

Adaptation of Remote Indigenous Communities of Mentawai and Rupert Islands to National Religious Regulations

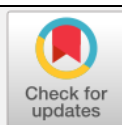
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ABSTRACT

This study examines two contrasting cases: the remote indigenous communities on Mentawai and Rupert Islands (Riau), where the majority of the original populations have formally adopted Christianity and Buddhism as their religious identities. The purpose of this research is to explore how indigenous belief systems are preserved amidst the pressures for religious conformity and to analyze the psychological preferences of remote indigenous communities when choosing one of the state-recognized religions. This study employs a case study design, focusing on remote indigenous communities in Rupert Kepulauan (the Akit people) and Mentawai Island (the Mentawai people). The findings reveal that remote indigenous communities in the Mentawai Islands are generally open to migrants, engage in cross-cultural communication, and experience social change through processes of acculturation, assimilation, and integration. Although a small segment continues to maintain ancestral beliefs exclusively, no discrimination is evident against them. Government efforts to integrate remote indigenous communities with mainstream society are conducted through persuasive empowerment strategies. The results highlight the importance of establishing formal legal recognition for the indigenous belief systems of remote communities.

Keywords: Acculturation; Indigenous Beliefs; National Religious Regulations; Remote Indigenous Communities; Socio-Religious Change

1. Introduction

From an anthropological perspective, the term *Indigenous people* refers to groups that maintain collective ancestral ties to the land and natural resources where they live (Persoon, 1998). The discourse surrounding indigenous peoples emerged from Western perspectives during the colonial period, where Western nations encountered indigenous communities in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. However, in Indonesia, the terminology differs. Under Indonesian laws and regulations, such groups are categorized as *remote indigenous communities* based on the Minister of Social Affairs Regulation No. 9 of 2012, which replaced the older term *alienated people* to eliminate its negative connotations. Generally, the marginalization experienced by these communities is attributed to geographical isolation or to social characteristics that limit their contact with other cultures (Koentjaraningrat, 1993).

In a religious context, remote Indigenous groups largely continue to adhere to ancestral beliefs (Indigenous religions) in the form of local religious practices, which are often viewed through the lens of mainstream religious and cultural concepts as animistic, magical, customary, or cultural (Maarif, 2017). The state and legal frameworks in Indonesia generally regard remote Indigenous communities as ethnic groups without formal religions, and their Indigenous beliefs are not recognized as legitimate representations of religious practice (Persoon, 1998). Consequently, adherents are required to select one of the five official religions recognized by the state. In this regard, religion is seen as an integral part of Indonesian national identity, as enshrined in the state ideology and constitution, emphasizing the necessity of adherence to religion as a reflection of national spirituality. Thus, for the state, religion symbolizes progress, modernization, and the realization of national ideals—values deemed important to instill among remote Indigenous communities, who are often perceived as backward (Atkinson, 1983).

Social scientists have widely explored the topic of indigenous or remote communities' belief systems. Geertz initiated discussions on Indigenous religions and belief patterns by examining the socio-religious structures of Javanese society (Wertheim & Geertz, 1963). Moreover, Geertz conceptualized religion as a cultural system, describing it as a symbolic framework through which adherents interpret the world and their existence (Geertz, 2013). Building on Geertz's theory, Atkinson argued that the Indonesian case constitutes an anomaly, wherein Indigenous religions conflict with world religions (Atkinson, 1983).

Research demonstrated that the state continues to treat followers of local or Indigenous religions as "second-class" citizens compared to adherents of officially recognized religions (Wibisono et al., 2020). The state often disarms some civil rights of these citizens, particularly those grouped under local or indigenous religions.

The compulsion experienced by remote indigenous communities to choose one of the five official religions has been a subject of longstanding anthropological and social inquiry. In the literature (Atkinson, 1983; Hasbullah, 2018; Koentjaraningrat, 1993; Persoon, 1998). Three main adaptive strategies are identified: (1) syncretism, combining ancestral beliefs with an official religion; (2) complete conversion to an official state religion; or (3) nominal affiliation with an official religion while continuing to adhere to ancestral beliefs privately. However, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the psychological preferences and decision-making processes of remote indigenous communities when adapting to state-sanctioned religions.

This study departs from two contrasting cases: the remote indigenous communities in the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island (Riau). The traditional religion of the Mentawai people, known as *Arat Sabulungan*, constitutes a religious and cosmological system wherein plants, animals, soil, rocks, waterfalls, and even rainbows are believed to possess souls, similar to

humans (Koentjaraningrat, 1993). In contrast, the Akit tribe's belief system centers around the protective spirits of Datuk Kimpung and Nenek Bakul, who are believed to offer protection, healing, and disaster prevention (Limben, 2011). Although both the Mentawai and Akit tribes have lived harmoniously with other communities, their indigenous beliefs remain deeply rooted. For these communities, formal religions are often perceived not as ideological commitments but rather as administrative complements to social life, with Christianity and Buddhism becoming their predominant formal religious identities.

This study aims to examine in detail the sustainability of ancestral belief systems among the remote indigenous communities of the Mentawai and Rupert Islands in the context of national religious regulations. Additionally, it explores the socio-religious transformations experienced by these communities and analyzes their psychological preferences in adapting to the obligation to choose among the state-recognized religions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Community Trust of Remote Indigenous Communities

2.1.1. Definition and Concept of Indigenous Religion

Maarif argues that the term *ancestral religion* is more appropriate than *ancestral belief* (Maarif, 2017), aligning with Atkinson's concept of traditional religion as equivalent to majoritarian religion (Atkinson, 1983). The concept often overlaps with terms such as *indigenous religion*, *local religion*, and *local wisdom*. The beliefs of remote indigenous groups differ from those of mystics in both structure and cosmology. Their customary practices are not formally recognized as religion but are instead categorized as cultural heritage. Although the influence of other religions has caused social and cultural changes, ancestral religions and official state religions frequently interact, resulting in forms of syncretism that shape the practices and philosophies of these communities.

2.1.2. Legal Framework on Religious Regulation in Indonesia

The 1945 Constitution guarantees the freedom of every Indonesian citizen to embrace and practice their respective religions or beliefs. Religious life in Indonesia is regulated under Article 29, Paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution, which states that "the state guarantees the freedom of every citizen to embrace their religion and to worship following their religion and belief." This provision serves as the constitutional foundation for the position of religion within the Republic of Indonesia and reflects the close relationship between religion and the state. The principle of religious freedom thus ensures recognition, guarantees, and protection for individuals to choose and practice their religion and beliefs freely.

Following the 1998 reformation, significant changes occurred in the Indonesian constitutional system, particularly concerning the recognition and implementation of human rights. Article 28E, Paragraph 1 states that "every person is free to embrace a religion and to worship according to the religion of their choice, choose citizenship, reside within the territory of the state or leave it, and has the right to return." Additionally, Article 28E, Paragraph 2 affirms that everyone has the right to freedom of belief, expression of thought, and behavior according to their conscience. Furthermore, Article 28I, Paragraph 1 emphasizes that the right to religion is a fundamental right that cannot be restricted under any circumstances. Over time, however, some groups have exploited these provisions to establish sects that deviate from the teachings of their official religion, both in terms of doctrine and practice (*muamalah*).

2.2. Mentawai Tribe and Akit Tribe

2.2.1. Mentawai Tribe

The traditional religion of the Mentawai people, *Arat Sabulungan*, is a religious and cosmological framework that considers plants, animals, rocks, waterfalls, and rainbows to possess souls, just like humans (Koentjaraningrat, 1993). According to Sihombing, *Arat* means *adat* (custom), while *Sabulungan* refers to a collection of leaves that symbolize nature and are used in ritual practices (Sihombing, 1989). The Mentawai people believe in the protective spirit of the *uma* (house), offering sacrifices to seek good fortune and avoid harm (Delfi, 2005). *Arat Sabulungan* embodies life values known as *kapuaranan Mentawai*, which encompass the philosophy of harmony between humans, nature, living beings, and supernatural spirits. *Arat* is regarded as a sacred heritage that unites families and strengthens community bonds (Coronese, 1986).

2.2.2. Akit Tribe

The Akit tribe is a remote indigenous community inhabiting several islands along the east coast of Sumatra, including Meranti, Bengkalis, Karimun, and Rupert Islands. They maintain a belief system that combines elements of animism with Buddhist ritual practices, particularly in the worship of the spirits Datuk Kimpung and Nenek Bakul. The Akit people adhere to polytheism, worshiping multiple deities and venerating ancestral spirits (Limberg, 2011). They also believe in supernatural forces that influence human life through both natural phenomena and religious teachings. Although the Akit people have interacted and mingled with other communities, they have continued to preserve their traditional belief system.

2.3. Functional Structural Theory

Structural-functionalism, often called functionalism, is a theoretical framework that views society or culture as a complex system striving to maintain internal stability and solidarity. With its emphasis on social stability, structural-functionalism portrays society as an organism composed of social institutions that work collaboratively to achieve social equilibrium.

However, criticisms of functionalism highlight its limitations in explaining social change and conflict. Societal change can arise through either consensus or conflict. Consensus occurs when society embraces change while preserving existing values and norms, whereas conflict emerges when clashes over values and resources drive social change. Remote indigenous communities, for example, may respond to external changes either through consensus, by maintaining their traditions, or through resistance, by opposing changes that threaten their identity and beliefs. Both consensus and conflict theories thus provide insights into how societies adapt to or resist social change.

2.4. Fourfold Models of Acculturation

Acculturation is a process involving social, psychological, and cultural changes that occur as individuals or groups adjust to a dominant culture. It addresses how individuals adopt, acquire, and adapt to a new cultural environment as a result of direct exposure to or interaction with another culture (Jacob, 2020).

According to the fourfold model of acculturation, cultural adaptation can occur along two dimensions. The first dimension concerns the maintenance of cultural values and identity, where minority cultures either retain their distinctiveness or face rejection. The second dimension relates to the degree of engagement and interaction with the broader society.

2.5. Social Behavior and Religious Social Behavior

The concept of social behavior refers to actions undertaken by individuals in response to their needs, influenced by societal views, and typically classified into productive, consumptive, and distributive categories.

Understanding and adhering to religious teachings hold significant value for society. Among university alumni, the meaning of religion often becomes more complex, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions. Religious behavior warrants careful analysis, as it shapes religious awareness and experience. Religious awareness arises from cognitive processes and introspection, whereas religious experience is tied to emotional and spiritual sensations.

2.6. Previous Research on Indigenous Religious Adaptation

- 1) Wibisono et al. found that the state continues to treat Indigenous religious followers as "second-class" citizens compared to adherents of officially recognized religions (Wibisono et al., 2020). The study highlights how the state often curtails certain civil rights of citizens who adhere to local or indigenous religions. The similarity with the present research lies in its focus on the position of indigenous peoples in maintaining long-standing religious practices. However, the present study specifically addresses the preferences of remote indigenous communities in adapting to official state religions, focusing on two contrasting cases: the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island (Riau), where the majority of the indigenous population formally adopted Christianity and Buddhism.
- 2) Pesik demonstrated that Laroma believers have obtained legal recognition, allowing access to civil registration, education, and civic participation rights (Pesik, 2024). However, they continue to face social discrimination, as many still view them as heretics. Like the current study, Pesik's research explores the position of Indigenous religious communities. However, the present research uniquely examines the psychological preferences of remote Indigenous communities in adapting to official state religions, focusing on cases from the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island.
- 3) Sulaiman showed that adherents of local beliefs are often forced to select one of the official religions to complete administrative requirements, such as obtaining population documents (Sulaiman, 2016). Despite formal registration as Christians, many continue to practice indigenous rituals. This study similarly examines indigenous religious adaptation; however, the present research distinctly focuses on how remote indigenous communities navigate the choice of official religions while maintaining ancestral traditions in the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed field research with a qualitative approach and an inductive framework. Data were obtained directly from the research subjects through field observations and subsequently analyzed using theoretical frameworks (Moleong, 2005). The research design followed a case study strategy, which aims to understand the dynamics within a single setting, such as a particular location, event, phenomenon, or group (Eisenhardt, 1989). This approach was chosen because it aligns with the research focus on social issues and challenges faced by specific communities.

In this study, a purposive sampling technique was employed to directly select individuals deemed capable of providing relevant and objective information (Palinkas et al., 2015). This technique is commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases. The research sample consisted of 50 participants, including traditional leaders, religious leaders, and

members of indigenous communities from the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island. The selection of these locations was based on the uniqueness of their remote indigenous communities, namely the Mentawai Tribe, which is predominantly Christian, and the Akit Tribe in Rupert, which is predominantly Buddhist. The main subjects of this research were the remote indigenous communities of the Mentawai Islands (Mentawai Tribe) and Rupert Island (Akit Tribe).

Data were collected using three techniques to ensure accuracy and objectivity. First, passive participant observation was conducted by directly observing community activities without active involvement. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out with traditional leaders, religious leaders, and indigenous community members from the Mentawai Islands and Rupert Island. Third, document analysis was conducted on regulations related to remote indigenous communities and national religious policies.

Data analysis employed triangulation by cross-checking information across different sources, methods, and times to enhance validity. The data were further analyzed using perspectives from anthropology, sociology of religion, and public policy studies to comprehensively and objectively understand the dynamics of the indigenous communities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Indigenous People's Responses to Migrants and Immigrant Religions

Indigenous communities maintain belief systems that have been passed down from generation to generation since time immemorial. These beliefs include deities and ancestral spirits whose existence and power are regarded as essential for the survival and well-being of the community. Rituals related to these beliefs continue to be performed today as acts of reverence toward ancestral spirits.

Over time, the islands and areas inhabited by indigenous peoples began to receive migrants from various regions, ethnicities, and tribes. Interaction with migrant communities has significantly influenced indigenous people's perspectives, knowledge, and even religious beliefs. This shift is largely the result of cultural and religious acculturation between indigenous populations and migrants. Migrants introduced their cultures and religions, many of which are officially recognized by the state, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. The arrival of migrant communities brought considerable changes to the lives of indigenous peoples.

Religiously, indigenous beliefs differ substantially from those of migrants. Indigenous communities continue to adhere to supernatural forces—whether rooted in religious teachings or drawn from nature—as their primary sources of support and protection. Belief in supernatural powers is often associated with objects, places, and animals. As a result, many rituals are performed to harmonize human life with these forces, which are seen as capable of bringing both prosperity and misfortune.

While traditional practices persist, the monotheistic framework embraced by migrant religions often contrasts sharply with indigenous cosmologies. Given these differences, both indigenous peoples and migrant communities must engage in processes of mutual adaptation.

Every citizen in Indonesia is required to possess an Identity Card (Kartu Tanda Penduduk, or KTP) as proof of citizenship. Possessing a KTP facilitates access to various administrative processes, including marriage registration. One requirement for obtaining a KTP is declaring adherence to one of the five official religions: Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism.

Among indigenous groups that continue to adhere to ancestral beliefs are the Akit and Mentawai tribes. These tribes are classified as part of the Remote Indigenous Communities (KAT) and live within multicultural environments, coexisting with both indigenous and migrant communities. Thus, two types of communities—indigenous and migrant—coexist within the same social space. Although the coexistence of these groups has the potential to create competition and conflict, interviews indicate that indigenous communities have generally welcomed migrants with open arms.

Importantly, not all indigenous individuals randomly select an official religion. Instead, they carefully consider the doctrines and practices of each faith to determine which aligns most closely with their ancestral teachings. Even when choosing to affiliate with an official religion formally, many continue to uphold their traditional beliefs. This phenomenon reflects the concept of biculturalism. Biculturalism refers to the comfort and proficiency individuals experience in maintaining their heritage culture alongside the culture of the broader society in which they live (Schwartz & Unger, 2010).

Unlike syncretism, which entails the blending of religious elements into new, abstract forms in pursuit of harmony, biculturalism does not produce a singular, new cultural identity. Hammons observes that many Mentawai people today continue to practice the local *Sabulungan* tradition while simultaneously adhering to an official religion such as Protestantism, Catholicism, or Islam (Hammons, 2016). This dual practice is considered natural. In contrast, those who refuse to affiliate with an official state religion and practice only their traditional beliefs are often viewed as opposing the state.

The indigenous Akit and Mentawai peoples demonstrate openness and tolerance toward migrants and the religious teachings they bring. They are willing to adapt, share cultural knowledge, and maintain intergroup communication. Although many have adjusted administratively to state-recognized religions, ancestral beliefs continue to be respected. Both ordinary citizens and religious leaders have affirmed that the acceptance of official religions has largely occurred without conflict, illustrating a strong spirit of peaceful coexistence and cultural diversity.

4.2. Conflicts and Social Tensions between Indigenous Peoples and Migrants

Conflict is a social process involving individuals or groups who challenge one another through the threat of violence (Narwoko & Suyanto, 2005). According to Dahrendorf, the emergence of conflicts of interest arises among people who live together and establish forms of social organization, where some individuals occupy positions of authority and command, while others are subject to their directives (Pruitt & Kim, 2004).

The integration of the Akit tribe, as an indigenous group, with migrant communities living in the same environment has not resulted in significant conflict or friction between the two groups. Although the Akit people reside in a relatively remote area, this does not imply that they are primitive or disconnected from societal advancements. On the contrary, the Akit community has demonstrated the ability to adapt to social changes and even occupy important positions, while still maintaining pride in their indigenous identity.

In contrast, the process of migrant acceptance among the Mentawai people was not initially smooth. The introduction of Christianity in the Mentawai Islands began in the 19th century when Pastor August Lett initiated the spread of Christian teachings. Over time, the indigenous Mentawai gradually began to accept and adopt various religious teachings, particularly Christianity and Islam. Religious leaders, such as Christian missionaries and *da'i* (Islamic preachers), actively propagated their respective faiths among the local population. The

acceptance of these teachings depended largely on the willingness of the indigenous people and the ability of religious leaders to introduce new religious concepts without coercion. Consequently, religious conversion occurred based on voluntary acceptance rather than force.

4.3. Social Cohesion between Indigenous and Migrant Communities (Mentawai and Akit)

Social cohesion reflects a state of integration characterized by fusion, harmony, and cooperation, as well as mutual adaptation, assimilation, and accommodation. In social harmonization, interactions or reciprocal relationships are essential within the social process. Individual social interaction plays a critical role in realizing social harmonization within a broader social system. The presence of social cohesion determines the speed at which a society achieves social welfare.

In the Mentawai community on Siberut Island, social capital is relatively high, although the overall level of social welfare remains low compared to the Indonesian population in general. This discrepancy is closely related to the differing standards of welfare among various ethnic groups in Indonesia. The common assumption that higher social capital correlates directly with better human development outcomes is challenged by the case of the Mentawai community, where this relationship does not consistently apply.

The development approach often adopted in the Mentawai community tends to disregard existing local value systems and norms. In some cases, religious rituals performed by the community are prohibited, and ceremonial tools are destroyed. Development paradigms that regard local culture as an impediment to progress have, in many instances, resulted in apathy, identity loss, and feelings of inferiority when interacting with members of other ethnic groups (Erwin, 2007).

The pattern of social relations established by the Mentawai community on Siberut Island is distinctive and serves as a unique survival strategy. The social relationships among community members and with their natural environment, developed over generations, are imbued with profound meaning and rooted in local wisdom. The value system and norms governing human interaction and environmental stewardship generate collective social energy, which the Mentawai people use to navigate various societal challenges. Mutual trust extends across cultural boundaries, and local ethnic-based institutions hold considerable potential for contributing to future development in Mentawai.

Meanwhile, the Akit tribe is one of the groups classified as part of the Remote Indigenous Community (KAT). The Akit people, also referred to as *Orang Akit* or *Orang Akik*, are a social group residing in the Long Forest area and along the coast of Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province. The name "Akit" was attributed to this community because much of their traditional livelihood activities historically took place on rafts.

Today, many Akit community members work as manual laborers in several *panglong* (charcoal kitchens) operating in and around their villages. Charcoal production has become their primary source of livelihood, as the natural resources they once relied upon are no longer sufficient to meet their daily needs. Members of the Akit community harvest mangrove wood not only for direct sale but also for charcoal manufacturing, demonstrating a livelihood adaptation to environmental changes.

4.4. Adapting Cultural Components

The encounter between indigenous and migrant religions and cultures inevitably influences the cultural components of both groups. These cultural components provide a lens through which collective changes can be observed, either within smaller structures of the original society

or among individuals. Cultural contact affects various aspects of heritage, both tangible and intangible.

The cultural wealth of remote indigenous peoples in the Mentawai and Rupert Islands embodies these cultural components. The arrival of migrants, coupled with modernization and globalization, has significantly impacted these components, leading to both changes in form and efforts to preserve traditional practices. Belief in divinity remains an integral part of the cultural identity of every indigenous community.

Field observations by the research team reveal that cultural contact between remote indigenous communities and the outside world has resulted in significant transformations of their cultural components. In the Akit community, tangible changes can be seen in traditional wedding ceremonies, which have been combined with national religious rituals; in the use of ancestor worship tools modified with modern equipment and materials; and in the adoption of common Indonesian names such as Amir, Agus, Anto, and Udin.

Reports from the UPT Disdukcapil of Rupert Sub-District indicate that some indigenous individuals still marry according to traditional customs rather than the administrative provisions required for state-recognized religious ceremonies. This practice poses challenges for Disdukcapil in processing official population documents. In response, village officials—particularly in villages led by Akit tribal leaders, such as Dungun Baru and Hutan Panjang—have initiated the issuance of legal-formal documents to recognize marriages conducted according to *adat* (customary law) rather than formal religious rules. These villages are the only ones in Rupert and North Rupert sub-districts where the village heads are from the Akit tribe, allowing for this accommodation.

Similar processes of cultural change are evident among the indigenous people of the Mentawai Islands. Cultural contact with the outside world and migrant cultures has significantly influenced Mentawai traditions. A notable example is the transformation of cosmological traditions associated with *Arat Sabulungan*, including body painting (tattoos), piercing, and traditional clothing. According to Coronese, government policies limiting the practice of *Arat Sabulungan* have adversely affected the preservation of original belief systems among the Mentawai people (Coronese, 1986). Yulia et al., further argue that the imposition of dominant cultural norms has contributed to the erosion of both tangible and intangible cultural heritages in the Mentawai Islands (Yulia et al., 2018). These restrictive policies, formalized under the Ministry of Environment and Forestry regulations, have persisted over time and have often involved coercive measures.

In 1954, a meeting involving representatives of Christianity, Islam, and *Arat Sabulungan* in the Mentawai Islands served to legitimize the banning of *Sabulungan* practices and beliefs. This initiative was motivated by the state's efforts to align religious practices with the ideological framework of the Indonesian nation, particularly the recognition of the Supreme Precept of Godhead. Such state domination, characterized by acts of discrimination and coercion, led to ideological conflict between the government and the Mentawai people, especially on Siberut Island (Glossanto, 2023). The Meeting of Three Religions represented the state's broader strategy to homogenize religion and beliefs, a process institutionalized with the establishment of the Pakem Interdep Committee (Interdepartmental Supervisory Committee on Community Beliefs) during the administration of Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo (1953–1955).

These developments indicate that the Mentawai indigenous people initially had a strong attachment to the traditions and beliefs of *Arat Sabulungan*. However, with the arrival of migrants and the central government's policy of religious homogenization during the 1950s, this attachment gradually weakened. Informants in the Mentawai Islands emphasized that religious

life there is currently peaceful and characterized by a high degree of tolerance toward minority religions. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this peaceful coexistence is the result of a long and complex process that began with the arrival of the first migrants and the dissemination of new religious frameworks.

In contrast, the indigenous Akit community has not experienced state-imposed coercion regarding their religious or cultural practices. However, the absence of clear regulatory protections for indigenous rights has contributed to the gradual adaptation of Akit cultural practices toward mainstream religious and cultural norms.

4.5. Modernization and State-Recognized Religion in Erasing the Original Beliefs of Remote Indigenous Communities

The literature review reveals that much of the discourse focuses on the dichotomy between indigenous peoples and migrants. It examines how indigenous communities strive to maintain their cultural identities, cultural heritages, and customary rights over ancestral lands and territories, particularly forests and their sustainability. Additionally, it explores how customary power structures have been undermined by state entities operating within national legal and normative frameworks. Modernization, neoliberalism, and capitalism frequently clash with the traditional values and ways of life of remote indigenous communities.

Robert van Krieken employs the term *cultural genocide* to describe the systematic destruction of Aboriginal cultural identity in Australia, criticizing the deliberate civilizing offensive aimed at assimilating remote Indigenous peoples (van Krieken, 1999). In this context, safeguarding the freedom and independence of indigenous peoples is crucial to preserving their cultural heritage and identity. Identity, Krieken notes, is partly shaped by recognition, non-recognition, or misrepresentation by others:

"A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them reflect back to them restraints or shameful attitudes or images of themselves. Not recognizing or misrecognizing can cause damage, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning one in a false, distorted, reduced form of existence."

The processes through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural identities are defined are complex, both historically and in contemporary settings. It is misleading to assume that all Indigenous individuals experience or express indigenous cultural identity in the same way simply by virtue of being born into an indigenous community. All aspects of indigenous life—including beliefs, social structures, and cultural practices—are subject to the forces of globalization, cultural exchange, and other phenomena of social change. In particular, the concept of divinity held by indigenous communities is increasingly eroded by the influence of dominant cultures introduced by migrant populations.

4.6. The Process of Socio-Religious Change among Remote Indigenous Communities in the Mentawai Islands

Socio-religious changes in modern society have brought profound consequences to the lives of the Mentawai Islands and Akit Tribe communities. These changes are marked by a shift from traditional agrarian systems to the adoption of formal religions. The transformation also affects the community's mindset and lifestyle, as concepts such as togetherness (egalitarianism), once central to traditional religious teachings and cultural heritage, are gradually replaced by individualistic, egoistic, and increasingly secular attitudes. This trend is largely attributed to the

impacts of industrialization, which accompany broader social change and contribute to the weakening of religion's role in people's lives.

Sacred elements, previously considered integral to traditional societies and serving as sublimation factors for human existence and noble missions, are increasingly supplanted by rationalistic and materialistic values, leading to a significant deconstruction of the transcendental aspects of human cognition.

Furthermore, sectors of society and culture are becoming rigidly separated from the supremacy of noble values and religious symbols once imbued with deep meaning. As a result, collective human life is increasingly perceived as devoid of value and significance. The Mentawai Islands community, once deeply communal, is not only experiencing a metamorphosis from a traditional agrarian society into a modern one but is also adopting increasingly pragmatic behaviors. However, the traditional sacred elements have not been completely abandoned; religious practices still permeate the daily lives of the local community.

In contrast, among the Akit people, social and cultural sectors remain closely intertwined with noble values and religious symbols. In their daily lives, a syncretism between officially recognized religions and ancestral animist and dynamist beliefs is evident. Religion and tradition coexist without a distinct separation. Although they have embraced state-recognized religions administratively, their religious practices remain heavily influenced by customary traditions and rituals imbued with symbolic meaning, such as birth rituals and offerings at sacred sites.

Tribal leaders and their customary roles continue to significantly influence the socio-religious life of the community, with noble *adat* (customary law) values serving as the principal social binder. Importantly, religious differences are not seen as sources of division; instead, tribal affiliation and adherence to *adat* are the primary unifying forces within the community.

Essentially, the socio-religious changes experienced by these communities must be understood as part of human life's dynamic nature. As inherently dynamic beings, humans are naturally inclined to grow, develop, and adapt. Much like a swiftly flowing river, human societies strive continually toward improvement and adaptation. The dynamics of religious understanding among the Mentawai and Akit communities reflect efforts to consolidate and internalize the religious values inherited from their ancestors.

In terms of religious adaptation, imitation emerges as one of the key mechanisms behind socio-religious change. Members of the Mentawai and Akit communities often emulate trends and behaviors they observe in the broader society. Particularly among the youth, there is a tendency to adopt modern practices perceived as prestigious or progressive, gradually moving away from the longstanding traditions and cultural practices that have historically defined the communities of the Mentawai Islands and the Akit people.

5. Conclusion

The socio-cultural and religious changes experienced by remote indigenous communities in the Mentawai Islands (Mentawai Tribe) and Rupert Island (Akit Tribe) reflect dynamic processes of social adaptation following the fourfold models of acculturation, namely acculturation, assimilation, and integration. Although a small portion of the community continues to maintain their original beliefs exclusively, there is no systematic marginalization of traditional belief systems.

Adaptation to state-recognized religions has occurred through a gradual and prolonged process. The Akit people, for example, have successfully blended and adapted with migrant communities without significant conflict or social friction. In contrast, the Mentawai community

initially experienced tensions during the introduction of Christianity in the 19th century, when missionary August Lett began to spread Christian teachings, which were not immediately accepted by the local population. Over time, however, integration was achieved through persuasive approaches from the government and the community's ability to adapt to new religious frameworks.

The findings of this study highlight the critical importance of establishing formal legal recognition of indigenous beliefs as part of efforts to protect the cultural identities of remote indigenous communities and as an expression of respect for Indonesia's spiritual diversity.

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7. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest regarding this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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