

Defining Indigenous Social Norms of Water-Related Taboo: Contemporary Social Attitude, Social Harmony and Development

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Abstract

The development has brought social conflict and ineffective development to indigenous Mentawai due to no synchronization between development and the social norms. Unfortunately there is no previous study on the social problem. The study examines the social norms of water-related taboo and contemporary social belief in relation to development and social harmony. The examination is held on water-related taboo due to that water in indigenous life is a sacred and essential part of land and forest. The result is that the social norms cover traditionally very important activities: building traditional house Uma, hunting, fishing, and farming. The norms are in the forms of forbidding doing and saying something. The norms control the social activities and have much influence on social harmony and development. The infringement will cause social conflict and failure of development as occurred in the past. However, the contemporary social attitude on the norms has changed. Some of the social norms are not practiced by the society. For development, it is seriously important to pay attention to the norms still fanatically practiced by the society in order to keep social harmony and sustainable development of the indigenous society.

Keywords: *Taboo, social harmony, contemporary social attitude, development, and indigenous Mentawai.*

1. Introduction

The development of indigenous society has caused social conflict which leads to failure of the development¹¹. In Mentawai, the studies on development conducted by Sibajak¹², Siahaan¹¹, and Elfiondri⁴ show that the development has negative effects on Mentawai society one of which is social conflict. The effect is not only on the society, but on the development itself as well. The development becomes ineffective⁶. The social conflict and ineffective development occur due to the ignorance of social norms, mainly social norm of taboo in relation to the development^{5,9}. For development, it is seriously important to pay attention to the norms of taboo in order to keep social harmony and sustainable development of the indigenous society. Unfortunately there is no previous study on social norm of taboo in relation to development in Mentawai culture. The paper examines the social norms of water-related taboo and contemporary social belief in relation to development and social harmony. Water-related taboo becomes focus on the study due to that water in indigenous life is a sacred and essential part of land and forest. Previous study on the social norm of taboo is held by Schefold¹³, but the study is limited to the social norm of taboo focused on food regardless of development and social harmony. In other cultures, many researchers have done the study on social norms in relation to the development like the study on social norms to protect culture from the effect of development⁷ and Humpage¹⁰, the social norm-based policy for the development of indigenous sovereignty and mitigation of climate change³, social norm for health², waste and water management based on social norm of tradition¹, and social norms for forest conservation⁸.

2. The Social Norms of Water-Related Taboo

The social norms of water-related taboo involve traditionally very important activities: building traditional house *Uma*, hunting, fishing, and farming. The norms are realized in the forms of being forbidden doing and saying something which has sanction, subject, origin, and places as pictured in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of water-related taboo

No	WATER-RELATED TABOO	FORM	SUBJECT	SANCTION	ORIGIN	ACTIVITY / PLACE
1	Taking a bath	Action	Hunters	Fail to get hunting-result / powerless poison on bow	Aratsabulungan*	Hunting
2	Doing sexual Intercourse	Action	Married couples	Spiritual anger / disaster	Aratsabulungan	Building Uma
3	Washing hair	Action	Hunters	Fail to get hunting-result	Aratsabulungan	Hunting
4	Washing hair	Action	Married couples	Spiritual anger / disaster	Aratsabulungan	Building Uma
5	Farming in area of monkey nest	Action	Everyone	Water-mother anger	Aratsabulungan	Farming / monkey nest
6	Extinguishing fire with water	Action	Everyone	Fever / decease	Aratsabulungan	Any activity / place
7	Discarding hot water	Action	Everyone	Fever / decease	Aratsabulungan	Any activity / place
8	Discarding rubbish into river	Action	Everyone	Natural disaster & water-mother anger	Aratsabulungan	River
9	Cutting trees destroying river	Action	Everyone	Natural disaster & water-mother anger	Aratsabulungan	River-surroundings
10	Kneading wet clothes	Action	Head of Family	Loss and damaged casting net	Aratsabulungan	Fishing
11	Screaming near the river	Verbal /Saying	Everyone	Water-mother anger	Aratsabulungan	River

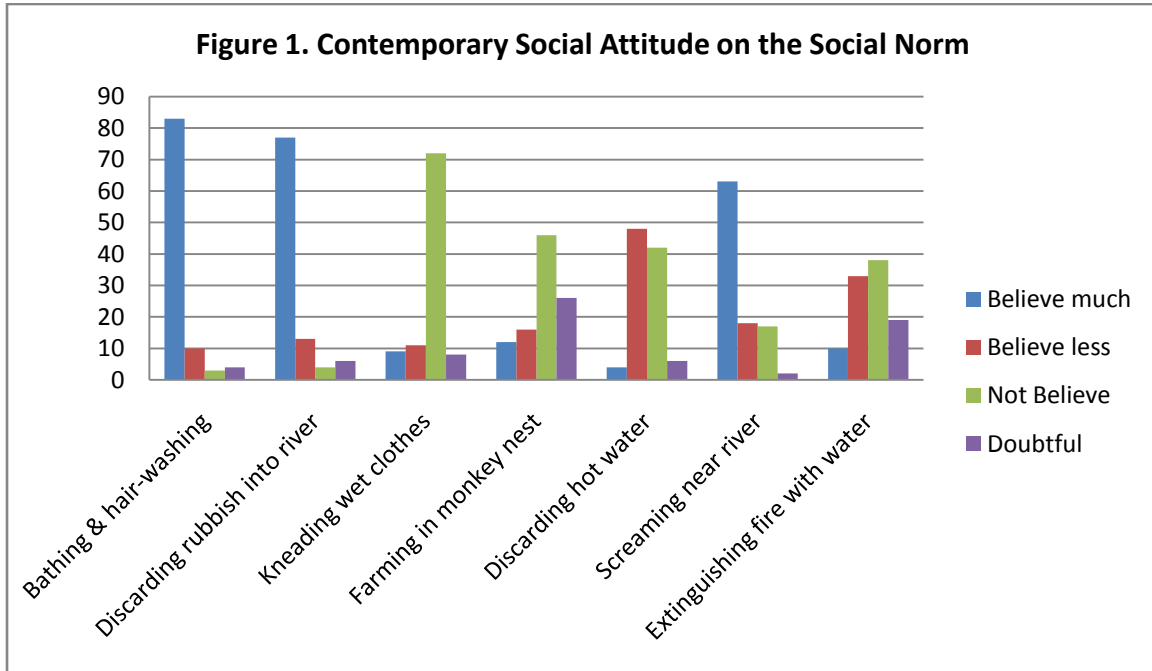
*/Traditional religious belief of indigenous Mentawai

There is the only one taboo of being forbidden to say which is found so far, that is 'to scream near river'. The indigenous societies as subject of taboo are strongly forbidden to scream near river due to that river is home for water. Screaming near the river means insulting mother of water. The indigenous society strongly obeys the taboo due to that water is a sacred and essential part of land and forest. The water, land, and forest in accordance with the indigenous belief are tree-in-one element from which the earth is created by god. Because of the belief, it is a taboo to foul, to pollute, or to spoil water resources. The actions like discarding rubbish into river, polluting river with industrial waste, and heaping piles on river are forbidden because they are water-spoiling actions. Water and its resources are protected spiritually in the indigenous culture. Activity of farming in the area of monkey-nest also includes as the water-destroying action. Monkeys make their nest in the forest. Forest, besides being included in the three-in-one element of the earth origin, is water resource. So, it is taboo to farm in the areas of the monkeys' nests as it is an action of destroying water. Spiritual water-mother gets very angry with those doing the water-spoiling actions. Besides, water may also not be used to extinguish a flame, and it is also forbidden to throw away hot water. Both actions are taboos which must be avoided in the indigenous life. The infringement will bring disaster and fever to the infringing persons as sanction imposed on them. Other taboos related to water are prohibitions to take a bath and wash hair. The actions are not allowed in the activity of hunting. When hunting, there are a number of taboos, but those related to water are prohibition to take a bath and wash hair. Infringement on both taboos can cause failure in hunting, lose of poisonous power on arrow, and it is also considered not respecting ancestors.

During the development of traditional house *Uma*, beside the owners (married couples) are forbidden to do sexual intercourse, they are also not allowed to take a bath and wash their hair. The last water-related taboo found in the indigenous culture is the prohibition to knead wet clothes. The taboo is obeyed by the indigenous society when they are fishing to catch fish or turtle. It is believed that kneading the wet clothes will cause fishing-net and preys (fish, turtle, and others) to disappear. All social norms of taboo are originally derived from the teachings of *Aratsabulungan*, a traditional belief which is not legally allowed to be practiced now.

3. Contemporary social attitude on the norms

Statistical analysis on the contemporary social attitude on the social norms of water-related taboo indicates that the indigenous attitude has changed. Some of the social norms of taboo are still fanatically practiced, and some are not done by the indigenous society. The social norm of taboo to take a bath and washing hair when hunting and building *Uma* is still strongly believed. Almost of the indigenous Mentawai (84%) are agreeing that taboo of taking a bath and washing hair when hunting. Few of them respond that they do not know or doubtful ((5%). It indicates that majority of the indigenous people still believe in the taboo. The taboo is still practiced in regions in which the indigenous live. Taking a bath and washing hair when hunting and building *Uma* is really forbidden. Thus, people are still so fanatic to the taboo that the infringement either by insiders or outsiders will bring potentially effect to the indigenous as the insiders and to immigrants as the outsiders.



The taboo’s strength is different from that of forbidding kneading the wet clothes while fishing. Most of the people do not believe it so much as indicated at Figure 1 (72%) that it is not practiced by them. They people say that it is suggested to do the taboo, but it is not a must. Compared to the taboo of taking a bath and washing hair in hunting, the kneading the wet clothes while fishing is not so stronger that the taboo on fishing may not be practiced. Referring to the statistics-based percentage, contemporarily most of the indigenous people do not practice the taboo of kneading the wet clothes while fishing. It is practiced by few people (9%) in a small part of the indigenous regions.

The changing social attitude also happens to taboo to farm in the indigenous regions in which monkeys live. Respondents in the highest percentage (44%) as presented at Figure 1 do not believe in it so much. Those believing in it are few (14%), and feel doubtful with it (26.7%). Most of the indigenous do not practice this taboo (64% respondents). Only do very few people still obey the taboo (11%). The reducing belief in this taboo according to some indigenous people is in high probability caused by that they begin to be rational and logic in observing the environmental facts they experience. Traditionally it is stated that those breaking this taboo will get punishment in the form of decease, but in fact, they see by their own eyes that the taboo-breakers do not get the punishment.

The attitude change of the contemporary indigenous Mentawai also occurs to the taboo of extinguishing a flame with water and discarding boiling-water. The indigenous do not implement both forms of taboo in their life. Figure 1 shows that very few indigenous people (4%) who still believe discarding hot water as taboo. Most of them do not believe it so much (48%) and do not really believe it (42%). It may be concluded that 90% of the indigenous do not practice the taboo. The same thing also occurs to taboo of extinguishing a flame with water.

The indigenous do not believe (38%), believe less (33%), and feel doubtful (19%). Based on the percentage distribution, it can be stated that 90% of the indigenous do not practice the taboo of extinguishing a flame with water in their life. Most of them state that there is no prohibition to extinguish a flame with water and to discard hot water, and also more indigenous people think that it is not necessary to obey the taboos. Thus, it can be concluded that the indigenous attitude shows explicitly that the indigenous do not behave in the taboos manner. Taboo which is still everlasting in the indigenous life is the prohibition of screaming near the river. It may be said that the indigenous attitude on the taboo is still strong. It does not change. Based on the social attitude percentage on the taboo: much belief (62%), less belief (18%), not-believing (17%), and feeling doubtful (2%), it can be drawn a conclusion that most of the indigenous people are still fanatic to the taboo. (62%). They still believe that water-mother will get angry unless the taboo is not practiced. The fanatically believed and practiced taboos as having been discussed above are the indigenous social norms will have a great effect on the indigenous social harmony and sustainable development.

4. The social norms in relation to sustainable development and social disharmony

The social norms of taboo are strongly related to the social harmony and sustainable development of indigenous Mentawai. The norms which control all activities involving indigenous society and regions of Mentawai are closely related to water, land, and forest. Undeniably, the development connects with land. The land is a sacred part in the three-in-one element (water-land-forest) of the earth creation. In the case, the development has a close connection with the social norms. The social norms play an important role as referential rules for the development and social harmony. In order to get the goal of the successful development and social harmony, it is strongly suggested to do the development based on the indigenous culture in which the social norms exist. Therefore, it is really important to define and pay attention to the fanatically-practiced social norms in order to obtain the goal.

Table 2. The government development policy and indigenous social norms : the case of pkmt¹ & relocation

INDIGENOUS DEVELOPMENT SOCIAL NORM				
Residence				
Residence	:	Location		
<i>Uma</i> ²	Land	Based on Environment and life safety	Based on <i>Mone</i> ⁵ (life earning)	Use of land based on <i>Sibakatlagai</i> ³
Big	Belonging to a clan	Developing a residence – protecting nature	House location near hunting ground	The use of land based on <i>Sibakatlagai</i> 's approval
Long form	Belonging to each tribe – part of the 'mother' clan.	Not damage or destroy water resources	Location near river	
Made of wood, leaf-roof	May be on other clans' land, but with <i>Sibakatlagai</i> approval.	Conserving forest	Location near farms	
One clan with all members live together in <i>Uma</i> led by <i>Rimata</i> ⁴	Living in a place with the same clan			
Building: ritual				

GOVERNMENT POLICY ON DEVELOPMENT				
Residence	:	Location		
House	The 'empty' land belongs to no body.	Based on Environment and life safety in government perspective	Based on <i>Mone</i> in general	Use of land not based on Sibakatlagai
National housing	The 'empty' lands belongs to state	Developing a residence – protecting nature in government perspective	Not consider location near hunting ground	The use of land not based on Sibakatlagai's approval
Made of Coconut trees	Everyone can have house	Conservation in a certain/areas determined by government	Not consider location near river	The use of the land based on state's administration
Zink-roof	State controls and may use the land for public based on state's law		Not consider location near farms	
Small in size				
For nuclear family				
Living in a residence together with other different families and clans				
1)Relocation of Indigenous Society,		2)Traditional house of indigenous Mentawai,		3)Land lord
4)Head of Clan, 5) Life-earning resource				

Table 2 presents the case of government policy on development which is not synchronized with the indigenous social norms on residence development (PKMT). The development ignores the social norms. The ignorance of the social norms clearly brings about social disharmony and ineffective development as occurred in the past. There are a number of social conflicts which occur in Mentawai due to the development policy not based on the social norms. Some conflicts are hidden, and some are uncovered. The very risky conflict is social conflict related to land¹⁴. An example is social conflict of the Development of Isolated Resident Relocating (PKMT) in 1975 which was failed because it was not based on the indigenous social norms¹². PKMT results in several kinds of conflicts like conflict on land-use, house-design, and residence location. The development of residence did not care the social norms of *Uma*-based pattern which regulate pattern of residence and land-ownership in Mentawai indigenous society.

The development opposes the indigenous social norms. Mentawai people traditionally live in *Uma* built on the land belonging to each clan, but the government built houses on the land belonging to other clans and removed the clans by force to live in the houses together. The indigenous people do not live in the houses and the social conflict on the land ownership still remains till now due to the social norm-ignoring development policy. social conflict also happened in 2009 due to the development policy. There are still other development policies which bring about social conflicts which in turn lead to the ineffective development. Thus, in the indigenous society, the social norms actively take part in determining the sustainability of development and social harmony.

5. Summary

The social norms of water-related taboo in Mentawai indigenous culture involve a number of taboos. The norms are originally derived from traditional religious belief so-called *Aratsabulungan*. Contemporarily, the indigenous attitude on the norms has partially changed. Some norms have been not practiced any more. However, it is seriously important to pay attention to the norms still fanatically practiced by the society in order to keep indigenous social harmony and sustainable development of the indigenous society.

The social harmony and successful development are strongly related the norms. The ignorance can potentially cause social conflict which leads to the failure of development in Mentawai.

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