

## PhD Thesis Summary

# **Family stories**

## **Oral tradition, memories of the past, and contemporary conflicts over land in Mentawai – Indonesia**

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### ABSTRACT

This is a study of oral tradition on Mentawai family stories. The family stories relate to historical events and contemporary social issues occurred in the Mentawai Islands and affecting the Mentawai kin groups. The Mentawai family stories comprise significant elements defining different kin groups living on the Mentawai Islands. They are also an important source of information with regard to claims to ancestral land. The Mentawai family stories can furthermore be regarded as the kin groups' verbal form of identities. Therefore, to maintain the family stories is indispensable to Mentawai communities and the power of human memory plays an important part in maintaining and transmitting the significance of these verbal identities of the communities.

### KEYWORDS

Mentawai, Indonesia, anthropology, oral tradition, family stories, memories of the past, and conflicts over land.

### INTRODUCTION

The Mentawai archipelago consisting of four larger islands (from north to south: Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai) and dozens of smaller other islands are situated in the Indian Ocean about 100 km off the west

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coast of Sumatra. It comprises 6,011 square kilometres and is inhabited by 76,421 people according to the population census in 2010.<sup>1</sup> To the people of the Mentawai archipelago, the initial occupation of and the way in which they multiplied and spread throughout the Mentawai Islands is an intriguing question – not only to them, but also to current scientific debate.

Mentawaians do not have any written tradition. While they have produced impressive carvings and painted objects, they also have oral traditions consisting of various ancestral myths and historical narratives that have been handed down through countless generations. Several ancestral myths inform us about how Mentawai ancestor(s) arrived on the Mentawai islands. How, why, and in which direction those first people spread from their place of origin over the archipelago is the topic of many narratives. Land plays an important role in the course of migration. Family stories and human memories preserve information of the migratory movements and land claimed by Mentawaians.

The central research question occupying this study is of “how and to what extent oral narratives, more specifically family stories are used in dealing with current questions about places of origin, the identity of the kin groups, and the current discourse of land and land rights in Mentawai society.”

## METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, my research comprised a period of study of the literature and three periods of fieldwork. At the stage of study of the literature, information about Mentawai was explored in published and unpublished documents in the Netherlands and in Indonesia. In three periods doing fieldwork in Siberut, Sipora, South Pagai, and North Pagai, I spent six weeks in 2002 to investigate general aspects of ancestral stories. For eight months in 2004, I conducted the main fieldwork, collecting family stories from selected Mentawai kin groups. During the last period of fieldwork, for three months in 2006, I focused on conflicts over ancestral and private lands.

My training as an anthropologist allowed me to make use of different approaches in the process of data collection. I relied on particular methods suggested by scholars such as Bruner (1986b) and Bernard (1994). Bruner specifically suggests, “First we tell the people why we are there, what information we are seeking, and how we intend to use the data. In the second telling we take this verbal and visual information and process it, committing it to writing in our field diaries.” (Bruner 1986b: 147–148). By following such guidelines, I was able to gather a lot of significant oral accounts. The interview was the most important technique in collecting my data. Following a few suggestions by Bernard (1994: 208–215), I did not, however, make structured questionnaires but prepared a few major questions that guided me in interviewing my informants.

My fieldwork was not one long success story, however. I occasionally came across difficulties in collecting information. Sometimes I figured out

<sup>1</sup> [www.bps.go.id/hasilSP2010/sumbar/1300.pdf](http://www.bps.go.id/hasilSP2010/sumbar/1300.pdf), accessed on 20 August 2011.

that informants had not frankly informed me about what I needed to know. I had hoped that my informants would tell me particular details like names of victims or kin groups killed by their ancestors during headhunting raids. Such information was not easy to get. As an anthropologist, I sometimes observed significant changes in their tone of voice and their body language while telling me a story; I took this to signify that they were hiding something from me. Edward M. Bruner (1986a: 4) has commented on such nonverbal sources of knowledge, "By experience we mean not just sense data, cognition [...] but also feelings and expectations." My fieldwork experience taught me that it is very important to pay attention to body language and changes in tone of voice.

One thing I did not forget in such situations was the essential thing that Briggs writes about in his book on focusing and how to ask about difficult and sensitive issues (Briggs 1986). He suggests that the researcher sometimes has to break the boundaries separating the researcher from the informants. I followed the suggestion in my research by speaking the local dialect and respecting my informants like my own grandfather, uncle, sister, or brother while talking to them. Eventually, they accepted me and told their family stories to me.

An informant's voice and attitude frequently changed when visitors interrupted our conversation. Moreover, my informants did not really want to tell me their story if they were not really sure that their information would be used properly for my research study instead of for my own personal interest (for example to acquire land rights for myself). Informants mostly took some time to explore whether they could trust me. They carried out their own research on me before responding to my research questions.

## CONTENTS OF THE THESIS

The core contents of this thesis are: 1) oral narratives and the transmitting of knowledge; 2) memories of early migratory movements and the inhabitation of places; and 3) traditional landownership and current discourses of land tenure. I elaborate them as follows:

### *Oral narratives and the transmission of knowledge*

Mentawaians generally hold no written records of their past including their land ownership. A few people perhaps still hold Dutch colonial documents, but the value and authority of these records is questionable whether they are valid according to current formal legal point of view. The Mentawaians themselves handle questions of land ownership through oral narratives. Mentawaians speak of the land as being imbued with a history of human uses. One of the most important ways in which the land gains a history is through the cutting and re-growth that characterises shifting cultivation. When people clear new fields, they do not forget the old ones. Old fields are rich sites for resources, as well as for stories. The history of the land is a social history, for it is the story of gardens and their owners over time. Through a description of their former gardens – their location, their neighbours, the plants on them and

the memorable events about them – people are able to remember and therefore to claim rights to certain plots of land. People use these stories to construct a trail of field sites that once inhabited and used by their ancestral clan. In Mentawai, these stories are called *tibo imone* (stories about gardens). Each clan in Mentawai has its own set of stories. Knowing these stories provides people with a certain power. The one who is able to recall the story and tell it in a convincing way has a potential claim to the land addressed to in the story.

Family stories are a kind of oral narratives that constitute the major carrier of Mentawai culture. Some oral narratives consist of general information and belong to all Mentawai communities. Mentawaians regard their oral narratives as important sources for understanding their cultural circumstances. The oral narratives show different features and characteristics as described in Chapter VIII. Some oral narratives belong to particular kin groups, as they convey features of those kin groups. Such oral narratives are the family stories of a Mentawai kin group, which they characterize and identify. Mentawaians tell certain stories and transmit these stories within their family and through the family generations. Memories play important roles in upholding the messages of the past and conveying them to the present.

#### *Memories of early migratory movements and the inhabitation of places*

According to Carsten (1995) an analysis of the relation between narrative and memory requires a “systematic study of the crucial role of forgetting in the creation of social memory.” She explains how the creation of shared identity in kinship can be linked to the process of forgetting details of the past. She considers some of the anthropological evidence about the way Southeast Asian people have been represented as afflicted by “genealogical amnesia” (forgetting who their ancestors are) – a topic also touched upon by H. Geertz and C. Geertz (1964) for the Balinese context. Carsten suggests that this process of forgetting can be linked to the widespread demographic mobility in the region (see also: Fox 1995). Although it might seem that while knowledge of the past is being lost, it is also clear that people do remember certain kinds of knowledge about kinship in considerable detail.

This brings us to current debates in science about the gap between memory and history and the ways of negotiating it. Davis and Starn (1989: 2) state that “One’s memory of any given situation is multiform and that its many forms are situated in place and time from the perspective of the present. To put this to another way, memory has a history, or more precisely, histories.” History and memory tend to be placed in sharp opposition, an opposition that was “already ancient when the debate resurfaced in the pioneering studies of collective memory in this century” (Davis and Starn 1989: 4). What is at stake here is a fundamental attitude about our relationship to the past.

Against memory’s delight in similarity, appeal, and emotions, history stands for critical distance and documented explanation. In the logic of the above-sketched opposition, a scientist who is sceptical about the reliability of memory becomes the true believer in the objectivity of history. Poststructuralist

criticism has brought to the fore that memory and history are both heavily constructed narratives, with only institutionally regulated differences between them. It is my conviction that if there is a gap between memory and history there also must be ways of negotiating it. Rather than to insist on the opposition between the two I would like to emphasize their interdependence.

Speaking of the inhabitation of places and its connection to the process of migratory movements in Mentawai, the term “topogeny” introduced by James Fox (1997) is of particular interest to my research. Topogeny in Fox’s words is the “recitation of an ordered sequence of place names. In so far as a sequence of names can be attached to specific locations in an inhabited landscape, a topogeny represents a projected externalization of memories that can be lived in as well as thought about. Topogenies may recount the journey of an ancestor, the migration of a group or the transmission of an object.” Topogenies are to be found recorded in written as well as in oral narratives. In the extensive topogenies – transmitted orally – of the migration of ancestral groups throughout the Mentawai archipelago the movements of these ancestors are the means through which the landscape is imaginatively fashioned, giving people identification and attachment to place. Such narratives therefore define significance and assign it to a landscape.

To consider the inhabitation of places in Mentawai, I was intrigued by stories about the early population of Mentawai. There is no clear prehistoric record about the actual origin of the Mentawaians as Schefold (1989) describes, but according to their cultural characteristics they may have arrived in the archipelago some two thousand years ago. This idea resembles to stories about the origins of current population of Mentawai as told by Mentawaians. The current owners of the family stories indicate the first location of their earliest kin as their own place of origin. That place is also presumed to be the location of their ancestral land. According to stories of origin, ancestors of current Mentawai kin groups began to expand to other places in the Mentawai Islands after leaving places of origin. The beginning of migratory movements was caused by different family conflicts.

Most narratives tell about disputes among a clan’s members after they separated from each other and from their residence and tried to find a new place to stay. After disputes, members of both parties tend to avoid each other in every respect. After a place had been occupied and claimed, the migrating members did not stay there permanently. They moved and stayed in other places. Of course, the initial kin groups did not migrate all at the same time. Some sub groups left earlier than other did. Especially during these earlier migratory movements, the ancestral groups claimed the places they occupied as theirs for longer or shorter periods of time. So the migrating process took place and the migrating members became away from home in order to avoid getting involved in conflicts again. This might be the reason that the leaving party sought for a new place to stay totally out of sight of their fellow clan members with whom they were at odds. Informants also told me that the fear of headhunting – still practised in those days – was another reason to stay out

of sight of possibly violent individuals as far as possible.

Mentawaians spread over the archipelago, especially in southern direction. This process of migration rises some questions of why ancestors of current Mentawaians moved in southern direction; why they sometimes moved so far from their initial place, and why they even moved to the southern Mentawai islands of Sipora and the Pagai islands, while there was still plenty of unoccupied land available on Siberut. Because of these migratory movements, the various kin groups were after a certain amount of time able to claim various plots of land, sometimes at rather long distance from each other, as their property.

Today, only some of these plots of land are still occupied and lived on by their initial owners. Much of the land the Mentawai Archipelago is nowadays occupied and used by kin groups who migrated at a later stage in history. However, all plots of land, even those not directly occupied or used, are still considered the property of the initial settlers. Due to the various migratory movements, the different subgroups regularly came into contact with each other again, causing not only hostilities but also new alliances as a result of which new kin groups were sometimes created.

#### *Traditional landownership and current discourses of land tenure*

Most of the past events told in the family stories are about the growth of the kin groups, their migratory movements and inhabitation of places, plots of land claimed, and social conflicts that affected the kin groups' lives. One category of past events that still affect the lives of current kin groups is conflicts over land. Conflicts over land not only occurred in the past, but also take place in the present. If we look at the total size of the Mentawai Islands and the total number of people living on the islands, we would conclude that land is still abundant in Mentawai. It works out to 13 people per square kilometre of land. This implicates that there is still much land range that is not directly occupied. One would not therefore expect to find serious conflicts about having or using land.

This low population density does not, however, mean that all land is not somebody's property. All members of a clan – according to patrilineal descent lines – communally own land in Mentawai. The first people in Mentawai simply claimed a place as being theirs by planting something. Then they named the place with what they thought suitable to it like a name of plant surrounding for instance *Sima soggunei* (a place where a lot of wild banana palms (*soggunei*) grow), human significant events for instance a place called *Silogau* (bloody place) where people killed each other in an assault, texture of landscape etcetera. This type of land is known as *porak sinese* (discovered and claimed land). These pioneers cultivating and thus owning the land they discovered are called *sibakkat porak* (the owner(s) of the land), and in the later stadium, the complex of geographical ranges for location of settlement, gardens, and surroundings, the owner(s) are called *sibakkat laggai* (owner(s) of the settlement). After some time all the land in the Mentawai archipelago

had a “legal” owner; there was no “free” land anymore. This led to new a situation: that of people using particular spots of land without owning it. These people had to ask permission to settle and make use of the land already claimed by another clan.

While rights over different plots of land in Mentawai may be called fluid, the borders between these different plots of land are permanent. Borders between different plots of land are indicated by *sog* (natural markers) like particular trees and rivers. The permanent nature of the borders does not, however, imply that there are no disputes over borders between clans and even amongst members of the same clan. Disputes over land often occur because an older generation transmits information about land to the next improperly, incompletely or even incorrectly. The new generation cannot properly defend the land in disputes. Consequently, disputes over land may have a long lasting character. When conflicts over land occur, family stories play an essential role in resolving the problems.

When, as explained above, part of the clan separates and leaves the residence in order to settle elsewhere, the separating parties still have equal and undeniable rights to the land they once conquered, occupied, and cultivated. This right is handed down from one generation to the next. Through this expansion of people and their rights, a network of still closely related families appeared, all with a certain claim to the land they once occupied. This idea of somehow being attached and entitled to ancestral land is an important notion in the Mentawaian sense of identity. In the Mentawaian context, one is only seen as a Mentawaian when one is somehow able to claim ancestral land.

Stories about landownership in Mentawai often cover a long period of time. A plot of land usually belongs to a kin group or a few related kin groups. Ownership of a kin group’s land is transmitted from one generation to the next within the kin group. However, land, as a whole or partly, can be sold or bestowed. Ownership of a plot of land can also be exchanged or surrendered from one kin group to another as payment for a social transaction like bride price. In order to protect their land, kin groups usually live on their land and maintain it. However, due to the early migrations, not all plots of land are situated in the current place of residence of the kin group. Over the course of many years, kin groups moved to find new places, sometimes leaving claimed land unattended and unmaintained. By moving away, the migrating kin groups become separated geographically from their unattended and unmaintained ancestral lands.

Most ancestral lands, therefore, are located in places far away from where the kin group currently live. A plot of ancestral land may thus be claimed and reclaimed by other kin groups that have migrated more recently from their initial place of origin. In the course of time, landownership in Mentawai has become uncertain. In the past decade, some people are in need of a plot of land where they can build a house and open a garden. Sometimes, people in Mentawai simply see a plot of land as a source of income, which they can sell and earn money from. This situation has caused several conflicts in Mentawai.

When there is a conflict over a plot of land, as explained in chapter X, the two opposing kin groups (or sometimes more) participate in a series of meetings in order to resolve the problems. One or more individuals are asked by the disputing kin groups to mediate the meetings. In these meetings, the kin groups rely to a large degree on oral narratives, especially family stories telling about the kin group's ownership of the contested land. Sometimes, witnesses from other kin groups are present at the meetings in order to give their oral testimony. The witnesses are expected to tell their family stories in order to endorse the claim of a particular kin group to the contested land. The process of resolving the conflicts makes use of the kin groups' family stories. My specific aim in this thesis has been to look at the role of family stories in the context of resolving current conflicts over ancestral land in the Mentawai Islands.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the conclusion of this thesis, I have focused on the role played by family stories in resolving social conflicts among kin groups in Mentawai. The power of human memory plays an important part in maintaining and transmitting the significance of past events. As a historical account, its owners must properly preserve a family story by carefully transmitting the content and significance of the story to following generations. For particular reasons, like clarifying the relationship of kin groups that were separated long ago, a family story cannot be simply changed and manipulated by its owners because it is an important identity marker of the kin group.

The Mentawaian family stories carry various features that distinguish them from other forms of oral narratives. A family story tells the history of a certain family group according to historical events and the strategic use of place names. By means of family stories, Mentawai kin groups remember crucial agreements made by their ancestors in dealing with other kin groups, for instance regarding land. They also remember important words that serve as evidence that they share a family relationship with other kin groups living in other places on the Mentawai Islands. Such oral narratives pertain to historical matters and they are therefore an important element of the Mentawai oral tradition.

In this sense, the family stories are an important meaning according to which certain claims with regard to ancestral land can be justified. Simultaneously the family stories are an important source of information with regard to identity, thus forming a verbal reflection of the kin groups' identity. In the field of oral tradition, family stories can thus be regarded as a specific genre of oral narratives. When studying oral narratives it is, in my opinion, important to pay special attention to family stories. Not in the last place so, because the communities still using family stories frequently consider them indispensable.



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