

## ***CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN MENTAWAI TRADITIONAL TOURISM COLLABORATION BETWEEN SIKEREI, VISITORS AND TOUR GUIDES***

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### **Abstract**

*The increasing tourist interest in Mentawai culture has generated a number of traditional tourism programs highlighting the customs, rituals, and daily life of the local community. It is in this context that cross-cultural communication is a key characteristic that helps to ensure that tourists from various backgrounds are able to understand and appreciate the true cultural values of Mentawai. This research also serves the purpose of investigating how cross-cultural communication happens in Mentawai traditional tourism through the collaboration of three actors, namely Sikerei as the owner of cultural authority; visitors as tourists; and tour guides as the bridge of interaction between Mentawai culture and tourists. A qualitative-descriptive method of the study was adopted, by conducting in-depth interview techniques, participant observation, and field documentation. There were five informants, with three Sikerei engaged in cultural acts, one person who was an immigrant who handled tourism activities, and the other being a tour guide who actively worked with visitors. Results from the study indicate that cross-cultural communication among Mentawai traditional tourism occurs in three directions: the first is to explain cultural meanings, such as tour guides assist tourists in learning about the significance of Mentawai rituals, movements, and cultural symbols. Second, adapted cultural performances, where Sikerei present their traditions in a manner that is easier for travelers to interpret without losing touch with their core values. Thirdly, cooperation by tourists and tourism operators is to help regulate how culture is brought forward so that it remains interesting while preserving its authenticity and not losing its important meaning.*

**Keywords:** *Cross Cultural Studies, Traditional Tourism, Mentawai, Sikerei, Tour Guide, Cultural Tourism*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Data from the Mentawai Islands Tourism Office, quoted by Antara Sumbar, shows a significant increase in tourist visits over the past five years, namely 45 per cent during the 2018–2023 period (Hapsoh, 2025). This has made Mentawai not only known as a world-class surfing destination, but also as an intensive meeting place between local culture and domestic and international tourists. Mentawai is a destination whose image and appeal are shaped by a combination of tropical landscapes, surfing waves, and the rich culture of indigenous peoples, including the Arat Sabulungan belief system and distinctive body tattoo traditions (Randrianirina & Yuliana, 2025). This growth in tourism has brought significant economic benefits to the community, but at the same time has created new challenges in terms of how to explain the values, symbols, and cultural

practices of Mentawai to visitors who come from very diverse social, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. In the context of cultural tourism, the Sikerei, as the holders of cultural and spiritual authority among the indigenous Mentawai people, no longer deal only with their own indigenous community, but also with tourists and tour guides who need explanations, negotiations of meaning, and packaging of cultural experiences so that they can be understood while still respecting the sacredness of tradition.

More broadly, data from the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2018) estimates that cultural tourism accounts for around 39–40% of total international tourist arrivals and is one of the main pillars of job creation in the tourism sector. Tourists are not only looking for beautiful scenery, but also authentic experiences that give them the opportunity to try and feel the experience of 'living together' with local communities and directly interpret cultural symbols. In this context, intercultural communication becomes a key process that involves not only the exchange of factual information, but also the negotiation of meaning, the reframing of values, and the formation of a sustainable destination image. Studies on cultural tourism trends confirm that the success of a destination in facilitating meaningful cross-cultural encounters is largely determined by the quality of communication between hosts and guests, including the ability to manage differences in language, expectations, and social norms in tourism situations (Richards, 2018).

Previous studies have attempted to examine the dimensions of communication and culture in Mentawai tourism. Elfiondri et al. (2021) concluded that language choice and ways of explaining culture play an important role in shaping tourist experiences. On the other hand, (Osman et al., 2021) described the Sikerei lifestyle and emphasised their role as a crucial pillar of cultural preservation within the framework of sustainable tourism in Mentawai. Recent research by Rahmanita et al. (2025) developed a strategic framework for preserving traditional Mentawai healing practices through community-based tourism, placing the Sikerei as central actors in cultural interpretation and emphasising the need to protect sacred spaces and practices from commercialisation pressures.

Based on the previous studies above, there is a significant gap in the existing literature. These studies have emphasised the importance of tradition, the role of Sikerei, and the need for tourism language, but have not explained in detail how intercultural communication processes take place in daily interactions between Sikerei, visitors, and tour guides in the context of traditional tourism. Therefore, this study was conducted to fill this gap. This study will qualitatively examine how intercultural communication is constructed and negotiated through the collaboration of these three main actors. In addition, this study also highlights and explains the cultural significance of daily activities participated in by tourists together with Sikerei and traditional performances so that visitors can understand them without losing their core values, as well as the patterns of cooperation between Sikerei, managers, and guides in regulating how culture is presented.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication views communication as a process of interaction and exchange of meaning that takes place between individuals or groups with different cultural backgrounds (Chen, 2017). Cultural differences can stem from ethnicity, nationality, or even social class. Intercultural communication occurs through direct encounters between representatives of different cultures, and to a certain extent also takes place through indirect forms of communication (Sattorovich, 2020). In the context of this research, intercultural communication occurs when Sikerei as cultural authority holders, visitors as recipients of cultural experiences, and tour guides as communication intermediaries interact in traditional Mentawai tourism activities to convey cultural meanings, values, and practices to visitors from diverse backgrounds.

Gudykunst (in Liliweri, 2021) stresses that the main aspect of intercultural communication is found in an individual's capacity to cope when dealing with uncertainty and anxiety. Cognitive uncertainty and affective anxiety can be controlled in order to enable an individual to interpret the actions of other people to communicate more efficiently and flexibly. Management of uncertainty and anxiety has been suggested to occur in what Sikerei, visitors, and tour guides do, particularly when sharing the meaning of rituals and modifying cultural enactments to be recognized by tourists, without betraying their basic values.

Milton J. Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity Model provides another angle which adds value to the study of intercultural communication. This model also delineates an individual's development of a perception of cultural differences by gradually moving from an ethnocentric mindset that views one's culture as the major orientation, to an ethnorelativistic one that considers the world's culturally diverse people as something valuable and consequential (Bennett, 2017). This evolution happens on several different stages, ranging from rejection and defensiveness, minimization of differences, then acceptance, adaptation, and integration of cultural values into individual identity.

In a theoretical sense, this model is applicable in explaining the dynamics of intercultural communication, which is relevant for cultural tourism, especially in this study. The interaction between the owners of cultural authority who I call the Sikerei, tour guides, and visitors illustrates a cross cultural learning process that does not always follow a linear fashion but is dictated by the degree of intercultural sensitivity of each actor. This framework provides an explanation for cultural interaction with others builds understanding and highlights the meaning of adapting communication to local cultural values so that they can both be understood and be preserved so that tourists of all cultures can relate.

In the field of tourism, intercultural communication takes place strongly because tourism is a meeting place for a many-variety of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Interactions between tourists, local communities, and the providers of tourism service create opportunities for individuals to gather to have firsthand experience of the history, traditions, and cultural values of the area (Jin, 2024). This can be seen in such a way in the traditional Mentawai tourism presentation of traditional ceremonies, cultural presentations, and narratives of community life that are part of the tourist experience.

Yet, this process itself is often marred by communication barriers, differences in interpretation, cultural shock, miscommunications, and stereotypes that contribute to misunderstandings, misunderstandings of meaning and impact tourism actors (Setiawan, 2023) about the quality of interaction and relationships. These difficulties make sense because of the presence of symbols and meanings of Mentawai culture that are not always easily understood by tourists without some explanation and communication adjustments.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) discusses adjustments in communication styles. Communication accommodation is the process of changing or adapting a person's verbal and nonverbal behavior during interactions, which often occurs unconsciously (Gasiorek, 2016). Communicators will accommodate their speech, writing, and other forms of communication to suit the communicants they are interacting with (Giles, 2016). West & Turner (2017) emphasize that during interactions, speakers modify their speech, voice patterns, and even body gestures to adapt to others. There are several reasons for making adjustments, namely to gain the approval of the other party, to ensure efficient communication, or even to assert a dominant position and maintain a positive social identity. The concept of communication accommodation is relevant in this research to understand how interaction patterns are constructed in encounters between the indigenous Mentawai community and visitors who have different communication backgrounds.

Communication adjustments in CAT are divided into main strategies (Dragojevic et al., 2016). Convergence occurs first when the individual starts changing their behavior to, for social gain, try to become more similar to their conversational partner so that they can build closeness. In this research context, interactions between Sikerei and visitors can be observed through a wide range of communicative adaptation strategies which include simplifying explanations, employing more expressive gestures to support verbal messages, slowing down the communication pace, and gradually demonstrating activities or rituals.

As well as convergence, CAT also identifies divergence and maintenance strategies. It is this point at which divergence strategies are used to accentuate differences while simultaneously protecting the identity of this group, while maintenance is the individual choice to maintain existing patterns of communication without major reintervention (Dragojevic et al., 2016). The above two strategies help elucidate the reasons why Mentawai cultural identity is maintained in interactions, even though communication happens in scenarios that mandate openness and adjustment.

### **Experiential Tourism Concept**

Experiential tourism emerged in tandem with those trends in travel and consumption, as tourists' expectations shifted from the standardisation of sightseeing into the notion of deeper personal engagement. As mass tourism grew, a lot of travelers became unhappy with the passive forms of travel that promoted observation over experience. This changed the character of the contemporary global economy, and became symptomatic of overall shifts to value on personal significance, emotional depth and

memorable experiences. In tourism, destinations began to be imagined not only as physical places, but also as social sites where visitors engage in cultural life, with and of local communities and establish personal meanings of place.

The genesis of experience tourism is in the intellectual ideas of B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, who introduced the concept of the experience economy developed in the late 1990s. They pointed to experiences as a new type of value that differs from goods and services, since they engage people emotionally, cognitively, and sensually (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Their framework to account for entertainment, educational, aesthetic pleasure, and escapism as a critical experiential dimension was subsequently incorporated by tourism researchers. "In this respect, the concept of tourism participation was also being re-conceptualized as dynamic processes generated and enacted through interaction and participation and interpretation, rather than as products packaged into boxes and sold at a box office.

From this angle of observation, experiential tourism is best considered interactive and communicative, as opposed to economic or purely logistical phenomena. The experiences acquire meaning from the social process, having symbols in common and from the interpretative exchanges between tourists and hosts. Cultural practices, rituals, landscapes, and everyday events are communicative signifiers whereby meaning is not constant, but always mediated. As tourists interact with these symbols they interpret and re-interpret them according to prior knowledge, feeling, and ongoing interactions - communication is essential for the production of experiential value.

The inherent intercultural aspect of experiential tourism makes communication theory relevant. The exchanges of tourists and host communities are often characterized by different cultural norms, communication styles, and expectations. Theories of intercultural communication offer insight on what can lead to misunderstandings, as well as how miscommunications could be prevented through sensitizing to the context, the use of body language and framing of cultural context. In this scenario, hosts and guides and cultural mediators also have an important responsibility in the regulation of visitors' affective reactions and cognitive expectations. Their ability to moderate levels of panic and insecurity allows visitors to stay open, attentive and respectful - all qualities fundamental for effective communication in and across cultures.

At the source level of the visitors to the Mentawai Islands, the effect of this experiential orientation, in particular, can be viewed in the fact that they experience the local culture that is not what is being presented at site-based events, but through their activities. Most tourists come with the intention of engaging with villages, living with people and participating in cultural conditions in daily lives and rituals. For these tourists, Mentawai is not an exhibition of cultural variability but an experience of living a common existence in which meaning is created through interaction and co-visiting.

These visitors' interactions are indicators of a communication move from bystander to participant. They seek for relational closeness rather than maintaining a distance, and adapt their communicative practices to context, and instead avoid alienating themselves from local circumstances. This involves sensitivity to non-verbal communication, respect for silence and the willingness to absorb through observation

before we act. Interaction with Sikerei, guides, and local community is thus at the heart of this process, and the act of mediated cultural meanings that will direct participation by visitors. Visitors become gradually included, interactively integrated, by gradual inclusion, and at that point start to perceive cultural performances less in terms of spectacle and more in the realm of 'meaningful' expressions of the social life in which it takes place.

Emotional involvement is instrumental in creating this connection to one's experiences here. In Mentawai, visitors frequently feel insecure as they discover new customs and rituals, spatial arrangement and social rules. Instead of avoiding these experiences, experiential-orientated visitors are often not resistant to them but embrace such as part of learning. Cemented by the serene, methodical ways in which local hosts talk about things, this uncertainty is largely managed so that tourists are allowed to be themselves. This equilibrium allows for visitors to feel somewhat temporarily part of the scene without crossing cultural bridges.

When such everyday activities as sharing food, viewing or helping to prepare rituals or spending long periods of time in the same communal space, tourists feel a strong sense of belonging even for a time. These interactions produce an experiential literacy one cannot extract from visual experience alone. Meaning comes from bodily presence, mutual time, and communicative responsiveness, further establishing visitors' position as momentarily residing among the culture and not merely passing through it.

Concerning communication, the case of the experiential tourist in Mentawai demonstrates that impactful cultural exchange is contingent to interactional skills, respect, and negotiated access. The journey is one where guests looking for the depth of experience are constantly interpreting and adapting while host community managers negotiate communicative situations for recognition without a loss of cultural integrity. Not just for a brief trip within the tourism, but even within such an extended visit, these communicative dynamics are able to move tourists beyond attending the site (Mentawai) to feel involved with the culture and contribute to transforming tourism into a lived intercultural experience.

### **Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory**

The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory, proposed by William B. Gudykunst, explains how effective communication between strangers can be achieved through the conscious regulation of anxiety and uncertainty during interaction (Gudykunst, 1995). The theoretical foundation of AUM stems from the integration of Uncertainty Reduction Theory developed by Charles Berger and Social Identity Theory introduced by Henri Tajfel. As one of the central frameworks in intercultural communication studies, AUM accounts for the antecedent conditions, interactional processes, and communicative outcomes that shape effectiveness in both interpersonal and intergroup communication contexts.

The formative stage of AUM theory emerged in 1985, with a primary focus on improving intergroup communication processes. After undergoing several refinements, the first version -explicitly identified as AUM Theory was formally introduced in 1993. From its inception, the theory was designed as an applied framework aimed at enhancing

the quality of interpersonal and intergroup relationships. In a subsequent development in 1998, the theory was expanded to address processes of effective intercultural adaptation. Core constructs of AUM include the notions of strangers, anxiety, uncertainty, tolerance thresholds, mindfulness, cross-cultural variability, communication effectiveness, and intercultural adjustment.

Central to AUM theory is the belief that interacting with culturally different or unfamiliar people typically elicits both the experience of anxiety and uncertainty at the same time (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The “stranger” framework builds upon the sociological work of Georg Simmel, who described strangers as being in a position both close and far afield where nearness is a word that refers to physical proximity of persons and distance refers to a difference in values, perspectives, or behavioral patterns. While on the in-group/out-group and figure ground, AUM theory posits that there are likely to be initial experiences of heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty among intercultural and interpersonal learners in all initial encounters.

Interactions between Sikerei and visitors in the Mentawai Islands can be effectively evaluated through Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory. Visitors can experience heightened emotional and cognitive discomfort upon initial exposure to an alien culture, marked by specific rituals and bodily gestures and social norms. Such conditions create both predictive uncertainty (for predicting the sikerei’s behavior) and explanatory uncertainty (for interpreting unfamiliar ritual actions), but are part of culturally related cultural experiences.

These different states of emotional and cognitive arousal can be regulated through Sikerei, which helps to maintain effective intercultural communication with others. Instead of throwing newcomers into complex ritual practices that might lead to panic, they move from a more anxious approach to a calm, welcoming, measured interactional style. It has very little physical work (slow movement of the body, soft voice, non threatening body language) that helps mitigate the emotional strain and build safety in that space.

In parallel, the cognitive unease is managed by gradual introduction as well as contextual explanation, with local intermediaries, or observation-based participation facilitating this process. It allows visitors at various stages of ritual practices to grasp the meaning behind them and decreases a reliance on stereotypes or simplified interpretations. Importantly, the Sikerei do not address anxiety and uncertainty in an all-out fashion. By remaining culturally bound and remaining symbolically deep, they maintain visitors’ focus and respect, not making them feel overly emotional or emotionally overwhelmed or distanced.

In this way, by their communicative responses the Sikerei act as competent controllers of anxiety and stress and uncertainty, and this reflects an efficient management of cultural anxiety through indigenous interpersonal practices, as a way that intercultural encounters for the positive and symmetric intercultural communication are consistent with the major assumptions of AUM theory.

## METHODOLOGY

To gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of communication actors in the context of traditional Mentawai tourism, this study employs a qualitative approach. It utilises a constructivist paradigm that views social reality as pluralistic, constructed through interaction, and constantly interpreted by the actors involved. The constructivist paradigm views knowledge not as something that is discovered objectively, but rather as something that is constructed through conversations between researchers and informants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This paradigm was chosen in order to capture how Sikerei, visitors, and tour guides jointly construct meaning around cultural practices and tourism experiences in Mentawai.

This study utilises a case study approach, enabling the researcher to provide in-depth, context-rich explanations so that readers can understand the uniqueness of the case while linking it to broader experiences (Stake, 2005). The study focuses on one case, namely intercultural communication practices in traditional tourism involving Sikerei, visitors, and tour guides.

The research was conducted in Ugay Village, Madobag, South Siberut, Mentawai Islands Regency, where visitors can interact directly with Sikerei and the local community there. Research informants were selected using purposive sampling with the main criteria being that they must be directly involved in traditional Mentawai tourism practices and be key players in the process of intercultural communication. Informants in this study included: (1) Sikerei Aman Lepon as the cultural authority and main performer of rituals that are the core of tourist attractions; (2) tour guide Imron Satya, who acts as a communication liaison between Sikerei and tourists, as well as managing interactions in the field; and (3) several tourists who were visiting Ugay Village for cultural tourism at the time of the study, as the recipients and interpreters of cultural messages.

Data collection was conducted over two days, namely on 24–25 November 2025, combining in-depth interviews and direct observation in the field. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner using flexible question guides, allowing researchers to explore the experiences, interpretations, and meanings conveyed by informants while also allowing space for new themes to emerge (Moleong, 2018). In addition, the researchers also conducted direct observations to experience first-hand the social situation being studied to understand the cultural meanings embedded in everyday practices (Yin, 2009). The researchers were directly involved throughout the series of traditional tourism activities, from the arrival of tourists, the introduction process, the preparation of performances, the implementation of rituals by the Sikerei, to informal interactions after the activities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the success of cultural interaction in Mentawai does not occur naturally, but rather through the collaboration of three main actors: Sikerei, tour guides, and tourists. Each actor plays a complementary role that ultimately shapes a meaningful tourist experience and strengthens intercultural understanding.

## 1. Sikerei and the Local Community as Bridges of Intercultural Communication

Sikerei is at the heart of the social structure and cosmology of the Mentawai community. He doesn't only provide healing services, he is also a guardian and heir to local knowledge, spiritual values, the traditions which go with him and which have been handed down from one generation to generation from Arat Sabulungan philosophy. In this faith the nature, humans, and ancestral spirits are considered intertwined with each other and Sikerei is called as a mediator to keep all three relationships in balance (Nur , M., 2025).

Sikerei enjoy high status and high moral authority in social life. They not only heal physical and non-physical diseases based on rituals but actively participate in community life as well: the life-cycle ceremony, the time of hunting and planting, and the peace within the uma group is also maintained. This job establishes that the role of Sikerei is more than just in health, but also encompassing the integrated social, ecological and spiritual dimensions.

In the context of cultural tourism, Sikerei plays a strategic role as a cultural host and mediator of intercultural communication. He acts as a figure who bridges the differences in language, value systems, and perspectives between local communities and tourists. Through narrative explanations, symbols, and adapted ritual practices, Sikerei creates a warm, dialogical, and inclusive cultural encounter without losing the essence of traditional Mentawai values (Delfi, et al., 2025).

Sikerei serves a strategic important role in cultural tourism as a cultural host and facilitator of intercultural communication. His role is to represent the language and value divide, he represents the viewpoint of local peoples, not simply that of the tourist. By using narrative explication, symbols, and modified ritual ways, Sikerei generates a warm, conversational and inclusive cultural event while preserving the value of traditional Mentawai tradition

Despite differences in language, customs, and cultural backgrounds, tourists feel that communication in Mentawai is natural, fluid, and accepting. The Sikerei and local communities welcome tourists with warmth and friendliness, reflected in nonverbal greetings such as smiles, eye contact, and open body language. This initial form of communication plays an important role in building a sense of security and trust, so that tourists feel accepted as part of the local community's social life.

Furthermore, this openness is manifested through invitations to tourists to participate in the daily activities of the community, such as hunting, processing sago, or simply chatting casually in an uma (traditional Mentawai house). This involvement not only strengthens social interaction, but also opens up space for direct cultural exchange. Through shared experiences in an informal and egalitarian context, the boundaries between "host" and "guest" become increasingly fluid, allowing intercultural communication to develop in a more equal, intimate, and meaningful way.



Figure 1: Sikerei family

Source: Personal documents

These findings are in line with the intercultural communication theory developed by Ting-Toomey & Dorjee (2019), particularly the concept of other-oriented communication. This concept emphasizes the importance of focusing on the comfort, needs, and perspectives of the other party in cross cultural interactions. In the Mentawai context, Sikerei demonstrates this ability through an accepting attitude, a non-intimidating approach, and active efforts to reduce tourists' psychological barriers. This orientation allows tourists to feel valued and safe to engage in communication and cultural activities that previously felt unfamiliar.

In addition, the interaction patterns that are established can also be explained through Communication Accommodation Theory developed by Giles. In its development, this theory emphasizes the convergence strategy, which is the adjustment of communication styles to create closeness and reduce social distance in interactions between individuals and between cultural groups (Giles, 2016; Giles & Ogay, 2020). This adaptation is evident in the way the Mentawai people use expressive body language, provide explanations step by step, and demonstrate cultural practices directly so that visitors can easily understand them.

Thus, the role of Sikerei and the local community cannot be positioned as parties who are merely “displayed” in tourism activities. Instead, they function as communicative actors who actively build bridges of intercultural communication. Through an open, accommodating attitude that is oriented towards the comfort of

others, the space for interaction becomes more equal and meaningful. This process strengthens tourists' cross cultural understanding and contributes directly to the quality of the tourist experience and the success of intercultural communication in Mentawai.

## 2. Mentawai Tribe Tour guide as Intercultural Communication Facilitators

A tour guide acts as a crucial bridge of intercultural communication when facing differences in language, values, and norms between foreign tourists or from outside the region with the Mentawai indigenous people. The Mentawai tribe is known to have strong local traditions and systems of wisdom, such as the structure of daily life and social rituals rooted in the values of collectivism, customs, and their traditional beliefs such as *paruruk*, *tulou*, and *punen* that reflect harmony and brotherhood in the life of their community (Yuniarto, 2021). When a tourist tour is carried out in the hinterland of Mentawai, the tour guide must be able to translate this complex cultural meaning into language and terms that tourists can understand without changing the essence of the culture itself. As shown in the research on the relationship between Mentawai tradition and tourism English, the proper and sensitive use of English by guides can increase the involvement of tourists and their intention to return, while minimizing communication barriers due to language differences (Elfiondri et al., 2021). This is where the role of intercultural communicators is very important, because tour guides not only convey information, but also articulate local values, social conventions, and cultural norms so that tourists understand the social context. Thus, they not only learned about Mentawai customs cognitively, but also arranged their experiences in a respectful way, which ultimately enriched the interaction between two culturally different parties.

In managing the awkwardness and uncertainty that arises from this interaction, the theory of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) is very relevant to be applied. AUM theory developed by William B. Gudykunst explains how individuals involved in intercultural communication manage anxiety and uncertainty in order to interact effectively (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Foreign or domestic travelers often enter a completely new situation, where they do not fully understand social rules, spiritual beliefs, or local customs.

If the tour guide does not manage this uncertainty, it can lead to awkwardness, misinterpretation, even social tension. Good guides applying the AUM model will actively predict and accommodate the uncertainty by giving relevant information and explaining cultural values, but also minimizing anxiety in a more human way with a very understanding communication skill. As a result of these experiences, it establishes more familiarity between tourists with local culture, which can be easier for tourists to connect with by understanding the Uma social structures and *punen* rituals that may be unfamiliar to them. As Gudykunst (2003) says, AUM helps us to show that the more a tour guide can handle this anxiety and uncertainty, the more the interactions are harmonious, respect each other and minimize the cultural misunderstandings, so that authentic and meaningful travelling experiences can be reached for both sides of the conversation.

The tour guide in Mentawai province in rural areas are agents not just for translation but also fulfilling the practical needs of tourists to make their travel experience work as smoothly and efficiently as possible for everyone. In the daily operational aspect, a guide operates the complex logistics of transportation from boat to boat, accommodation to the Uma or homestay, food arrangements according to preferences and diet, emergency medical readiness, as well as sanitation access. This needs to be tailored to individual island context and local community capability. This surfing experience is prevalent in Mentawai tourism, which requires coordinating with wave time, equipment and sea safety (Awaliya, 2024). Experienced guides try to integrate modern safety principles with local customs and habits in a balanced manner so that tourists will still feel safe and not violate the customs of the local community. However, when language is delivered in a clear form with explanatory information, the level of comfort for tourists may be higher and the difficulty of misunderstanding norms and daily practice of the community will be lessened.

Instead of only meeting immediate needs, the guide is also an enabler for the expectation management of the tourist, so that what they receive is something real and ongoing. By applying sustainable tourism concepts (e.g. managing the inflow of guests by managing the flow of tourists, the sharing of economic value with the local people, protecting the environment) the guide also keeps off commercialization's pressures in place which can undermine cultural and ecosystem values. Another reason is, guides tend to provide educational and reflective experience as well in the form of giving information on the historical background and meaning of the ritual explaining reasons as touristic tourists should know the essence of each attraction without taking advantage of the tribal cultural symbols (Asnur et al., 2025). By doing so, this style strengthens the image of the destination as an accessible tourist site with regard to respecting local people, while preserving the quality of the visit experience.

To avoid confusion, the guide plays the role of an interpreter of cultural meaning that makes the translation of tourists' cultural meaning, while simultaneously suppressing the tension (and uncertainty) that tourists' level of anxiety and uncertainty by providing information that is straightforward and context sensitive. The principle of Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) is reflected when this guide can anticipate potential confusion, such as rules of politeness or restrictions on snapping photos for certain events and how to hand out souvenirs. Since there can be fewer contradictions to consider for interaction in those cases, the entire process goes smoothly and the process of communication is streamlined by proactively explaining it from the start (Gudykunst, 2003). By decreasing its ambiguity, tourists can act purposefully and be respectful of local customs, minimizing the chances of unwanted actions that may violate cultural norms. In intense cultural encounter contexts, such as cultural tourism in Mentawai, this mode of communication holds great importance for practitioners.

To ensure that the interaction that is built remains within ethical limits, tour guides need to ensure clear consent and protection of sensitive traditional knowledge and practices, while applying ethical principles such as the obligation to ask for permission before documenting or following certain rituals. Tourism ethics also includes transparency in the distribution of economic benefits as well as efforts to

protect the knowledge of traditional medicine so that it is not exploited or commercialized excessively. Rahmanita et al., (2025) emphasized the importance of the existence of a protective framework for traditional roles, such as sikerei, in the development of cultural tourism. Through the formulation of ethical standards agreed with the community either through local agreements, guide training, and tourism operator policies, the relationship between tourists and the community can be established more equally and respect cultural sovereignty, so that the benefits of tourism can be felt in reality by the Mentawai community.

### **3. Tourists as Cultural Learners in the Encounter with Mentawai Culture**

The findings of the research indicate that tourists visiting Mentawai have an exceptionally high level of satisfaction. This feeling comes not so much from the natural beauty of Mentawai, known for its tropical forests, blue seas and spectacular beaches, but from the culture they experience firsthand.

The most memorable tourist's experience is of interacting directly with the indigenous Mentawai people. Tourists are encouraged to visit the villages and enjoy the way the community goes about their daily lives from preparing daily meals (sago), to fishing in the river, to crafting loincloths for men, to making arrow poison from forest plants. In addition to searching for and eating sago worms an important source of protein for the Mentawai people. For a lot of tourists, this was a unique and rarefied experience. One such was a tourist even remembers how fear and disgust was his first reaction when he first saw sago worms, which transformed his disgust to curiosity and bravery in the act of taking them in to consider trying these organisms.

Interestingly, the experience can often start with an initial emotional reaction as in these days when we see fear. Disgust or fear from the fact or hesitation on a tourist. Nonetheless, as the interaction proceeds, and with a few explanations and cases straight from the locals, such negative feelings slowly become curiosity, courage and even pride, and eventually the tourists finally start to think enough to step out and taste the sago worms. One of our tourists shared that the memory of tasting sago worms, something that had been perceived as difficult and weird back in the day, became the most pleasant experience and was often recounted after their excursion was complete. Their journey is proof that being a tourist is not just a comfortable experience, but also one that leads to new experiences that can strike a chord, extend the mind and evoke a response. We can help explain tourist engagement in local cultural events in Mentawai using the principle of experiential tourism that considers experience to be the essential element of tourism activities. Tourism, at its development stage, no longer concentrates solely on visual consumption, but is directed at crafting an interactive and experiential experience for tourists that is personal, immersive and meaningful to them (Pine & Gilmore, 2019).

The participatory nature of such an experience also reinforces intercultural learning in general cross cultural learning that occurs via direct and social engagement. By becoming deeply involved with the local population, tourists learn cognitive aspects about the culture but also feel and act on it taste, touch, fellowship, active participation in activities of culture. While observation-based learning is typically based solely on observable contexts, such embodied learning creates a

deeper, context-sensitive and reflective perspective of culture that is more beneficial for tourists (Deardorff, 2020; Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

Yet, within the dynamics of anxiety and uncertainty at play in intercultural communication, this cultural engagement is inseparable from them. At first, tourists were anxious and uncertain; the relatively challenging journey to Mentawai included traveling down the river by pompong, unfamiliar terrain, and different language and customs. This is the beginning of intercultural communication, when misunderstandings and psychological tension likely thrive.

In the context of intercultural communication, the experiences of tourists in Mentawai fit well with the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory developed by Gudykunst and then extended in more recent research. Tourists visiting Mentawai face a variety of hardships in their travel, such as navigating long rivers in small boats (pompong), encountering tough terrain, and entering unfamiliar social or cultural places. In this case this does evoke fear, anxiety, uncertainty and fear both physically feeling like physical, anxiety and fear is very frequent from an international background: emotions we know a common place that also happen during human-human interaction.

Instead, according to the fundamental assumptions of AUM, these anxiety and uncertainty levels can be controlled by social support and communication. In the case of Mentawai, tour guides are a key mediator of sorts in terms of understanding the travel situation, showing tourists the terrain and providing comfort before and during the trip, particularly the environment. Such backing makes the people feel secure and more hopeful in their situation, and this is a characteristic required for intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 2018).

And the open atmosphere of Sikerei and the local culture toward tourists is another effective way to combat cultural anxiety. A friendly manner of greeting, good feeling, acceptance of body language and the acceptance of being educated with the meaning behind everyday life creates a feeling of cultural acceptance. Sikerei, as an established figure and cultural authority, symbolically assures tourists, that they are welcome and have the respect of the community. This strengthens the tourists' confidence, in cross-cultural confrontation, without feeling threatened and should to violate local cultural norms.

These findings further support the interpretation that anxiety is a critical factor in managing anxiety during cultural tourism, as it is not only related to the readiness of individual tourists but also to social support, local actors, and communicative quality established in the field. Recent tourism research suggests that the presence of communicative local guides and traditional leaders significantly contributes to trust, as it diminishes anxiety, enhances satisfaction and significance of experience and the tourism (Reisinger & Steiner, 2018; Ward, C., Bochner & Furnham, 2020). Thus, tourist experience in Mentawai exemplifies practical strategies for handling anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communicating by professional advice, cultural openness, indigenous actors' social legitimacy in intercultural communication practices.



Figure 2: Visitors searching for fish in the river with sikerei wives.

Source: Personal documents

## CONCLUSION

Intercultural communication in traditional tourism practices in Mentawai is a conscious process in conjunction with Sikerei, tour guides, and tourists. Cross-cultural interactions do not occur spontaneously, but through collaborative efforts to transmit, interpret, and preserve cultural meaning so it does not lose its meaning and is easy to understand. The successful implementation of Mentawai cultural tourism ultimately relies very much on the participation of its actors to address differences and facilitate mutual understanding.

Sikerei, as holders of cultural authority, occupy an important position to play this role of guardian of the divide between openness and the sacredness of tradition. Through calm communication, cultural symbols, and an explanation in stages, Sikerei can establish a comfortable interaction atmosphere for their visitors. This approach helps alleviate the tourists' awkwardness and uncertainty, while not diminishing the spiritual significance and cornerstone values of Mentawai culture. These findings suggest that indigenous communities' communication techniques are consistent with the concepts of managing anxiety and uncertainty in cross cultural dialogue.

On the other hand, tour guides are major liaisons who close out the gaps in cultural, language, and social norms differences in exchange with tourists and host communities. The role of tour guides is not only concerned with transmitting knowledge, but also managing expectations, handling emotional situations, and maintaining ethics in cultural interactions. By providing the right context for the Mentawai people's rituals and daily life experience, guides help tourists be more focused and mindful and follow the relevant social rules.

In this study, tourists also played a role as active learners of culture. Direct participation in everyday life and traditional knowledge and traditions presented learning opportunities which were not just intellectual, but emotional and experiential. This process can be a catalyst for a change in tourists' mindset from feelings of doubt and alienation to a greater awareness of Mentawai culture. From such experiences, tourism is no longer just a visit; it becomes a mode for the social interactions in which cultural meaning is co constructed.

This study confirms that intercultural communication is an important factor in protecting the sustainability of traditional Mentawai tourism. The collaborative communication between Sikerei, tour guides, and tourists reveals that cultural preservation and tourism development can be in balance and work hand in hand if developed as a matter of cultural sensitivity, flexibility in communication, and ethical awareness. These findings support the development

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