THE IMAGINED RISK:
HOW COMMUNITIES IN MENTAWAI PERCEIVE TSUNAMI RISK
AND WHAT DIFFERENCE SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS MAKES

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Mentawai Tsunami, 25 October 2010

School building washed away by very short lead time tsunami in Purourouwat village, South Pagai - Mentawai
Research sites

Map 1.1 The Mentawai Islands off the west coast of Sumatra
social/sociological perspectives

in defining disasters

• Determining what is a ‘disaster’ is a continuous debate to understand a certain phenomena, conditions that lead to them and the consequences of that result” (Quarantelli, 1998)

• Disaster sociology may avoid overlooking conflicts, domination, alienation, inequalities, gender, oppressions, hegemonies, ambivalences in disaster studies (Hartman & Squires, 2009)

• Disaster sociology is still facing huge challenge against the mainstream disaster theories (Tierney, 2007)
perceptions....
Geo-seismic History

Social History

Oral traditions & traditional religion

Modern literacy and religions

Uma system

Migration from inland towards coastline & scattered houses near fields by kin groups

Individual housings & modern village system

Legend:
- = Recorded Earthquakes smaller than 8 Mw
- = Recorded Earthquakes larger than 8 Mw
△ = Recorded tsunami event with direct impact to Saibi village
△ = Recorded tsunami event with non direct impact to Saibi village

Timeline:

Before Dutch colonization – 1800s

1864

1900s

1905

1915

1950

1960s

1980

1999

2000

2004

2005

2007

2009

2012

2014
Geo-seismic History

Social History

1864 Documented entry of Dutch colonialization
1915 Entry of zending missions
1950 First modernization and ban of traditional symbols
1980 ‘Modern settlements’ and national development program
1999-2000 Early science intervention and research on Mentawai
2010 Mentawai tsunami at the south islands
Traditional Mentawaian settlement in the interior of the islands
Courtesy: Tarida Hernawati S, 2007
Grandfather (earthquake), the squirrel is singing
Grandfather (earthquake), the noise comes from the top of the hills
Grandfather (earthquake), there is a landslide and destruction
The Grandfather (earthquake) of the spirit of the sea shell is angry (tsunami?)
Because the Baiko tree has been cut down
The kuilak bird is singing
The chickens run away
There comes Grandfather (earthquake)
And people are running away
“I don’t know the song. We don’t use the word ‘Teteu’, we use ‘Gukguk’ for earthquake. “

(Sitriyah Sababalat, elder from Sipora Island)
“Now we know tsunami. We didn’t know before. But we don’t know what it is like to experience a tsunami. “
(Andreas, elder in Saibi Village, Siberut Island)
ARTICLES RELATED WITH EARTHQUAKES AND TSUNAMIS IN MENTAWAI
(from 1 January 2003 - 31 December 2014)

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Articles on earthquake and tsunamis outside Mentawai are mainly excluded
Articles emphasizing on rehabilitation and reconstructions post earthquake and tsunamis in Mentawai are mainly excluded

Information and scientific suggestions made mostly after an event occur
Headline, articles and advertorial by scientists, NGOs and media published through the local news bulletin ‘Puailiggoubat’

Risk information and scientific/social interventions made mostly after an event occur
Earthquake is now very threatening to most of communities in Siberut Island. Massive tsunami exercise (Mentawai Megathrust Exercise in 2013) brought imagination that an earthquake followed by a tsunami will actually happen.
I am not afraid of earthquakes. (We have experienced shakes) already since we are still in our mothers’ womb. It is ‘waspada’ that I am afraid of. And people get to mock this word all the time.
Key findings

• A diffusion of interpretations between modern knowledge and the vague cling on traditional views on how tsunamis and tsunami risks are imagined. It provided a reflection of the ‘unfinished project of modernizations’.

• Power/knowledge relations between: The Will to Save Lives and Reduce Risk and community’s knowledge and perceptions on risk
Conclusion

• Risk reduction, based on risk knowledge is among the interventions that are believed to save lives.
• Knowledge does not necessarily create a ‘preferable’ risk perception and actions
• It is nevertheless important to appreciate and take into account the spectrums of perceived risk exist in the life-world of those living with tsunamis in the past and in the future, especially when developing strategies for risk communication
Thank you.
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