



The Role of *Sikerei* in Preserving Mentawai Cultural Heritage: Between Tradition and Modernization

Anggia Rita Andriana¹, Muhammad Falah Rizky² Arfan³

¹Universiti Utara Malaysia, ²Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University, ³Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin State Islamic University

ARTICLE INFO

Research Article

Keywords: *Sikerei*, Social Identity, Culture.

Received: 2025-12-14

Accepted: 2026-02-13

Published: 2026-02-15

ABSTRACT

Sikerei plays a central role in the spiritual, environmental, social, and cultural life of the Mentawai people, including leading traditional rituals, conducting traditional healing practices, and maintaining ancestral knowledge passed down through generations. This study aims to examine the role of *Sikerei* in the Mentawai Islands in maintaining traditions and cultural values in the face of modernization. Although several studies have discussed the traditional culture and belief systems of the Mentawai people, very few have specifically examined the role of the *sikerei* as the main actor in preserving cultural values in the context of social change and modernization. This research method involved participatory observation and in-depth interviews with 12 participants regarding the daily habits of the *Sikerei* people. The results of this research contribute to enriching the study of cultural anthropology regarding the role of the *Sikerei* in pre[3] serving the spiritual, social, and ecosystem values of the Mentawai people amidst modernization. Practically, this research can serve as a reference for formulating sustainable community-based local cultural heritage preservation strategies in the Mentawai Islands.

*Corresponding author: anggiaritaandriana110800@gmail.com

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Introduction

The Mentawai Islands in Indonesia are a cultural region long known for their strong local traditions and beliefs, including the “*Arat Sabulungan*” belief system, which forms the basis of the social, ritual, and spiritual lives of its people (Agustinus et al., 2024). In this belief system, the *Sikerei* play a central role as spiritual guides, shamans, social balancers, and intermediaries between humans and nature, spirits, and ancestors (Loravianti et al., 2025). Humans, nature, and spiritual entities are understood as subjects that are blessed or possess agency and consciousness (Wahyuni & Sabna, 2025). Most Mentawai people still follow traditional customs alongside their religious beliefs or syncretism (Yuniarto, 2021). The *Sikerei* lead healing ceremonies and the “*Turuk*” dance and preserve ancestral knowledge about

nature, healthy living, and cosmic relationships that are passed down from generation to generation as a symbol of the cultural identity of the Mentawai people (Loravianti et al., 2025). Based on its culture and history, the availability of *Sikerei* is said to be dynamic along with social changes, one of which is the economy related to material needs, including in terms of rituals (*punen*) that include symbolic meanings regarding life and the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Nur, 2019).

Several previous studies have shown that *Sikerei* plays a significant role from a traditional perspective, preserving culture, and interacting with the community to promote health. For example, the study "*Sikerei lifestyle in cultural preservation for sustainable tourism*" explored the role of *Sikerei* in practicing a conservationist lifestyle and engaging in sustainable tourism in Mentawai, ensuring that indigenous cultural values can survive amidst modernization or the push of civilization (Emier Osman dkk., 2021). In the theory of cultural resilience developed by Walker and Salt (2006), a community is able to survive not by resisting change, but by managing it selectively (Pisano, 2012). Furthermore, the preservation of forest-based livelihoods and the openness of cultural ecotourism also demonstrate a kind of hybrid modernity, where traditional and modern identities do not oppose each other in a binary manner but rather interact with each other (Bhandari, 2022). Similarly, further studies examining strategic parameters for protecting traditional *Sikerei* medicine through local tourism have highlighted the relationship between culture and socioeconomic sustainability, focusing on cultural authenticity, youth engagement, and preservation of sacred traditional sites (Rahmanita et al., 2025). Anthropological research also reports that "*Mentawai cultural identity is struggling with modernization*" and is undergoing changes due to global social dynamics (Irwandi et al., 2024). The young generation of the Mentawai are balancing traditional beliefs with world religions, but traditions and customary rituals are threatened by modernization and new values (Fabro, 2025). Even in community service articles, it is stated that many Mentawai students do not understand their identity, thus requiring efforts to strengthen the understanding of traditions among the younger generation (Sabagalet, 2024).

Although several studies have focused on lifestyle, cultural tourism, and the pressures of modernization on Mentawai culture, few have adequately addressed the specific role of *Sikerei* as important agents in preserving their diverse cultural heritage amidst contemporary social challenges and changes (Yudas et al., 2023). Most studies only deal with sustainable tourism or specific rituals, thus failing to provide a comprehensive picture of the importance of *the role of Sikerei* in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, adapting to changing social contexts, regenerating knowledge, and engaging younger generations in cultural sustainability processes. This gap highlights the need for research related to *Sikerei's* involvement not only in maintaining rituals but also at a broader socio-cultural level (Rahmanita et al., 2025). Moreover, one article notes that local Mentawai traditions, such as rituals and culture, are facing regeneration challenges, as the younger generation is increasingly disinterested, which may be due to the influence of modernization (Wijaya & Zakaria, 2023).

The significance of this study is to add to the literature on cultural anthropology, research on intangible heritage, and local-based cultural policy. The scientific benefits of academic research on *Sikerei* will contribute to contemporary literature on the strengthening of traditional values by cultural actors in the era of global modernization, taking into account Indonesia's vast cultural diversity. Practically, the results of this study are highly relevant for policymakers, cultural tourism managers, and local cultural preservation institutions, resulting in a sustainable and equitable approach to preserving culture among local communities (Zulfikar, 2025).

Based on the background and research gaps, the purpose of this study is to analyze the role, adaptive strategies, and meaning of the presence of *Sikerei* in maintaining Mentawai cultural values amidst modernization. This study will focus on three main questions: (1) What is the role of the *Sikerei* in preserving and maintaining the sustainability of Mentawai culture? (2) What challenges do the *Sikerei* face in modernizing? (3) How do *Sikerei* adapt their

strategies to ensure that the tradition of effort remains relevant in the contemporary era? By adopting this perspective, this study is expected to produce comprehensive knowledge that can enrich cross-disciplinary discussions on the function of cultural actors based on the dynamics of rapid social change.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach (ethnographic study). This approach was chosen because the researcher aimed to understand the meaning, role, and cultural practices of *Sikerei* in the daily lives of the Mentawai people, which cannot be measured with numbers. Through this approach, researchers can explore social reality from the in-depth, contextual, and comprehensive perspectives of cultural actors (Siddiq, 2020). This research was conducted in the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra, among indigenous communities that are still actively practicing traditional cultural practices and *Sikerei*. The selection of this location is based on the consideration that Mentawai is the center for the continuity of the *Arat Salubungan* belief system and that the roles of the *Sikerei* are still well practiced in the social and spiritual life of the community (Budi, 2024).

The subjects of this research are the *Sikerei*, who are the main cultural actors and play a relevant role in the social structure of Mentawai. The number of participants in this study was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which means that when additional interviews no longer provide significant new information or themes (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). Overall, this study involved 12 participants, with the following breakdown: five active *Sikerei*, four traditional figures, and three community members from various regions in generations.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with the following criteria: knowledge, experience, and direct involvement in cultural practices in the Mentawai Islands. Research data were collected through several techniques, namely, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The interview process was conducted in a semi-structured manner to explore *Sikerei's* perspectives, experiences, and the meaning she holds regarding her role in preserving culture, the challenges of modernization, and the strategies she employs. Next, observations for this research were conducted directly on cultural activities, traditional rituals, and social interactions involving the *Sikerei* to understand cultural practices in their natural context as performed by the Mentawai. Documentation such as local notes, photos, videos, and related literature on the culture in Mentawai and *Sikerei* were used to strengthen field data.

The data analysis for this research was conducted thematically through several stages: data reduction, coding and categorization, and drawing conclusions and interpretation (Espedal et al., 2022). Data reduction was performed to filter and organize the results of the interviews and observations, followed by the identification of themes related to the role of the *Sikerei*, the challenges of modernization, and strategies for cultural preservation. Subsequently, conclusions were drawn by linking the findings from the field to the theoretical framework of cultural preservation, social change, and local wisdom. The analysis was conducted in stages after data collection until the research was completed.

Result and Discussion

Result

1. The role of Sikerei in preserving and maintaining the sustainability of Mentawai culture

This research demonstrates how *Sikerei* play a role in preserving Mentawai culture through customs, social norms, rituals, and traditional education. The *Sikerei* play a role and act as guardians of the Mentawai regional language, which possesses rich cultural quality. Based on

language expression and communication, the use of certain words such as "*teteu*," "*ama*," "*ina*," "*kebuk*," and "*bagi*" symbolizes family ties, social structure, and the importance of warmth in the Mentawai culture. Thus, language is the most important tool for maintaining cultural identity and countering the impact of global homogenization.

In addition to spoken language, body symbols such as paintings or tattoos on the *Sikerei's* body serve as a visual language that communicates the *Sikerei's* life story, social status, and spiritual path. For example, the *sibalu-balutattoos* worn by the *Sikerei* on their bodies symbolize their spiritual obligations and bonds with the spirits of life. This custom highlights the *Sikerei's* responsibility as guardians of cultural icons that connect the history, present, and future of the Mentawai. The tattoo tradition, a form of visual communication that is deeply meaningful, requires several stages of creation, a lengthy and sometimes painful process for prospective *Sikerei*. The first stage is at the age of 11-12 (on the arm), the second at the age of 18-19 (on the thigh), and the third stage when the individual is considered an adult. Uniquely, the tattooing process is carried out by a tattoo artist (*sipatiti*) who uses a special technique with small needles and natural dyes, thus creating not only a work of art but also a deep spiritual bond. The image below is an example of a tattoo carving on the body of a *Sikerei* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Symbols or tattoos on body parts *Sikerei*
Source: Community Service Team (2022)

Each tattoo carving on the body of the *Sikerei* has a unique meaning. For example, one of the tattoos on *Sikerei's* hand is called the "fishing eye tattoo." This tattoo is usually depicted with fish and dangling hooks and carries deep meanings related to spirituality, natural balance, and social status. This also signifies that *Sikerei's* life is entirely derived from nature.

"Kehidupan seorang Sikerei tanpa tato kurang mengesankan; Sikerei harus memiliki tato dan rambut panjang." (Partisipant 2)

"The life of a *Sikerei* without tattoos is less impressive; *Sikerei* must have tattoos and long hair," said *Teteu* (Partisipant 2)

Among the Mentawai people, tattoos are not merely decorations; they are cosmological symbols that are part of the Arat Sabulungan belief system. The phrase "*kurang mantap*" implies that a *Sikerei* without tattoos does not meet the religious and social requirements, because the condition to become a *Sikerei* is to be tattooed. In other words, becoming a *Sikerei* and preserving this culture is not easy task. This is also in line with what Aman Lepon, the child of one of the *Sikerei*, said:

"Memang tidak mudah untuk menjadi seorang Sikerei, seseorang harus melewati kesulitan terlebih dahulu, dan sebagai seorang anak, saya tidak bisa langsung menjadi seorang Sikerei; jika seseorang ingin menjadi seorang Sikerei, mereka harus memenuhi persyaratan yang ada." (Partisipant 3)

"It is indeed not easy to become a Sikerei, one must endure hardships first, and as a child, I cannot immediately become a Sikerei; if one wants to become a *Sikerei*, they must meet the existing requirements." (Partisipant 3)

Becoming a Sikerei is not a birthright, but is obtained based on customary requirements that demonstrate physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual readiness. This shows that their continued life ensures the sustainability of the Sikerei role thru a sacred selection and initiation process.

In addition, enforcement of social norms (*Kei-kei*) is another example of the obligation of preservation. *Sikerei* acts as a defender of harmony in society and communal ethics, as seen from the taboos during the *Kerai* procedures, prohibitions on consuming certain foods, and spiritual moral guidelines. In addition to controlling individual behavior, these standards protect Mentawai culture from outside ideals that would threaten the established order. These results indicate that *Sikerei* functions as a cultural stabilizer, plays a role in maintaining and neutralizing Mentawai culture, and guarantees its validity in the face of change. The findings of this study indicate that *Sikerei* continues to play a vital role in maintaining the cultural sustainability of the Mentawai people. Rather than focusing on ritual aspects, this role also emphasizes the spiritual, social, ecological, and educational aspects.

In practice, *the Sikerei* is considered the head of traditional ceremonies who builds harmonious relationships between humans, ancestral spirits, and nature through the amanah system *Arat Sabuhungan*. The ritual is led by *Sikerei* become a means of passing on cultural values and collective identity within Mentawai society. In addition, *Sikerei* serve as inheritors and guardians of local knowledge, particularly in the areas of traditional medicine, moral behavior, and environmentally conscious management. Through participation in ceremonies, healing techniques, and traditional activities, this information is transmitted directly to younger generations. As a result, *Sikerei* can continue to act as role models in communal life while symbolically preserving the Mentawai culture. These results show that *Sikerei* has a comprehensive and long-lasting function in the daily lives of the Mentawai people by connecting spiritual components.

2. Challenges Faced by Sikerei in Facing Modernization

This study shows that modernization has presented serious challenges to the sustainability of the *Sikerei* function. Identity conflicts arise from social, economic, and technological changes, particularly among the younger generation in Mentawai. The availability of technology, social mobility, and contemporary work schedules have led to lifestyle changes that move away from traditional customs and relationships with the natural environment. Interest in *Sikerei* regeneration is another problem, which is the *Kerei* process, which requires a high level of dedication, financial requirements (such as owning a pig), a certain age, and individual adherence to strict taboos. Some younger generations view these requirements as unnecessary and burdensome in the context of modern value systems that prioritize practicality. Cultural authority has also changed as a result of modernization, with state education systems, formal religion, and contemporary medical procedures often receiving greater recognition than the individual's spiritual role. *Sikerei* is a result of *Sikerei* gradually being symbolically marginalized, instead of becoming an important player in the value system, *Sikerei* is often viewed as a tourist or cultural object. This information shows that

modernization presents structural, ideological, and technical difficulties that can erode the position of the *Sikerei* in the Mentawai social hierarchy.

This study also shows that *Sikerei* face a number of structural and cultural barriers as a result of modernization. The main challenge is the declining interest of the younger generation in learning and continuing their role as *Sikerei*. Views related to customs *Sikerei* the perceived outdated and irrelevant practices of contemporary life, the modernization of education, and the introduction of global values are all significant contributors to the decline in regeneration. The dominance of formal religion and the contemporary health system, which in certain situations sidelines traditional healing methods and rituals, presents another challenge. According to several sources, the cultural authority of *Siekerei* has experienced a decline in some social structures due to the role of *Sikerei*, which is often considered illogical or even contrary to contemporary norms. *Sikerei* also struggle with a lack of formal recognition in policies related to cultural growth and preservation. Rather than being seen as a set of values within an indigenous community, cultural practices are sometimes positioned simply as tourist attractions. This puts genuine cultural preservation at odds with the administrative and financial objectives.

The results of this study show that the *Sikerei* community does not completely reject modernity, even though it is facing a number of obstacles. In contrast, the *Sikerei* Mentawai have developed selective adaptive strategies. One important tactic is to maintain a forest-based way of life as a fundamental aspect of Mentawai culture while allowing interaction with the outside world through cultural ecotourism. As stated by one of the The decision to remain in the forest has gained social and economic recognition and attracted visitors curious about this way of life *Sikerei* in the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra. *Sikerei* children:

“Kami tidak menentang modernisasi, karena hal itu memudahkan kami untuk terhubung dengan masyarakat luar, sehingga kami dapat memperkenalkan budaya kami dengan lebih baik. Meskipun ada tantangan tersendiri, hal itu tidak mengubah pandangan kami untuk terus hidup secara budaya dan menetap di hutan seperti ini. Justru dengan cara inilah kami dapat bertahan hidup, ya, dengan tetap tinggal di hutan.” (Partisipant 3)

"We are not against modernization, because it makes it easier for us to connect with the outside community, so we can better introduce our culture. Although there are challenges of their own, that does not change our view of continuing to live culturally and settle in the forest like this. This is precisely how we can survive, yes, by staying in the forest." (Partisipant 3)

The statement was delivered with full determination, especially since he is a child of the *Sikerei* people who has experienced modern life and integrated with the general public during his college years. He wants to continue living in the forest because it is precisely a cultured life and preserving the uniqueness of the *Sikerei* people's way of life that is a way to survive and earn income from tourists who come and learn more deeply about Mentawai. Figure 2 shows a discussion activity between *Sikerei* and a volunteer community who want to learn about *Sikerei* culture.



Figure 2. Sikerei and volunteer community
Source: Community Service Team (2022)

The image above shows community-based cultural education activities, and knowledge is transmitted through practical experience, rituals, songs and dances (*turuk*), and traditional medicines, showing that adaptation techniques are also clearly visible. The use of music and ceremonial songs, such as *Urai Ukai* and *Urai*, which serve as channels for transferring knowledge between generations, has been closely linked to this education system. The participation of youth, volunteers, and social media indicates a shift in cultural transmission. This aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda, promoting cultural *Sikerei* through cultural exhibitions, volunteer initiatives, and digital documentation, which are ways to adapt and maintain the edition in a contemporary context.

3. Sikerei Adaptation Strategy: Cultural Negotiation between Tradition and Modernization

Furthermore, *Sikerei* also strengthens the role of women in rituals and cultural education, this is another adaptation strategy that emphasizes how traditional values align with modern ideas about gender equality. This illustrates the ability of *Sikerei* to compromise on morals without sacrificing the philosophical and spiritual foundations of their culture. The results of this study reveal that the *Sikerei* society is not passive in the face of change but has used various cultural adaptation techniques to preserve the meaning of their customs despite facing a number of obstacles. One important technique is selective negotiation with modernization, in which the *Sikerei* society upholds fundamental spiritual and traditional values while being open to modifications that do not reduce the relevance of Mentawai culture.



Figure 3. *Sikerei* introducing traditional activities to the volunteer community
Source: Community Service Team (2022)

An educational and cooperative approach is another tactic, particularly for young people and local communities. To ensure that cultural knowledge is not only transferred symbolically

but also understood contextually, several *Sikerei* have begun to involve young people in traditional rituals and activities using a more dialogical approach. To strengthen the validity of their position, *Sikerei* also adapt through connections with external parties, such as scholars, cultural groups, and regional organizations (Figure 3). These tactics show how *Sikerei* is a dynamic cultural agent that can maintain its cultural identity while connecting it to modernity. As conveyed by one of the traditional leaders in Mentawai:

“Kami memiliki tiga sanggar budaya di Mentawai, termasuk sanggar pasi geu-geu, sanggar bukbuk, dan sanggar bubuakan. Kami menggunakan ketiganya sebagai tempat tari penyambutan saat wisatawan tiba, dan ketiganya juga digunakan oleh anak-anak Mentawai untuk melestarikan tarian budaya kami.” (Partisipan 8)

“We have three cultural centers in Mentawai: the pasi geu-geu center, the bukbuk center, and the bubuakan center. We use all three for the welcoming dance when tourists arrive, and they are used by the children of Mentawai to preserve our cultural dances.”
(Partisipan 8)

This shows that cultural preservation in Mentawai does not only rely on individuals like *Sikerei*, but also on local cultural managers who utilize simple studios as strategic locations to maintain traditional dance practice. It is not only as the cultural identity of the community but also as an attraction for tourists. This is a sign of the enthusiasm of the Mentawai children involved in the process of learning and preserving the Mentawai identity. In addition, the use of dance in relation to tourism is an example of cultural adaptation to modernization, while not forgetting traditional values.

Discussion

The concept of *Sikerei* reflects the position of *Sikerei* as central cultural actors who simultaneously fulfill social, spiritual, and ecological roles within the Mentawai community. The findings that the *Sikerei* act as cultural guardians align with the notion that culture is a living symbolic system that is continually replicated through social activity.

The existence of *Sikerei* cannot be separated from the Arat Sabulun belief, which places humans, nature, and ancestral spirits in a network of interconnected relationships. The rituals performed by the *Sikerei*, such as turuk (a ritual performed by the ritual of worship), traditional healing practices, and the use of body symbols (tattoos), illustrate that Mentawai culture is not merely a legacy from the past, but a guideline for life that becomes a rule and regulates the daily life. This confirms the view (Sapoula et al., 2025) that the ritual practices carried out by the *Sikerei* represent a symbolic relationship between cultural identity and social life in society. Therefore, this concept confirms previous studies that only highlight certain rituals and demonstrate how the *Sikerei* play a holistic role in the social, spiritual, cultural education, and environmental management dimensions. These roles make the *Sikerei* the main actor of cultural stability, capable of neutralizing external influences to avoid damaging the balance of local cultural values.

This discussion demonstrates how modernization has not only brought about technological change but has also created structural and ideological challenges to the Mentawai cultural system. The findings of this study also indicate a decline in interest among the younger generation in the role of *Sikerei*, in line with research (Rahmanita et al., 2025), which revealed that the younger generation is starting to lose interest in rituals and customs. Cultural authority has undergone changes due to the impact of formal religion, public education, and modern health care systems, so that the role of *Sikerei* is considered illogical and insignificant. This situation is also in line with the study by (Irwandi & Taufik, 2023) which states that as the dominance of external values that have the power to change the cultural identity of local

communities, *Sikerei* experiences marginalization of symbols related to this context, but still tries to maintain great legitimacy in several traditional communities. Furthermore, development strategies tend to view culture solely as a tourist attraction, highlighting the tension between genuine cultural preservation and an administrative economic approach. The challenges facing *Sikerei* are not individual; they are internal to the community but also deeply rooted in power structures and policy contexts that fail to adequately recognize and support Indigenous peoples.

This concept shows that despite the obstacles of modernization, the *Sikerei* community is not a passive figure, but rather *Sikerei* as an identified cultural agent, such as the negotiation of changes that remain selective, the involvement of the younger generation, and collaboration with external parties, and supports the theory of cultural preservation, which emphasizes that culture is always in the process of negotiating with the changes of the times. In addition, this finding is also able to expand previous studies conducted by (Emier Osman dkk., 2021) which in the study emphasized that *Sikerei* has a sustainable role in the tourism sector, this is shown by the adaptation of *Sikerei* which is not only oriented towards the economic sector, but also plays a role as a strategy for transmitting values and regenerating cultural knowledge. Educational-dialogical approaches to younger generations are an important mechanism so that traditions are not only inherited symbolically, but can also be understood contextually and it is very important to apply educational-dialogical approaches to younger generations.

Furthermore, it was concluded that direct involvement in networks with researchers, cultural communities, and local institutions also demonstrates the transformation of the *Sikerei's* role from a mere holy man to a mediator across all cultural layers, connecting the traditional and modern worlds. Furthermore, the sustainability of Mentawai culture depends entirely on *Sikerei's* ability to adapt without losing its spiritual and philosophical network from *Arat Salubungan*.

Conclusion

In general, this study shows that *Sikerei* plays a crucial role in maintaining and balancing Mentawai culture woven through modernization, where modernization presents complex challenges from various perspectives, including structural, ideological, and generational, to the cultural authority of *Sikerei*. Adaptive *Sikerei* reflects a dynamic process of cultural control, where tradition is not opposed to modernization in all respects but can instead be applied discriminatively and selectively. These findings complement research that considers *Sikerei* as agents in preserving primary culture for modern social change, which has not been widely studied yet. Therefore, this research is important for studying anthropological development, cultural studies, and cultural recovery.

Funding Declaration

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due ethics related to protecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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