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## Performing Cosmology: Sound, Movement, and World-Making in the *Turuk Lagai* Ritual of Mentawai

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**Abstract:** : This research investigates *Turuk Lagai*, a central ritual of the Mentawai people in West Sumatra, Indonesia, as a performative act that enacts and sustains their cosmological worldview. The study aims to understand how this ritual reflects belief and constitutes reality through embodied and relational practices. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study draws on long-term fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and thematic analysis assisted by QualCoder. Data were coded and interpreted through a theoretical framework combining Victor Turner's ritual process, Catherine Bell's ritualization theory, and Tim Ingold's concept of relational ontology.

The analysis identified three overarching themes—Embodiment, Spiritual Correspondence, and Relational Ontology—demonstrating how bodily movement, chants, offerings, and environmental elements co-produce a cosmological order. Rather than symbolizing cosmology, *Turuk Lagai* brings it into being, renewing social and spiritual relationships between humans, nature, and ancestral forces.

The study concludes that *Turuk Lagai* is a dynamic system of knowledge production and cosmological maintenance. It recommends greater recognition of indigenous ritual not as static tradition but as an active and vital mode of world-making with implications for cultural preservation and ecological ethics.

**Keywords:** Cosmological World-Making; Ritual Performativity; Mentawai Cosmology; Relational Ontology; *Turuk Lagai*.



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## 1. Introduction

In the forested archipelago of the Mentawai Islands, rituals are not merely symbolic representations of cosmological order—they are the very means through which such an order is enacted and made real. Among the most vital ceremonies in Mentawai society is *Turuk Lagai*, a ritual that serves as a conduit between the human and spiritual realms, mediating relationships among the living, the dead, the forest, and ancestral spirits. Performed during significant life events such as birth, house-building, healing, and death, *Turuk Lagai* consists of complex sequences of dance, chant, offering, and communal labor. Central to the ritual is the figure of the *sikerei* (shaman), whose embodied performance, vocal expression, and rhythmic correspondence animate the connection between humans and the spirit world. The ritual unfolds in and around the *uma* (communal house) over several days, engaging multiple families and invoking cosmological forces through movement, sound, material offerings, and sensory discipline.

Sound and rhythm play a crucial role in sustaining the ritual's energy and cosmological correspondence. The sonic environment is shaped by the interplay of traditional percussion instruments such as *gajeuma'* (hand drums), *tuddukat* (wooden slit drum), and gong, producing cyclical rhythms that accompany the *uliat* dance. Over these pulsations, the *sikerei*'s chants—part invocation, part mantra—form a dialogic bridge between the human and spirit worlds. The alternation of low, grounded drumming and high, wavering vocal tones mirrors the dynamic exchange between earthly and ancestral realms. These sounds are not merely musical accompaniment but an essential component of ritual efficacy, orchestrating the participants' movements, focus, and spiritual receptivity.

*Turuk Lagai* is thus both a religious event and a performative act through which the Mentawai people make and maintain their world. Through its integration of bodily movement, chant, rhythm, and sensory awareness, relations between humans, spirits, animals, and the forest are realigned and affirmed. Far from being a static tradition, *Turuk Lagai* is a living system of knowledge transmission, ecological engagement, and cosmological renewal (Chrismenta Siritotet & Sarjoko, 2024; Aragon, 1991; Nasution et al, 2022). The relationship between ritual and cosmology is not one of representation, but of mutual emergence—the ritual does not describe cosmology; it performs it into being (Puspita & Asrani, 2025; Balogh, 2021; Butterworth, 2008).

Within anthropology and ethnomusicology, ritual has long been recognized as a central element of cultural expression. Classical theories, such as those of Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner, framed ritual as a means of social cohesion or symbolic transformation. More recent scholarship has moved beyond symbolic and

representational models to examine ritual as a form of practice, performance, and ontological world-making. As Catherine Bell (1992) argues, ritual should not be viewed merely as a system of symbols to be decoded but as a form of embodied practice that actively shapes social and cosmological realities. Similarly, Tim Ingold (2011) invites us to consider how humans do not act upon the world from a distance but engage with it from within—through movement, sound, correspondence, and relational dwelling.

This research situates *Turuk Lagai* within this evolving theoretical landscape by asking: how does ritual function as a performative mode of enacting Mentawai cosmology? Rather than treating ritual as a symbolic expression of belief, this study approaches it as a lived, sensory, and embodied process through which participants “become with” the world around them (Ingold, 2011). It investigates how bodily gestures, rhythmic structures, vocal intonations, spatial arrangements, and material practices serve not only to mediate between worlds but to materialize cosmological relationships in the here and now (Rahman, 2015; Malik, 2023, 2024).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and phenomenological observation, the study focuses on how the ritual is experienced by those who enact it—particularly *sikerei* and community members who inhabit the cosmological logic of *Arat Sabulungan*, the indigenous Mentawai belief system (Nasution et al., 2022; Y et al., 2023; Juliardi, 2024). Attention is given to how ritual performance engages the forest as a spiritual soundscape, how rhythm and chant bring ancestral presence into being, and how the interplay of music, movement, and offering reinforces relational bonds between humans and non-humans.

By engaging with Turner's concept of ritual process, Bell's theory of practice, and Ingold's relational ontology, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that foregrounds the sonic, performative, and ontological dimensions of ritual. It offers a localized, culturally grounded example of how ritual acts communicate with the spirit world and sustain it moment by moment. Ultimately, this research aims to show that *Turuk Lagai* is not simply a reflection of Mentawai cosmology—it is one of its primary modes of production. In this way, the ritual becomes a space where cosmology is not spoken about but performed—and sounded—into existence, enacted through bodily movement, rhythmic correspondence, and relational connection with spirits, ancestors, and the natural world.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together ritual theory, performance studies, sound anthropology, and relational ontology to examine how *Turuk Lagai*, a key ritual among the Mentawai people, serves

not merely as a symbolic act but as a performative process through which cosmology is enacted and sustained.

A central concept guiding this study is ritual as process and transformation, as developed by Victor Turner. In *The Ritual Process* (1969), Turner reconceptualizes ritual as a structured, dynamic sequence involving phases of separation, liminality, and reaggregation. The liminal phase, in particular, represents a space of ambiguity and transformation, where ordinary roles and boundaries are suspended, allowing participants to undergo significant ontological and social change. This framework helps to understand how *Turuk Lagai* functions as a threshold event—when the boundary between the human and spirit worlds is temporarily dissolved, allowing for the reconfiguration of relationships within the cosmological order. Turner's emphasis on *communitas*, rhythm, and embodied transformation provides a lens through which to analyze how ritual produces not only social cohesion but also spiritual realignment and ontological renewal (Turner, 1982).

Beyond Turner's model of ritual process, scholars in ethnomusicology have long explored the interrelation between music, rhythm, and ritual transformation. As Gilbert Rouget (1985) argues in *Music and Trance*, sound plays an essential role in structuring ritual time, inducing altered states of consciousness, and enabling participants to move between cosmological domains. Similarly, John Blacking (1973) emphasizes that musical performance is a social and spiritual act, not merely an aesthetic one—it mediates relationships between individuals, communities, and the metaphysical world. These perspectives illuminate how the sonic dimensions of *Turuk Lagai*—its drumming, chanting, and cyclical rhythms—function not as accompaniment but as agents of transformation, guiding the bodies and perceptions of participants through ritual space.

To extend this analysis beyond process and symbolism, this study draws on Tim Ingold's theory of relational ontology and his concept of correspondence. In contrast to representational models of knowledge, Ingold (2011) proposes a dwelling perspective, wherein beings do not act upon a pre-given world but grow with it through relational entanglements. According to this view, knowledge and reality are not built but lived through movement, sound, and sensory engagement (Ingold, 2011, 2018). In the context of *Turuk Lagai*, this approach allows us to see how participants are not merely enacting cultural meanings, but becoming with the forest, the spirits, and the cosmological landscape. The ritual thus becomes a form of sonic and bodily world-making, in which cosmology is not described but materialized through lived, rhythmic, and vocal interaction with the more-than-human world (Feld, 1990; Stoller, 1997).

This relational and performative view of ritual is further supported by Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization, which shifts the analytic focus from symbolic decoding to strategic, embodied practice. Bell (1992) emphasizes that rituals are not static containers of meaning but practices that produce and negotiate power, knowledge, and cosmological order. Through ritualization, actions become distinguished from the ordinary and charged with significance not through symbolic representation alone, but through how they are enacted, by whom, and in what context (Bird, 1999). In the case of *Turuk Lagai*, this perspective helps explain how ritual authority is constructed, how specific gestures and sounds become sacred, and how cosmological legitimacy is established through embodied and sonic action rather than belief alone.

Together, these theoretical approaches enable a reading of *Turuk Lagai* that highlights its performative, generative, and sonic-ontological functions. Rather than reducing ritual to mere tradition or symbolic expression, this framework positions it as a dynamic, embodied encounter in which cosmology is lived, heard, and sustained. By engaging with Turner's ritual process, Ingold's relational ontology, Bell's practice theory, and key ethnomusicological insights (Rouget, 1985; Blacking, 1973; Feld, 1990), this study aims to illuminate the multiple dimensions through which *Turuk Lagai* enacts Mentawai reality—not as an abstract worldview, but as a lived, resonant, and ongoing practice of being in the world.

### 3. Methods

This study applied a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine how the ritual of *Turuk Lagai* performs and enacts cosmological reality in Mentawai culture. Ethnography is particularly appropriate for this research, as it allows for an in-depth, immersive exploration of cultural practices, beliefs, and lived experiences through long-term engagement and reflexive interpretation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Over the past three years, the researcher has conducted sustained fieldwork in the Mentawai Islands, building relationships with ritual participants, observing ceremonial processes, and documenting everyday interactions that frame the ritual in its broader cosmological and ecological context.

### Research Design

The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand how meaning is produced through lived practice, bodily performance, and relational engagement rather than universal or measurable truths (Rapley, 2018). *Turuk Lagai* is investigated as a symbolic system and a performative, embodied practice that materializes Mentawai cosmology.

The research design integrates participant observation, semi-structured interviews, sensory ethnography, and qualitative textual analysis to explore the ritual's ontological and experiential dimensions.

### **Field Site and Duration**

From 2021 to 2025, fieldwork was conducted in the Sikaliou tribe on the Mentawai Islands, West Sumatra. The research focused on a community that continues to actively perform *Turuk Lagai* within the framework of *Arat Sabulungan*, the indigenous belief system. Over three years, the researcher participated in and observed multiple iterations of the ritual, conducted follow-up interviews with key actors, and embedded themselves in the daily rhythms of community life.

### **Data Collection Methods**

#### **a. Participant Observation**

The researcher engaged in extended participant observation, attending and documenting *Turuk Lagai* rituals in their entirety. Particular attention was given to bodily movement, gesture, and rhythm; the spatial and material arrangements of the ritual setting; and the interactions between humans, spirits, and the surrounding environment. Fieldnotes were recorded in real time and subsequently expanded after each ritual event to capture additional reflections and contextual details. In addition, audiovisual documentation—including photographs, sketches, and sound recordings—was collected with the consent of the community.

#### **b. Semi-Structured Interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted with ritual participants, including *sikerei* (shamans) such as Teteu Lala, family members of the deceased or honored individuals, community elders, and a Mentawai cultural observer, Yosep Sagari. The interviews explored several key themes, including cosmological beliefs and worldviews, the role and meaning of the ritual, sensory and emotional experiences during the ceremony, and participants' perceptions of change or continuity in ritual practice.

#### **c. Sensory Ethnography**

Inspired by Pink (2015), the study also employed sensory ethnography to document how smell, sound, temperature, and texture contribute to the atmosphere of the ritual, recognizing the non-verbal, embodied knowledge present in performance.

#### d. Artifact and Space Documentation

Important ritual objects (e.g., offerings, tools, clothing) and spatial arrangements (e.g., ritual sites, forest paths) were recorded through photos and sketches to support analysis of material-symbolic correspondences.

### Data Analysis

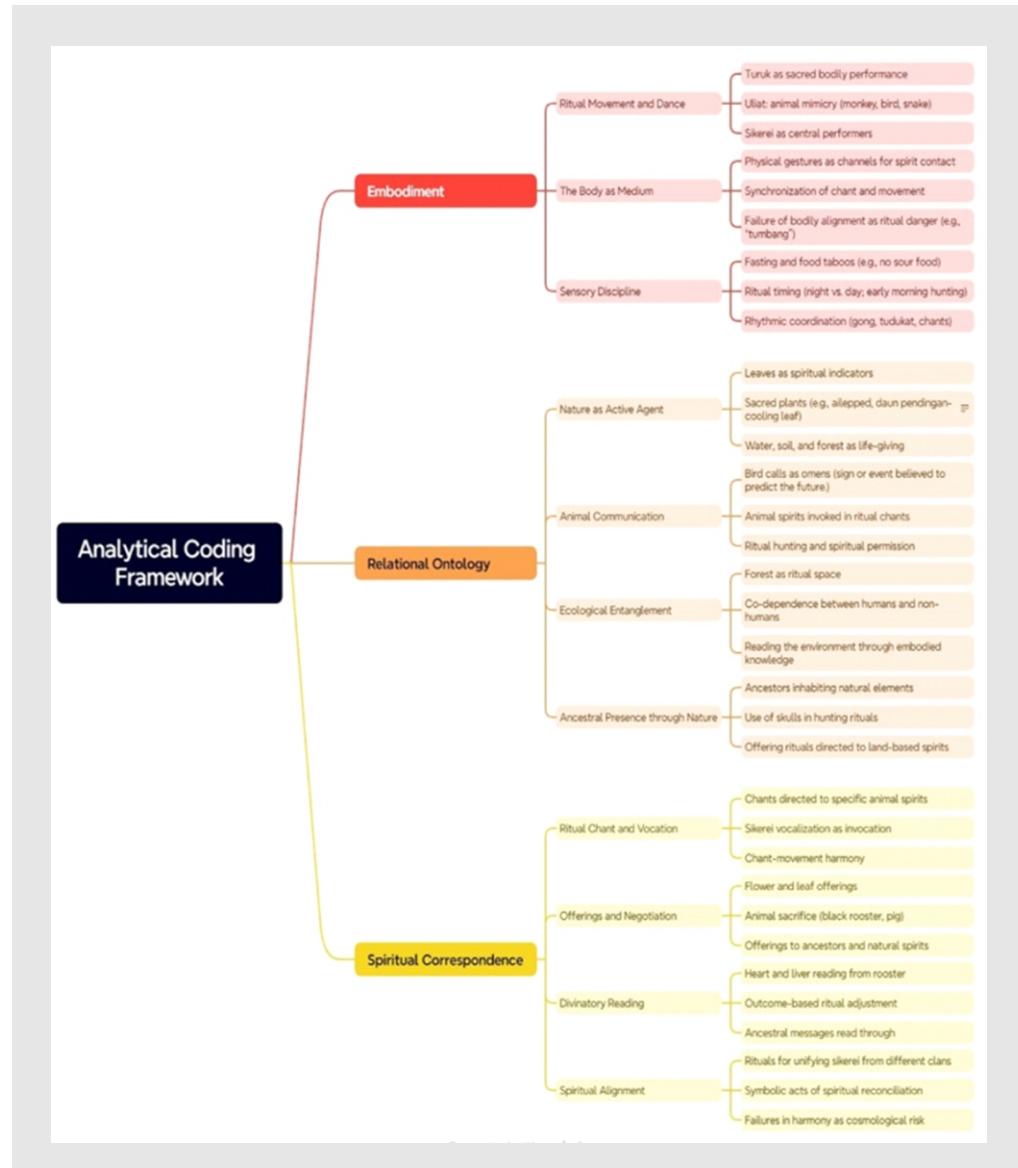
Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, supported by QualCoder, an open-source software for organizing and coding qualitative data. While QualCoder managed and segmented the transcripts, the interpretive analysis was conducted manually, guided by a codebook that integrated theoretical constructs and themes emergent from the fieldwork.

The analysis followed several key stages. First, the interview recordings and fieldnotes were transcribed to enable systematic textual analysis. This was followed by an open coding process in which significant patterns and meaningful segments were labeled with descriptive codes, such as *Turuk* as sacred performance, animal mimicry, ancestor presence, chant harmony, and ritual hunting. These initial codes were then categorized into three overarching analytical themes (Fig. 1): Embodiment, which included elements such as ritual movement, bodily alignment, and sensory discipline; Relational Ontology, encompassing ideas of nature as an active agent, ancestral presence in the forest, and ecological entanglement; and Spiritual Correspondence, which addressed aspects of chanting, offering, divination, and spiritual alignment. Finally, the thematic clusters were examined through interpretive analysis, drawing upon key theoretical frameworks including Victor Turner's theory of ritual process and liminality, Tim Ingold's concept of relational being and correspondence, and Catherine Bell's theory of ritualization as embodied practice.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained through analytical memos and positional reflections, allowing the researcher to remain attentive to the cultural context and aware of their interpretive position. This reflexive approach ensured that meaning was not imposed on the data but allowed to emerge through engagement with participants' lived experiences.

To enhance analytical transparency and traceability, a visual representation of the coding structure was developed (see Figure 1). This Analytical Coding Framework diagram illustrates how descriptive codes were clustered into higher-order themes, showing the connections between ritual elements, cosmological concepts, and embodied practices in *Turuk Lagai*. It also demonstrates how the coding strategy bridges field data with theoretical insights, supporting a rich, layered interpretation of ritual performativity and Mentawai cosmology.

**Figure 1: Analytical Coding Framework of Turuk Lagai ritual**

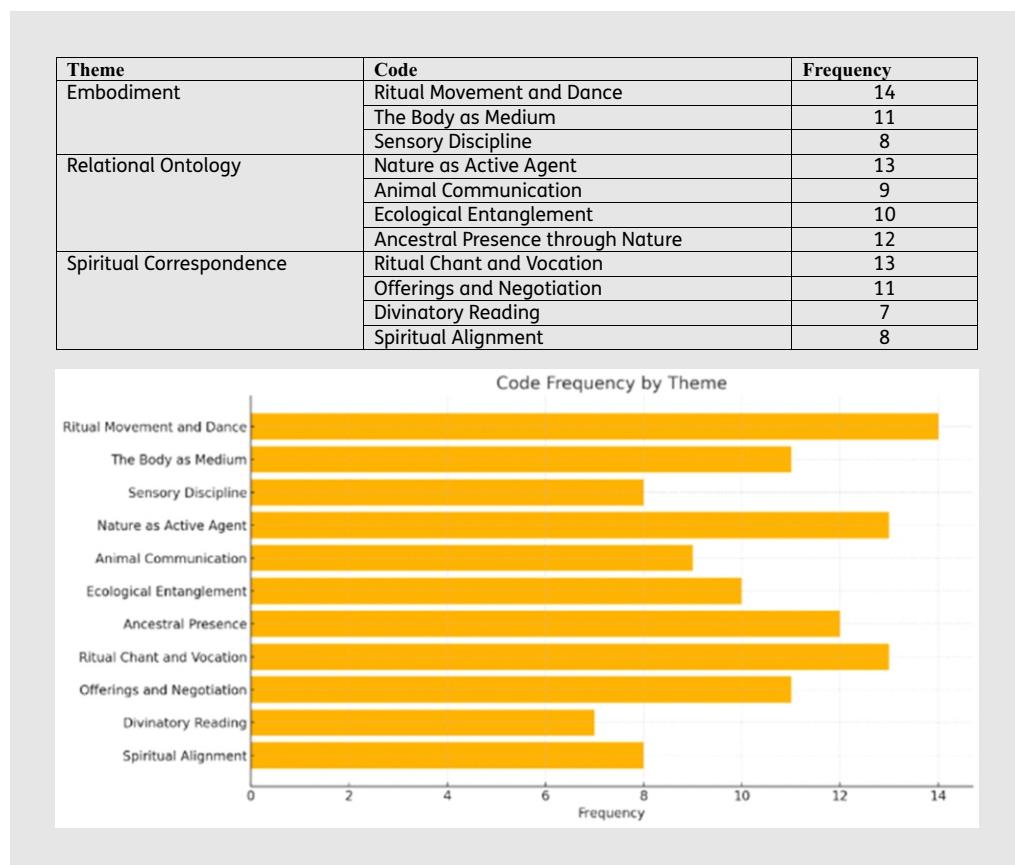


#### 4. Results

This section begins with a visual representation of the coded data gathered through thematic analysis to provide clarity and transparency in the analytical process. The table and accompanying bar chart (see Figure 2) illustrate the frequency with which specific codes appeared during qualitative analysis of the interview data and fieldnotes. The coding framework is divided into three overarching themes—Embodiment, Spiritual Correspondence, and Relational Ontology—consisting of finer-grained subcodes.

While qualitative research does not aim to quantify meaning, presenting the frequency of codes offers valuable insight into the salience and emphasis of particular ideas within participant narratives. Codes such as Ritual Movement and Dance, Ritual Chant and Vocation, and Nature as Active Agent emerged frequently, suggesting that participants consistently referenced and experienced these elements as core aspects of the ritual. Therefore, the frequency data helps justify why specific themes were prioritized in the discussion, without reducing qualitative meaning to numerical value.

**Figure 2. Analytical Coding Framework of Turuk Lagai: Themes, Codes, and Frequency Distribution**



The bar chart provides a visual summary of the distribution of analytical codes derived from thematic analysis of qualitative data related to the *Turuk Lagai* ritual. Each bar represents the number of times a specific code appeared across interview transcripts, reflecting how often participants emphasized key ritual elements. Notably, "Ritual Movement and Dance" and "Nature as Active Agent" emerge as the most frequently referenced codes, highlighting the centrality of bodily performance and ecological entanglement in the ritual. Other widespread codes such as "Ritual Chant and Vocation", "Ancestral Presence", and "The Body as Medium" further emphasize the embodied and relational character of *Turuk Lagai*.

This frequency data contributes to the research by offering empirical support for the interpretive structure of the study. While qualitative research does not aim to quantify meaning, the recurrence of specific codes offers a grounded indication of the most salient themes within participants' narratives and ritual practices. These frequencies guided the organization of the findings and discussion into five interpretive subheadings—Ritual Structure, Embodied Practice, Spiritual Correspondence, Relational Ontology, and Symbolic Materials and Sensory Atmospheres—which together illustrate how *Turuk Lagai* enacts Mentawai cosmology through embodied, performative, and ecological modes of being.

### Ritual Structure: Performing Social and Temporal Order

The ritual of *Turuk Lagai* unfolds as a structured and communal process that mirrors the social and cosmological order of the Mentawai people. Rather than a single event, it spans several days or even weeks, encompassing a sequence of ceremonial acts deeply woven into community life (Barraud, 1990). The duration depends on the ritual's purpose—whether connected to *Uma* (house construction), *sikerei* (healing), birth, or death—each carrying varying degrees of complexity (Rifalrik & Sandra, 2023). As one informant explained, rituals tied to house-building may last up to three weeks due to the number of preparatory and performative stages involved.

The structure of *Turuk Lagai* can be broadly divided into three temporal phases: preparation, ritual performance, and post-ritual closure (McWilliam, 2009). Each stage holds symbolic and spiritual significance (Yulianti et al., 2013). During the preparatory phase, the community repairs ritual spaces—replacing decayed wood, fixing roofs, and cleansing the environment both physically and spiritually. Taboos are enforced, such as refraining from eating sour foods or engaging in conflict, to maintain harmony among participants. This collective discipline ensures a state of readiness conducive to ritual efficacy.

Family coordination plays a central role in the preparation. The *Uma* (communal clan house) becomes a center for planning and negotiation (Schefold, 2008). Extended family members convene to determine the ritual's schedule, assign roles such as hunting and cooking, and prepare offerings (Ardhanari et al., 2021). These gatherings serve not only practical purposes but also reaffirm kinship ties and social cohesion (Derung et al., 2023; Elfiondri et al., 2021; Kusbiantoro et al., 2016).

As the ritual transitions into its performative phase, activities become more formalized, including gatherings of *sikerei*, purification rites, and musical-dance performances that continue through the night. This progression aligns with Turner's (1969) model of separation, liminality, and reaggregation, culminating in post-ritual

feasting and, in some cases, ritual hunting—acts that symbolically return participants to daily life, renewed and spiritually realigned.

**Figure 3. Top:** A sikerei (shaman) prepares to lead the Turuk Lagai ritual (photo by Ivan Saputra). **Bottom:** Community members repair an Uma (traditional house) as part of ritual preparation (photo by Andro Dwi Putra).



The ritual structure of *Turuk Lagai* serves as a performative framework through which Mentawai society reorders itself in alignment with both ancestral expectations and cosmological principles (Wahyuni, 2025; Delfi, 2013). The ritual stages are not arbitrary but reflect a deep indigenous understanding of how time, action, and social relations must unfold to maintain balance between the visible and invisible realms (Schröter, 2000). Through this structure, the Mentawai people do not merely commemorate cosmology—they perform it into being.

### **Embodied Practice: Movement, Music, Dance, and the Role of *Sikerei***

The ritual of *Turuk Lagai* is fundamentally an embodied and musical practice, where the body and sound together serve as central media through which cosmological relationships are enacted (Sari, 2016). Within the performance, the *sikerei*—spiritual leaders and healers—play a critical role, using movement, chant, rhythm, and gesture to bring into being the unseen relationships between humans, spirits, and the environment (Fig. 4) (Porath, 2015). Music in this context is not a separate art form but an intrinsic element of ritual communication: the rhythmic drumming, vocal intonations, and cyclical chants provide both the temporal structure and spiritual resonance that guide the dancers' bodily actions. The findings from interview data reveal that *Turuk Lagai* involves a series of performative acts, particularly dance and mimetic movement known as *uliat*, which imitate animals and natural gestures. These sonic and bodily forms are not symbolic acts in the Western theatrical sense but ritual technologies through which knowledge is activated, spirits are addressed, and the cosmological order is maintained (Schieffelin, 1985).

**Figure 4.** *Sikerei* dancing during the *Turuk Lagai* ritual. Photos by Yuli Hendra (top) and Ivan Saputra.



The dance sequences are described as highly specific and contextually meaningful. The *uliat* includes imitations of animals such as monkeys (*bilou*), snakes, birds, and chickens, as well as everyday human activities such as hunting and fishing. According to the informant, each movement must be consistent with the animal it represents, and the accompanying chants or vocalizations are designed to entertain, appease, or call forth the spirits of those animals. This bodily performance is more than artistic expression; it is a relational act of becoming, where the performer temporarily inhabits the form and spirit of the animal being mimicked (fig 5). Thus, the movement is a form of correspondence with the non-human world, echoing Tim Ingold's argument that we know the world through "being along with" rather than observing from a distance (Ingold, 2011).

**Figure 5. Dance as an act of becoming by the Sikerei—photo by Benny Kurniadi.**



The *sikerei* are central to this process. Not everyone in the community performs the most sacred parts of *Turuk Lagai*; the spiritual efficacy of the ritual depends on the ritual integrity, musical alignment, and bodily discipline of the *sikerei*. Their dance is accompanied by chants that often resemble mantras—not in the doctrinal sense, but as rhythmic vocalizations that convey meaning through tone, repetition, and breath (Fig. 6). These chants are inherently musical, merging rhythm, melody, and intention to communicate with the spirit realm. Each vocal line is synchronized with corresponding gestures and directed toward specific spiritual entities. As one informant explained, if the chant and dance fall out of alignment—such as mismatching a chant meant for a

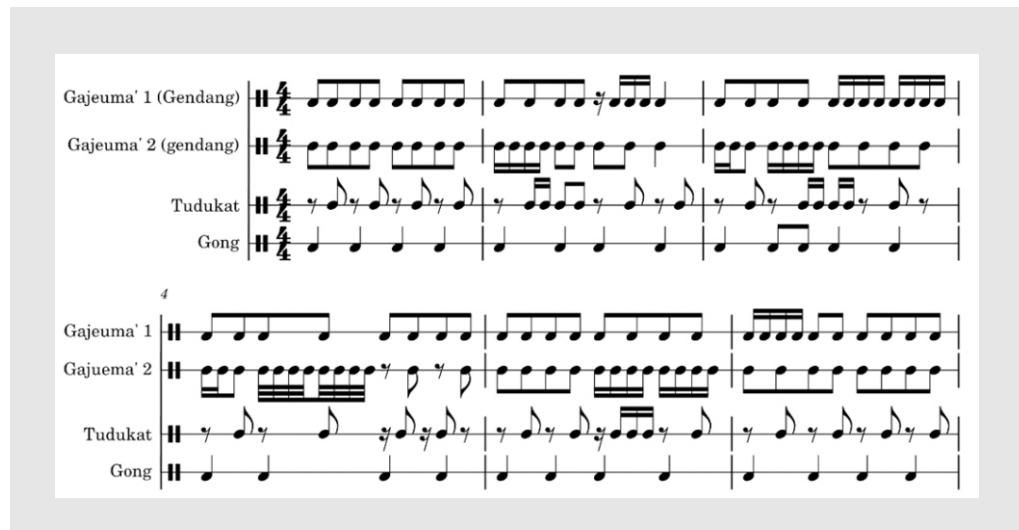
monkey with a movement invoking a bird—the ritual harmony is disrupted, potentially causing a spiritual rupture or “*tumbang*” (collapse) among the performers.

The musical accompaniment unfolds as a layered percussive texture, characterized by steady, cyclical rhythms produced by *tuddukat* and *gajeuma'* drums (Fig. 7). Performed at a moderate tempo of approximately  $\text{BPM} = 90$ , the pulse provides a rhythmic foundation that supports the dancers' sustained movements. The beat is not metronomic in the Western sense but fluid, allowing for subtle rhythmic elasticity that responds to the dancers' shifting gestures and spatial arrangements. Over this percussive base, intermittent vocal calls from the *sikerei* act as cues, guiding both the pacing and emotional intensity of the dance. The structure of the music is repetitive yet accumulative—the cyclic phrases generate a trance-conducive sonic environment in which repetition dissolves temporal awareness, deepens physical immersion, and aligns the embodied actions of performers with the ritual's cosmological rhythm.

Rhythmically, the interplay between drum accents and vocal interjections is designed to entrain the dancers' bodies into a shared temporal and spiritual flow. This entrainment is essential in *Turuk Lagai*, as the *sikerei*'s bodily gestures and rhythmic footwork must correspond precisely with the music to maintain ritual coherence and efficacy. Subtle dynamic shifts—such as accelerations, volume surges, and intensified drumming—often coincide with heightened phases of the *uliat* dance sequences, reflecting reciprocal feedback between musicians, dancers, and spirits.

In this context, music does not serve as mere accompaniment but as a cosmological medium that enables communication between the human and non-human worlds. The combination of repetitive drumming, chanting, and movement produces a state of sensory saturation in which both *sikerei* and participants become receptive to spiritual presences. During such moments, the *sikerei* can discern whether benevolent or malevolent spirits have entered the ritual space. This discernment arises not from passive observation but from a deeply embodied act of musical and spiritual correspondence—a resonance between rhythm, breath, and cosmological force. Thus, the musical structure is not an aesthetic frame but an active agent of transformation, facilitating the altered states and perceptual sensitivity through which the *sikerei* enact their cosmological role.

**Figure 6. Transcription of the percussion ensemble in the *Turuk Lagai* ritual, featuring Gajeuma' 1 and 2 (hand drums), *Tudukat* (slit drum), and *Gong*. The interlocking rhythmic layers illustrate the structured timing and coordination that guide the movements of the *sikerei* and ritual participants.**

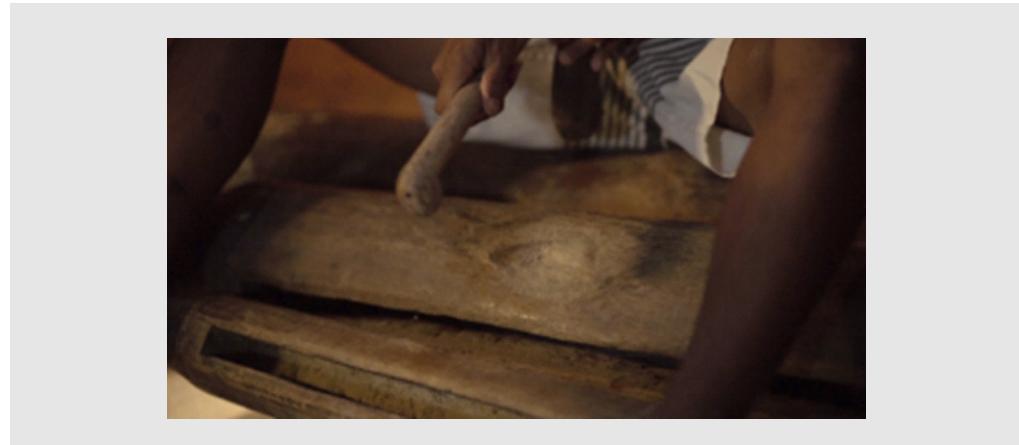


What emerges from the data is a clear view of the body as a cosmological instrument. The *sikerei* do not only perform for a human audience but also for a spiritual one, whose presence must be summoned, calmed, and respected. The role of bodily discipline, memorization of chant, and sensory alignment is essential. This supports Catherine Bell's theory that ritual is not a passive enactment of tradition but a strategic practice, deeply embedded in the body and repeated over time to produce meaning and structure (Bell, 1992).

*Turuk Lagai* is an embodied cosmology. Through movement, voice, and gesture, the *sikerei* and other ritual performers activate a relational world in which humans and spirits interact directly. The body becomes a conduit through which knowledge, spirit, and ecology are made visible and alive—ritual becomes not just a reenactment of belief but also the enactment of being itself.

**Figure 7. Gajeuma (above) and Tudukat (below) a traditional percussion instruments used in the *Turuk Lagai* ritual. Photo by Benny Kurniadi.**



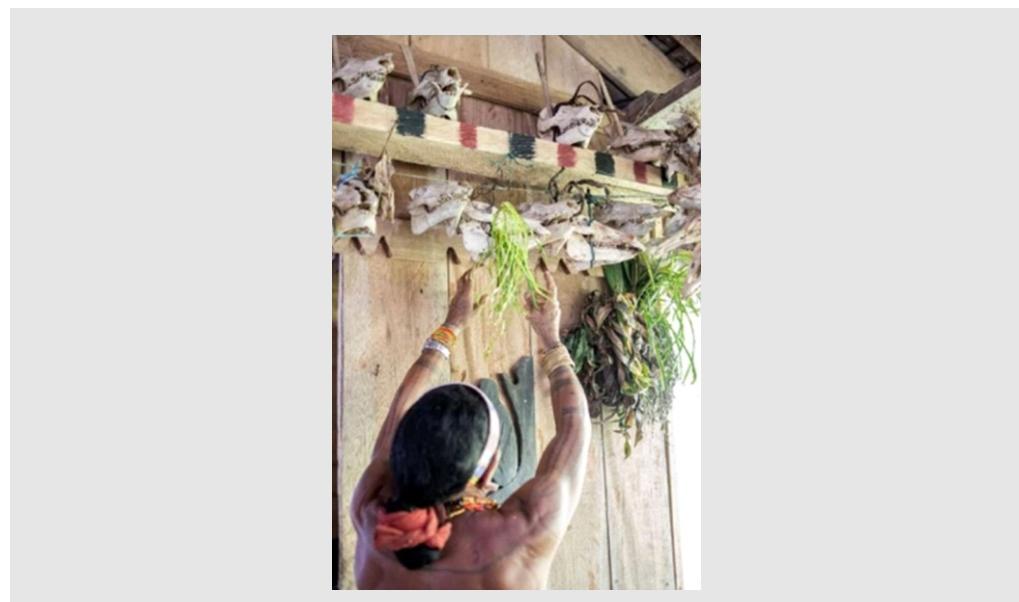


## 5. Discussions

### Spiritual Correspondence: Chants, Offerings, and Ancestral Presence

The ritual of *Turuk Lagai* is deeply grounded in the Mentawai people's cosmological understanding of the world as a spiritually inhabited and responsive domain. At the heart of the ritual is the belief that spiritual beings—particularly ancestral spirits and the spirits of animals—must be engaged through specific acts of correspondence (Fig. 8). These acts are neither symbolic abstractions nor passive representations but active, relational gestures that sustain harmony between the visible and invisible realms. The interview data reveal that within *Turuk Lagai*, this spiritual correspondence is most vividly expressed through music, chanting, and offerings, all mediated by the presence of the *sikerei*, whose roles extend beyond performance into spiritual negotiation and cosmological maintenance.

**Figure 8.** A *sikerei* performs a ritual to request permission from ancestors and the spirits of all hunted animals before the hunting procession, as part of the *Turuk Lagai* ritual—photo by Benny Kurniadi.



Music is the primary medium through which these interactions occur. The sonic field—composed of rhythmic drumming, chanting, and vocal calls—forms the ritual's temporal and emotional structure. Chanting, or vocalization by the *sikerei*, functions as a communicative bridge between the human and non-human worlds (Fig. 9). These vocal expressions are often mischaracterized as songs or mantras, but as one informant clarified, they are tailored ritual texts that align with the intention and focus of the dancer's movements (Tulius & Burman-Hall, 2022). For instance, if a dance mimics a monkey (*bilou*), the chant must entertain or appease the spirit of that specific animal. A mismatch—such as dancing meant for a bird while chanting a monkey's song—is considered spiritually inappropriate and can lead to ritual failure or disruption. This expectation of alignment underscores that music is not simply accompaniment but a ritual technology that synchronizes gesture, intention, and cosmological order. The chant is not ornamental; it is a spiritual utterance that embodies presence, respect, and acknowledgment toward the spirit world.

The *sikerei* mantra is delivered in a steady, measured tempo, with phrases that follow a cyclical rise and fall in pitch (Fig. 9). The vocal tone is slightly nasal and projected forward, producing a penetrating sound that carries across the forest landscape. Sustained notes at the ends of phrases, microtonal bends, and subtle vibrato evoke tension and release—musical gestures that mirror the ebb and flow of communication with spirits. Ornamentation is minimal but deliberate, as slight pitch slides or rhythmic variations mark transitions of meaning and intensity. The collective yet individual delivery of the *sikerei* voices suggests a form of heterophony: a shared melodic contour where each voice introduces personal inflection, reflecting the communal yet fluid nature of ritual agency.

The musical notation of the *Turuk Lagai* chant (see Fig. 9) reveals that its structure is not governed by a fixed metric pulse but by the fluid pacing of the *sikerei*'s breath and vocal phrasing. Written in B<sub>b</sub> Major for reference, the parenthetical pitch markings indicate that the notated tones are approximations, aligned with the closest Western scale degrees rather than fixed tunings. This flexibility reflects the embodied and improvisational essence of Mentawai musical cosmology, where rhythm and tone emerge from breath, intention, and interaction with the environment rather than from rigid compositional rules.

The melody consists of short, cyclical motifs repeated with subtle variation, ornamented by slides, wavy tones, and occasional falsetto passages. These sonic gestures function as spiritual indicators: upward slides gesture toward invocation—calling upon spirits—while downward slides and vibrato-like waves signify descent or presence. The falsetto, with its distinct timbral contrast, often marks

moments of heightened spiritual contact, signaling the arrival or acknowledgment of a spiritual force.

Within the ritual, such features reveal the power of music as an agent of transformation. The cyclical repetition and microtonal movement induce altered states of consciousness, allowing both the *sikerei* and participants to enter a heightened awareness. The power of the chant lies not in its lyrical content but in its vibrational quality—its ability to resonate physically and spiritually, tuning bodies and minds into cosmological frequencies. This sonic resonance creates a shared emotional and spiritual field that enables communication with the unseen world. In these moments, the *sikerei* becomes a conduit, perceiving signs—through sound, sensation, or rhythm—that reveal whether benevolent or malevolent forces are present.

Thus, in *Turuk Lagai*, music is not simply an aesthetic element but a cosmological force. It organizes time, movement, and affect; it mediates relationships between humans, spirits, and the environment; and it enables transformation by dissolving the boundaries between the physical and spiritual realms. In doing so, music enacts the very principles of Mentawai cosmology—embodiment, correspondence, and balance—making it both the structure and substance through which the world is continually made and remade.

**Figure 9. Transcription of the *Turuk Lagai* Ritual Chant by *Sikerei***



*Irregular Rhythm*

Musical symbol	Notes
( )	Parentheses on the key — A reminder that the pitches in this transcription are not fixed in absolute accuracy but are transcribed according to the closest pitch in the B♭ major scale.
—	Swing line from bottom to top — Indicates that a note is produced by gliding upward from a lower pitch toward the target note.
—	Swing line from top to bottom — Indicates a note produced by gliding downward toward the notes below it.
~~~~	Wavy line — Denotes a note produced with a wavering or oscillating vocal technique.
↑	Upward arrow — Marks that a note is produced using a falsetto vocal technique.

In addition to vocal correspondence, offerings play a significant role in mediating relationships between humans and spirits. Flowers such as *ailepped* and leaves like *daun pendingan* (a sacred leaf symbolizing unity) are ritually distributed to the *sikerei*

before the core performances begin (fig 10). These botanical gifts unite the ritual actors' hearts, minds, and spirits, enabling them to act with a singular purpose (Couillard & Laderman, 1991). This ritual phase is often followed by the sacrifice of a black rooster, which is not only symbolically important but functionally critical. The rooster is sacrificed after the *sikerei*'s spiritual alignment, and its internal organs—the heart and liver—are examined to interpret omens and decide whether the ritual may proceed.

**Figure 10.** Leaves collected from the forest are essential to the *Turuk Lagai* ritual. During the ceremony, *sikerei* enter the forest to search for and gather specific leaves used in ritual practices. Top: photo by Yuli Hendra, Bottom: Ivan Saputra (Left) and Benny Kurniadi (right).



The interviewee describes the reading of animal organs as an act of divination through which the offering reveals the state of cosmological balance (Fig. 11). Favorable signs allow the ritual to proceed, while unfavorable

ones require purification or delay. This interpretive act represents a negotiation with ancestral forces—a way of listening and responding to the unseen. Such correspondence reflects Ingold's notion of relational becoming, where humans and non-humans co-create reality through rhythmic engagement. In *Turuk Lagai*, spirits are not spectators but co-actors whose presence sustains the ritual's very possibility.

**Figure 11.** In this ritual, a black rooster is sacrificed to determine whether the ceremony can proceed. The decision is based on interpreting the bird's internal organs—photo by Yuli Hendra (top) & Benny Kurniadi (bottom).



#### Relational Ontology: Nature as Agent, Kin, and Cosmological Partner

A key finding from the interview data is the deeply relational and animistic worldview of the Mentawai people, in which the environment is not seen as a backdrop to human life but as a living network of sentient beings. Within the context of *Turuk Lagai*, this relational ontology is affirmed and enacted. The informant described how all aspects of the natural world—plants, water, soil, animals, and even weather patterns—are perceived as spiritually alive and cosmologically significant. This worldview is embedded in the Mentawai belief system known as *Arat Sabulungan*, which considers all moving elements, especially leaves, as sacred indicators of life and spirit (Hanani &

Nelmaya, 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2025). As such, the forest is not simply a setting for the ritual—it is a participant in it.

The ritual of *Turuk Lagai* reflects this relational understanding through practice and material expression (Wahyuni et al., 2024). The use of leaves in costume and dance is not merely decorative; it is a gesture of kinship and alignment with the forest (fig 12). Every ritual component—from selecting leaves and flowers to interpreting animal behavior—functions within a logic that assumes interdependence among all beings. For example, the *sikerei* relies on specific plant materials for physical healing and spiritual activation. Certain leaves are used in ritual bundles to purify the space or the bodies of participants, indicating that plants are not passive matter but collaborators in spiritual work.

**Figure 12. The use of leaves in the Turuk Lagai ritual is not merely decorative, but deeply connected to the Mentawai belief system of Arat Sabulungan—photo by Yuli Hendra.**



One revealing aspect of the interviews concerns how natural signs are read as part of Mentawai cosmological knowledge. The cries of animals—particularly birds and primates—are interpreted as omens signaling illness, fruiting seasons, or environmental transitions. The call of the *bilou* (a type of monkey), for instance, is believed to mark spiritual disturbances or shifts in natural cycles. These interpretations are not “superstitions” in a Western sense, but expressions of an ontological worldview in which animals are communicative subjects. Such readings exemplify a long-standing dialogue between humans and the more-than-human world, sustained

through ritual practice and lived experience.

This relational logic is embodied in the closing phase of *Turuk Lagai*, when ritual hunting honors childbirth or house completion. Skulls of previous game—monkeys, pigs, or deer—are adorned with leaves and offerings to request permission from the animal spirits (Fig. 8). This act is a genuine negotiation with the unseen realm, renewing interspecies relationships (Darmanto, 2025).

This worldview aligns with Ingold's (2011, 2018) relational ontology, which conceives the world as a field of correspondences rather than objects. Through *Turuk Lagai*, humans, spirits, and animals coexist in rhythmic reciprocity, making ritual a means of sustaining and renewing life itself.

### **Symbolic Materials and Sensory Atmospheres**

Beyond its performative and spiritual dimensions, the *Turuk Lagai* ritual is distinguished by its use of symbolic materials and sensory orchestration that mediate between the human and spirit worlds. Objects such as flowers, leaves, animal offerings, and musical instruments are not decorative but active agents in a multisensory system linking body, environment, and cosmology. A central example is the black rooster sacrifice, in which the *sikerei* reads the rooster's heart and liver to determine whether the ritual may proceed—a divinatory act viewed as direct communication with ancestral forces (Fig. 11) (Daugey, 2018).

Other materials, including *ailepped* flowers and *daun pendingan* leaves, are distributed to unify the hearts and intentions of participants, creating a state of emotional and spiritual harmony. Meanwhile, sound plays a vital role: the *gajeuma'* drum, *tuddukat* percussion, and gong produce cyclical rhythms that guide dance, mark transitions, and call spirits into presence. These sounds form a living atmosphere—vibrations that bridge visible and invisible realms. As Bell (1992) argues, ritual operates through embodied engagement with space and materiality. In *Turuk Lagai*, sensory materials and music are not representations but forces that make cosmology perceptible and lived.

### **6. Conclusions**

This study has explored *Turuk Lagai*, a ritual practiced by the Mentawai people, as a performative and ontological process through which cosmology is enacted, not merely represented. Drawing from ethnographic interviews, this research demonstrated that *Turuk Lagai* is a holistic ritual system that structures time, social relations, and spiritual engagement. The ritual sustains relational balance between humans, spirits, and the natural world through its carefully staged structure, embodied performances, chants,

offerings, and material-symbolic practices.

The findings reveal that ritual in the Mentawai context is not a fixed cultural tradition but a dynamic and adaptive process that functions as a mode of knowing, being, and becoming. Each movement, object, chant, and gesture correspond with the more-than-human world, emphasizing a relational ontology where humans do not act upon nature but act with and through it. The *sikerei*'s role, sensory experience integration, and ecological actors' involvement confirm that *Turuk Lagai* is not a symbolic performance but a cosmological enactment.

This study contributes to broader anthropological and performance theory discussions by showing how indigenous rituals not only preserve belief systems but also perform and reproduce worldviews in lived and embodied ways. By focusing on performativity and relationality, this research affirms the importance of viewing ritual not as a mirror of society, but as one of its primary modes of production. *Turuk Lagai* is not only about cosmology—it is a means through which cosmology continues to exist.

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