

Introduction

The present sample of translations of some Mentawaiian myths is the preliminary stage of a larger project in which the whole corpus of about one hundred myths collected by me since 1966 will be presented and interpreted. Their setting is the Mentawai archipelago 100 km west of Sumatra in Indonesia, especially Siberut, the northernmost and with around 4000 km² largest island. In the course of the twentieth century, most of the nowadays about 40,000 inhabitants of Siberut converted to Christianity. The traditional situation, which is the background to the narratives reproduced here, has been preserved to some extent only among some isolated groups in the interior.

Here, the *uma*, the patrilineally organised exogamous local group of about ten families, still forms the framework for daily life. Uma is also the name for the community house, a large building erected on stilts. The uma stand at irregular intervals from one another along the rivers, the main transport routes, which are navigated by dugout canoes. These are used for transport and for contact with neighbours, either in a friendly and often matrimonial relationship or sometimes in conflict, as the case may be. Sago and taro are planted in the swampy lowlands and coconut palms on the banks. In the higher clearings, tubers, bananas and fruit trees grow. Chickens and pigs are kept near the houses. In the streams, the women fish with small hand nets, in the jungle on the hills, the men go hunting with bows and poisoned arrows.

The Uma community is egalitarian and knows neither chiefs nor specialized craftsmen. Important decisions are taken collectively after long discussions of all adult men and occasionally also the women. Iron tools and textiles that the Mentawaiians cannot produce themselves have been exchanged for coconuts and rattan by Malay traders on the coast for many generations. Only in the religious sphere is there a specific role, that of the shaman, the *kerei*. The kerei communicate

with ancestors and spirits, they heal the sick and call back the souls of patients who may have strayed to the ancestors as the cause of the illness. One's own ancestors are a helpful authority with whom one feels safe. In addition, there are various categories of benevolent or hostile spirits in all areas of the environment. Large periodic rituals maintain religious ties and strengthen the feeling of community.

Oral Traditions

All the myths were recorded on tape on the spot. The recordings were listened to and discussed with the narrators; later I transcribed them and translated them word for word. The transcription was then slightly edited for the present texts. In this culture without writing, the narrator (male or female; this will only be specified in the following if gender plays a role in the interpretation) did not have any canonical texts of reference at his or her disposal; one reproduced from memory what one had heard from others. Of course, while narrating, there are always slips of the tongue that break the flow of the story and, characteristic in the context of orality, there are multiple repetitions of certain words ("he went and went and went" etc.); they mean small pauses of rest for the narrator in which he can reflect on the subsequent episodes. The same mnemonic function can also be assigned in the texts to the formulaic verses that are repeated several times and always sung. In addition to corresponding streamlining, the editing occasionally included the subsequent insertion of a passage that had been forgotten during the initial telling.

The tape not only made it possible to accurately record what was told, but it also often proved to be an incentive to tell the story itself. The new possibility of hearing one's own voice was often the impetus to share a story and sometimes even stimulated women to participate, although their narratives were otherwise usually intended only for female listeners. Apart from some genealogical myths in which

the claim of a group of relatives to a certain territory is authenticated, however, there were no secrets in the tales. We sat together in the evening in the front gallery, and if it was not directly my own request, the question of a child or the mention of some incident might be the stimulus to tell a relevant story.

It was important that a narrative corresponded literally to the tradition. Much of what was told was generally known, the listeners looked forward to the expected dramatic punchlines and then often fell into the narrator's speech with the traditional wording. In this context, a circumstance must also be mentioned that is of fundamental importance for the meaning of the myths for the Mentawaians themselves: the idea of a story as an invention was completely foreign to them and was categorically rejected. In their eyes, all mythical events had actually happened exactly as they were narrated; possibilities of stories that did not make this claim they flatly called "lies". They never tired of giving me evidence for the veracity of the myths. This was true not only for origin myths, for the irrefutability of which the actual existence of what had newly arisen in the course of the story formed of itself a kind of circular authentication, but also for all kinds of other narratives in which the proving phrase "since then" was time and again connected in an explanatory way with something existing today. Our texts are full of examples of this 'aetiological' component of myths.

Mythical Topics

In addition to explaining the origin of a phenomenon, myths deal with many other topics: Killing to live, growing up, the emergence and cohesion of the community, the relations with neighbours and spirits, etc. They always take place in an undefined past and have always a religious dimension. Via dramatic developments in the relationships between exemplary protagonists, answers are suggested to questions that are experienced as problematic in real life. These latent answers are often expressed in the course of a story through events that represent

alternative possibilities to daily reality; through the way these events are shaped and developed, a general message about the right order of things unfolds symbolically - a fundamental characteristic of myths which they share with the course of events in the major rituals. It is a goal of the interpretation to articulate this general message and make it understandable. Both universal psychological phenomena and the peculiar cultural context must be taken into account in the analysis. From case to case, it will then become clear whether a myth ultimately legitimises existing conditions or whether fractures become visible that have remained unsolvable and can possibly be interpreted as a subliminal protest by a disadvantaged party in the narrative.

The selection of the myth with which to begin here is more or less arbitrary. In a field of regional developments from a common cultural basis, such as exists in the Mentawai Archipelago, there are no original features that would have remained unchanged from a hypothetical beginning of settlement until today. All local variants are related to each other elbow to elbow in their specific appearance. They enrich each other, or they open new directions.

It is no different with our corpus of myths. Each myth develops its particular content according to its topic, and each simultaneously refers in transformational relationship to other narratives. I begin with the story of Polele because I think it is particularly rich and touches on many questions that we will encounter again in other contexts.

Polele

The myth of Polele was told to me by Tengatiti, my long-time friend and companion from Saibi in eastern Siberut, who had heard it in his village. He did not know how to give a meaning to the name Polele. The story must be quite old;

a version similar in many details has already been reproduced by Morris (1900. p. 97), who recorded it on the neighbouring Mentawai island of Sipora.

Like any myth, the story of Polele speaks to us on different levels. First of all, there is the exciting plot itself, the dramatic development of an adolescent. It leads from the secure sphere of the home into an environment full of dangers that the hero must overcome until he returns home safe and sound and matured by his experiences. In the process, he moves through all areas of life of the Mentawaians, from the paternal communal house of his kinship group, the *uma*, through the primeval forest, along the river to the sea with the offshore island, and again through the primeval forest finally back to the home district.

Among the events during this journey are various episodes in which the specific mythical dimension of the aetiological, i.e. the explanation of the origin of a phenomenon, emerges: since then crocodiles have no tongues, since then we know about the edibility of turtles and birds, since then there are no trolls anymore and birds, with the exception of the crow, have their magnificent patterns. Such episodes increase a myth's claim to truth, even if they are not always logical: Both the announcement of the edibility of birds and that of sea turtles are preceded by passages that already suggest the earlier consumption of these animals. The Mentawaians I asked about this clearly had no desire to ponder about such inconsistencies.

But part of the essence of genuine myth is that underneath the explicit episodes there is also a general lesson, a symbolic message about a problem that keeps people concerned. In my view, the teaching in Polele attempts to provide an answer to a fundamental human dilemma: man must kill to eat, but how can he make up for this violent interference with the existing natural balance?

Polele is a killer. In the order of the story, he first kills birds, then a crocodile, then a sea turtle, then the total number of trolls, and finally birds again. Via the different circumstances in all these actions the problem is presented, illuminated and finally brought to a solution. The implicit way this is dealt with in the myth is apparently message enough. It is up to the outsider to express its content explicitly. Of course, no one is forbidden to talk about it. The following commentary is the result of many conversations I had with the narrator of the story himself and other listeners.

The presentation of the problem of killing is linked to Polele's growing up. At first he appears as a boy, marked by his childhood bow. In this not yet fully responsible position, he kills for the first time, shooting birds as food for himself and his grandfather. The only hint that something is wrong with this is his inexplicable moodiness after returning home from the jungle

The palm wood bow for adults marks the beginning of the following phase. Nevertheless, it immediately becomes clear that there is still much that is new to him in the adult world: he mistakes a piece of palm leaf for the monkey he wanted to shoot. Without intending to do so, he kills a young crocodile with his arrows instead. Parts of its meat are given to friends in neighbouring houses, as was in former times the rule with the meat of crocodiles, in contrast to that of other game. The trail of this meat leads the crocodile's father, who has apparently taken on human form in the process, to discover the killer. The father takes revenge. Again in crocodile form, he abducts Polele to an island and kills two pitiful fish during the journey because of their forwardness, an act for which he has to pay with the loss of his tongue. The audience pointed out to me that crocodiles indeed still had no tongues today. The crocodile father now shows compassion in turn and cares for Polele on the island as if he were a substitute for his own child.

The crocodile now falls victim to an attack itself. The fact that this is associated with the devouring of a pointed-shelled snail may have something to do with the fact, also known in Mentawai, that stones are often found in the stomach of crocodiles (cf. below the story of Mutsimata). But even after the crocodile's death, its care manifests itself in dreams with instructions from his soul to Polele on how to get off the island again as the beginning of his return home. His care is then taken over by a sea turtle, which carries Polele to the mainland and is cautiously piloted by him. In return, the turtle offers itself as food; however, Polele is only willing to kill it after it has made it clear to him how he can revive it afterwards by carefully treating its carapace and bones.

In the following episode, the killing is under the sign of aggression. Trolls appear who want to eat Polele. He takes refuge in a tree and by using various tricks he manages to destroy the trolls. The fact that he is still no closer to returning leads to the next episode.

Polele sits lost in the top of his tree, longing for home. The birds, still white at the time, appear and ask him to give them their patterns. Polele tattoos them, and in thanks they carry him back home and set him down on a palm tree.

There at first, he spits after his relatives. Even Tengtiti could not explain why he does this, but it is significant for the vitality of the story itself with regard even to such apparently minor details that this episode also occurs in almost identical form in the version from Sipora mentioned at the beginning (Morris 1900: 101). Perhaps a look at the *pulijajat* ritual (Schefold 1988: 370, 467, 509) will help us to interpret it: Ceremonial spitting occurs here in two different contexts. On the one hand, spitting has the function of spitting *out* all harmful influences from outside, together with a lure into which one has called these influences in order to get rid of them. On the other hand, spitting also appears under the sign of spitting *at*: the shamans have enticed the souls of the members of the *uma* into a bowl of

magically cooling plants and now spit the contents in the direction of the rising sun in order to connect with the life-giving light.

Perhaps it is just such a connection that Polele wants to establish through his spitting. In any case, after spitting, he is joyfully welcomed again. He proclaims what the birds had told him: 'That they could serve as food for humans. To attract them, food is prepared for them. They come in flocks, and after they have eaten their fill, they willingly let themselves be caught. However, a grouchy old man spoils the situation and insults and offends the birds. The story ends with the birds' bequest that in the future humans must observe certain taboos when hunting birds in order to be successful.

In the sequence of episodes, it becomes increasingly clear how the Mentawaians face the phenomenon of killing. Killing for food is unquestionably a necessity. This is shown right at the beginning, but something is wrong: "Gladly" the prey is eaten, but the killer remains moody. However, he is still a guileless child. Only after he has outgrown infancy does the killing occur, which, although involuntary, has devastating consequences. The victim's father causes a flood that overflows the inhabited world, and hunger breaks out. Nevertheless, he seems to take Polele's lack of intention into account by not eating him, but later caring for him on the island as if he were his own child. On the journey there, Polele's fate calls forth the pity of the two fish. They are punished for their forwardness by the crocodile, but the crocodile itself is injured in the process and is finally killed on the island by the pointed-shelled snail. The next killing is again by Polele, but in a way that already seems to prelude the end of the story.¹ The sea turtle voluntarily comes to Polele and carries him to the mainland. The latter helps it on the way against the hunters and at first compassionately resists the animal's offer to use it as

¹ That a bodhisattva sea turtle rescues shipwrecked people by taking them on its back and then offering itself as food to them is an ancient Buddhist motif in the Jakata stories - an indication of an early historical origin of the Polele motif?

food. He only gives in after it tells him certain requirements that humans must comply with to ensure the continued existence of hunted turtles.

In the next episode, killing appears under the sign of ruthless aggression. The attackers, the trolls, atone for it with their lives. The outcome remains in limbo; Polele is isolated. But then he can do the birds a service. Like the sea turtle, they come willingly. He provides them with their patterns and thus performs something whereby wild nature receives a cultural addition, so to speak, parallel to the tattooing of an adolescent when he enters the adult world. In a certain sense, this act continues to this day: the wooden birds that the Mentawaians make for their rituals as "toys for the souls" are not naturalistically painted with their feather ornaments, but decorated with ornaments and scrolls that spring from the artist's pure imagination. In gratitude for his help, Polele is freed from his isolated position. And now he feeds the birds he had, in a sense, brought into culture through the tattoo, as if they were his fowl. This act, which puts the birds in a different light from the wild sea turtle, seems to give him the right to use them as food. Unfortunately, a grouchy uncle spoils everything and thus scares the birds away. The people are told, however, that they will still be able to catch and eat birds in the future. But from now on, the condition is that they must observe certain rules of conduct and taboos every time they are hunting as a kind of compensation.

Our story reveals an ambivalent image of Mentawaians towards killing. One must kill to eat, otherwise hunger threatens, as Polele's family experiences during the flood on the ridge of the roof because of his actions. But killing as such must never be an end in itself. The unjustified aggression of the trolls is punished by their extinction. But then what about the necessary killing for food? The myth does not discuss how the Mentawaians behave when killing their traditional domestic animals, chickens and pigs. The rituals, however, give a clear picture of this: Before

an animal is slaughtered, it is respectfully reminded of the good care it has been given during breeding, and receives apologies for the impending killing, by pointing out to it that this is in keeping with its existence as well as that of all its ancestors. I argue that it is against this background that we must understand the two positive episodes in the myth.

Polele has helped the sea turtle return home to the mainland, and afterwards he has done something that echoes from a distant hunter's past. From Northeast Asia, an area of influence of the ancestors of the prehistoric immigrants to Mentawai, rituals are known that seem to correspond exactly to the demands of the sea turtle. The tribes there were hunter-gatherers. The continuity of the game they killed could only be guaranteed if they buried the bones carefully and completely, thus allowing the slain animals to be reborn (Friedrich 1964: 209). In today's Mentawai, this is no longer done; the audience saw this episode as a unique and unrepeatable occurrence only in this story. As with domestic animals, attempts are made to propitiate the game animals, but of course this cannot happen before the killing takes place, but only during the rituals following a hunting expedition with the prey at home. This distinguishes the hunting game from those animals for whose existence one feels responsible, one's own domestic animals.

In this sense, feeding the birds in the Polele story seems like an attempt to bring the two categories, wild and domestic, to a common denominator. This possibility fails through human error and the behaviour of the grouchy uncle. What remains is the reconciliation of the opposing poles - the need to eat and the perilous consequences of the killing necessary for it - through the discovery of a mediating bridge: reciprocation through one's own renunciation. The submission to the taboos that the birds have stipulated means a willingness to accept certain restrictions, through which killing apparently also becomes acceptable in the future.

The story of Polele illuminates the problem of killing from the point of view of the victims. But these victims belong to two different categories of living beings. According to my interpretation of the Polele myth, what is at stake is the special position of the first category, the wild animals. For the second category, the domestic ones, man has taken responsibility by protecting and caring for them. As in all undertakings, he is helped in this by the spiritual members of the *uma*, his own ancestors. In contrast, man has contributed nothing to the life of wild animals; here he reaps where he has not sown, and it is all too clear that the ritual apologies and attempts at appeasement in the case of the killed prey animals stand out only meagerly in comparison not only with the religious but also practical care for the domestic animals.

In my view, it is this dilemma that is addressed in Polele's story. The moodiness of the childish shooting of the forest birds, the half-punishment for the partial guilt of the adolescent for killing the young crocodile, is confronted in the case of the sea turtle with the possibility of ensuring its continued existence through considerate treatment. But this is only like a rudiment of a past cultural phase. The Mentawaiian listeners telling the story commented with laughter that this did not correspond to any generally valid rule and here only referred to this individual animal.

So it seems logical that it is precisely at this point of unclear guidelines that the wilderness strikes back aggressively directly on man's life with a group of its spiritual representatives, the trolls. The hero successfully fights back, but he remains isolated and continues to be endangered. What follows are attempts to deal with the dilemma by also showing care to the wild animals, the birds, as if they were domestic ones: Like them, they are cared for and fed. The end makes it clear that in view of the different spheres of life, even this will not be a lasting solution.

But then the way out opens up that points to the future: By observing taboos, humans will impose on themselves specific restrictions, which the wild animals will accept as compensation.

However, a hitherto unnamed problem remains open. In all their actions, the Mentawaians know that they are dependent on the approval of the ancestors. Likewise, the wild animals also have protective authorities, forest spirits, under whose guard they stand. And just as the ancestors regularly expect offerings as a sign of solidarity and as thanks for their lasting protection, the forest spirits also demand something in return for every success in the hunt. In the myth, the forest spirits are alluded to only once by the narrator as the reason for Polele's moodiness, for killing his mother's brothers' chickens.

Here another dilemma arises. In contrast to one's own ancestors, who, like careful parents, generally do not demand any real value from their offspring for their support, the forest spirits are strangers, entities with whom there is no family relationship and whose assistance cannot be taken for granted. Thus, one would actually have to provide an adequate return for their yielding of game. But how can humans repay a favour for something which, unlike their own domestic animals, they have not cared for themselves and which they would nevertheless like to receive? This is the subject of another myth again told to me by Tengatiti. It explains the sacrifice of the left ear of the prey as thanks for success in the hunting.

Ear Sacrifice

The starting point of the story is the continual disappearance of the hunted animals in the jungle. The hunter finally discovers that the animals have an owner and that he has to pay something in return for their acquisition. He is the first to learn what has applied to all hunts since then: part of the prey must be ceded to its original owners. Moreover, the hunter must also submit to certain rules in his

behaviour, through which he can compensate for his violent intervention in the environment.

In any interpretation of myths, it is important to pay attention to the exact choice of words. In the story of the ear sacrifice, the difference between the relationship to wild animals and that to people's own domestic ones comes out clearly. The breeding of domestic animals is only one of the elements in the series of human actions for the success of which one places oneself entirely under the protection of one's own ancestors and to whom one constantly shows one's gratitude with small gifts, just as one does to the elders within the family. With the forest spirits, on the other hand, one encounters a quite divergent idiom, a negotiation with words like "disadvantage" and even "cheat" which evoke a completely different image.

This idiom characterises the solution of the story of the ear sacrifice. The forest spirit fights back almost as if bargaining when he feels he has been taken advantage of. But the dilemma that I hinted at earlier arises distressingly: It cannot be that man, in view of his efforts in the hunt, should forego a substantial part of the prey.² Here he is helped by a mental construction in which a general characteristic of the spirits finds a suitable application: In various Mentawai traditions, there is talk of everything being reversed in the world of the spirits. This idea is widespread in Southeast Asia [Malaya, Batak, Dayak]: the spirits sing when they speak, up is down for them, the wilderness is their settlement area, the animals there are their cattle and fowl. And what gives the punch line in our case: the good

² In this context, a comparison with a well-known Greek tradition suggests itself, according to which Prometheus, faced with a similar dilemma, left it up to the gods themselves to choose what kind of sacrifice they desired (Hesiod, *Theogony* 535 ff). He made two heaps from a slaughtered cow: a small one with the good meat and a large one with bones and fat, and covered the whole with the skin. Zeus, summoned to come and choose, demanded the larger part, and since then the sacrifices have contained, as desired, what people gladly desist from. In contrast to the conciliatory outcome in Mentawai, however, this led to conflict here. According to Meuli (1975, II: 1011), the Greek offering of the bones is an echo of the same hunter tradition I mentioned above with Polele and the sea turtle.

side, which is the right one for humans, is the left side for them, and little is for them much. On this basis, everywhere in Siberut, with the approval of the left ear as a particularly minor *pars pro toto* from a human point of view, a solution is reached that is satisfactory for all concerned and can also ensure success in hunting in the future - a hope that seems to be confirmed by the generous attitude of the spirits at the end of the story. The fact that it is the responsible spirits here, and not the hunting animals themselves as in the case of the birds, who on top of the offering also demand the observance of specific taboos as a condition for hunting success, confirms the interpretation that the Mentawaians also actually perceive the renunciations associated with the taboos as a kind of *quid pro quo* on their part.

The idea of forest spirits bargaining is striking when we compare it with the tone of the daily and ritual sacrifices dedicated to the ancestors. A similar trust is expressed towards the ancestors as towards one's own parents: one appeals to their willingness to help with small gifts as a sign of togetherness and sometimes fortifies the expectation of their general support in the ritual by a verbal offer of one's own possessions, the selection of which is entrusted to them but which afterwards can be used again without further ado (cf. Schefold 1980).

In order to better understand this picture, I will include another short myth here. It tells of the origin of the forest spirits. The story was not narrated to me on Siberut, where it seems to be unknown in this form, but in 1968 on Sipora by the descendants of former immigrants from Siberut. The narrator was Jonas, a Christian of about seventy years of age, who was known for his great knowledge of the former situation on this island which had been missionized for a long time.

Palia

The story takes place at a time when death had not yet come to the people. The people multiplied and began to worry that soon there would not be enough

room for everyone. They split up in two parties and conjured each other with a black chicken (*palia*), and one half of them became the forest spirits. Their zone is the primeval forest. People can continue to plant crops there, but only on condition that they show consideration for the invisible spirits. Moreover, death has since come to the people.

The Mentawaian concern about an overpopulation of the earth may come as a surprise. However, the theme is also found elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Just like in the present story, it is then often associated with the supernatural introduction of human mortality - in Jonas' rendering, it is referred to as a divine bequest, in line with his Christian background. In our story, this introduction is combined with the simultaneous division of the population into the visible present-day human population and the invisible category of forest spirits. In the story it is made clear how humans have to proceed ritually so that they do not get in the way of the forest spirits while working in the plantations. And what is important for our question about the sphere of the ear sacrifice: the myth shows that, given the nature of the relationship between the parties involved, one can by no means appeal to a familial attitude of the spirits. For humans, the forest spirits appear more like members of neighbouring groups with whom one lives on friendly or hostile terms, as the case may be, and where there are possibly exchanges of women or goods. Such an exchange is always connected with lengthy negotiations about the extent of gift and counter-gift until the balance required under peaceful conditions is achieved.

Durian

In the story of the ear sacrifice, it is made clear that man must pay to the owners something in return for his appropriation of creatures of the wild. But not only animals are part of this sacrificial pantheon. The fruits of the trees also belong to them. Their origin is again seen in the realm of the wild. In this case,

however, this realm is not equated with the primeval forest, but is transferred to the "interior" where they have their roots, i.e. under the earth or, and there also accessible to the diving human being, under the sea. In this way, at any rate, the situation unfolds in another myth. Its theme is the origin and harvest of the durian fruit. The story was told to me by Topoiogo, the ritual leader (*rimata*) of the Sakuddei, who was about sixty years old at the time (1968).

The parallels of this story with that of the ear sacrifice are evident even in details: Instead of the hunter in the jungle, it begins with a pair of brother fishermen in the sea, but in both cases the arrows are lost at the beginning and the search for them leads to the discovery that the wild animals of the people are actually domestic ones of the spirits. From the fish, the "chickens" of the spirits in the interior, the emphasis then shifts to another possession of these spirits: the seeds of the then still unknown durian fruit. The spirits refuse to hand them over at a first request - out of pity, as they emphasize, since their cultivation could lead to many diseases. The second attempt is successful, but, as with the ear sacrifice, humans are simultaneously told that in order to gain the hoped-for goods, they must return part of the harvest to their original owners. And just as in the previous examples (birds, hunting game), the desired good itself, the durian, expects that one has to take its peculiarities into consideration in the form of relevant taboo restrictions and rules of conduct. The Sakuddei, in whose house I was told the story of the durian, stressed however that most these cumbersome rules relating to the fruit harvest only applied to the peculiar instance documented in the myth. In contrast to the taboos for hunting game, they observed them only to a very limited extent at the time of my stay.³

³ The Sakuddei linked the inconveniences of cultivating fruit trees directly to another story, the tale of a younger brother's retiring into an existence of writing, which eventually led to the splitting off of the Western way of life from their difficult own one (cf. 13a2).

This less orthodox attitude is, in my opinion, related to the difference in accessibility of the goods in question. While there is always a shortage of game, at harvest time so many tree fruits accumulate that they rot in heaps on the ground. The Sakuddei saw the problem with tree fruits less in their availability than in the fact that the ripening season also coincides with the period of heavy rainfall. Then, Mentawai's greenhouse climate becomes even more humid than usual and the colds or sicknesses predicted in the myth are quite common. In the narrative, however, the causality appears reversed: it is not the rainy season that is responsible for the ripening period, but the latter causes the former and must be mitigated, so to speak, by observing the taboos. And it is the remains of rotting fruit under the houses that cause the floods that wash them away - albeit again with accompanying dangers, namely the drowning of domestic animals. It is in this context of abundant supply that we must probably also understand the different attitude towards the spirits: A bargaining for the substance, such as with game, makes no sense given the abundant tree fruits. Here, it is more a matter of acknowledging the dependence on the spirits as such.

A common theme in the previous myths concerns problems related to man's dependence for his livelihood on the world outside his social environment. The following group of myths relates to the origins of this social environment itself. Above all, it is about the fundamental values of the uma community: unconditional solidarity and the equality of all its members. Here, once again, the category of spirits comes to the fore that already played a decisive role in the emergence of the durian: the "spirits of the interior" (*taisikabaga*).

Siusiubu

One myth relates the origin of these spirits. In this story, which is known throughout Mentawai, their dwelling place is not in the sea, but under the earth. Their position as lords of the tree fruits appears, although rather incidentally, in the

episode at the beginning, when the bad fruits assigned to the protagonists suddenly become good in their hands, this special quality makes an appearance. The emphasis is on the beginning of a central element in Mentawai life: the emergence of the *uma*, the community house, and thus the visible core of their social order.⁴

In the myth of Siusiubu, the hero of the story, the crocodile takes a preeminent role. Crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) were endemic to Mentawai until recently. The pelagic animals come up the river from the sea and pose a constant threat to the local inhabitants. Mentawaians put this danger into perspective by associating it with a certain form of unacceptable behaviour, thus removing it from the threatening realm of the unknown. The fact that the crocodile sometimes eats a person, but sometimes it does not, is associated with the violation of a rule in which the crocodile acts as a punishing authority. And it is significant for which cases such punishment is apparently deemed necessary. They all refer to forms of antisocial behaviour within the community. Mostly such behaviour is embodied in a non-willingness to share meat.

It is not difficult to understand the underlying precept from the Mentawaiian social order. In contrast to external aggression, which is answered by counter-aggression from the aggrieved, there is no sanctioning authority among the traditional roles of the egalitarian society to punish anti-social behaviour within. It is the crocodile, the most dangerous animal in Mentawai, that is given this task. It grabs the miscreant in the water and eats him, or it makes him sick with its magical powers. It is only logical then that this same animal is also given the key role in the creation of the community house, as our myth tells us.

⁴ In a variant of this myth from Pagai transmitted by Loeb (1929, no. 10), the hero named here Sikeppailangai possesses his magical knowledge by himself and it is only hinted (he moves under water) that there is an association with the crocodile. After his murder in the posthole, however, he also proves to be the lord of tree fruits and the cause of earthquakes.

Anti-social behaviour marks the very beginning of the story. Two orphans⁵ are deprived of the good fruits in the plantations, while others share among themselves. The crocodile appears in order to help them. It calls itself their father's-sister and thus, as an adult and also married woman, belongs to a different family group as a result of the virilocal rules of marriage. In what follows, this contrast only makes the "meanness" of Siusiubu's own family members more apparent, as they kill Siusiubu in a post hole during the construction of the communal house; one which he undertook at the instigation and under the guidance of the crocodile. He turns into a spirit. His revenge at the ritual dedication of the house through an earthquake leads to the creation of today's circumstances: The former orphan boy retreats into the earth as the future lord of earthquakes and tree fruits and continues to live there at the base of the main post. The old family is destroyed. The survivors, embodied by the earthquake spirit's married sister and her family, reconstituted themselves and the prospect of a new community appears.

The myth of the earthquake spirit is common in Mentawai⁶. Everywhere it receives special weight as an attestation of both the central position of the community, and the significance importance of its most important periodic ritual, the *puliaijat*. In the present performances of this ritual, he is the only spirit who is individually appealed to for his favour, each time receiving his own sacrifice in return. He is supposed to take it at the foot of the main post of the *uma*, at the place where he had been killed as a human being in history and where he still resides today as a spirit, together with his family whose origins are not mentioned.

⁵ The name Siusiubu for the boy was associated by the narrator with *masubu*, deceased, because of his pitiful status.

⁶ The mythical anchoring of the first house by the underworld goddess Jata associated with crocodiles among the Dayak is especially similar, cf. Stöhr 1967, 23ff.

When a new community house is built and the hole for the main post is dug, he receives offerings there as well.⁷

The motif of killing a human being at the base of an architectural construction to strengthen it ("death in the posthole") is found throughout Southeast Asia as far as India and often refers to an actual human sacrifice. However, all Mentawaians strongly denied to me that human sacrifice had ever occurred among them. More important to them than the preservation of the building as such was apparently the continuity of the community that is inhabiting it. In this community there was no central, judging authority. Instead, the creature that had given rise to the *uma in the* myth, the crocodile, was regarded as the guarantor of this continuity until the present day.

Mutsimata

It is not only the community, the *uma*, that owes its origin and authentication to the crocodile. In Taileleu in the south-east of Siberut, I was told a myth according to which another central instance in the life of the Mentawaians also goes back to the crocodile. It is the origin of shamanism, of *kerei*. All informants, including those on the neighbouring islands of Sipora and Pagai, which were settled from Siberut many generations ago, agreed that the origin of the shamanic traditions lay in East Siberut. In fact, the shamanic songs seem to be based to this day on the dialect of this area - but a closer study of this is still pending. In a myth from Saibi, this origin is traced back to an orphan boy who received his knowledge from his deceased mother at the place where she was left to rest. In this version, the crocodile does not appear. In the present narrative of Mutsimata, however, it takes on a central significance. It appears here with the designation "Big Shirt" (*Ben*

⁷ Another offering to the earthquake spirit seems like a direct quotation from the myth: he is invited to the consecration of a new shaman with a decorated sacrificial tree stuck into the earth and is supposed to survey the event from its top.

Leppes), an allusion to the sinister, enveloping shape of the water spirits with which the crocodile is associated in mythical tradition. In this form, it also exercises its control function over the *uma*, already mentioned in Siusiubu, when it punishes antisocial behaviour with illness. As in the myth, it then ascends from the river into the house, where the shamans must try to appease it with sacrifices during the healing ceremony. As in the story of the earthquake spirit, it is addressed as "father's sister" in the pertinent songs. In the Mutsimata myth, however, it appears as a male figure, as evidenced by the casual mention of its "wife" - a circumstance to which the narrators questioned about it did not want to attach any particular significance.

In the Mutsimata myth, it is again an orphan to whom the transmission of religious knowledge goes back. And like the Siusiubu boy, he too is abandoned by his family and is then cared for and taught by the crocodile, later called the 'big shirt', out of compassion. Here, however, there is subsequently no conflict with the family and no emergence of a new community. On the contrary, Mutsimata's new shamanistic knowledge is willingly accepted by the family and preserved for the future. The fact that he shares his food with his crocodile friend, causing astonishment at his supposed gluttony, is a motif that with other protagonists recurs in several other Mentawaiian myths. But it is at this point that the story takes a turn that adds a new accent to the fresh acquisition of knowledge. Koikoi, a friend of Mutsimata, takes on the leading role. He accidentally shoots a crocodile, is seized by its father during a flood and taken under his care - a motif that occurs in exactly the same way in Polele. This crocodile now leads him on a journey around the island and transfers a local stone upon him at each human settlement.⁸ These turn into the magical plants that the shamans still use in their rituals today.

⁸ This motif is perhaps related to the observation that stones are regularly found in the stomach of crocodiles, which the animals have eaten in order to be able to stay under water more easily, and which also help to digest the food. That each stone comes from a different river mouth that the crocodile has visited is a tradition that is also known from Malays from *Sumatra* (Van der Valk 1940:28).

At the end of the story, Mutsimata comes back into the picture and now conjures up a flood himself, which opens the waterway for the return of Big Shirt and Koikoi with the magical plants. The fact that Mutsimata receives fruit gardens from the Koikoi family in return, which are still in the possession of his descendants today, marks the truthfulness of the story for the listeners.

In a great move, this turn in the story expands the message of the earthquake spirit. There it was about the constitution of the local community. Here, the entire settlement area of the Mentawaians is included in the events: The knowledge of the shamanistic tools results from contributions from the scattered localities of all Mentawaian social groups. In this way, all of the ever-present regional conflicts are countered by a collective cooperation of the entire population, which I have not met anywhere else in the Mentawaian traditions.

Crocodile, deer, monkey, wild boar

The crocodile as the originator of magical remedies adds a new nuance to its creative role. However, it is still its general significance as founder and preserver of the local community that grants it the most important position all over Mentawai. This is also expressed in the myth of the origin of the crocodile, variants of which are known throughout the islands.

In the version of 'Tengatiti from Saibi reproduced here, the story begins with a misunderstanding and its tragic consequences. A woman prepares a carrying bamboo with supplies for her husband while he works in the plantations, but her little daughter exchanges the contents for scraps behind her back. The husband feels badly treated and takes revenge by bringing her back a bamboo with snake and lizard meat from fishing. Both are unhappy but do not speak out. The man takes his daughter and son to the riverbank, makes them count how long he can dive, and then turns into a crocodile before their eyes. The mother sadly devours

her fishing net and moves into the forest with the children. She pinches the children while they sleep there at the foot of a buttress root and deceives them with the lie that they have been bitten by the mosquitoes of their ancestors. When they finally fall back to sleep, she leaves them without their taking notice and transforms into a stag; the net frame becomes the antlers, the net itself the stomach.

The children wander around in the jungle, see rambutan fruit, and while the son is picking it in the tree top, he turns into a monkey. The daughter finds her way back home, marries and becomes the mother of a son. As he has grown up, the mother hears that the neighbours have captured a monkey and want to eat it. She learns the name of the monkey from her son when she asks, after the son had initially forgotten it because he had stumbled on the way. Although it now becomes clear that the monkey is the mother's transformed brother, she asks her son to join in the neighbours' meal. But sorrow overcomes her and during a fishing trip together with the other women of the *uma*, she turns into a wild boar.

Various other variants of this tale are known from the literature on Mentawai, whereby certain often seemingly incidental motifs are regularly repeated which obviously appeal particularly to the imagination. They will be briefly mentioned below, since they are especially well suited to illustrate how fresh variants are created each time a story is retold. I will pass over new episodes that occur only sporadically.

In two early versions from Sipora by Morris (1900, nos. 16 and 18), the transformation of the disappointed father into a crocodile is not mentioned, but the running away of the mother who feels betrayed, devours the fish net and pinches the children in the forest is noted. Here, too, the son becomes a monkey. The success of the neighbours' hunt is again only revealed here after the messenger initially stumbles in the forest.

Kruyt (1923: 91 and 102) cites from Pagai the fact of counting while being submerged during crocodile metamorphosis and the origin of the deer, but not the origin of the monkey and the wild boar.

Hansen (1915: 185), former head of the military police on Pagai, reports in a different order the misunderstanding between the spouses, the mother's transformation into a deer after devouring her net, the pinching in the forest, the daughter's marriage, the father's immersion and metamorphizing into a crocodile while counting and after quarrelling with him because of bad food. No mention of monkey and wild boar.

Loeb (1929: 197) tells, also from Pagai, of the misunderstanding between man and woman, of the deer transformation after devouring the fish net, the pinching of the children, the transformation of the father, offended by bad food, into a crocodile, and that of the brother after eating fruit into a monkey.

It is precisely the incidental details, such as the pinching of the children, the counting while submerging, or the stumbling while delivering the name, that accentuate the common Mentawaian basis of the different variants. A motif apparently confined to Siberut is the daughter's transformation into a wild boar. However, since there are no wild boars on Sipora and Pagai, this is not surprising. As for the crocodile, the linking of its creation to a disadvantageous allocation of food is noteworthy. It is the same underlying rule of equal sharing that motivated the crocodile's intervention in the tale of the earthquake spirit, and which, as already mentioned there, accounts for its sanctioning role when someone in the community has behaved antisocially. The fact that the tragic event is not based on an evil intention but on a tragic mix-up is apparently irrelevant. It is the visible act, and not the intention, that counts.⁹ In the versions from Pagai, the crocodile also

⁹ In this sense, one acts preventively when there is meat but a member of the *uma* is staying elsewhere out of reach. People then sacrifice to the spirits and assure them that this companion also has enough to eat and will get his share later.

proclaims other taboos, the breaking of which would be punished. Here, too, the precept of just social behaviour dominates.

A special feature of the story of Siberut is the legacy of the son on the occasion of his transformation into a monkey: After a hunt, his kind in future may only be eaten by men and not by women. I have dealt in detail with a possible symbolic background to this commandment in *Lia* (Schefold 1988: 574-7). It remains astonishing that here - albeit in animal form - a protagonist identified by name is eaten. However, this is only a special case in a general motif in the Mentawai mythology that certain animals and plants originated from humans. The narrators, appalled by my accounts of the existence of cannibalism elsewhere, commented on this as part of the mythical past rather than a concern for today.