

# LIFE-SHIFTING PHENOMENA OF SAKAI WOMEN IN RIAU

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## **LIFE-SHIFTING PHENOMENA OF SAKAI WOMEN IN RIAU**

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### **Abstrack**

*This research aims to explore the life shifting phenomena of Sakai women in the modernity era. The research based on the phenomenon of Sakai women living in off the beaten track of rural areas in which communication with outsider is extremely limited. Living with traditional patterns that handed down from generation to generation, their social shift occurs very slowly. Up to this moment, they are still at a marginal level; where the level of education, public social participation, and economic level is considered low still. This study was carried out using phenomenological qualitative methods by looking at and exploring phenomena into structured concepts so that they were easy to understand. The study involved 10 key informants, six women including the village head and four men. The research findings explain that the cultural shift towards change in the Sakai women more created through the assimilation between ethnic groups. It leads to cultural interaction which is built positively, the coercion of situations that force to stay settled, living side by side with the outside of Sakai community, exposure to the social environment and TV media have change their life style.*

*Keywords; Sakai Women, Social Change, cultural assimilation, public social participation, the coercion of the situation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The earlier portraits of Sakai women are not far away different from today; illiterate, difficult to communicate with foreigner and afraid of visitors who come to their village. These become the real profile of Sakai women (Erni,2014). It is quite difficult to invite them to involve in conversation due to their low self-confidence. It is not like other women villagers surroundings, it is much more difficult to ask the Sakai women to go to school. Going to school or making socialization with other villagers is considered to be not appropriate with their tradition. This situation has set the lives of Sakai women left far more behind around the modernity of people surround.

The seclusion of women in Sakai is factually worse than the general condition of women in the boundary rural areas around them. Most of the women are involved struggling for economic activities to reduce their dependence on men and empower themselves (Obeng, 2014). In this social context, these women participate to construct their livelihood. However, when women are still in a marginal and isolated social context, their existence will be in the natural social position that is built based on their particular social constructs which are commonly uneducated, weak access, low participation, control and usefulness in life will be low.

Facts and data about social construct of society mentions that in general, the Sakai women are still positioned in subordinate point. The sphere of education, work, customs, politics and other social situations are often found to ignore their involvement and abilities. The existing assumption that education is not so important for women has led to a social phenomenon such as limited access and control for the women. They keep maintaining their tradition that teaching the women about household management, food processing, clothing and house arrangement so that they can carry out their maximum role in the household is better than asking them to go schooling or having a formal education. This condition is socially set the Sakai women in a position of high dependence on men which directly forced them to social and economic vulnerabilities (SDGs; New York: 2015).

Sakai women have lived their tradition hereditary. For them, household "rituals" is a normal task that must be through naturally. The rules that have occupied with them for such a long time is just like a sacred book in which there will be punishment if they break and violate it. Their ignorance on formal education, thinking that education is not crucial need for a Sakai woman's life but merely the ability to read to avoid fraudulent people. In fact, women education is very important in efforts to improve their quality of life (SDGs; New York; 2015; 89-93). Along with the times, Sakai women have been an inseparable part of empowerment program provided by the government. Despite all the delays, the slow process of changing, Sakai women began to move little by little from the lag that occurred. With the basic provisions of education – which is essentially – not aware, the Sakai women start going to school-knowing hope in life and achieving goals.

The shift in women's lives occurred in line with changes in the life patterns of the Sakai people who originally are nomadic to sedentary. They begin to use the same land for farming, getting to utilize tools in facilitating life processes such as farming tools, vehicles, fertilizers and so on. In this regard, women are one of the segments of society that are directly involved in change. But the process of changing does not necessarily run smoothly. Changes in perspective on the role of women in general remain the range of existing changes. Women are still positioned as outranked in various fields because their main focus is on household matters as required by customs.

#### **RESEARCH METHODS**

The research approach used is a phenomenological approach with qualitative methods. Marleu-Ponty, (1962), Shaun Gallagher & Daniel Schmicking, (2010) wrote that this approach is a philosophical approach that seeks to explore phenomena that develop in society. The phenomenological approach used in this study relates to the phenomenon of significant changes that occur in the lives of Sakai women so that a holistic picture of change can be found. This study involved 10 key informants 6 women including the village head and 4 men living in Kesumbo Ampai Village, Bathin Solapan, Duri. Data obtained by means of in-depth interviews and analyzed using qualitative techniques (Matthew B Miles & A Michael Huberman, 1994) combined with the daily phenomena of women recorded in field notes.

## **FINDING AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Reality of Life of Sakai Women**

#### **1. Sakai Women in Custom**

The Sakai people historically are descendants of the Pagaruyung kingdom of West Sumatra who are looking for a new life in an area that is considered close to the kingdom's territory. The failure of getting a good place and unsuccessfully building good relations with the indigenous people, the Sakai people mostly avoid and live in the hinterland. Suparlan, (1995), Luthfi, (1990), Hamidi, (1991), Thamrin, (2003), Erni (2014) confirmed in the results of research conducted that the Sakai people made a treaty of cooperation in obedience to the Siak kingdom and paid tribute to the King. Essentially, the life movement Sakai people is not much different from other inland tribes such as Paparan, about the life of the Talang Mamak people in Riau who still live with all the 'simplicity' (Jpang, 2020), also the Laut tribe who still remain on the sidelines even though government has interfered to build prosperity (Meri Erni Puspita Sari & Diah Ayu Pratiwi, 2018). Overall, the life of the women as companions in these tribes runs naturally, and so does their learning of life.

The lives of Sakai women were almost no different from other 'native' tribe women. They run their life like flowing water. The almost no changing of their old live pattern put their live stagnant. Remaining the inadequacy, the women carry out their roles as wives, mothers and house keepers. Their main tasks are always about to care of household matters such as cooking, washing clothes, cleaning the house, taking care of children, and gardening for food or make modest crops (Erni: 2014; 77). Cooking for Sakai women is not as simple as what other demoted societies do. The process of making food for the family need takes about one week. It starts by looking for the ingredients, Menggalo roots, in the forest, then followed by the process of making flour such as Tiwul – also takes almost 1 week. The peeled roots must first be soaked in the river for about 2 days before grating it. Long time ago, before they recognized the can grater, the grater was made of sharp thorns. The process of grating can take one or two days. Then the root are ready to be roasted for about two days in order the root can last longer.

The process of making Menggalo flour is carried out in the range of 1 to 3 months depending of the number of Menggalo roots taken from the forest. The Menggalo root were not planted, but as time progressed, they plant the Menggalo roots to produce more. The dried Menggalo flour is stored in burlap for household needs for several months. Roasted Menggalo is also known as galo mesik can be eaten directly with chili belacan sauce or with fish that they can seek in the river. It can also be cooked like rice.

Washing clothes and cleaning the house just like cooking, the activities are completed discreetly. There is no concept of neat, clean and healthy in the process of these activities. The limited numbers of clothing also make the task less time-consuming. They will wash each piece and wait for the clothes dry before they can wear it again. They also clean the house slightly since the house is very simple. It can even be said that it is not a house but a mere shelter.

While, in the concept of caring for their children, the Sakai people control their children not to do dangerous activities or are attacked by animals while playing. There are no specific instructions given other than forbidding their children to fight among themselves. This situation continues to this day, even though almost all their children go schooling. In this



case, mothers only allowed their children to go to school, helped them prepare uniforms to wear, and woke their children up to go to school. This situation is still ongoing even though they live sedentary now. Therefore the children will grow up naturally without any intrusion.

There are Sakai women who work as traditional birth quack. Not all women can be a traditional birth quack but those who have the background as a shaman. Shaman in Sakai women's lives is important to help with labor or delivery. But, nowadays, there are some Sakai women who started to use medical personnel (midwives) to assist with childbirth. Moreover, there are only few women are willing and dare to be a shaman due to the risks that may occurs.

With her expertise, the shaman will help and look after the child for approximately one week. She keep the baby away from bad evil or spirit through her spell. Basically, there are not many customary rules that bind the Sakai women in socio-cultural life. All of the roles performed by Sakai women are considered as natural. With the isolation of life and limited knowledge, life goes on naturally without any specific demands.

## **2. Modernization Push**

The Sakai people remind to keep their life naturally without interaction with other tribes around them such as Malay. They mostly depend on what nature provided for them. They will move to another land when the land they are living now cannot support for their life anymore. For them, the vast and wide open nature is their asset. Moreover, they can open new settlement in deep forest although the community group only consists of a few families. And in this case, the women cannot refuse the family decision. The tradition of living Clustered in small groups, closed them off and did not have much open interaction with the outside community, including not participating in government programs aimed at society in general. It has made the Sakai people banned to socialize with other society around them-including with programs held by the government.

The phenomenon of the life of the Sakai people has recently begun to shift due to the pressure of population growth which has cleared a lot of land in the fields of the Sakai people. Social interaction that cannot be avoided builds objective and subjective social reality in building society (Poloma, 1994). When the social interactions occur, the Sakai people will make influences that come from outside as something new. The unsustainability of the concept of 'Ulayat land' as the impact of the global economy has forced the Sakai people to start not leaving the land they own. They are forced not to leave the existing land because when they return to the forest, they often found that the intended land has been cultivated by someone else (private owner). So that they can no longer be free to cultivate land that was originally a tribal Ulayat land.

The construction of housing for non-Sakai residents around the Sakai village naturally has influenced the Sakai people. The undeniable pressure of population distribution is a part that forces Sakai women to interact and communicate with residents other than Sakai. Sakai women are getting to know the models of clothes, accessories, cosmetics and so on. The existence of information-communication technology, vehicles, other assistive technologies, different patterns and arrangements of economic, social, religious and cultural life became something new for the Sakai people who were slowly starting to shift. By settling down, several Sakai households have TV which they can afford via merchants. Unconsciously, they learn about life outside through watching TV.

This situation cannot be separated from the urgency of globalization that knows no boundaries, (Tjiptohrijanto, 1996). The globalization has forced many changes in Sakai

women. This cross-border influence forces women to be different from the ordinary Sakai women who are taught from generation to generation.



Sakai woman cooking 'mesik mengalo' of Sakai people's food

Starting to live sedentary and as the government and schools affirms them to go to school, Sakai's boys and girls began to attend basic education to learn to read, write and count. The girls interact, learn and play with children other than their tribe. Their ability to write and read has an indirect impact on access to fashion and dressing style, including language.

In fact, not all of Sakai's children survive to the end of basic education. Being good at basic reading and writing, and basic arithmetic is considered enough for them to stop studying. The boys are required to help their parents earn a living such as up keeping their farm, finding woods, captivating forest products manual labor in a nearby wood factory –which often the mill/timber felling was carried out on former land belonging to the Sakai people. The girls are ought to take care of the house, are taught to make food ingredients (*mengalo-mesik*), look for *ngalo* sweet potatoes, and others related to the family's needs. The social stigma of women's position in society naturally leads women to uneducated positions (Syamsiyah, 2015)

The un-well educated condition of Sakai's children might be related to the large number of young families due to the early - age marriage. When the boy is considered to be able to earn a living (food needs) for the family, then he must get married. Likewise with women, when they are 'menstruating', are good at taking care of the house including dressing up, they are considered adults and should immediately get married to build their own families. Their Biological maturation that is not followed by emotional maturity is stronger triggered by uneducated video shows that is accessed by children without parental control (Santrock, 2011). This situation again slows down the process of positive social change. Even though they are already living sedentary, the shift that leads to better improvements is still progressing slowly and even seems unbalanced with the consumptive influence that is rapidly pervading the lives of the Sakai people.

By living sedentary and grouped together with the Sakai extended family, many social aspects of women have also shifted. They are no longer process '*ngalo*' but have started to consume rice through purchased rice. Groceries, fish is begun to be well-known and supplied by outside traders who come to visit. In this position the role of money becomes dominant among the Sakai family. Limited knowledge on managing of their owned land, purchased groceries, fashion and style directly increases inequality compared to lifestyles that have begun to change.

### 3. Educational Participation

Socially, the Sakai people are not abstinence from interaction with outsiders, especially related to matchmaking. This can be seen in the past that there have been marriages between

Sakai people, both male and female, with outsiders or other tribes besides Sakai. This marriage then becomes the motor, although slow, for the changes that occur within the Sakai people and group. This condition was experienced directly by "Anita" a Sakai woman who had attained a bachelor's degree (S1) education and became a village head in Sakai Batin Solapan Village. Attending education is more than the motivation given by his grandfather who comes from the non-Sakai Malay tribe and works as a chief of religious figure who plays a role in marrying the bride and groom in the midst of rural communities. With role and as nonnative of Sakai made him live in the middle of a rural Malay village and not move around. He also did not depend on agriculture or farming to earn for living. The settlement of the Sakai people, and assimilation in marriage, causes a gradual process of change, including the motivation to get an education. Anita said:

*"... the school period, especially when I was still at the elementary level, was a very hard part to face. The desire to play casually like friends of the same age and join parents moving around is an extraordinary temptation that must be suppressed. Moreover, at school there is ridicule that tends to be demeaning such as: 'e.. Sakai people, Sakai and others'. If I didn't follow my grandfather then I definitely had never been gone to school. Grandpa's role was very big when I sulked that didn't want to go to school anymore but went home to my parents in the forest. I insisted that I didn't want to go to school. My grandpa always persuaded, motivated and always picked me up to go back to school. It is conceivable that if grandpa did not act as a motivator and at the same time as a facilitator for school, then I will not take education.." (Inner Solapan, August 15, 2018)*

In the statistical data of Batin Solapan Village (Sakai Village as a result of the expansion) there are 4 Sakai women who have graduated from high school and are currently in the process of education in Higher Education (getting a bachelor's degree). The education of a few Sakai women is essentially not related to the awareness of the importance of women's education (mothers) so that they can become the motor of family education. Mother as the initial 'madrasa' (Abdul: 2020) I in this regard is seen by Sakai women as an innate role.

Information obtained in the field explains that nowadays the Sakai people do not move much in gardening anymore. The reasons that arise include: 1) Land is getting narrower; it is no longer like before, when you enter the forest to clear the forest, the cleared land can be owned and marked. 2) A cultural shift with more and more Sakai people starting to take education even though they only reach elementary school (SD) level or then go to a higher level. 3) More and more Sakai people marry people outside the Sakai tribe, especially Sakai women; make changes happen naturally. 4) The growing number of wood industries in the territory of the Sakai people which involves the descendants of the Sakai people to work. 5) The government's affirmative action in building and developing the lives of the Sakai people towards a better condition. 6) The more open information and technology that inadvertently helps the process of social change in the Sakai community.

The level of education of the Sakai people in general is only at the elementary level (SD), if there are Sakai people who take higher education, it is certain that there is motivation and other social interactions that occur between themselves and their families with people outside of Sakai. Moreover, women which are not involved too much socially in making a living; women are at home to take care of the household and children. The household chores that were a bit tiring for women in the past were making food supplies made from tuber "ngalo" – a type of broadleaf woody tuber with large tubers and contains poison. Nowadays, there are not many food made from 'ngalo' but rice.



The limited Sakai women's social roles don't necessarily keep them busy with education or training. Staying at home and accompanying children is the main choice that seems to be common. Mothers in families who have school children mostly only tell their children to go to school. And if there is homework (PR) then the child will do it himself as best he can. Mother in this regard cannot help with homework due to minimal education. Children naturally follow education in schools located in villages.

Out of their routine activities at home, some women participate in helping young mother who is about to give birth. This was done with the initiative. Unlike in the past, the only women who helped in the delivery process were the 'traditional birth quack' and the person she asked for – usually her assistant comes from her family, her child or sister. No other woman could even take the initiative to help to prepare the items needed. In the Sakai tradition, a woman who is about to give birth is not accompanied by her husband but other women around with the birth quack. There are also a small number of Sakai women who have been trained to become pioneer for *Posyandu* (integrated service post for mother and children), even though they only help with weighing, giving children 'food' and other simple things. The Sakai women who become the pioneer of the *Posyandu* are those who are literate, able to count and able to read, although some of them graduated from elementary and junior high school.

Since the Sakai people live settled, almost all of their children go to school. The children are no longer spend the days playing or helping to earn a living. They go to school together with their school aged friends. Although the children are not properly assisted by their mother, the government's efforts to build schools is hoped to be able to motivate the community to register their children to school. In Solapan Batin Village, there are schools ranging from Kindergarten to high school. However, most of the students who attend the schools are non-Sakai outsiders. In general, Sakai children only accomplish their school until elementary school. Moreover, the women are often found not completing elementary school.



Talk to the Sakai figure.



Sakai Settlement

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sakai women are a handful of Indonesian women who cannot be separated from other common women's phenomena. The study of women found a number of information on social inequalities in women's lives caused by traditions, customs and less precise religious understandings. Women are considered temptresses and have a demonic nature so women should not be given the opportunity to make decisions. Freiden, (1963) early American feminists began their struggle in the 1950s against social treatment of American women who were only placed in the domestic sector, dependent, uneducated, not considered important and so on.

Sakai women are essentially only wives, housekeepers who fulfill the sexual and physical needs of their husbands, are uneducated and have no economic access. The general view of



women is that when the women start working and has economic access; their "female" role will decrease. It cannot be denied that in the reality of women's lives, the economic access they have is often neglected socially, because the fulfillment of household needs does not have any economic value and is considered as an obligation that must be done. In rural areas, in addition to their domestic duties, women are obliged to go to the fields, fields or gardens to grow crops to meet the economic needs of the family (Sajogyo, 1983). In some areas, the work is distributed socially in which women are obliged to fulfill their food needs by farming, gardening and so on, while men are obliged to earn a living in the form of 'money' which can be used to buy other necessities (Emi, *Distribution Patterns*). *Work in Meeting the Needs of Family Houses in Tj. Berulak Kampar Village*, 2003). In this position, Sakai women are not much different, in charge of taking care of everything related to the household including providing food by farming around the house.

The social stigma about women including the Sakai woman as a housekeeper, fulfilling household and food needs has an impact on women's socio-economic vulnerability. The research of Sajogyo (1983), Mosse (1993) confirms that the time allocation given by women in managing (working) in the domestic sector, these activities are not seen as active economic access. Meanwhile, a housemaid—with a certain wage—is seen as an active economic access with a very limited time allocation (Mosse, 1996). In other words, the economic work that the women do in the gardens, rice fields is not considered as profit work because the results obtained are consumed by the family or if sold, the sales proceeds are considered as the husband's work. Such a situation will directly build the exclusion and castration of women in making decisions. This makes the women continuously dependent on their husband. The crucial impact is that they consider that education is less important, weak control, inability to communicate in the public world which leads to economic and social vulnerability. .

The concept of social change in society is basically not aimed at marginalized communities, but involves the whole community, both in rural and urban areas. Social change is a manifestation of the dynamics of a culture leading to innovation or friction between cultures which emerged to new cultures or movements in the cultural structure. The analysis of social change in society cannot be separated from the thoughts of Merton (1975), Parson (1977) who are important in explaining the changes that have developed in the structure of society (Poloma: 1994: 23,168). Whatever the social process that gives a change, is essentially, a cultural reproduction that occurs dynamically, independent, spontaneously and definitely. Seeing through the indicators of population density which mentions that with the increasing number of settlements, assimilation between residents of different ethnicities, the flow of globalization become an important and undeniable part in the movement of slowly changing of a Sakai women.

The dynamics of human behavior goes hand in hand with the dynamics of social change. When social elements experience a shift, it cannot be denied that the social structure also shifts, turning into something new. Likewise in women's lives, social dynamics actively shape social changes that present new ones, both positive and negative. The potential for change that humans have is equipped with awareness that emerges into energy for social change (transformation) in society (Mudji Sutrisno & Hendar Putranto, 2005). The movement of macro change occurs in Sakai women along with the needs of sedentary life. This need has spurred many Sakai women to participate in making money or getting income from the harvest – which means women become involved in economic activities (Warto, 1997).

Education in relation to the social changes of the Sakai women becomes an absolute must as a dynamic motor that will affect itself. Mandle (1981) explained that in the past, social changes for American women also occurred because women began to have education. The development of education and training that women participated is begun to open the veil of women's limitations and tended to reduce differences in attitudes, behavior and skills between men and women.

### CONCLUSION

Sakai women's social change is progressing very slowly following the customary pattern in the Sakai tradition. The absence of targets and goals to be achieved in life, the 'just flows naturally' life is the main reason of slowing change. Although progress is slow, change is undeniable. There are at least 4 important aspects that build change, namely; 1) Cultural assimilation in the form of marriage between Sakai people and non-Sakai people has become an important trigger for change in women, 2) the pressure of non-Sakai residents to settle into the Sakai village has built direct and indirect interactions between Sakai women and outsiders, 3) pressure to settle down globalization (across borders) in the form of lifestyles, appearances including technology such as TV, vehicles and cellphones, has made Sakai women know a lot about the new world and follow it. 4) Involvement in education and the general social world such as *posyandu*.

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