

Harmony of Nature and Culture: The Case of Sirombu Beach and Aekhula Tradition in West Nias, North Sumatera Province

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Abstract

Tourism attraction cannot be established alone, it must be juxtaposed by all the potential around it. The phenomenon of research on the dual attractiveness of tourism activities in a destination has become popular because it provides its own challenges and happiness for researchers who are competent in this field. This research explores the harmonization between the natural beauty of Sirombu Beach and the rich cultural tradition of Aekhula in West Nias Regency, North Sumatra. Sirombu Beach, with its stunning beaches, attractive spots for surfing, continuously improved infrastructure, and stunning natural panorama, has become one of the leading marine tourism destinations in the region. On the other hand, Aekhula's traditions, which include distinctive dances, cultural values, and regional identity, are a rich cultural heritage that attracts tourists. This combination of natural beauty and cultural strength is likened to a harmonious relationship between lovers, which ultimately led to West Nias being known as the "Earth of Aekhula." By applying the case study method, this research reveals how the synergy between natural and cultural attractions in West Nias provides a special attraction for tourists to come and enjoy various tourist and cultural attractions. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of sustainable tourism in the region by utilizing the existing natural and cultural potential in a balanced manner.

Keywords: Sirombu beach, aekhula tradition, maritime tourism, cultural tourism, west Nias

1. INTRODUCTION

The West Nias Regency in North Sumatra, has marine and cultural tourism potential. The regency is known for its beaches and natural beauty. Some top marine tourism spots are (1) Sirombu Beach, known for its white sand and waves, and (2) Asu Island, known for its natural beauty and snorkeling and diving activities. Gu'u, Fari'i, Ture, Fadaya, and Valaete Beaches each have unique characteristics and offer various activities. Attractions, accessibility, and amenities are already available in the marine tourism area in West Nias Regency. Transportation between islands can be done using boats or passenger motorboats.

The president of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, visited West Nias in July 2022. This attracted attention to the area. After the visit, the road and port were improved. Building a ring road to connect all districts on Nias Island, improving Sirombu port, and arranging local roads are important for national development. The Aekhula Pesona Festival (FPA) in 2022 was attended by the ministers of tourism and public works, provincial officials, and other regional leaders. It attracted more attention and boosted tourist visits to West Nias Regency.

The culture of West Nias is also very rich and diverse, such as Megalithic Sites, where there are several historical sites in villages such as Lahomi, Lolozirugi, and Sisarahili that show the cultural heritage of the Nias people. Furthermore, the distinctive Nias traditional houses are a special attraction for tourists who want to understand the local culture. Furthermore, various festivals such as "Mandi Limau" which is carried out the day before the fasting month is an example of how local traditions are still maintained. The most phenomenal cultural attraction is the Aekhula Pesona Festival which is an annual cultural event agenda in West Nias Regency. Thus, the potential for

marine tourism and cultural wealth in West Nias Regency not only offers natural beauty but also a deep cultural experience for visitors.

Combining aspects of culture and marine tourism in West Nias Regency is significant in increasing tourism attractiveness. First, the importance of combining is for (1) Diversification of Tourism Attraction i.e. Integrating local culture with marine tourism can create a richer experience for visitors. Tourists not only enjoy the beauty of nature, but can also understand and experience the traditions and cultural values of the Nias people (2) Cultural Preservation i.e. By highlighting local culture in the context of tourism, there is an incentive to preserve cultural heritage, such as traditional dances, handicrafts and traditional rituals. This helps maintain the cultural identity of the Nias community and Local Economic Boost i.e. The combination of marine and cultural tourism can increase local revenue through increased visitor numbers. It also opens up job opportunities for local people in the tourism sector, from tour guides to accommodation providers.

Combining natural and cultural aspects is important for West Nias tourist destinations. This helps them to survive in the globalized world, where many local cultures are threatened. Integrating culture into tourism can help protect and promote local culture as modernization occurs. This can also help West Nias Regency compete with other destinations in Indonesia and abroad. This attracts travelers looking for authentic experiences and helps develop better infrastructure. This includes making tourist sites, accommodation, and other facilities more accessible. Combining cultural and marine tourism in West Nias is important for more tourists and to help the area stay sustainable. With the government, community, and private sector working together, this potential can be used to help the people of West Nias.

West Nias tourism is not as developed as other regions in Indonesia. Combining marine tourism with cultural traditions could make West Nias a unique tourism destination. This study looks at how combining marine tourism with the Aekhula tradition can improve tourism in West Nias. It also looks at what makes this combination successful.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative research approach to explore the intricate relationship between nature and culture in the context of tourism development in West Nias. The following methods were utilized:

1. Literature Review: A comprehensive review of existing literature on sustainable tourism, marine tourism, cultural heritage, and community-based tourism was conducted to establish a theoretical framework for the study.
2. Field Research: Data collection was primarily conducted through field research in Sirombu Beach and surrounding areas. This included:
 - a. Observation: Direct observation of the natural environment, cultural activities, and tourist interactions was carried out to gain insights into the relationship between nature and culture.
 - b. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including local residents, community leaders, tourism entrepreneurs, and government officials. These interviews focused on their perceptions of tourism development, the role of Aekhula tradition, and the potential for combining marine tourism and cultural heritage.
 - c. Focus Groups: Focus group discussions were held with local communities to gather their perspectives on the impact of tourism, the value of Aekhula tradition, and their involvement in tourism development.
3. Document Analysis: Relevant documents, such as government policies, tourism plans, and historical records, were analyzed to provide context and support for the findings.
4. Data Analysis: The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes were identified based on the research objectives and the emerging patterns in the data. These themes included:
 - a. The potential of marine tourism attractions in Sirombu Beach

- b. The significance of Aekhula tradition in local culture
 - c. The potential for combining marine tourism and Aekhula tradition
 - d. Challenges and opportunities for sustainable tourism development
5. Ethical Considerations: Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their privacy and confidentiality were respected. The research adhered to ethical guidelines set by relevant institutions.
6. Limitations and Future Research: While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. The research was primarily focused on Sirombu Beach and Aekhula tradition, and the findings may not be directly applicable to other regions. Future research could explore the potential of combining nature and culture in other tourism destinations in West Nias or other parts of Indonesia.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Local Pride Of West Nias

West Nias Regency was formed based on Law Number 46 of 2008 concerning the establishment of West Nias Regency. West Nias Regency consists of 8 (eight) sub-districts namely Lahomi, Lolofitu Moi, Mandrehe, West Mandrehe, North Mandrehe, Moro'o, Ulu Moro'o, and Sirombu. There are 105 (one hundred and five) villages, and 312 (three hundred and twelve) hamlets with a total land area of 520.34 km² or about 0.7% of the area of North Sumatra Province which has an area of 71,680 km². There are 10 (ten) small islands in West Nias Regency where 5 (five) islands are inhabited, namely Hinako Island, Imana Island, Bawa Island, Bogi Island, and Asu Island, and 5 (five) other islands are uninhabited, namely Si'ite Island, Lawandra Island, Langu Island, Heruanga Island, and Hamutala Island. West Nias Regency offers a blend of natural and cultural tourism that positions it as a unique destination within Indonesia. With careful management, it has the potential to grow into a major eco-cultural tourism hub in North Sumatra.



Figure 1. Site Map of Nias Island and Asu Island
(Source: Google Earth, 2024)

The people of West Nias as part of Ono Niha (Nias people) have a culture and traditions that are relatively similar to those of Nias in general. However, there are some uniqueness of West Nias that is not shared by Nias in other regions, namely the architecture of West Nias traditional houses. The architectural style of traditional houses in West Nias has some differences with architectural styles in other parts of Nias. (1) Traditional village structures such as those in Simaeasi, Sisobambowo and Onolimbu villages are still available. (2) Megaliths in Sisarahili village are unique because some of

the megaliths are large (2-3 m high with a diameter of 30-40 cm) and hundreds of years old. (3) Traditional dance, among the dance arts that developed in West Nias are Moyo dance, Maena, Faritia Halu, Fangolaya Saembu, Maru dance, Famadogo Omo. (4) Local Culinary. Some types of local culinary that used to be consumed by the community include Gowi Nihandro, Harinake, Gia Nifaga, Lehedalo Nifange, Hambae Nikuah, Fakhe Ba Bulu Damo. Gowi Nihandro, for example, is a dish made from pounded sweet potatoes.

3.2. Marine Attraction in West Nias

Generally in Nias Island, World-class surf breaks, a rich cultural legacy, and breathtaking natural beauty characterize Nias Island, a volcanic island off Sumatra's west coast. Its aquatic features are especially varied, providing a variety of activities for both nature lovers and adventure seekers. Key Marine Attractions on Nias Island: World-Class Surfing: With many breakers suitable for surfers of all skill levels, Nias is a popular surfing destination worldwide. World-renowned locations such as Sorake, Lakey Peak, and Threepieces attract surfers from all over the globe. Coral Reefs: Nias's coastal waters are home to magnificent coral reefs, teeming with marine life. Excellent opportunities for diving, snorkeling, and underwater photography are provided by these reefs. Beaches: There are a lot of immaculate beaches on the island, from large expanses of golden sand to quiet coves. Well-known beaches include.

Specifically in West Nias Regency, Asu Island is the top tourist spot in West Nias Regency. The sea is clear and the sand is white and soft. On Asu Island, tourists can sunbathe, walk, swim, and surf. Asu Island has waves up to 7 meters high and 200 meters long, so many visitors come to surf. To visit Asu Island and other islands around West Nias, tourists must take a ferry or speedboat from Sirombu Harbor. Local ferries are cheap but take a long time. Asu Island is one of many tourist destinations in the area. Others include Bawa Island, Hinako Island, Sirombu Beach, Gu'u Beach, Vadaya Beach, Fari'i Beach, Ture Beach, Valaete Beach, Kamadu Beach, and Luaha Humene Beach.

Sorake Beach in South Nias and Asu Island Beach in West Nias are the top spots for surfing on Nias Island. These spots are often visited by foreign tourists and often hold national and international surf competitions. This makes them one of the best surf spots in Indonesia. But even though these destinations are favorite spots, there are also significant differences between surf spots on Sorake Beach and Asu Island, namely:

Table 1 . Differences Atmosphere of Asu Island and Sorake Beach

Features	Asu Island In Sirombu	Sorake Beach
Waves	Quite Challenging : Suitable for beginner-intermediate	Very Challenging, suitable for experienced surfers
Atmosphere	More relaxed, suitable fsor enjoying nature	Very supportive of surfing activities atmosphere of competition
Facilities	Available, but not as much in Sorake	Very complete, various available supporting facilities

More tourists visited West Nias from 2010 to 2019. There was a big drop in 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic. In 2019, West Nias Regency saw the most tourists, with around 70,000 domestic tourists and 372 foreign tourists. In 2019, West Nias Regency hosted several events, including the Aekhula Pesona Festival, Sail Nias, and the Ya'ahowu Nias Festival. These events led to an increase in tourist visits. Here is a breakdown of the number of domestic and foreign tourists who visited West Nias Regency.

While the marine attractions of Nias Island are generally similar, there are some specific differences between West Nias Regency and other parts of the island such as Surf Breaks as well as West Nias is particularly renowned for its world-class surf breaks, attracting professional surfers and enthusiasts from around the globe, then Island Hopping for like the smaller islands and islets around West Nias offer more opportunities for island hopping and exploring secluded beaches. Cultural Experiences for like West Nias is home to unique cultural traditions and customs, which can be combined with marine activities for a more immersive experience. In conclusion, a variety of maritime attractions that appeal to a wide range of interests may be found on Nias Island, especially

at West Nias Regency. Nias has something to offer everyone, whether they are experienced surfers, passionate snorkelers, or just looking for a peaceful beach vacation.

Table 1. Overview of Tourist Visits in West Nias Regency

Years	Domestik Tourist		Foreign Tourist	
	Volume	Units	Volume	Units
2010	500	people	212	people
2011	118	people	127	people
2012	207	people	154	people
2013	236	people	191	people
2014	281	people	236	people
2015	218	people	300	people
2016	423	people	358	people
2017	457	people	363	people
2018	7600	people	361	people
2019	70000	people	372	orang
2020	1316	people	57	orang
2021	6729	people	12	orang

Source: File, Nias Barat Regency 2022

The average foreign tourist visiting West Nias is for surfing and diving purposes on Asu Island and Bawa Island. Most foreign tourists come from Australia, America and Brazil. The average length of stay for these tourists is from 5 to 10 days.

Point of View : Sirombu Beach



Point of View Asu Island



Figure 2. Site point of view Marine Attraction in West Nias

3.3 Wonderfull The Land of Aekhula

The Aekhula Pesona Festival (FPA) is one of several annual tourism events held by the West Nias Regency Tourism and Culture Office. Aekhula means west. West Nias Regency is on the western side of the Nias Islands, where the sun sets. The sunset view along West Nias Regency's coastline is a treat for visitors and sunset fans. The word "Aekhula" became the tagline and branding for West Nias Regency tourism.

The Aekhula Pesona Festival started in 2018. Activities were held at several tourist attractions for two weeks. The main goal is to promote tourist spots that aren't well known. The 2018 Aekhula Pesona Festival was held at the Hiligoe Megalith Stone Site and Sirombu Beach. Activities included a storytelling competition, an Aekhula voice competition, a kite festival, and a photo contest.

In 2019, the Aekhula Pesona Festival was held again with the same concept but focused on Sirombu Beach. The theme was marine tourism. The 2019 Aekhula Pesona Festival is also a pre-event for Sail Nias 2019. The festival includes a storytelling competition, kite festival, Aekhula Voice Competition, photo spot competition at Sirombu Beach, and a summit with entertainment and performances.

In 2022, Aekhula Pesona Festival (FPA) was selected to be included in 110 Kharisma Event Nusantara (KEN) 2022 after passing a series of curation stages from all regions in Indonesia. The selection of the Aekhula Pesona Festival is an achievement for the region as well as an encouragement in producing the implementation of national quality events. Kharisma Event Nusantara itself is a collaboration strategy of the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia with local governments through the implementation of quality events that aim to promote tourism destinations, increase tourist visits, empower local potential and have a positive impact on the economy, social, culture and of course the environment with sustainable principles. The Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy of the Republic of Indonesia, Mr. Sandiaga Salahuddin Uno, in his remarks at the Aekhula festival in 2022 said that the government is ready to assist local governments in mentoring, monitoring, consulting as an effort so that quality events at the time of the event can be upgraded.

In 2024 the Aekhula Pesona Festival was held again. FPA 2024 was selected again for the second time on the Kharisme Event Nusantara (KEN) 2024 agenda. The concept of raising traditional culture to the national level to preserve culture and boost tourist visits to the region. The lineup of excitement, which is displayed at the FPA in 2024 is the Colossal Mass Maena Pamungkas Show, Nusantara Craft & Culinary Exhibition, Maena Kreasi Art and Culture Festival, Cultural Performances, Aekhula Manari & Voice, Team Silat Attraction, and Traditional Game Competition. The Aekhula Pesona Festival is a people's party that can be enjoyed by all. Not only the local community, this event also attracts domestic and foreign tourists to come. Therefore, the 2024 FPA also invites local industry players to showcase their best products. Various local MSME stands stand while introducing Nias' superior products. With all its natural beauty and cultural diversity, the 2024 Aekhula Pesona Festival is a tourist attraction that can be enjoyed by various groups.

The Aekhula Pesona Festival celebrates West Nias' culture, including dances, souvenirs, and food. It takes place in West Nias' tourism destinations. This festival has benefited the region in six ways:

1. It has preserved regional culture and local wisdom through cultural arts performances.
2. It has provided educational facilities for the younger generation.
3. It has developed regional culinary treasures and handicrafts.
4. It has encouraged the involvement of creative economy businesses in the implementation of events.
5. It has increased tourist visits, both local, archipelago, and foreign.
6. It has improved the economy of the community around tourist sites.

The Aekhula Pesona Festival is a local event that shows the spirit of togetherness and cooperation in the West Nias Regency community. This helps to revive tourism, culture, and the creative economy. This spirit of cooperation is shown by the parades and cultural attractions, which are always accompanied by drumming and dancing. The number 105 represents the 105 villages in West

Nias. The 8 gongs represent the 8 sub-districts. The performance of 105 villages and 8 sub-districts was the final event to show the people of West Nias Regency's enthusiasm for regional development. After the FPA event in 2022, the land of Aekhula dance from West Nias has become a routine performance at the State Palace on Indonesia's Independence Day.

Atraction of Aekhula From West Nias Regency



Minister of Tourism performing the Aekhula dance at FPA 2022 in Sirombu



Drumming and Aekhula Manari Parade at FPA 2024



Aekhula Attraction the State Palace on Indonesia's Independence Day 2023



Aekhula Attraction the State Palace on Indonesia's Independence Day 2024

Figure 3 . The Atraction of Aekhula Dance

3.4. Synergy Between Marine Tourism And Aekhula Tradition

The combination of marine tourism attractions and Aekhula cultural traditions provides a great opportunity to boost tourism in West Nias. Travelers can enjoy natural beauty while participating in cultural activities, creating a holistic experience. This synergy also has an impact on local economic development, with increased demand for local products, homestays and other tourist services. These two attractions, if combined and managed strategically, can be the driving force for sustainable tourism development in the area. The successful combination of marine tourism attractions and Aekhula cultural tourism in West Nias Regency is influenced by various factors that support each other. These factors include elements of management, promotion, infrastructure support, and community and tourist participation. The following are the main determinants of the success of the combination of marine tourism and Aekhula culture:

1. Adequate Tourism Infrastructure

The availability of good infrastructure is a key factor in supporting a quality tourism experience—and it's a factor that West Nias has in spades! One of the most exciting developments in West Nias is the construction of a ring road connecting all districts in the region. This project is set to make travel in West Nias much more accessible, starting from Sirombu Beach. We're excited to announce the development of new tourist support facilities! We're making great strides in ensuring the comfort of our tourists! With the availability of lodging (homestays, hotels), restaurants, parking lots, public toilets, tourist information centers, and health facilities, our tourists will be able to enjoy their time in West Nias to the fullest. Ports and Sea Transportation: The fantastic Sirombu Port is

being managed and revitalized to facilitate tourist arrivals, especially for those interested in marine activities such as snorkeling, diving, or boating.

2. Sustainable Tourism Management

The central and local governments are thrilled to implement sustainable tourism management in West Nias. This includes sustainability efforts such as environmental conservation, which will benefit the local community and the planet! It's so important to protect marine ecosystems like coral reefs to keep the beauty of marine tourism going strong! We're thrilled to announce that conservation efforts are underway! Local communities and tourists alike are playing an active role in nature conservation programs. Cultural preservation: It's so important to keep Aekhula traditions authentic and adapt them to the demands of tourism. This way, we can all enjoy the cultural values of the local communities without interfering with the original rituals or traditions. And let's not forget about tourism regulation and management! Having rules in place to govern tourism activities is essential. This could be limiting the number of tourists in certain areas or regulating the operating hours of tourist destinations. This helps us avoid over-tourism and environmental or cultural damage.

3. Local Community Involvement

It's so inspiring to see local communities actively participating in marine and cultural tourism! It's a great way to ensure the sustainability of this wonderful combination. There are so many ways to support local involvement! One great example is to empower local communities. This means getting communities involved in managing homestays, tour guides, making handicrafts, and providing traditional food. This helps the local economy and gives tourists something extra special to enjoy. Training and education are key to boosting community skills in tourism. From guest services to foreign languages and business management, these skills will take tourism services to the next level! It's so inspiring to see local communities taking part in preserving traditions and nature! They should be empowered to keep up the amazing work they're doing to preserve Aekhula traditions and the coastal environment. This includes taking part in all kinds of fun festival activities, helping to keep the beach looking beautiful, and learning more about the importance of looking after the marine ecosystem.

4. An Integrated and Memorable Tourism Experience

An attractive tour package that integrates marine and cultural tourism will provide tourists with a unique experience they'll never forget! We're thrilled to announce that some of the factors that support this include a combination of integrated tour packages! We've got the perfect package for you! Start your day with some amazing marine activities like snorkeling or diving, and then head over to the Aekhula Festival or cultural village in the afternoon. This diverse experience is sure to increase the appeal and extend travelers' stay! Knowledgeable tour guides are a must! Tour guides who understand both the natural aspects (e.g. about marine ecosystems) and local culture (such as the history and meaning of Aekhula traditions) will provide tourists with an amazing experience. And tourist interaction with local communities is a great way for tourists to get to know the local culture. They'll love learning traditional dances, taking part in ritual activities, or experiencing local cuisine served traditionally!

The harmonization between marine tourism and the Aekhula cultural tradition in West Nias Regency is a unique and potential combination in increasing tourist attraction. By utilizing the natural beauty of the coast and preserving local cultural traditions, West Nias has a great opportunity to develop as a leading tourist destination in North Sumatra. Tourism development based on local wisdom and environmental sustainability will also provide economic benefits for local communities and preserve culture and nature.

4. CONCLUSION

As a result of the careful blending of its natural and cultural resources, this study concludes that West Nias Regency has enormous potential to become a premier travel destination. Visitors seeking both leisure and cultural immersion will find a unique value proposition in the combination of the rich cultural history of the Aekhula culture with the pristine maritime features of Sirombu Beach. Rejuvenating the infrastructure and fostering strong community ties have made West Nias one of

North Sumatra's most promising destinations, especially for ecotourism. This strategy not only improves the experience for tourists, but it also helps with environmental preservation, cultural preservation, and local economic development. West Nias could compete with other Indonesian travel destinations by providing a genuine, all-inclusive tourism experience that appeals to domestic and international tourists alike.

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