

The Poison Culture: The Forbidden Tradition, Social Class and Belief of Poisoned People in Aceh

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Abstract

The poison in Aceh (especially in Aceh Singkil) is called Aji. Aji is a mystical tradition aiming to achieve a certain spiritual level (maqam). There are some people referred to as Pekhaji (poison makers), whom the local people are wary of. And there are certain villages forbidden for foreigners because there is fear that the poison is added to food and drink. Even if a person is accused of being a Pekhaji or a village, it is considered forbidden, and no legal action is taken because it is based only on speculation. Aji as a spiritual practice is considered taboo; the Pekhaji's and forbidden villages are socially and economically marginalized. The forbidden villages and the Pekhaji are usually aimed at the poor and disadvantaged traditional village heads; the people accused as Pekhaji are poor people who do not get proper civil rights. This research examined rituals in the Aji tradition as part of social construction and analyzed religious studies by viewing social stratification in traditional villages and local rituals. The data in this research were collected through interviews and phenomenological field observations to explain all aspects of the Aji tradition in Aceh Singkil.

Keywords: Spirituality, Poison (Aji), Mystical Belief, Religious Studies, Aceh Singkil

Introduction

Aji (Poison) is commonly heard in Aceh Singkil to describe poison potions wrapped in mystical beliefs passed down from their ancestors. As a taboo local tradition, concocting poison is common in many areas of Aceh. The *Aji* tradition is also used by regions culturally close to Aceh Singkil, such as Barus and Pakpak.¹ These three regions have similarities in local traditions and black magic. When an outsider comes to Aceh Singkil, the first prohibition for the local people is eating and drinking from strangers.

The tradition of concocting *Aji* in Aceh Singkil originated from spiritual understanding. Poisoning others is believed to be an act that raises the spiritual level of the *Aji* makers (*Pekhaji*) by putting the victim in a proper place in the afterlife if he dies.² Some think that making *Aji* is a mystical science from the darkness and must be passed on to the heirs.³ Many victims of *Aji* have terrible conditions with symptoms such as continuous vomiting of blood, severe coughing, and shortness of breath. The victim will be ravaged by internal diseases that make his body scrawny. Currently, not many victims die; many of them can be cured through herbal medicine from local healers such as *Datuk* or *Tabib* in Aceh Singkil. *Aji* healing potions generally use unconventional remedies, such as putting coconut husk into the

¹ Zulfikar RH Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Histriografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI* (Yogyakarta: Jejak Pustaka, 2021). pp. 23

² Jaurah Limbong, *Mistis dalam Aji*, 2022.

³ Muslimah Lingga, *Aji di Belegen*, 2022.

victim's mouth or various potions that can vomit the victim inwards.⁴

As a spiritual tradition, *Aji* is still considered to exist. The *Aji* makers (*Pekhaji*) have yet to be examined by the state law and local customary. The accusations against the *Aji* makers are without proof, so they will never admit they are *Pekhaji*. The position of *Aji* is like witchcraft, which cannot be processed and proven by legal law.⁵

Local people in Aceh Singkil only mark the *Aji* makers if there is a victim after (allegedly) consuming food and drink from the accused *Aji* makers. As a ritual, the *Aji* makers are also never examined through the pharmacy laboratory approach and modern medical devices. The *Aji* tradition does not grow in urban areas in Aceh Singkil. Generally, it is only often heard from remote villages far from development and inhabited by the lower class.

Some villages are forbidden to be visited by outsiders, and even if the outsiders have to, they must be careful to consume food and drink. The villages considered forbidden by rumours are Cibubukan, Lentong, Belegen, Sepang, Tanah Bara, etc. These villages are remote, far from the urban or the trade centre. A new narrative has arisen that the stigma of *Aji* and forbidden villages only aims at the poor and traditional villages in remote areas.

Aceh Singkil has lower economic growth and development.⁶ However, it is the fourth largest oil palm fruit-

⁴ Rusmin Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus* (Depok: Komunitas Bambu, 2017). pp. 79

⁵ Jamhuri and Zuhaini Nopitasari, "Penyelesaian Perilaku Santet Dengan Hukum Adat Ditinjau Melalui Hukum Islam Di Kecamatan Gajah Putih," *Legitimasi* Vol. VII No. 1 (June 2018).

⁶ Sadri Jaya Ondang, *Singkil Dalam Konstelasi Sejarah Aceh* (Jawa

producing area in Aceh Province.⁷ It makes Aceh Singkil an oil palm industrial area, significantly influencing the community's cultural orientation and spirituality. Behind the onslaught of oil palm plantations, the people of Aceh Singkil still have a traditional cultural orientation, and some still believe in mystical things.⁸ Living in the palm oil industrial area with a strong belief in mystical matters, the people of Aceh Singkil, even any of them, are wildly suspected as *Pekhaji*. The characteristics of *Pekhaji* are usually pinned on older adults, who have a strong body odour, live in shabby houses, smoke clove, and eat betel.

Some of the victims who confessed to being poisoned by *Aji* have complaints of the same disease, such as coughing and vomiting blood, shortness of breath, no appetite, and a thinner body.⁹ The people being poisoned by *Aji* also have the same testimony: eating food given by a mysterious person (often, the villagers were accused). The people usually poisoned by *Aji* are strangers from outside the village. In medical analysis, such symptoms are commonly caused by excess corrosive acid consumption, lung tissue inflammation, fluid accumulation in the lungs, and others. However, *Aji* cannot be said to be a mere myth; people broadly believe in the existence of *Aji* phenomena through local cultural experiences. As a cultural experience, *Aji* is juxtaposed by society with a theological by the *Pekhaji*, and as a

Timur: FAM Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Histriografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI*. pp. 78

⁸ Zulfikar RH Pohan, "Mantra, Sabda Dan Sastra: Kata-Suara Dalam Ritual Adat Untuk Leluhur Dan Tuhan," in *Relasi Agama Dan Adat Di Indonesia*, ed. Sumanto Al Qurtuby and Teddy Kholiluddin (Semarang: eLSA Press, 2023). pp. 69

⁹ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

theological practice, *Aji* is expected to exist for a while.

The social side effect arising from the *Aji* phenomenon is the growth of anxiety in traditional society, increasing the class gap between modern urban and traditional rural societies. The *Aji* phenomenon also illustrates modern society's perception of one form of cultural and religious orientation in conventional culture.¹⁰ Traditional societies and everything attached to them are often considered sacred, strange, and mysterious. This research wants to elaborate on the *Aji* phenomenon in the social, religious, and mystical context.

Method

This research used a field research approach to collect material data directly in the field. The collected data are compiled into primary and additional data, complementing the main data. This research analyzed the data from interviews with several respondents, relevant field notes, and documentation in the form of testimony to ritual practices. Based on religious studies, this research examined various findings regarding ritualistic themes, beliefs, and social relations. The research data were compiled in narrative form with a qualitative approach that led to three research concepts: a) data reduction, b) data presentation, and c) conclusions and verification.¹¹ Although based on religious ritual studies, this research focused on political and economic relations in traditional societies. The author also used phenomenological research methods that rely on a cultural study approach.¹² Leach mentions that cultural study research views unequal power

¹⁰ Peter George Murdock, *Culture and Society* (USA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1965).

¹¹ Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Pendidikan: Pendekatan Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, Dan R&D.*, Cet-XI (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2010).

¹² M Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia, 2004).

relations based on the field's material base. He reveals that in scientific research, researchers must be able to find the internal logic of the structure to understand cultural societies so that the research does not create segregation of social classes in society.¹³

Result and Discussion

The tradition of poisoning others to death has many variants. In Gayo itself, it is called *Tubê* (poison), which has the same symptoms, such as coughing up blood, vomiting blood, itching, and so on.¹⁴ In Bali, it is called *Cetik*, while one with vomiting blood symptoms is called *Cetik keratan*.¹⁵ The poison tradition indeed exists in Indonesia, in which the tradition of concocting poison commonly aims to do evil to harm others with certain mystical beliefs. In the Barus people's beliefs, *Aji* is called *Rasun*, a disease that attacks humans (*hona rasun*) due to human actions. The symptoms and treatment have similarities. If the *hona rasun* itches, coughs hard, vomits blood, or is watery, the tip of the nail flesh will be stretched from the nail. The local people generally state that the poison tradition is part of mystical rituals performed by certain people. However, although this is common, no law strictly applies to the (accused) perpetrators of *Pekhaji*. On the other hand, some people know the antidote for poison with herbal medicines.

The medicine used is *Codieum variegated* / *Euphorbiaceae*, coconut milk, honey, wild chicken eggs, siring, jariango (*enhalus acorides*), pepper fruit, *hasior*, rice, and massage oil (*minyak kusuk*). After processing some of these

¹³ Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1961).

¹⁴ Nopitasari, "Penyelesaian Perilaku Santet Dengan Hukum Adat Ditinjau Melalui Hukum Islam Di Kecamatan Gajah Putih."

¹⁵ Nopitasari.

materials, the *Datuk* gives a spell with a sentence: "*Bismillah rohman rohamin. Sah atik ading ujiujian ni si tatap dohot ujiujian ni si bursok. Malum borgoh ya hum. Baen panggohi ni tawarho. Yah ahi mamake sitappar dasar. Malum borgoh yahum. Baen panggohi ni tawarhu sian pamatang si anu on. Yasah Yasuh Yasih.*"¹⁶

The treatment of poisons is generally only handed over to the village elders, who are considered to have supernatural advantages in reading *Aji*'s power, and they can find the right medicine according to the dosage. In addition to using medicine, various spells considered sacred are also used. In this case, the spells are fundamental in healing, usually accompanied by ritual offerings.¹⁷ In Aceh Singkil, elders or *Datuks* use prayers derived from Islam as a healing spell. In this case, poison is considered an evil spirit that disturbs humans. In local tradition, disease comes not from outside a man but within the human body and evil spirits.¹⁸ Therefore, treating poison also requires prayers and spells, in addition to using herbal medicines that can be found in livestock or plants.

It is rare for people suspected of being poisoned by *Aji* to be taken to the hospital with modern medical care. Most still believe that vomiting blood or regular vomiting and shortness of breath for days is a sign of *Aji* poison. Even so, doctors are considered unable to cure the patients poisoned by *Aji*. The firm belief of the society in *Aji* poison and alternative medicine has an impact on the health quality at the local hospital in Aceh Singkil.

¹⁶ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*. pp, 302

¹⁷ Pohan, "Mantra, Sabda Dan Sastra: Kata-Suara Dalam Ritual Adat Untuk Leluhur Dan Tuhan."

¹⁸ Harold G Coward and David J Goa, *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

However, people still need to be convinced about the hospital's professionalism.¹⁹, especially in terms of curing the patients suspected of being poisoned by *Aji*.

Aji as Ritual and Tradition in Aceh Singkil

Aji is a form of social phenomenon connected with supernatural things. Some previous research viewed *Aji/Rasun* as part of the mystical things; some considered poison with the same symptoms of pain that are not mystical.²⁰ However, the people of Aceh Singkil have always juxtaposed *Aji* as part of mystical practice and must be cured with mystical ritual practices.²¹ Generally, *Aji* treatment is also carried out with a spiritual or ritual-ceremonial approach of the mystic-religious. Rituals in the treatment of victims who are subjected to *Aji* rituals are anthropologically indeed a collective part of social integration as Durkheim states, “ritual... as reinforcing collective sentiment and social integration”.²²

There are various assumptions about *Aji*. Aceh Singkil is an area with the title of 3T (*Tertinggal, Terdepan dan Terluar*/Outermost, and remote areas region); the large number of underprivileged families in Aceh Singkil indicates this.²³ The lack of access to health, education, and clean water in Aceh Singkil causes various social, cultural, and religious phenomena.

¹⁹ Anniheriyati, “Komunikasi Terapeutik Sebagai Sarana Efektif Bagi Terlaksananya Tindakan Keperawatan Yang Optima,” *Jurnal Kesehatan Prima* V, no. 2 (Agustus 2011).

²⁰ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

²¹ Manjek Pohan, Pengobatan Aji, December 1, 2023.

²² Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

²³ Zulfikar RH Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Historiografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI* (Yogyakarta: Jejak Pustaka, 2021). pp. 76

One of the things that emerged was the firm belief of mystical beliefs in all forms of social phenomena. *Aji* is a form of social phenomenon connected with supernatural things. Some previous studies, indeed, saw *Aji/Rasun* as part of the mystical; some considered poison with the same symptoms of pain to be not mystical.²⁴ However, the people of Aceh Singkil have always juxtaposed *Aji* as part of mystical practice and must be cured with mystical ritual practices.²⁵ Generally, *Aji* treatment is also carried out with a spiritual or ritual-ceremonial approach of the mystic-religious. Rituals in the treatment of victims who are subjected to *Aji* rituals are anthropologically indeed a collective part of social integration as Durkheim argues, “ritual... as reinforcing collective sentiment and social integration”.²⁶

There are various assumptions about *Aji*; some people think that *Aji* in Aceh Singkil is a method of murder carried out to avenge or harm others. On the other hand, some say that *Aji* is a spiritual journey. The *Aji* makers assume that if he can kill as many people as possible with his concoction *Aji*, then he will get the highest spiritual level because he believes that whoever dies because of his *aji* potion will go to heaven.²⁷ Both assumptions are based on specific experiences and knowledge of society. It is rare for *Aji* poison to be discussed openly by the community; there has never been government socialization about *Aji* poison, nor has there been any local religious leader who defines *Aji* openly; all assumptions are mere assumptions. Discussing *Aji*'s poison in public is a disgrace. However, it is necessary to test the motive

²⁴ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

²⁵ Manjek Pohan, Pengobatan Aji, December 1, 2023.

²⁶ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

²⁷ Limbong, Mistis dalam Aji.

behind the *Aji* potion. To see *Aji*'s poison, discussing social and economic matters in Aceh Singkil is essential.

Aceh Singkil, ethnically, culturally, and religiously, is not synonymous with Aceh. Aceh Singkil is the outermost area of Aceh Province, which is genealogically sourced from Batak-Pakpak culture. Aceh has nothing in common with Aceh in terms of language and customs. In addition, theologically, Aceh Singkil does have several religious leaders who studied and were influential in Aceh. However, the form of religiosity of the Aceh Singkil people differs from that of Aceh.²⁸ Aceh Singkil is included in Aceh Province only because Aceh Singkil adheres to Islam (the thing that distinguishes Aceh Province from North Sumatra, which is identical to Protestant Christianity).

Of such differences, Aceh Singkil is often culturally and politically isolated in Aceh.²⁹ Various allegations regarding areas infested with shamans, poor areas, and areas full of poisonous beliefs were alleged against Aceh Singkil. This is sourced from multiple historical records in the Aceh Singkil civilization. In the 16th century, Tome Pires even mentioned that *Singkel* (the name of Aceh Singkil before it was included in Aceh Province) was inhabited by irreligious cannibals.³⁰ If examined critically, the writing can be refuted with various historiographical histories of imperialism carried out by Europe, which will generally stigmatize regions or nations that refuse to cooperate with European imperialism.³¹ Nevertheless, the accusations of the

²⁸ Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Historiografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI*.

²⁹ Nurhalimah, "Kisah Kaum Parmalin Di Aceh Singkil," *Opini Harian Serambi Indonesia*, 2019.

³⁰ Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Historiografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI*.

³¹ H.K Tamba and A Diansyah, "Kondisi Kehidupan Masyarakat Di Tanah Batak Setelah Masuknya Belanda," *MUKADIMAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*,

uncivilized people of Aceh Singkil are still believed today, with a relic that exists in the community's assumption of the tradition of *Aji* poison.

In addition to the period of European imperialism brought first by the Portuguese, Aceh Singkil many times had to accept a dark history along with control from the Aceh Sultanate in the form of violent colonialism in the Dutch East Indies Government until finally considered part of Aceh Province during the incessant identity politics carried out by Daud Beureuh in the DI/TII movement.³²

Aceh Singkil has experienced a complicated history in political, social, and religious terms, such as the burning of churches from the 1970s to 2015.³³ With this series of social histories, Aceh Singkil is increasingly immersed in the negative stigma that tends to give birth to conflict, the uneducated Aceh Singkil people, and the rise of harmful mystical traditions.

Furthermore, one of the things that emerged was the firm belief of mystical beliefs in all forms of social phenomena. *Aji* is a form of social phenomenon connected with supernatural things. Some previous studies, indeed, saw *Aji/Rasun* as part of the mystical; some considered poison with the same symptoms of pain to be not mystical.³⁴ However, the people of Aceh Singkil have always juxtaposed *Aji* as part of mystical practice and

Sejarah, Dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial 6(2) (2022).

³² Zulfikar RH Pohan and Ismail Angkat, "Human Rights Without Religions: The Polemics in Establishing Churches and The Dilemma of Implementing Human Rights in Aceh Singkil," *At-Turas Jurnal Studi Keislaman* Vol. 9 No, 1 (2022).

³³ Pohan and Angkat.

³⁴ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

must be cured with mystical ritual practices.³⁵ Generally, *Aji* treatment is also carried out with a spiritual or ritual-ceremonial approach of the mystic-religious. Rituals in the treatment of victims who are subjected to *Aji* rituals are, anthropologically indeed, a collective part of social integration.³⁶

There are various assumptions about *Aji*. Some think that *Aji* in Aceh Singkil is a method of murder carried out to avenge or harm others. On the other hand, some say that *Aji* is a spiritual journey. The *Aji* makers assume that if they can kill as many people as possible with their *Aji* concoction, then they will get the highest spiritual level because they believe that whoever dies because of their *Aji* potion will go to heaven.³⁷ Both assumptions are based on specific experiences and knowledge of society. It is rare for society to discuss *Aji* poison openly. Neither the government nor any local religious leaders have ever socialized or defined *Aji* poison openly; all assumptions are mere assumptions. Discussing *Aji*'s poison in public is a disgrace. However, it is necessary to test the motive behind the *Aji* potion. To see *Aji* poison, discussing social and economic matters in Aceh Singkil is essential.

Of such difference, Aceh Singkil is often culturally and politically isolated in Aceh.³⁸ Various allegations regarding areas infested with shamans, poor areas, and areas full of poisonous beliefs were alleged against Aceh Singkil. This is sourced from multiple historical records in the Aceh Singkil civilization. In the

³⁵ Manjek Pohan, Pengobatan Aji, December 1, 2023.

³⁶ Tumanggor, *Gerbang Agama-Agama Nusantara (Hindu, Yahudi, Ru-Konghucu, Islam & Nasrani) Kajian Antropologi Agama Dan Kesehatan Di Barus*.

³⁷ Limbong, Mistis dalam Aji.

³⁸ Nurhalimah, "Kisah Kaum Parmalin Di Aceh Singkil," *Opini Harian Serambi Indonesia*, 2019.

16th century, Tome Pires even mentioned that Singkel (the name of Aceh Singkel before it was included in Aceh Province) was inhabited by irreligious cannibals.³⁹ If examined critically, the writing can be disputed with various historiographical records of imperialism carried out by Europe, which would generally stigmatize regions or nations that refused to cooperate with European imperialism.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the accusations of the uncivilized people of Aceh Singkil are still believed today, with a relic that exists in the community's assumption of the tradition of *Aji* poison.

In addition to the period of European imperialism brought first by the Portuguese, Aceh Singkil many times had to accept a dark history along with control from the Aceh Sultanate in the form of violent colonialism in the Dutch East Indies Government until finally considered to be part of Aceh Province during the incessant identity politics carried out by Daud Beureuh in the DI/TII movement.⁴¹

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³⁹ Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Historiografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI*.

⁴⁰ H.K Tamba and A Diansyah, "Kondisi Kehidupan Masyarakat Di Tanah Batak Setelah Masuknya Belanda," *MUKADIMAH: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sejarah, Dan Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial* 6(2) (2022).

⁴¹ Zulfikar RH Pohan and Ismail Angkat, "Human Rights Without Religions: The Polemics in Establishing Churches and The Dilemma of Implementing Human Rights in Aceh Singkil," *At-Turas Jurnal Studi Keislaman* Vol. 9 No, 1 (2022).

⁴² Pohan and Angkat.

The Hidden Motives of *Aji* Poison

The motives for performing the *Aji* ritual are pretty diverse; however, the local community admits that the most important thing is not how *Aji* poison is concocted but how to avoid *Aji* poison. Thus, it is hard to find the true motive for *Aji*'s poison. Several interviews in this research were conducted on victims who had suffered from prolonged illness and were sentenced as a result of being exposed to *Aji* poison. Candra Purnama, who was poisoned, confessed that he had the same type of disease and allegedly originated from one similar thing, participating in a traditional party held in a village.⁴³ No one has ever interviewed the perpetrator of the *Aji* poison compounder.

Based on the interviews, the motives behind *Aji*'s potions are as follows: *First*, the desire to harm others. This motive is equated with witchcraft; the target that wants to be poisoned has been set. Usually, most of the *Aji* victims are those who do not come from their villages or are outsiders, such as young students (*santri*) from Islamic traditional schools (*pesantren*) who are invited to the villages to perform in custom activities such as *begahan* (customary party). At the customary party, prayer is held in Aceh Singkil; *santri* always comes to do the recitation of *asthma al-husna* and recite the Quran. The students are an easy target for *Aji*. It often happens that the students are affected by vomiting blood, loss of appetite, and high fever. With these symptoms, they are suspected to be exposed to *Aji* poison. *Aji* poison is frightening, but even more alarming is that the accusation leads to a form of supernatural ritual that sacrifices several lives. Indeed, as explained earlier, there has never been an in-depth investigation of why the students get the same disease, so the accusation of *Aji* poison is pinned on several villages in

⁴³ Candra Purnama, Sakit Kena Racun Aji, January 20, 2023.

Aceh Singkil.

Second, Aji poison is also used as a spiritual form. This motive is generally based on the theological understanding espoused by an individual poison maker. As a theological-mystical practice, this motive does not determine who the target is for which he will poison. This motive makes more sense when looking at how the local people in Aceh Singkil responded to the *Pekhaji*.

Of the two motives presented, the second motive makes more sense as a part of the reason that people suspect *Aji*. This motive is carried out to achieve a certain level of knowledge, and some also believe this is a curse arising from the family tree. In an interview, Joni Syahputra⁴⁴ mentions that the *Aji* poison concoctors can be identified with physical characteristics that never cleanse the body, have long nails, and have poor life. The dirtier the person is, the stronger the poison will arise.

Aji and *Pekhaji* in Aceh Singkil are indistinguishable from myths because *Pekhaji* and the composition of *Aji* are mysterious things and cannot be proven scientifically and rationally. The only proof of the existence of *Aji* poison is based on empirical sources of knowledge.⁴⁵ However, it does not mean that belief in the existence of *Aji* poison can be considered an ordinary story; it is a myth. People are still vigilant about *Aji* poison, and stories about it are growing. *Aji* poison can be seen from both the infrastructural and super-structural approaches. From the form of an infrastructural approach, it can be seen how class relations in society can be seen as a form of social inequality between underdeveloped rural areas and developed or urban areas, which

⁴⁴ Joni Syahputra, *Aji dan Ciri-ciri Pekhaji*, November 12, 2022.

⁴⁵ Pohan, *Pengobatan Aji*.

leads to a discourse about deviant ritual myths. On the other hand, super-structurally, Aji poison can also arise from cultural and religious orientations that grow in deepening communities, especially in Aceh Singkil.

Social Class and Birth of Myths

A form of marginalization, stigmatization, has arisen from the existence of myths considered to be true. This occurs because of the unequal relationship between two or more groups of people. In this case, *Aji* poison can be seen as a form of myth that has an impact on the marginalization of rural communities. As explained in the sub-chapter above, some underdeveloped villages in Aceh Singkil are accused of being areas that often perform magical rituals in concocting poisons that harm others. This information is only based on sporadic experiences, while ordinary people only have information about the social and economic conditions in the villages.

How is the condition of the region accused of the forbidden villages? It is a small region far from modernization; the villages are close to forests, oil palm plantations, and palm oil mills.⁴⁶ These relatively isolated areas are generally inhabited by most of the elderly and middle-aged. In an era continuously moving towards modernization, such areas will be increasingly underdeveloped and isolated. Remote villages like Tanah Bara, Cibubukan, Seping, Teluk Rumbia, and others need sound sanitation systems. The garbage is usually thrown behind the house because they need more waste management systems. At the same time, clean water is obtained from river flows prone to

⁴⁶ D Helbing, "Societal, Economic, Ethical and Legal Challenges of the Digital Revolution: From Big Data to Deep Learning, Artificial Intelligence, and Manipulative Technologies," in *Towards Digital Enlightenment*, ed. D Helbing (London: Springer, 2019).

flooding or digging wells that can be contaminated with palm oil mill waste.

With such conditions, the disease is more easily spread in rural areas than in urban areas in Aceh Singkil. According to Manjek Pohan,⁴⁷ Once upon a time, a village in Aceh Singkil, Tanah Bara village, was simultaneously affected by vomiting and defecation. After being investigated by the residents, it occurred because they accidentally drank palm oil mill wastewater dumped into the river. The exact incidence occurred in remote villages, including Cibubukan village, which still defecated openly and was prone to flooding. Contamination in food and beverages may occur in various cases. The lack of health standards and medical technology in Aceh Singkil makes this region full of accusations and stigmatization. However, some people also tend to have different opinions that *Aji* poison is indeed sourced from various types of herbs deliberately concocted, which they think is also inevitable. *Aji* poison can also be considered as a belief in the form of an obscure ritual.

The Sacred in Poison

Spiritual motives in *Aji* certainly have sources as part of the search for local history or at least have continuity in the forms of spiritual expression the society believes. Therefore, *Aji* must be seen as a practice with a (holy) sacred concept. Durkheim sees that the most fundamental characteristic of religious belief lies in how religious followers create the idea of 'the sacred.' At the same time, the second thing that is no less important is the idea of the supernatural.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Pohan, Pengobatan Aji.

⁴⁸ Samsul Maarif, "Dimensions of Religious Practice: The Amatoans of Sulawesi, Indonesia" (Dissertation, United States, UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2012).

The sacred includes two meanings: the scary thing with an anxious mystery and the admirable thing with a fascinating beauty. Human feelings support the sacred, so particular objects, places, or entities are considered holy. Muslims regard the Quran, mosques, and Ka'bah as sacred, and the indigenous people regard trees, forests, seas, and mountains as sacred.

Aji, in this case, is an object that is considered sacred by the makers of *Aji*. The sacredness of *Aji* lies in its function as a way of reaching a certain spiritual level. The perception built in the concept of the sacred in *Aji* is essential for the *Aji* (sacred) devotees, but it will have the opposite (profane) value for the victims and those who are not *Aji* makers.

In Mircea Eliade's presentation, religion has a system that arises from one form of sacredness concept.⁴⁹ Thus, it is a cause, not an effect. As a cause, religion plays a role in the spiritual realm by using the concept of sacredness. Sacredness is a space in which there is isolation and perfection, as well as a place believed to be the existence of ideas about supernatural entities.

Aji's concept of 'the sacred' is a part of a spiritually functioning order. No one can perform the *Aji* except those who believe in 'the sacredness of *Aji* so they can concoct and spread it to others. As something considered sacred, *Aji* is part of a 'dark ritual' hidden from most people. In Aceh Singkil, from the beginning of *Aji*, until this article was written, there has never been anyone who claimed to be a *Pekhaji*. Most of the data about *Aji* was obtained through victim testimony, local community confessions, and community prohibitions. Although there is no

⁴⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane (The Nature of Religion)*, trans. Willard R Task (Florida: A Harvest Book, 1957). pp. 89

data yet, feeling worried is significant in society.⁵⁰

Aji never seemed to exist in society; from the beginning, there was no clarity about the perpetrator and the form of *Aji*. Its substances can also not be proven through advancements in medical and pharmaceutical sciences that are currently developing rapidly. Apart from believing *Aji* to be a mystical entity, is there any other explanation for why *Aji* is so considered and feared? The question is often asked to explain what needs to be explained, but it ends in a stalemate. To avoid being trapped in the impasse of discussion, this research used an approach that relied on mystical study and discussed the material based on the concept of *Aji* in Aceh Singkil society.

This research was also carried out based on religious studies so that the aspects affecting spirituality and social and political issues of religious communities explain religious practices in society. In this case, *Aji* is also connected with social, economic, and political relations in Aceh Singkil. Juxtaposing *Aji*'s issues on economic-political issues is a new step to explaining *Aji* straightforwardly without being wrapped in an abstract explanation that intersects with the supernatural entity.

***Aji*: Social Conspiracy**

The problem that arises from *Aji* in the social sphere is the growth of severe segregation between traditional and modern society. Traditional societies become social communities that are exiled from urban culture. The development of remote villages is often hampered due to negative stigma and the assumption of "The Forbidden Villages." In the Oxford Dictionary, tradition is "a belief, a custom or a way of doing something that has existed

⁵⁰ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return on Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R Task (New York: Princeton University Press, 1987).

for a long time among a particular group of people; a set of beliefs or customs. Traditional practices by local people are considered positive for material culture but unfavourable for immaterial culture. *Aji* is part of the bad stigma in conventional society, so its existence is often regarded as fanatical, savaged, immature, and childish. The stigma has the same tendency as the one researchers give to define animism.

Frazer⁵¹ writes about animism as a childish trait, which he categorizes as a primitive label, while monotheism is categorized as a modern religion. What Frazer reveals comes from a long study in religious studies, such as Taylor⁵² who defines animism and traditional spiritual belief as part of the discussion of primitive societies. However, this view has drawn many criticisms, such as Bird-David's criticism of refusing to call animism a primitive religious orientation and Bird-David's explanation of cultural materialism that tries to break primitive accusations on traditional societies with an approach to political and economic relations.⁵³ The stigmatization of traditional societies that are said to be primitive turns out to hide Western economic and political interests and define a culture that is considered foreign or primitive.

The failure to communicate with traditional societies caused some researchers to make primitive accusations easily. This is a discussion of Western modernization standards of religious and cultural rituals.⁵⁴ People who still live traditionally

⁵¹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: MacMillan Press, 1980).

⁵² E.B Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (London, 1871).

⁵³ Nurit Bird-David, "Animism" Revisited *Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology [and Comment and Reply]*, vol. Vol 40, *Current Anthropology* (United States: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ Daniel L Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, trans. Inyik Ridwan

are considered underdeveloped, even though behind these accusations comes a development mission that tries to change the pattern of people's lives from traditional to modern. In Indonesia, some traditional communities often receive damaging accusations of their culture and beliefs; the allegations are directly proportional to how corporate-related governments try to turn rice fields into cement mills, paddy fields into international airports, and forests into oil palm plantations.

Economic and political interests have always accompanied the emergence of negative stigma in traditional society. In Singkil, *Aji* has become a negative stigma alleged to conventional people with traditional beliefs and culture. 'The Forbidden Village,' suspected to be a traditional village in Singkil, has a charge loaded with politics and economics. This negative stigma has made the remote villages develop sporadically, and some villages need to be touched by prolonged development.

Aji and the *Pekhaji* are not only touched by economic and political equality but also tend not to be touched by equal social relations. The accused *Pekhaji* was usually exiled by the community, not invited if there was a traditional celebration, and very few people were willing to take care of his remains if he died.⁵⁵ The treatment is fraught with discrimination, but some Singkil villagers think it is reasonable. *Pekhaji*'s children and grandchildren could also get the same treatment by society. Not only is it labelled as a primitive society, but it is also regarded as a criminal figure who has the potential to kill others. Although the allegations have never been directly proven, the stigma remains and has become the belief of the local people.

Muzir (Yogyakarta: IRCISOD, 2012).

⁵⁵ Lingga, Aji di Belegen.

Marginalized Culture and Local Society

Polemics arising from accusations against *Pekhaji* often lead to social conflicts. People who are not trusted will always experience stigmatization regarding social association. This genealogically stems from the marginalization of peripheral areas. Aceh Singkil is a suburb that is far from prosperity. In the 19th century, Aceh Singkil experienced various social problems such as poverty, hunger, natural disasters, unemployment, and lack of access to education. In addition, the people of Singkil have considerable natural potential, whereas the people of Aceh Singkil inhabit forests, hills, and rivers.⁵⁶ This makes the perspective of Aceh Singkil consistently negative, with accusations of people who tend to poison someone.

As an area still with many remote villages and uneven development of facilities and infrastructure, Aceh Singkil has become increasingly isolated due to the failure of efforts to recognize traditional communities. Instead of providing an understanding of sanitation, health, livable houses, and equitable education in villages, rural communities are increasingly squeezed into stigma and centralized development around cross-city areas and the increasing prevalence of oil palm companies. These oil palm plantations cause floods that have the potential to spread disease. Aceh Singkil is the poorest district in Aceh Province, which, from year to year, shows a low percentage of prosperity and minimal life expectancy.

In 2021, Aceh Singkil's poverty was 20.36%. Seven years ago, the poverty rate was 22.11%; indeed, there was a gradual

⁵⁶ Pohan, *Sejarah Tanpa Manusia: Historiografi Singkel Abad VII-XXI*.

decline.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, in 2022, the poverty rate was at 19.18%.⁵⁸ The percentage of poverty generally existed in rural communities where workers worked as factory workers without land ownership rights, here in the sea, and fishermen fish in rivers. Thus, efforts to eliminate the stigmatization of forbidden communities and villages begin with forming an awareness of development at the village level by recognizing traditional communities in Aceh Singkil so that there is no social inequality or unequal social class relations.

Conclusion

Aji is a belief that is still considered part of the local belief in Singkil by certain people, who refer to it as *Pekhaji*. Many victims fell with similar symptoms, and the diseases emerged due to consuming food and drink from strangers in a slum. Underdeveloped villages in Aceh Singkil often encounter negative stigma around the accusations of primitive and *Pekhaji* communities. The *Aji* phenomenon is not only in the discourse of one side, but several sides are attached to this phenomenon: society, *Aji* victims, *Pekhaji*, and *tabib/datuk/gukhu* as healers to the victims. However, *Aji's* problem is not only a matter of ritual killing and healing, but there are relations of economic, political, and alienation power in it.

A side effect of the notion of *Aji's* existence is the emergence of forbidden communities and villages, which are shunned by most people from outside the village. Specific

⁵⁷ KOMPAS, "Jumlah Penduduk Miskin Di Aceh Singkil Kantong Utama Di Perkebunan Sawit," *Kompas.Id*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/05/09/jumlah-penduduk-miskin-di-aceh-singkil-tinggi-kantong-utama-di-perkebunan-sawit>.

⁵⁸ BPS Provinsi Aceh, "Persentase Penduduk Miskin Di Provinsi Aceh" (BPS Provinsi Aceh, 2022), <https://aceh.bps.go.id/indicator/23/42/1/persentase-penduduk-miskin.html>.

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communities and villages are accused of being *Aji* spreaders who can at any time kill anyone unknown. However, these accusations instead resulted in severe segregation between traditional societies (villages) and modern (urban) societies. Traditional culture is accused of being a primitive society that is challenging, difficult to communicate with, lazy to work, and has mystical knowledge. From an economic and political point of view, the people accused of being *Pekhaji* and living in *Pekhaji* village were exiled from village development and knocked away from economic competition in the market. Traditional village communities are left poor, exiled, and restricted in association with the outside world, contrary to the principles of equal humanity and the right to equal treatment by the civil rights contained in them.

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