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THE SWIFTLET NEST BUSINESS OF GUA SIBARASOK: A HISTORICAL STUDY IN PASAR II SINGKUANG VILLAGE, MUARA BATANG GADIS DISTRICT, MANDAILING NATAL REGENCY (1989-2020)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the history of the swiftlet nest business at Gua Sibarasok in Pasar II Singkuang Village, Muara Batang Gadis District, Mandailing Natal Regency. It aims to describe the historical background of the business's emergence and analyze its socio-economic impact on the community. This qualitative study employs a historical method encompassing four stages: heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Findings reveal that the swiftlet nest business at Gua Sibarasok originated from the cave's discovery in 1989. Initially, it was privately managed. However, in 1990, the Singkuang Village community claimed rights to Gua Sibarasok, establishing it as a community-owned enterprise with management subsequently transferred to PT Mujur Timber. In 1993, the Singkuang Village community formed KUD Singkuang to manage Sibarasok Cave. Yet, in 1999, KUD Singkuang handed over management to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which continues to manage it today. The presence of Sibarasok Cave, containing high-quality swiftlet nests, has significantly contributed to improving the economy and generating employment for the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village. Despite these positive contributions, the swiftlet nest business at Sibarasok Cave has also led to negative impacts, including various community conflicts and environmental degradation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Swiftlet nests are highly valuable biological resources. These nests are naturally produced by swiftlets dwelling in caves found in forests or along coastlines. This dark-colored bird is medium to small-sized with narrow, pointed, sickle-shaped wings. Swiftlets typically inhabit damp, dim, dark caves or buildings, using the ceiling to attach their nests for resting and breeding (Budiman, A., 2002). Basically, swiftlets can be cultivated throughout Indonesia. Swiftlet nests are actually composed solely of the saliva of a *Collocalia* species of swiftlet, used by the birds to lay their eggs. The price of a swiftlet nest can reach tens of millions of rupiah per kilogram (Taslim, H., 2002).

Swiftlet nest is considered an exclusive food and is highly valued for its purported health benefits. Wild swiftlet nests, particularly those found in caves, are believed to possess superior efficacy compared to nests harvested from cultivation in man-made structures. In Chinese culture, swiftlet nests are utilized as both a culinary delicacy and a traditional medicine, believed to cure various ailments and enhance bodily vitality. Within Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), swiftlet nests are employed to promote lung health, alleviate coughs, and reduce inflammation of the respiratory tract. The glycoproteins present in swiftlet nests are thought to contribute to lung moisturization and irritation reduction. Due to these perceived efficacies, there is substantial global demand for swiftlet nests, contributing to their high price in the international market (Marzuki, 2000).

One of the wild swiftlet nesting businesses is located in Pasar II Singkuang Village, Muara Batang Gadis District, Mandailing Natal Regency. In fact, three villages in Muara Batang Gadis District possess swiftlet-inhabited caves: Singkuang Village (Sibarasok Cave), Tabuyung Village (Sungar Pinang Cave), and Ranto Panjang (Lombang Cave and Dolok Cave). These caves yield two types of marketable nests: black and white. However, only Sibarasok Cave in Pasar II Singkuang Village is noted for producing high-quality swiftlet nests among these four caves. Singkuang, an area in Mandailing Natal Regency, is recognized as a natural habitat for swiftlets. Within this area, four primary caves serve as traditional collection sites for swiftlet nests. Swiftlet nests sourced from these caves in Singkuang are renowned for their high quality due to several factors: the maintained natural environment, ideal cave humidity and temperature for swiftlet nesting, and the fact that cave swiftlets (compared to house swiftlets) produce nests richer in nutrients, albeit in smaller quantities. Sibarasok Cave specifically yields high-quality white nests, commanding a relatively high market price. Conversely, black nests contain numerous feather impurities, which significantly lowers their market value.

Sibarasok Cave was originally discovered by two individuals, Manjang and Imron, in 1989. They encountered a cave containing swiftlet nests while fishing in the vicinity. Upon this discovery, they refrained from informing the community and instead exploited the resource by privately harvesting and selling the swiftlet nests.

In 1990, the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village eventually learned about the cave's existence and assumed management rights to Sibarasok Cave. They established this site as a community-owned swiftlet nest business, entrusting its management to PT Mujur Timber. Notably, PT Mujur Timber holds a business permit for the utilization of timber forest products (IUPHHK) in various areas of North Sumatra, including regions recognized as natural swiftlet habitats such as protected forests and national parks which received permission from the Governor of North Sumatra as a temporary manager to avoid conflict between communities.

After receiving a permit from the government, in 1993, the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village formed KUD Singkuang to manage the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business. Chaired by Wajidi and collaborating with Haji Anif, KUD's management period experienced numerous problems, resulting in a decline in both yield and harvest quality.

In 1999, KUD Singkuang transferred the management of Gua Sibarasok to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which has been the manager ever since. The community of Pasar II Singkuang Village, via KUD, felt they could no longer manage the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business due to a lack of community knowledge in swiftlet farming. Additionally, management required substantial funds, and harvests were continually declining.

The utilization of Sibarasok Cave's swiftlet nests has had a significant positive economic impact on the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village. The swiftlet nest business at Sibarasok Cave contributes to increased income and supports the local economy. It notably provides employment opportunities, with the majority of Pasar II Singkuang Village residents (70.30%) working as employees in this swiftlet nest operation.

In addition to positive contributions, the swiftlet nest business at Sibarasok Cave has also generated negative impacts, including the emergence of community conflicts over the authority to manage the business, its utilization, and disparities in income distribution. A further negative impact is related to environmental degradation, specifically observed through landscape destruction and the disappearance of surface vegetation due to rampant logging in the vicinity of the cave.

Given the observed conditions, it's reasonable to conclude that research into the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business is highly pertinent and significant for historical study. Its exploitation dates back to 1989, with a history of alternating managers. Furthermore, the business has profoundly impacted the community's socio-economic well-being (Herman Taslim. 2002 : 68).

II. METHODS

This study is a qualitative research employing the historical method, which consists of four stages: heuristics, internal and external source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, L., 1989). This research utilizes data from various sources, encompassing both primary and secondary data (Sjamsuddin, H., 2007). Primary sources include documentation on the physiology of Sibarasok Cave, KUD archives, and various reports. The primary data is further strengthened by oral data gathered from interviews with several relevant informants. Secondary sources comprise books, articles, and journals, along with internet Browse to support the research data.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the explanation above, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Historical Background of the Emergence of the Sibarasok Cave Swallow's Nest Business in Pasar II Singkuang Village

Historically, the swiftlet nest business in Pasar II Singkuang Village began with the discovery of Sibarasok Cave in 1989. This cave, located on the coast of Pasar II Singkuang Village, features three entrances and spans approximately 150 hectares in an L-shape. Locals refer to it as "Sibarasok," meaning it appears smoky from a distance, yet no smoke is visible upon closer inspection.

The discovery of swiftlet nests within Sibarasok Cave was purely accidental. In 1989, Manjang and Imron were returning from an unproductive fishing trip in the river near the cave. Their meager catch led them to explore further upstream than usual. It was then they noticed a flock of birds circling above a cave, slowly entering it. Curious about the unusual number of birds, Manjang and Imron investigated. Using rattan from around the cave as ropes, they descended inside. To their surprise, they found numerous swiftlet nests attached to the cave walls.

The initial harvest was conducted clandestinely by Manjang and Imron. They directly collected marketable swiftlet nests from the cave walls and sold them to Efendi, a swiftlet nest collector from Sibolga. This sale was kept secret, and the community remained unaware that Sibarasok Cave contained swiftlet nests.

Although Manjang and Imron initially kept the existence of Sibarasok Cave's swiftlet nests a secret, the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village eventually discovered it. They then collectively moved to claim their rights to the cave. The community was already aware of the benefits and uses of swiftlet nests from the people of Tabuyung Village, who had their own swiftlet nest cave (Gua Sungai Pinang). However, the quality of nests in Sibarasok Cave proved

superior to those in Sungai Pinang Cave. The swiftlets inhabiting Sibarasok Cave are identified as *Aerodramus fuciphagus*, a species known for producing high-quality, valuable nests.

Recognizing the immense potential of Sibarasok Cave's swiftlet nests, the community of Pasar II Singkuang Village ultimately asserted ownership of the cave. This meant Manjang and Imron, as the initial discoverers, no longer held exclusive rights. However, to prevent community clashes, in 1990, management was temporarily handed over to PT Mujur Timber, led by Fatihi and Sutor, with the Governor's permission. Although primarily a timber management company, PT Mujur Timber was appointed by the community as temporary cave manager due to Sibarasok Cave's location within their operational area.

In 1993, a government permit was issued to establish a community business unit for managing Sibarasok Cave's swiftlet nests. Consequently, the community formed the Singkuang Cooperative, led by Wajidi in collaboration with Haji Anif. However, the Singkuang Cooperative faced numerous obstacles in managing Sibarasok Cave. By 1995, there was a significant decline in harvests. This was largely due to workers continuously harvesting nests based on immediate need—effectively continuous "looting"—over four consecutive harvests. This practice prevented the swiftlets from breeding, leading to a daily decrease in their population as they became uncomfortable and relocated. Additionally, harvest activities extended into the evening, disturbing the swiftlets' resting periods. This continuous disruption resulted in a sustained decline in harvests, which subsequently impacted the Singkuang Cooperative's income.

In 1999, KUD Singkuang faced the requirement to extend its operational permit from the government. However, KUD Singkuang was no longer able to continue the swiftlet nest business due to a lack of knowledge in swiftlet cultivation and insufficient management funds. Consequently, the management of Sibarasok Cave was transferred to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which has overseen operations ever since. With the support of Haji Anif, PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur successfully extended the government permit and recruited individuals with expertise in swiftlet cultivation to ensure the production of high-quality nests. Notably, the swiftlet nest business continues to employ residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village as its workforce.

Under the management of PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur from 1999 to 2002, the harvest of Sibarasok Cave swiftlet nests notably increased. On average, each harvest yielded 120 kg of intact, 4-5 cm nests. This improvement was attributed to more regular and planned harvesting practices, guided by principles of sustainability and balance to ensure swiftlets had sufficient opportunity to breed. Careful consideration was given to both the timing and method of harvesting; once a nest was ready, it was collected promptly according to predetermined schedules and techniques.

Developing the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business has not been straightforward, even under PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur's professional management. The fluctuating selling price of swiftlet nests significantly impacts income. From 2003 to 2008, a notable decline in revenue occurred as national swiftlet nest businesses proliferated, driven by the high market value of nests that spurred competition among entrepreneurs. Adding to the challenge of price volatility are conflicts between communities and workers, which disrupt the swiftlet nest harvesting process at Gua Sibarasok. Logistical hurdles also plague the delivery of nests. The long journey from Singkuang Village to Medan, spanning a day and a night over poor road conditions, means nests remain in confined spaces for extended periods. This often leads to mold and damage during transit, further lowering their market price.

2. The Impact of the Sibarasok Cave Swallow's Nest Business on the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Pasar II Singkuang Village Community

The exploitation of swiftlet nests in Sibarasok Cave has significantly impacted the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village, primarily by improving the local economy. Before the swiftlet nest business emerged, the community largely relied on fishing and farming. However, with the establishment of the swiftlet nest operation, residents increasingly chose to work as swiftlet nest employees due to the more promising income opportunities.

Working in the swiftlet nest business provides a substantial boost to income, offering a permanent job that helps families meet their needs. This employment opportunity has significantly improved people's financial well-being. Not only can they cover daily expenses, but they've also been able to build proper homes, purchase motorcycles and televisions, and send their children to school, among other advancements.

The exploitation of Sibarasok Cave has also brought a significant influx of aid funds to the village community. Every four months, the Head of Singkuang Village receives a direct contribution of Rp 7,000,000 from swiftlet nest sales. These funds are specifically allocated for the construction and improvement of village facilities and infrastructure, including projects like the Village Head's office and road widening. Beyond these communal benefits, direct financial aid is distributed to individual residents: each of the 439 families receives Rp 300,000, 275 widows each get Rp 200,000, 345 young men and women each receive Rp 100,000, and 693 children each benefit from Rp 10,000. Furthermore, as an annual initiative, the management sponsors five employees of the Singkuang Village Grand Mosque to perform Umrah.

The community has also experienced another positive impact: a reduction in unemployment rates and the creation of new job opportunities. The swiftlet nest business not only supports the local economy but also provides consistent employment. Many residents now choose to work in this business, finding new hope in its permanent jobs and the promise

of increased income. Their earnings have significantly improved their living standards, covering daily expenses and children's education for married employees. Unmarried employees, meanwhile, can contribute to their parents' needs, manage their own expenses, and save for future endeavors like marriage.

Beyond its positive contributions, the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business has unfortunately also led to negative impacts, specifically the emergence of community conflict. Before this enterprise, the community's social life was marked by minimal friction. However, as the swiftlet nest business developed, frequent commotions and disorder began to arise, escalating into social conflict. The disharmony in social relations stemmed from a lack of mutual respect and appreciation among some community members. They felt their need for work in the business was paramount, leading them to disregard previously agreed-upon regulations between management, KUD, and the community.

The issue of dividing harvest shifts also ignited disputes and quarrels. Many workers rejected this system, not wanting to be replaced at each harvest, as it limited work to only certain individuals. Workers grew impatient awaiting their turn to work during harvest season, frequently leading to disagreements among them. They felt disappointed and oppressed by this system, which further fueled the formation of worker and community factions based on their respective interests.

The disharmonious relationship is also evident in the work environment. Work interactions are no longer pleasant and are constantly tainted by mutual suspicion. Often, workers undermine and badmouth their colleagues to the foreman. Every negative aspect of the business is reported, often through any means necessary, in an attempt to gain a higher rank and earn the trust of the foreman and management. This situation makes workers uncomfortable, leading many to leave this job in favor of working as palm oil plantation workers at PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which operates within the village.

The subsequent negative impact pertains to the destruction of natural resources. The exploitation of Sibarasok Cave is implicated as a cause of environmental degradation, specifically observed through the destruction of the landscape and the disappearance of surface vegetation due to rampant logging in the cave's vicinity. Furthermore, forest encroachment is attributed to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which seeks to establish an oil palm plantation not far from Sibarasok Cave. This activity contributes to the continuous decrease in tree cover year by year. Such deforestation around Sibarasok Cave impacts the swiftlet nest production, as the birds' habitat and behavior are disrupted.

a. History of the Sibarasok Cave Swallow's Nest Business in Pasar II Singkuang Village

Sibarasok Cave, a natural habitat for swiftlets, was discovered in 1989 by two residents, Manjang and Imron. This cave, located in a wilderness area, features three entrances and spans approximately 150 hectares in an L-shape. The swiftlets inhabiting

Sibarasok Cave are identified as the *Aerodramus fuciphagus* species. This particular swiftlet species is highly sought after; its body typically measures 12 cm, with a blackish-brown upper body, pale gray underparts, and a noticeably deep tail slit.

Sibarasok Cave is an ideal habitat for swiftlet breeding, aligning with the animals' natural behavior and habits. Its suitability stems from its location in a consistently wet area experiencing over six months of rainfall annually, its distance from human settlements, and the abundant presence of small insects, which serve as a food source for swiftlets. This observation is consistent with Arief Budiman's (2002) view, which highlights swiftlets' unique preference for nesting in high, damp, and humid caves rich in small insects, and situated away from residential areas.

Initially, the Sibarasok Cave swiftlet nest business was privately managed by its discoverers. However, in 1990, the Singkuang Village community claimed rights to the cave, transforming the swiftlet nest operation into a community-owned enterprise. Its management was then transferred to PT Mujur Timber. By 1993, the Singkuang Village community established KUD Singkuang to oversee Sibarasok Cave. Ultimately, in 1999, KUD Singkuang could no longer sustain the swiftlet nest business due to insufficient expertise and funds. Consequently, management of Sibarasok Cave was transferred to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which has continued to manage it to this day.

Since its discovery, and through successive changes in management, the production of swiftlet nests from Sibarasok Cave has consistently experienced a downward trend in both harvest yield and nest quality. This decline is primarily attributed to harvesting practices based on immediate needs, or what can be termed "continuous looting," over four consecutive harvests. Such relentless collection prevents the swiftlets from breeding effectively, leading to a daily decrease in their population as they become uncomfortable and relocate. Furthermore, harvest activities extending into the evening disturb the swiftlets' resting periods. This aligns with Marzuki (2000), who explains that swiftlet nest harvesting must be conducted in a planned manner, adhering to principles of sustainability and considering the carrying capacity of the swiftlets' food sources. Effective management and harvesting processes require specific provisions to ensure high-quality swiftlet nest yields.

b. The Impact of the Sibarasok Cave Swallow's Nest Business on the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Pasar II Singkuang Village Community

The discovery and subsequent utilization of Sibarasok Cave's swiftlet nests have undeniably contributed positively to significant economic growth for the residents of Pasar II Singkuang Village. The Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business has directly impacted increased income and supported the local economy. Beyond merely economic support, this business also creates employment opportunities and reduces unemployment, with a

majority of the community (70.30%) having the chance to work as employees within the swiftlet nest operation. This aligns with Taslim's (2002) perspective, which posits that swiftlet nest business activities are capable of driving the community's economy, filling limited employment opportunities, and providing business avenues for obtaining decent income through the utilization of highly valuable swiftlet nests.

Beyond its positive contributions, the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business has unfortunately also had a negative impact by generating social conflict within the community. The cave's existence has become a battleground for competing interests, with individuals vying for authority over its management, utilization, and access. This aligns with Fisher's view (2001:66), which posits that society, as a system, comprises differing interests where one component attempts to dominate the interests of others to fulfill its own desires or gain benefits in regulating valuable assets like the swiftlet nests.

The subsequent negative impact is related to the destruction of natural resources. The exploitation of Sibarasok Cave is accused of being the source of environmental degradation, specifically beginning with the destruction of the landscape and the disappearance of surface vegetation due to rampant logging around the cave. This logging directly disrupts the habitat and behavior of swiftlets. This environmental damage is primarily attributed to a lack of awareness regarding environmental preservation. In fact, according to Marzuki's view (2000), the exploitation of naturally provided swiftlet nests must adhere to the principle of sustainability, which necessitates attention to the balance of the ecosystem and the swiftlets' natural habitat.

IV. CONCLUSION

The swiftlet nest business in Pasar II Singkuang Village originated with the discovery of Sibarasok Cave in 1989. Initially, it was privately managed. However, in 1990, the Singkuang Village community asserted its rights over the cave, transforming the swiftlet nest operation into a community-owned enterprise. Management was then transferred to PT Mujur Timber. By 1993, the Singkuang Village community established KUD Singkuang to oversee Sibarasok Cave. In 1999, KUD Singkuang ceded management to PT Anugerah Langkat Makmur, which has remained the manager to this day.

The presence of Sibarasok Cave, with its high-quality swiftlet nests, has significantly contributed to the economic growth and employment opportunities for the people of Pasar II Singkuang Village. Despite these positive contributions, the Gua Sibarasok swiftlet nest business has also led to negative consequences, including the emergence of social conflicts and damage to natural resources.

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