concept, he is actively involved in rituals or celebrations (*Punen*),

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traditional plant-based medicine practices, and the preservation of body symbols (*Ti'ti*) that have the function of identity and spirituality. According to Schefold, that Mentawai women have authority in matters of domestic rituals. Furthermore, according to Suharmiati et al., explaining that traditional medicine in the Mentawai Islands has extensive knowledge of medicinal plants, although some of them are not in accordance with modern pharmaceutical science. This fact shows that the ecological and spiritual knowledge managed by indigenous women such as (Schefold, 2011) (Suharmiati et al., 2021) *Baboi* still functions empirically in the daily life of the community.

Furthermore, from the perspective of feminist anthropology, *Baboi* can be understood as a representation of indigenous women's authority negotiating power spaces in a society that is still formally patriarchally oriented. According to Delfi, the role of women in the Siberut region comes from the traditional norm of *Arat Sabulungan*, where women are placed in subordinate positions. This phenomenon shows that (Delfi, 2013) *Baboi* became an agent of cultural transformation. In this context, *Baboi* also maintains old knowledge, which will continue to adapt to the changing social structure due to modernization, education, and the influence of outside beliefs.

The social changes that have swept the Mentawai region in the last two decades show a sharp dynamic between traditional and modernity. Infrastructure development, tourism expansion, and increased education flows have shifted traditional life patterns and customary authority structures. As reported by The Jakarta Post on October 7, 2023: "Women in Mentawai are still seen as a group that is unable to manage forests, or control resources; that is why women should not own land." In this context, it is explained that indigenous women such as (Post, 2023) *Baboi* are still spiritually respected, but their authority in the economic and ecological system is always marginalized.

However, there is also a new trend, where indigenous women take an active role in cultural and environmental conservation. A recent study by Habibah, notes that Mentawai women's initiative in preserving traditions and customary forests shows the formation of a new ecological subject, which reaffirms the gender relationship with nature. Likewise, Andalas and Erwin's research explains that the role of Mentawai women in the movement of food and traditional rituals is a form of local feminist ecology based on traditional wisdom. In this context, (Habibah, 2023) (Andalas et al., 2024) *Baboi* as the Indigenous Mother in the village of Sagulubbeg, represents a typical model of the *prempuan* figure, in which social, spiritual, and ecological authority is integrated in daily cultural practices. *Baboi* became an epistemic figure who connected the past and present, maintained the sustainability of knowledge, and negotiated social change without giving up the basic values of *Arat Sabulungan*.

In general, *Baboi* not only preserves the identity of its community, but also serves as a guardian of cultural resilience against the pressures of modernity. Scientifically, the research of *Baboi: The Indigenous Mother of Sagulubbeg Mentawai* is important, to understand how indigenous women play a role in the social and ecological reproduction of the people of Southwest Siberut, especially Sagulubbeg Village. This research also contributes to the discourse of feminist anthropology and cultural ecology, which specifically highlights how gender is involved in indigenous knowledge systems. As Tsing puts it, local practices often serve as moral frameworks, through which societies negotiate their dependence on forests, rivers, and land. In this context, (Tsing, 2024) *Baboi* is the personification of such local practices. In this case, through his involvement and position in the customs, *Baboi* taught that the preservation of culture and nature is not two separate things, creating an ethical unity in the life of the Mentawai people, especially in Sagulubbeg Village.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

*Baboi* Research: Traditional Mothers of Sagulubbeg Mentawai, uses qualitative research methods with an ethnographic approach, which aims to deeply understand the symbolic meaning and social function of *Baboi* as a figure of Indigenous Mothers in the cultural system of the Mentawai community, especially in Sagulubbeg Village, Southwest Siberut, Mentawai Islands. These methods and approaches were chosen, because they are descriptive and interpretive, allowing research to explore cultural values through the views of local communities. As stated by Auerbach, qualitative research is a process of analysis and interpretation of texts, interviews, and observation results to reveal the meaning of a social phenomenon that cannot be measured statistically. In this case, (Auerbach, 2003) *the Baboi* figure is understood not only as a social role of indigenous women, but a representation of the spiritual and ecological value system in *the Arat Sabulungan belief*.

Furthermore, according to Hammersley, ethnography is a form of social research that involves in-depth observation of people's practices and interactions in daily life. This approach allows research to understand cultural symbols, actions, and narratives based on the direct experiences of local communities. Meanwhile, according to Emerson, ethnography aims to produce descriptions and analyses of, how societies organize life and understand its world. In the context of this research, the researcher's position as an ethnographer is as an observer as well as a participant, who tries to interpret (Hammersley, 2007) (Emerson, 2011) *the life of Baboi* through direct experience in the social and spiritual context of the community in Sagulubbeg Village.



Field research was carried out in stages, which was carried out from 2018 to 2025. It includes participatory observation in Sagulubbeg Village and several surrounding areas in Southwest Siberut, which still maintains the *Arat Sabulungan* belief system. The location was chosen not arbitrarily, which is an area that still carries out customary, spiritual, and ecological understanding functions in daily life, especially for a *Baboi*.

The research subjects consisted of *Baboi*, *Sikerei*, *Sipatiti* (Mentawai traditional painters), traditional leaders, and *Arat Sabulungan* trustees. In this case, the selection of informants is carried out purposively, taking into account direct involvement and in-depth knowledge of *Baboi figures*, customs, and Mentawai spiritual practices. The informant's representation also took into account the variation in age and social experience, to get a comprehensive picture of the transformation *of the role of Baboi* in contemporary society in Sagulubbeg Village.

Data collection methods include participatory observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and literature studies. This refers to the view of Joan D, who explains that participant observation is the main method in ethnography, because it allows researchers to understand the value system and symbols in the lives of the people being studied. During the research process, researchers participated in traditional ritual activities, traditional healings, as well as community gatherings involving (Joan D, 1999) *Baboi*, while documenting the social interactions and narratives that emerged. In this case, the interaction is built in a semi-structured manner using Mentawai and Indonesian, to make it easier to explore cultural perceptions, spiritual meanings, and personal experiences *of baboi* in carrying out their roles. This is in line with Creswell's explanation, that interviews in qualitative research serve to understand the subject's perspective directly in their social context, not just to obtain factual data. Meanwhile, the documentation process is carried out through photos, videos, and field notes for them to perform (Creswell, 2018) *Baboi* activities during rituals, involvement during traditional meetings, and daily activities in carrying out activities. As explained by Bungin, documented empirical data becomes visual evidence that can be accounted for in the ethnographic analysis process. (Bungin, 2015)

All the collected data is then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model in Sugiyono, which includes four main stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing or verification. In this case, data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing on information relevant to the focus of the research, namely (Scott, 2020) (Patton, 2015) *Baboi* as a symbol of traditional knowledge and spirituality of Mentawai women. The data that has been reduced is arranged narratively to form a complete construction of meaning (Moleong, 2019).

The validity of the data is maintained through the process of triangulating sources, techniques, and time. In this case, source triangulation was done by comparing the results of interviews from *Baboi*, *Sikerei*, and members of the Sagulubbeg Village community; technical triangulation was done by combining interviews, observations, and documentation; while time triangulation was done in different social contexts, such as in rituals, domestic activities, and traditional ceremonies. Validation of interpretation results is carried out through *member checking*, by informing the main informant again to ensure the suitability of the meaning with the views of the local community.

In particular, this study also shows the ethics of socio-cultural research. Before the research was conducted, the researcher first asked for official permission from the traditional head and community leaders of Sagulubbeg Village, as well as explaining the purpose and purpose of the research. Each piece of information provides *informed consent* to be interviewed and documented. In this context, the overall ethnographic approach in this study is intended to understand *Baboi* as a representation of the local wisdom of women in Sagulubbeg Village, which reflects the harmonious relationship between humans, nature and ancestral spirits. Through direct involvement in the life of the people of Sagulubbeg Village, this research seeks to uncover the social, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of *the role of Baboi* in maintaining the balance of Mentawai cultural customs and identity. Thus, this approach not only produces cultural descriptions, but also opens up space for academic reflection on cultural resilience and the role of indigenous women in preserving spiritual and ecological heritage in the archipelago.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Indigenous Knowledge and Authority Figures

In the social system of the community in Sagulubbeg Village, *Baboi* or Traditional Mothers also play a central role in maintaining a balance between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. The figure *of Baboi* is a symbol of customary authority that is recognized for its depth of knowledge of *the Arat Sabulungan* belief system, namely the belief of the Mentawai people that emphasizes the harmony between material, spiritual, and ecological dimensions. In this case, *Arat Sabulungan's* belief is based on understanding, which affirms humans, spirits (*Simagre*), and nature in a cosmological unity that supports each other. In this context, the human body is considered a spiritual space that is the place where the spirit dwells, as well as the link between the human world and the spirit world. Therefore, every

human action must take into account the balance of the cosmos so as not to disturb the harmony of life . (Scheffold, 2011) (Juliardi, 2022)

According to Tulus, belief in *Simagre* (spirit) and *Ketsat* (soul) is at the core of the cosmology of Mentawai society; where all human activities have a spiritual dimension. In this context, (Tulus, 2020) *Baboi* understands this principle deeply and applies it in ritual and social practices. In the community in Sagulubbeg Village, *Baboi* is an archival figure of collective life, which stores and transmits knowledge about ritual procedures, traditional medicine, and ecological signs that serve as guidelines for the community.

As stated by Islam et al, Arat *Sabulungan* is a form of sacred ecology, where every human action has spiritual value that is closely related to the management of the environment. In this context, (Islami et al., 2022) *Baboi* is not just a symbolic figure, but an epistemic authority that bridges the relationship between humans and nature. He practices ecological and spiritual knowledge that is inherited from generation to generation, which guides and accompanies each of his descendants to live in harmony with the ancestral spirit and the cycle of nature.

## 2. Baboon Ecological Knowledge : Body, Ritual, and Environment

A Babo's *ecological knowledge* is manifested through three main domains: body, ritual, and environment. The three are intertwined in a knowledge system that is manifested through the life practices and cultural symbolism of the Mentawai community. In this case, *the body of the Baboi* is a symbolic text, which contains spiritual and ecological values. Mentawai's traditional tattoo, namely *Ti'ti Geilat* which adorns the *body of Baboi*, is a visual representation of the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestors. The *Ti'ti Geilat motif*, which resembles *Rakkeu Subba* (a fish trap or tangguk used by women when taking fish in the river), depicts women's attachment to the activities of the river and the cycle of life. In line with Delfi's interpretation, that the traditional Mentawai tattoo serves as a spiritual protection against negative energies, as well as a marker of moral and social maturity. (Delfi, 2019)



Figure 1. Ti'Ti Geilat  
(Riski Dwi Kemala)

In the context of Mentawai society, women who have *Ti'ti Geilat* occupy respected social positions. They are often the wives of *Sikerei* (the spiritual leader of Arat *Sabulungan*), so their bodies are not only a symbol of aesthetics, but also a form of purity and social responsibility. The body that has *Ti'ti Geilat* is seen as having been "purified" by the ancestors, so the owner is obliged to maintain behavior, speech, and social ethics. Thus, *the body of Baboi* becomes a medium that connects the morality, customs, and spiritual values of the community, which is often a consideration of self-openness when socializing outside the Mentawai community.

In addition to *Ti'ti Geilat*, there is a *Sipaggeu tradition*, which is the sharpening of teeth that symbolizes the maturity and courage of a *Baboi*. Rahmi et al, explained that body modification practices such as tattoos and teeth sharpening in Mentawai women represent *embodied knowledge*, which is knowledge that is internalized through pain, discipline, and spirituality. In this case, (Rahmi et al., 2024) *Ti'ti Geilat* and *Sipaggeu* on *the body of Baboi*, are not just aesthetic symbols, but a form of commitment to the Mentawai prempuan to live a traditional life with courage and ecological responsibility.



**Figure 2. Punen Preparation  
(Riski Dwi Kemala)**

Rituals in the *Arat Sabulungan* belief system are an important arena for *Baboi* and the people in Sagulubbeg Village. In this case, the ritual is a space for the *Baboi* to articulate their spiritual knowledge and power. In the context of the *Punen* or *Mulia ceremony*, a healing ritual, *Baboi* is also responsible for providing ritual ingredients, such as leaves, flowers (*Ogok*), and cooked animals without the use of additional ingredients that involve a lot of humans (chemicals). This act has a deep meaning, showing respect for the sanctity of the natural elements and maintaining the balance of ecosystems and the occult through non-exploitative practices.

According to Islami et al, the elements of nature such as leaves, water, and fire in the Mentawai ritual ceremony, reflect symbols of life and balance. In this context, (Islami et al., 2022) *Baboi* not only participates in regulating the technicalities in the ritual, but he also carries out spiritual practices like *Sikerei*, such as fasting, self-purification, and food and action. All these actions are aimed at ensuring the harmony of the human world and the supernatural world, which if violated or failed to comply with these rules it is believed that it could bring disaster or spiritual disturbance to the *Baboi*, *Sikerei*, or the local people.

In addition to his role in ritual ceremonies, *Baboi* also plays an active role in the context of *Uma*, the traditional house of the Mentawai people. In this case, *Baboi's involvement* includes from pre-construction, development, to the time of establishment and functioning of *Uma*. The actions of *Baboi* in the rites of purification, fasting, and abstaining from food and actions, as a symbol of asking for permission for the smooth development process and blessings when *Uma* is fully functioning. In this case, *Baboi* is responsible for fulfilling offerings for ancestors and dishes for the community who have helped the process of building *Uma*. Not only that, after *Uma* was built and functioned in its entirety, *Baboi* also participated in meeting the needs of offerings and food for the residents of *Uma* through forest and river products. This active involvement makes a *Baboi* not only respected by supernatural beings, but also the local community, and members of the nuclear family.



Figure 3. Uma in Sagulubbeg Village

(Riski Dwi Kemala)



Figure 4. Baboi in Sagulubbeg Village

(Riski Dwi Kemala)

The role and position of *the Baboi* above is not consciously obtained without reason, where he also has deep knowledge of the environment and spirituality. In particular, *baboi* are believed to have more knowledge of the flora and fauna in their environment, such as medicinal plants, dye materials, the manufacture of traditional accessories (*Oni* or beaded necklaces), planting or harvest times, hunting seasons, as well as signs of weather changes (wind direction, sea tides, and moon position), as well as they master and apply in daily life.

According to Suwarno, the Mentawai people have a land rotation system and restrictions on tree felling and garden products, based on the natural cycle taught by traditional elders. This principle is known as (Suwarno, 2021) *Simataibak*, which is take in moderation, which specifically emphasizes the importance of taking natural produce without damaging the sustainability of resources. Through his daily practice, *Baboi* plays a role in maintaining this principle, ensuring that future generations and life in the forest can also feel or gain the same thing. In this context, the ecological and spiritual knowledge possessed by *Baboi* is not a form of empirical science alone, but an epistemological system rooted in the spirituality of *Arat Sabulungan* that nature as a living entity is like human life.



#### 4. CONCLUSION

*Baboi* as the Indigenous Mother in Sagulubbeg Village, Southwest Siberut, represents indigenous women figures who have a multidimensional role in maintaining the social, spiritual, and ecological balance of the Mentawai community. Through the *belief system of Arat Sabulungan*, *Baboi* not only helps to maintain traditions and indigenous knowledge, but also functions as an epistemic authority that connects humans, nature, and ancestral spirits in a cosmological unity. In this context, the role and position of *the Baboi* and his overall involvement, show that spirituality and ecology are inseparable from the social life of the community; they are integrated in everyday cultural practices governed through symbols, rituals, and moral values.

Empirically, this study confirms that *Baboi* play an active role in various aspects of indigenous life: ranging from ritual ceremonies (*Punen*), Uma development, to natural resource management based on traditional knowledge. The body of *Baboi*, through symbols such as *Ti'ti Geilat* and *Sipaggeu*, becomes a cultural text that contains the spiritual meaning and ecological identity of Mentawai women. In this framework, *Baboi* appears as a transformation agent who negotiates the role of women in a social system that tends to be patriarchal, without losing the roots of traditional values and spirituality.

Thus, the figure of *Baboi* is a representation of female ecological subjects, who also play a central role in the reproduction of local knowledge and environmental conservation. Through this study, it shows how the ecological wisdom of indigenous women is not only symbolic, but also has a practical function in maintaining the sustainability of the Mentawai ecosystem and cultural identity in the midst of the pressures of modernity and globalization. Scientifically, the study of *Baboi* can be subangsih, which enriches the discourse of cultural ecology and feminist anthropology by showing that nature and culture conservation is an ethical practice born from the experience and spirituality of Mentawai indigenous women, especially for *the figure of Baboi* in Sagulubbeg Village.

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