

Attitude of Elders, Youths, and Women of the Indigenous Communities on Water: The Case of Siberut, Mentawai, Indonesia

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Abstract

Clean water was crucial in the life of the indigenous communities of Siberut, Mentawai Indonesia. The water in river, well, and water-containers was polluted. Local government of Mentawai was greatly concerned with the problem. There was no previous study on the communities' attitude on water which could be useful for the government in developing water-management in Siberut. The paper examined the attitude of the indigenous communities on water. The result was that the indigenous attitude was derived from the traditional religion, Aratsabulungan. The communities' attitude consisted of beliefs; water as god, earth-blood, earth-mother, and live being. The communities had different attitude on water. Old generation believed in water as god so much, but the youths did not do. The different attitude was due to education, outsiders, and the converting of traditional religion to Christianity and Islam. In gender, more males believed in water as god compared to females.

Keywords: Attitude, water, indigenous, and Siberut

Introduction

Clean water was crucial in the life of the indigenous communities of Siberut, Mentawai Indonesia. Most of water resources like river, well, and spring were dirty and contaminated. The indigenous used the water resources for washing dishes, taking a bath, washing clothes, and even for drinking and cooking. High pollution on water (85%) occurred in puddle (like river and well) and water-containers due to the way to take water for cooking, washing dishes, brushing teeth and for other uses (EHRA, 2013). According to EHRA, the way was unhealthy behavior of the indigenous when using water for the uses; they behaved in dirty manner such as 32% of communities who did not urinate in a rest-room or toilet, and in village Madobag, 15% of the communities did not defecate in toilet, but in the river, in the bush, or in the wood, and also wasted garbage in any place. They did not use and maintain tap-water pipes of the clean water provided for them by local government of Mentawai. The local government kept taking efforts to provide the clean water for the region which had important role for Indonesia. The government put water-management as its major agenda (Mentawai-Summit, 2013). How was the attitude of the indigenous communities on water?

Water-management for the indigenous was closely linked to their attitude on water (McGregor (2012). It implied that water-management for the indigenous should consider their attitude on water. Their attitude should be understood as they are users and simultaneously act as water-managers. Traditionally in Siberut indigenous communities, the attitude was hidden in the family story as traditional knowledge. The indigenous communities of Siberut were so fanatic to tradition that it was a great challenge and importance to dig up the indigenous Siberut's attitude on water hidden in the family story or traditional knowledge. The indigenous attitude on water was very useful for the local government of Mentawai which was developing Mentawai.

The government could synergize the indigenous traditional language on water (attitude) with the government's concept on water management in order that the water management development for the indigenous could be done effectively and efficiently.

Previous researchers like Absar (2013), Rodamemn (2013), McGregor (2012), Ephraim (2010), Cole (2009), UNESCO (2006), and Akiwumi (2003) held studies on the indigenous attitude (world-view) on water, but their studies were not on the indigenous people of Siberut. The paper examined the indigenous world attitude on water of Siberut indigenous communities. The communities of Siberut consisting of women, youth, and old generation (elders) had quantitatively different attitude on water. The difference was due to gender, age, tradition, education, traditional religious belief, Christianity, and Islam. Siberut indigenous attitude on water had uniqueness and similarity with those of other indigenous communities in the world.

2. Methods

Data were collected by doing survey in Madobag, the biggest indigenous village with the highest population in South Siberut, Mentawai, Indonesia. The standar procedures used in data collection begun with survey on families that consisted of headmen and family members. To collect data, questionnaires were randomly distributed to the headmen and member of the family (100 informants). The headmen like *Rimata* and *Sikerei* were selected as key informants. Culturally important world-view on water (data) were determined and enriched through interview. The deep interview was conducted to have confirmation and to determine the culturally important elements of the indigenous world-view on water. Data were analyzed qualitatively and statistically.

2. Findings and Discussion: Siberut indigenous communities attitude on Water

The Siberut indigenous communities' attitude on water recorded during the survey was classified into several forms. The community believed water as god, live-being, earth-blood, and as earth-mother. The attitude on water was derived from the indigenous traditional religious belief that their god so-called *Sipagetasabbau* brought water, land, and forest down to earth. When Siberut ancestors were looking for a place to live, they found a place on which there had been water, land, and forest. It caused them to believe that water, forest, and land were inseparable three-element unity. The universe was created from the three elements. The origin of water caused the indigenous community of Siberut to believe that water was sacred. Those related to the water-land-forest like rivers, swamps, mountains, sea, spring, and hills were places in which sacred spirit lived. The spirit appeared in the universe in the form of river, lake, sea, swamp, well, and spring. The spirit had responsibility for water supply for the need of mankind in the universe. Siberut society mainly the old generation (elders) still believed water as the embodiment of god. Kyrgyzstan community (Cole, 2009) and Sierra Leone community (Akiwumi, 2010) also viewed that water had spiritual dimensions, a sacred site. Barekese community protected water because water was viewed as spiritual subsistence (Ephraim, 2010). Based on Cole (2009), Akiwumi (2010), and Ephraim (2010), unlike Siberut communities, the three communities did not believe water as god, earth-mother, earth-blood, or as live being.

Thus Siberut communities' belief had connection with god, so-called *Sipagetasabbau* which was represented in the teaching of the indigenous traditional religion, *Aratsabulungan*. Rodamemn (2013) studying Siberut indigenous society also found that the relationship of water with land and forest was closely connected to the *Sipagetasabbau*; forests, rivers, swamps, mountains, sea, and hills were entirely regarded as sacred things. Unfortunately Rodamemn (2013) only stated the connection of the water-land-forest with *Sipagetasabbau*; but he did not discuss how the history on the connection occurred. Compared to Andean community, Siberut's belief in water had similarity to that of Andean community in the case of water origin. Both indigenous communities had the same origin of water – water was derived from god. A little difference was that the Siberut community did not state directly and firmly that water was god, but embodiment of god. According to the Siberut community, embodiment of god was another shape of god. It could be inferred that water was viewed as god. UNESCO (2006) who studied the indigenous Andean society belief in water found that water was god; water was derived from *Wirakocha* (god which created universe) which married *Pachamama* (earth's mother); water was god which appeared in the form of lake, river, sea, and water resources.

The attitude of Siberut community on water was rooted from the traditional religious belief so-called *Aratsabulungan* in which it was told the origin of water-forest-land. Like in Muslim community, the community belief in water was also derived from their religious teaching.

Muslims world view on water was from Islamic teaching (Absar, 2013), while traditional belief of IBesao society on water was based on *Nakinbaey*, spirit of universe (Bang-Oa, 2006). Water according to the Siberut community's belief was important spiritually. The community used water for ritual activities. In Muslim community as studied by Absar (2013), water also had spiritual importance. Water was important for prayer which must be performed five times a day. Before performing the prayer, ablution (a ritual cleansing of hands, nose, feet, head, ears, and face with water) must be done. Without the ablution, a prayer stands void. Besides after urination, defecation, and doing legal sexual intercourse (by legally married couple), Muslims must also wash themselves with water. Water in Muslim community was a symbol of purity and cleanliness. It was the importance of water in Islam found by Absar.

The indigenous Siberut also believed water as earth-blood. The water was the blood which ran into the whole body of the earth. It gave blood to the earth for life in the universe. The water as the earth blood played an important role for the life sustainability of all live beings. Other indigenous society who also believed water as the earth-blood was Andean society. According to UNESCO (2006), the Andean society believed water as the blood of earth and universe; water played as social mutual assistance. Another belief of the indigenous Siberut was water as mother of the earth. Water was food and medicine for the life on the earth. The Anishinabe community also had world view that water was blood; water was to clean the earth and universe (McGregor, 2012). The difference was that the earth in accordance with Anishinabe community was mother of mankind feeding the mankind, while in Siberut social belief, water was the earth mother. The traditional religious belief based-attitude of the indigenous Siberut could be understood through Figure 1.

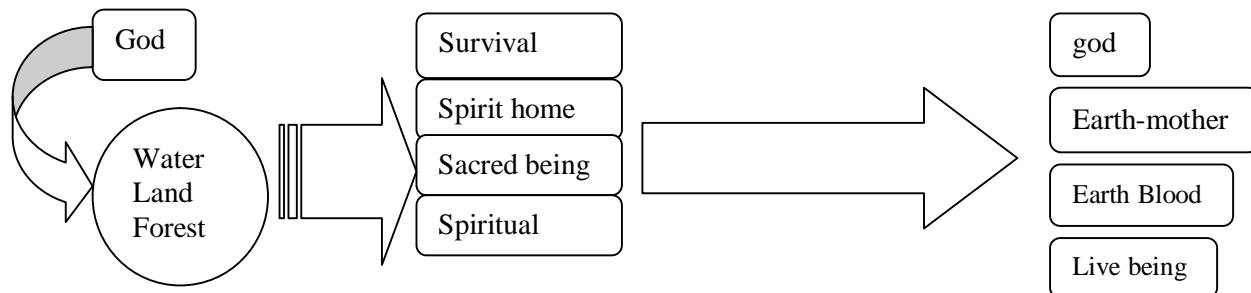


Figure 1: The Indigenous Siberut's Attitude on Water

In gender, male and female had different attitude on water in quantity (see Chart 1.). There were more males than females who believed in water as god. The difference was strongly assumed to have connection with two reasons. The first one was the male position in the indigenous tribe. The male position in the tribe was as chieftain. All the chiefs in communities of Siberut, Mentawai were males. Females in the tribe were only as members of the tribe. The chiefs, elders, and social headmen were males who had more knowledge on customs, norms, beliefs, and tradition. As the chiefs, elders, and the headmen in the society, the males knew and understood more knowledge on tradition than females. It was indicated by some surveys conducted by Elfiondri (2012, 2013, 2015), and Tulus (2004).

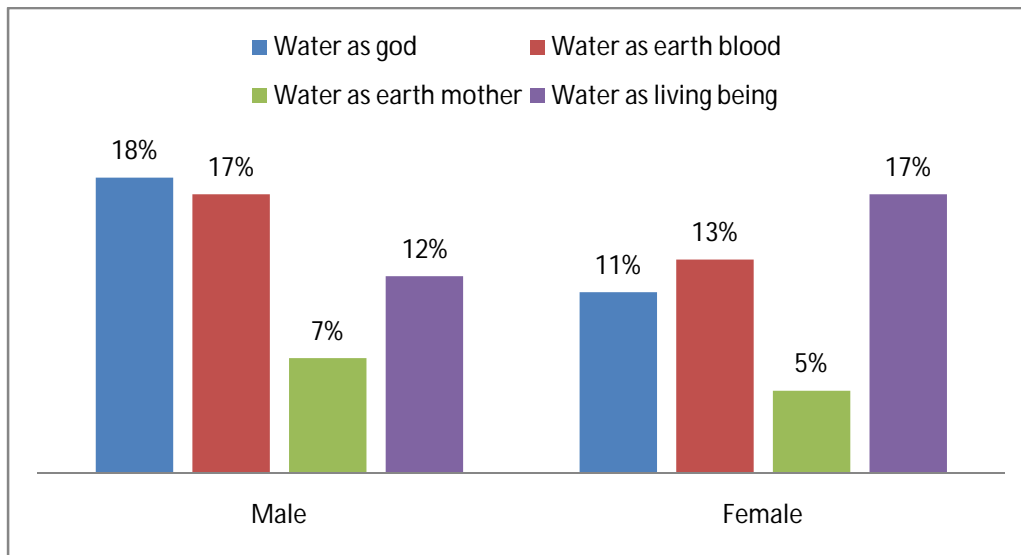


Chart 1: The Indigenous Siberut’s Attitude on Water in Gender

The second reason had connection with Mentawai’s religious belief, *Aratsabulungan*. Historically in 1901, Christian missionaries came to Mentawai, and converted the religious belief to be Protestant Christianity (Mariati, KS, 2014). Since the time, mostly people of Mentawai including Siberut began practicing the newly introduced religion, and gradually left *Aratsabulungan* teachings (Exelia, 2014). Besides practicing Christianity-teaching, few people also practiced Islamic teaching. It was approximately about 5% of Siberut community practicing Islamic teachings. There was a tendency that youth did not practice *Aratsabulungan*. Those who still practiced *Aratsabulungan* were mostly old men (elders). The youth still practicing it was the candidate of the chief of the tribe, the magician so-called Sikerei, and headmen.

The assumption was supported and strengthened by age. Of the four age-groups of the informants (see Chart 2.), the informants of 51-60 years believed very much in water as god (14%), the highest percentage of belief in water as god indicated by the Chart 2.). The ages indicated that the informants were clearly derived from the old generation (the elders). They were those who still practiced *Aratsabulungan* and believed in their god, *Sipagetasabbau*. Their fanaticism to the traditional religious belief led them to have the attitude that water was embodiment of god (as god). The second highest percentage of belief in water as god was also derived from old generation of 41-50 years. Conversely, the informants of the youngest age-group (31-40 year) randomly selected did not believe so much in water as god. Their belief percentage on the chart 2 was the lowest one compared to those of the other age-groups. The chart 2 showed that the youth did not believe so much in the attitude on water as god. Why did the youth not believe so much in the attitude on water as god? The answer for the question was supposed to have relationship with the following contemporary change which happened in Siberut.

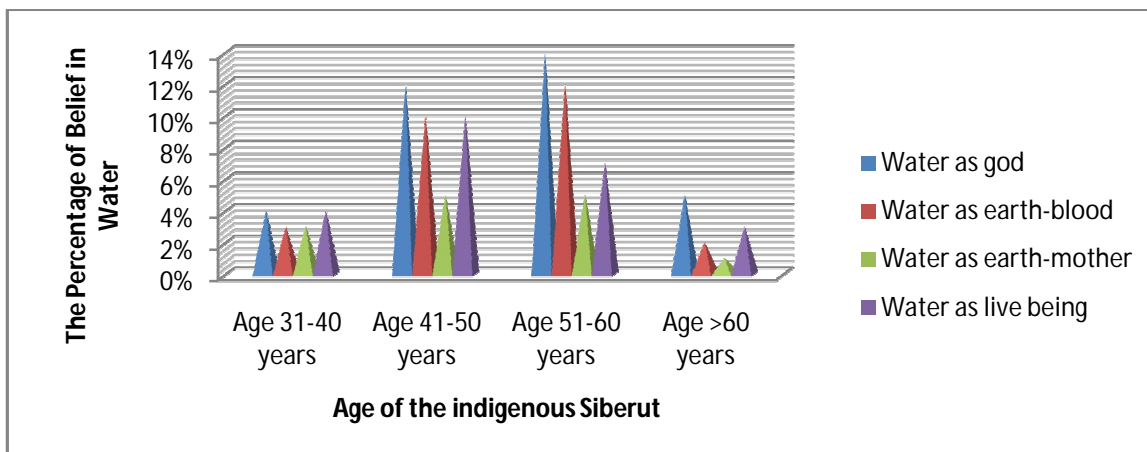


Chart 2: The indigenous attitude on water based on age

As previously described, now majority of the Siberut people were practicing Christian, and few of them were Islam. Both religious teachings might also have effect on the youth’s attitude on water. Few young people believed in water as god, live being, earth-mother, and earth-blood. The young attitude on water might also be due to education. Most of the indigenous youths have gone to school, even though most of them go to elementary school, junior school, and senior high school, and few have gone to university. Even though their village was in remote area, and can only be reached on foot, by motor cycle, or by boat, Mentawai government built elementary school and junior high school in the indigenous hinterland. Data on education gained through informants of the research indicated that more than 58% of the indigenous were educated – 38% graduates of elementary school, 14% graduates of junior school, and 6% graduates of high school, 4% higher education, and the rest, 38% uneducated (see Chart 3).

Educationally, the indigenous attitude on water was that the lower the education of the people was, the higher their belief in water as god. It was indicated by the percentage of informants believing in the water as god. The highest percentage was no-school-informants (13%), followed sequentially by elementary school-informants (10%), Junior High School-informants (6%), and by informants with the education of Senior High School (0%). Data showed that the indigenous who had higher education (Senior High School) did not believe so much in water as god. Based on their percentage of belief in water as god (0%), as earth-mother (0%), as earth-blood (1%), and as live being (4%), it could be generally concluded that their education had a significant effect on the change of the young generation’s world view on water.

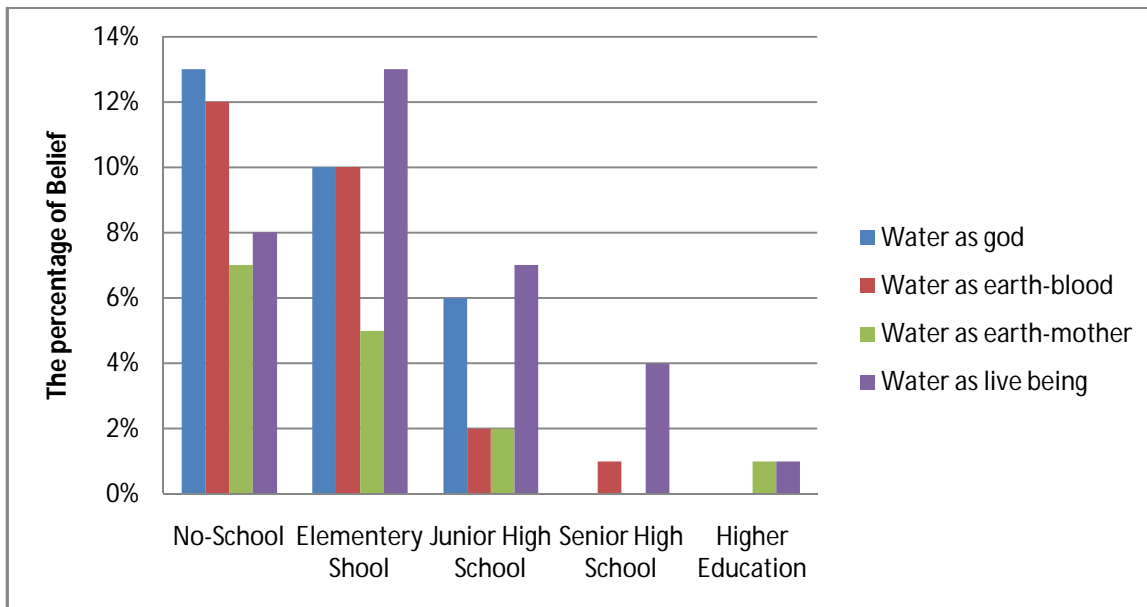


Chart 3: The Indigenous Attitude on Water Based on Education

Another factor which might have changed the young indigenous attitude on water was religious teaching of Christian and Islam. Few indigenous perhaps only the old ones still practiced traditional belief, *Aratsibulungan*. Most did not practice the belief at present. Most of the indigenous worshiped Christian and few do Islam as their religion. In Islam, as stated by Asbar (2013), attitude on water was also linked to religion, Islam. Water was only as a ritual part to clean body before performing prayer, but the water was not God. Like other contents of the universe, water was creation of God. He (God) created all contents of the universe including all live beings. Human beings should protect and preserve any contents of the universe. Water was not inhibited by God, and it was not a sacred one. The Islamic attitude on water was almost the same as that of Christian.

The last factor which might have changed the indigenous youth attitude on water was contact with outsiders coming to visit to their village. The outsiders visiting the indigenous villages were researchers and tourists (domestic and foreign ones). The indigenous youth almost every day got in touch with them. They served the outsiders who wanted to know their culture, social life, tradition, economy, and the beauty of nature in English, Indonesian, or Minagkabau language. Besides socializing with the outsiders, they also got in touch with immigrants in Muara Siberut in which there was folk market, small sea-port, high school, bank, police station. Many immigrants with different tribes – Minagkabau, Batak, Nias, and Jawa lived there permanently.

The indigenous youth, however, still practiced their traditional belief in water as sacred thing. They applied it to a particular water resource, but not to all water resources. They applied it to river (water) used for ritual activity. A river from which the water for ritual activity was taken was still considered sacred. It was strictly forbidden to pollute or contaminate the river. They protected, preserved, and kept the river clean and natural. Trees growing around the river were also conserved by the indigenous. A river they still considered sacred was the river of Kulukubuk Water Fall in the village of Madobag, South Siberut, Mentawai.

4. Conclusion

Siberut indigenous communities' attitude on water consisted of four beliefs in water; water as god, earth-blood, earth-mother, and live being. The belief was derived from the traditional religious teaching, *Aratsabulungan*. There was a tendency that quantitatively male, female, youth, and elder had different attitude on water. Gender, age, tradition, education, traditional religious belief, Christianity, and Islam were factors which contributed to the difference. Most of elders (old generations) believed in water as god. Youths (young generations) did not believe so much in water as god. The different attitude on water between the elders and the youths was due to education, social contact with outsiders and immigrants, and the converting of traditional religion to Christianity and Islam. The tradition positing males as headmen contributed to that more males believed in water as god compared to females.

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