Family Stories : oral tradition, memories of the past, and contemporary conflicts over land in Metawai- Indonesia

Tulius, J.

1

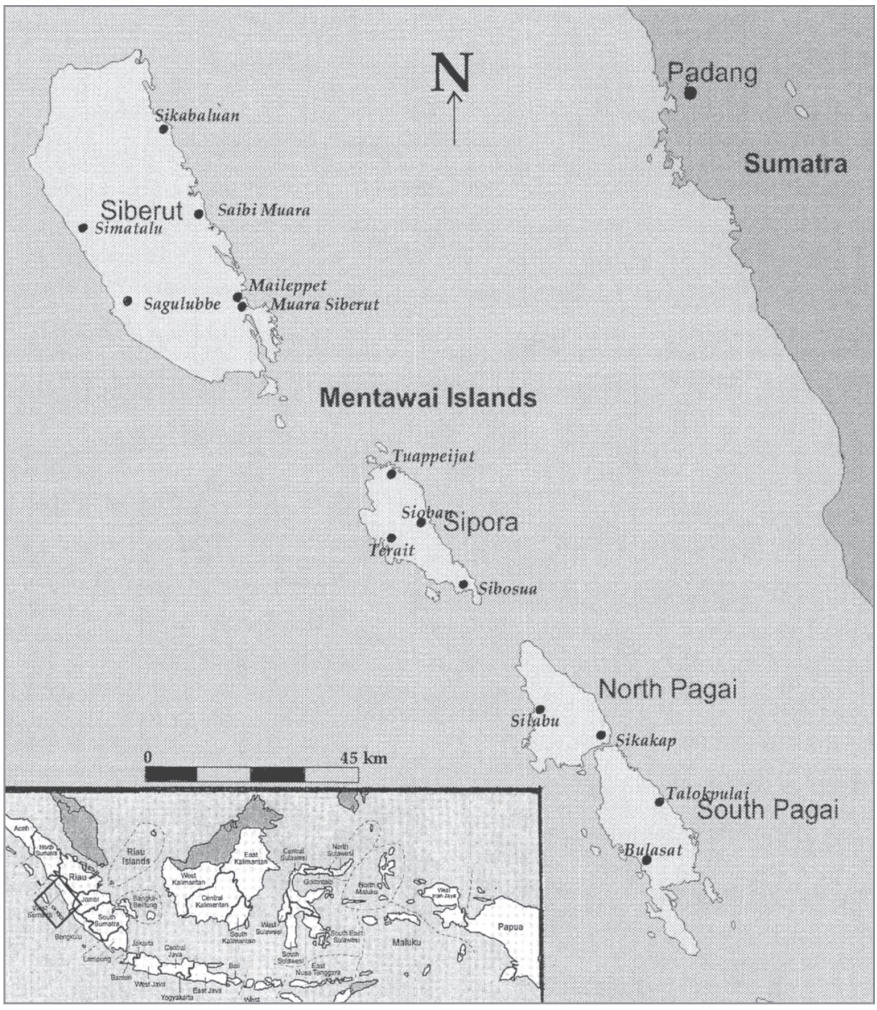
Introduction

1.1 Research objectives and questions

This book is about Mentawai family stories. These stories tell about past events that have affected the life of Mentawai kin groups. The family stories convey how Mentawai kin groups expanded. The earliest ancestors of the kin groups left their places of origin in the Mentawai Islands due to conflicts of one kind or another. These initial kin groups migrated in different directions. During their migrations, the ancestors inhabited different places and claimed land in all these places as their own. They migrated and kept claiming land until every plot of land in Mentawai belonged to one or another kin group.

The Mentawai Islands comprise 6,011 square kilometres and were inhabited by 76,421 people in 2010[1] (see Map 1.1). 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. One would therefore not expect to find serious conflicts about having or using land. When conflicts over land occur, family stories play an essential role in resolving the problems.

1 www.bps.go.id/hasilSP2010/sumbar/1300.pdf, accessed on 20 August 2011.



Map 1.1 The Mentawai Islands off the west coast of Sumatra[2]

In general, this study examines what I call family stories. Family stories are a kind of oral narratives that constitute the major carrier of Mentawai culture. Mentawaians do not practise any written tradition. They maintain their cultural values in the form of oral narratives. Mentawaians tell certain stories and transmit these stories in their family through the generations. 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. Some oral narratives belong to particular kin groups, as they convey features of those kin groups. Such oral

2 The map is based on maps found on: nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bestand:Mentawai_Islands_Map.png and www.indonesiamatters.com/images/indonesia-map.gif. The last access was in December 2010.

narratives are the family stories of a Mentawai kin group, and they characterize and identify the kin group.

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. So, the general aim of this study is to examine the role of oral narratives in the lives of Mentawaians living in the Mentawai Islands.

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 out of. This situation has caused several conflicts in Mentawai.

When there is a conflict over a plot of land, 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. So, my specific aim in this thesis is to look

at the role of family stories in the context of resolving current conflicts over ancestral land in the Mentawai Islands.

In this study I am concerned with three aspects, as follows: characteristics of oral narratives and the transmitting of knowledge of cultural values, memories of early migratory movements and the inhabitation of places, and traditional landownership and current discourses of land tenure. The understanding of these three aspects is meant to answer the central research question: *how and to what extent are oral narratives, more specifically family stories, 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*?

In order to answer the question, I specifically posed several questions to people during fieldwork. Do current Mentawaians know the initial place where their ancestors started to live in Mentawai? To what extent are issues of origins relevant to their current interests in claiming a plot of ancestral land? How do current Mentawaians perceive past conflicts experienced by their ancestors, the conflicts that forced the ancestors to leave their initial place? What is the relevance of past conflicts to the present situation? Why do current Mentawaians dispute rights to land if there is still a lot of land available in Mentawai? How are they able to prove their claims to a particular plot of land if their ancestors left the place long ago and they themselves have never been there? What strategies are used to win a conflict over land? How do they preserve the content of their stories over the generations? What do they think of the existence of different versions of the same story?

This study relies on oral narratives, especially family stories, as a major source of information, just as Mentawaians themselves have relied on family stories to explain how they have been living in the Mentawai Islands and how they expanded and separated into different kin groups genealogically and geographically. However, family stories not only contain information on Mentawai kin groups, but also on other past events that have affected the lives of the kin groups. Family stories as a category of oral narratives have significantly coloured Mentawai oral tradition and Mentawaians' lives.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Oral tradition is very important to communities that do not culturally practice a written tradition. Even among communities with a written tradition, oral tradition still plays an essential role as a source of early information before information was documented into written accounts. Oral tradition consists of various types of oral narratives that have several elements, marking differences between types of oral narratives. Scholars of oral tradition therefore categorize oral narratives into particular genres.

In this theoretical section, I specifically examine the concept of family story in order to reveal its significance and characteristics. I look to see which category family stories may best fit into, according to definitions by other scholars. My discussion of family stories is included as part of the discussion of oral tradition and oral narratives because some elements of oral tradition and oral narratives are also characteristics of the family story.

Most categories of oral narratives described in the scholarly literature have to do with stories that belong to a whole community (or village). In Mentawai, there is a category of oral narratives that do not seem to fit into categories previously defined by other researchers, namely what I call 'family stories'. Family stories differ from other oral narratives in being associated with one particular kin group – rather than with the whole village (in which several kin groups usually live side by side). Family stories may serve to emphasize what is special about this kin group and its history. Furthermore, family stories in Mentawai form a historical record of land claims made by that kin group. Because no existing category of oral narratives was available, I have coined the term 'family story' to refer to this category of oral narratives.

Performance or the act of narrating; performers and storytellers; and listeners or audience are some of the elements of oral tradition that I examine. Thereafter, I look at functions, roles and issues of versions in oral narratives, especially as applied to the family story. Later, I evaluate the content of family stories and consider motifs and themes. At the end of this discussion, I treat the power of collective and individual memory. Maurice Halbwachs wrote an important study of memory under the title of *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1952). (An English translation by Lewis A. Coser was published in 1992.) I use some ideas discussed by Halbwachs to understand collective memory. But first, I look at terms used by scholars to distinguish several genres of oral narratives; in this way we can arrive at the position of the family story in existing scholarship on oral tradition. By understanding the concept of oral tradition, I can define the concept of the family story.

Oral traditions, oral narratives, and family stories

Jan Vansina has studied oral traditions from communities in several parts of the globe. Along with the results of his research, Vansina states:

> Oral traditions are historical sources of a special nature. Their special nature derives from the fact that they are 'unwritten' sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human beings (Vansina, 1973: 1).

By 'oral traditions', Vansina means to include 'reported statements' in the form of verbal testimonies (Vansina, 1973: 19). To my point of view, reported statements of verbal testimonies are the same as oral narratives. And the sustain-

ability of oral significance indeed relies on memories of certain individuals (leaders of groups) and particular groups of people (several elders of groups or community).

In her book, Finnegan (1992: 5-17; 142-157) mentions several genres of oral tradition: mythical stories or mythical tales, poems, riddles, folktales, fairytales, fables, legends, mantras, norms and other kinds of verbal arts. Surveying the large scholarly literature on the scope, methodology and history of folklore, Finnegan (1992: 11) notes that the term 'folklore' is often used by scholars of oral tradition to refer to stories, narratives, poetry, song, riddles, and proverbs collected from different communities. However, stories come in a wide variety and they comprise different meanings. Therefore, the term 'folklore', at least to me, does not obviously convey historical matters that are important events for family or community.

Scholars of oral tradition specify the historical occurrences that have affected a family or community with a particular term. Sometimes, the term 'narrative' is used to refer to several categories of oral tradition. Finnegan (1992: 39) uses the term 'narrative' to accommodate all stories of human beings. Narrative includes stories that are present at all times, in all places and in all societies as exemplified in *South Pacific Oral traditions* by Finnegan and Orbell (1995).

In order to describe narratives, Edward M. Bruner (1986b) mentions their key elements, which are story, discourse, and telling:

> The *story* is the abstract sequence of events, systematically related, the syntagmatic structure. *Discourse* is the text in which the story is manifested, the statement in a particular medium such as a novel, myth, lecture, film conversation, or whatever. *Telling* is the action, the act of narrating, the communicative process that produces the story in discourse (Bruner, 1986b: 145).

With the element of *story*, we are informed about events that are described structurally and systematically so that we fully understand how the events occurred and what they can tell us. With the element of *discourse*, the abstract sequence of events is manifested in structured texts in a particular medium. Structured texts of the abstract sequence of events are categorized into particular types of stories. With the element of *telling*, the act of narrating means to perform. By the performance of telling a story, we communicate the sequence of events to the audience in particular ways in particular circumstances. However, storytelling may not be politicized in order to maintain the imperative clarity of liturgical language and performance (Ernst, 1999: 88). In telling, a storyteller has particular gestures while giving his speech or narrating his story. Rubin (1995: 114) analyzes McNeill's system (1987) in seeing gestures as iconic and holistic rather than arbitrary. Gestures by McNeill are seen as a window through which to view speech production. For instance, in one exam-

ple, a gesture of holding and throwing a spear to illustrate how a person shoots his enemy in headhunting raid while a storyteller narrates his headhunting story in which moment he is not holding the spear at all. So, 'narrative' is the common term referring to oral accounts, and some of those oral accounts contain historical information about families.

However, the term 'narrative' still needs to be specified in order to point out a specific importance of Mentawai family stories. The word 'oral' is sometimes needed to distinguish particular narratives that relate an event orally and the word 'historical' is used to emphasize events that have occurred in the past. These historical events are perceived by family members or members of a community as important occurrences. Therefore, they need to preserve them by continuing to tell stories about the events.

The historical significance told in narratives is simply the history of the family or community. Scholars of oral tradition employ the term 'oral historical narrative' to designate stories that recount crucial past events and are transmitted orally through generations. After all, different genres of oral narratives to some extent specify particular elements of oral tradition, and those genres in common sense are similar: they communicate verbal structured ideas of something that happened in the past.

Among the approaches used in the study of oral tradition, local people's perspective on perceiving their particular circumstances is used to appraise the local situation. The importance of this approach is considered by Basso (1996), who finds out that the Western Apache people of Cibecue have different narratives that each have a different historical significance and therefore they have different 'historical tales'. By using different terms to define different narratives of oral tradition, Basso tries to understand the life of local people with reference to the local people's perspective in seeing themselves through the context of his research and the place where the local people live (see also other examples in *Sense of Place* edited by Feld & Basso, 1996).

Basso (1996: 48) follows the classification made by Apache people, with the intention of getting closer to an interpretation of native claims about the symbolic importance of geographical features and personalized relationships that individuals may have with them. An important native claim is about events that have occurred in the past but have significance to comprise their 'history'. The medium that is used to maintain such information is called a 'historical tale'. As some historical tales concern a particular family, they are defined as 'family historical tales' and the discourse of tales is about family history.

The Mentawai family story conveys information about the past and about the identity of the family or kin group to whom the story belongs. So, I use the phrase 'oral tradition' to group together different genres of oral narratives. For the different structured statements or the abstract sequence of events, I use the term 'oral narratives'. In order to express 'oral historical significances' of family

or kin group, I use the term 'family story', telling about past events that have affected a family or kin group. In the next section, I aim to characterize features of the family story.

Performance, performers, and audiences

In terms of performance, Mentawai family stories differ from other oral narratives in which moment they are told. Oral narratives that are appropriate for communal audiences can be told in public or in the presence of different groups of people. Mythical tales, legends and historical narratives, which pertain to a community, are mostly told by members of the community in a variety of circumstances. There is almost no secret hidden from community members because those narratives belong to the community.

It is slightly different in the case of family stories, which are told in specific circumstances. A common moment to do so is at family gatherings. Most social gatherings take place during rituals and ceremonials. Family members often come together when one of their members passes away. After the burial ceremony, family members gather and listen to stories about the dead person and about other events concerning their family or kin group. Or, they tell a story when a new baby is born to the family and extended family members come to celebrate the birth. This also applies to other ritual rites because particular family stories relate to particular stages of life.

Sometimes, a specific story is only told in the presence of a few adult individuals of a family in order to protect the content of the story. Therefore, people make use of a moment when they are working in the garden because there are only a few people. Or they tell the story while resting in the middle of the night at home after other members are asleep. Sometimes, a story is only told from a particular individual to other particular individuals. In fact, part of the content of family stories can only be told to a limited group of people in order to maintain the secret part of the content. Furthermore, a family story belongs exclusively to a family or several related families that share the same ancestors. Due to their content, family stories have a limited audience as well as a limited number of storytellers who can tell them. Even among family members, there are particular stories that can only be listened to by a particular group of family members. Young family members are allowed to listen to the stories telling about the heroic actions of their ancestors in defending their family. However, when family stories tell about events concerning matters for adults – social conflicts like assault, headhunting, and abuse done by adults – young people are forbidden to listen to the stories.

Due to limited opportunities for listening to particular family stories, there need to be storytellers or performers who can tell the stories. Members of a kin group or community regard their family stories as an important way to preserve their historical events. Therefore, particular individuals are assigned to take the responsibility for preserving the stories. Older married men are

seen as mature enough to carry out this task, and other members trust them, because older relatives are presumed to know more and better than younger members of the family.

A family leader and a few married adults can also tell the family stories, and they select a few new adults to replace them when they get older. They transmit certain family stories before they pass away. It usually happens when they realize they are getting weak and old and soon will pass away. So, they transmit not only the family stories but also the status of family storytellers.

Nevertheless, members of the family, kin group or community realize that not all older members are capable of bearing this responsibility. Therefore, among the mature members, there are some individuals who have strong characteristics for leading the rest of the family. They are usually the ones assigned to be fully responsible for the task. Mature leaders must have a good memory to remember details of past events. And they must be good at telling the stories in such a way that other family members can easily understand the content. Elder members of a family or kin group have the capacity to remember the common familial past in their own manner, attributing the memory to their family or kin group.

Functions and roles of family stories

The explanations of oral tradition and oral narratives described by Finnegan and Vansina as well as historical tales mentioned by Basso characterize the functions of family stories in connection with historical events. Like other oral narratives, a family story functions to maintain the historical values of past events of a family or kin group. The family story is not a myth or legend, although some parts of it may sound mythical as described by a few scholars in *Sacred Narrative: readings in the theory of myth* edited by Alan Dundes (1984). The past events told in a family story construct and reconstruct the group's identity, and the materiality of place and landscape in structured words. *The Anthropology of Landscape: perspectives on place and space* edited by Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995) and *The Anthropology of Space and Place: locating culture* edited by Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) give several examples of people's strong connection to the place and space where they live. Local people's view of their landscape reflects their connection to their ancestral land and ancestors. They express their connection by means of telling narratives of landscape. Or they sing a song as happened in Malaysian rainforest communities (see Roseman, 1998).

Like other kinds of oral narratives, the functions and meanings of a family story differ from one society to another. Brigitte Boenisch-Brednich (2002) tries to understand why people attach importance to narratives. She writes: 'One could probably say that narratives are so important for everyday life, for persons, for groups and for nations because they give a comforting assurance about our existence' (Boenisch-Brednich, 2002: 75). I find her argument inter-

esting. To my point of view, this purpose is one of the meanings and functions of the family story. The stories explain about our existence.

Another supportive argument about the function of family stories is found in the research done by Basso (1996: 40), who argues that oral narratives have the power to establish enduring bonds between individuals and features of the natural landscape, as he illustrates with his research among Western Apache in North America. A similar assumption is voiced by Elizabeth Tonkin (1992). According to her research in Africa, Tonkin writes:

> Oral accounts no less than written ones can be means of comment and reflection, in which different pasts are conceptualised, and, often, contradiction and failure are admitted. Historical narratives are also not just historical in the identity-forming sense; they can serve many ends, and be aesthetic elaborations, philosophical or religious discourses; by the same token ways of representing pastness include genres that can be indigenously distinguished from 'history' (Tonkin, 1992: 130-131).

So, a family story like other (oral) narratives tells about how a kin group exists and expresses their understanding of what has taken place in their collective lives.

Content of family stories

Vansina (1973: 156) says that tales concerning family history deal with the past history of lineages. He therefore states: 'Very often these family tales are no more than the outgrowths of genealogies. They explain why two branches of a family have separated and no longer live together' (Vansina, 1973: 156). Vansina's tales concerning family history indeed convey information of how a family expands into several families or kin groups. Moreover, Vansina states, 'family histories also often contain traditions of migrations from other villages, or localities usually not very distant'. Such family tales, according to Vansina (1962: 156-157), 'are often still more useful as checks on official resources, whether these consist of general or local traditions, or as checks on the history of migrations.' Regarding the explanation, Vansina's tales concerning family history of lineages seem similar to the family stories that I investigate in this study. The tales are family stories in terms of content.

However, a family story not only tells about genealogy but also gives detailed information about family expansions and family ownership of particular communal properties. Besides, a family story contains family members' knowledge of land and the natural surroundings where they live or have lived in the past. A family story also tells about daily activities of ancestors of the family. A family story sometimes includes a list of place-names. Place-names are important to particular communities. Rosaldo finds among the Ilongot community how important the narration of place-names is in an elaborate

story. He writes: 'Ilongots claim that listening to the place-names where somebody walked is just as much a story (and indeed can not be omitted from any true story) as a more fully elaborate narrative' (Rosaldo, 1986: 106).

In storytelling, place-names are recollected by imagining the places and recollecting the particular events that have occurred in those places. I have observed that members of a family or community actually illustrate figuratively the appearance of the place they are describing. By doing so, people operate a mental map to imagine their historical land and its current situation. An interesting example of this matter is given by Gold and Gujar (1997) in their research finding in Rajasthan. In the process of telling the story of a place, local people image as if they were standing or sitting at a particular spot. The recollection of place-names is usually closely related to the recollection of ancestral migratory movements. A place-name has the function of enabling listeners to picture the site based on its name.

According to Fox (1996), an important element of a family story is to define the origins of the family. The story of origin is not a mythical narrative or the story of origin that has been assimilated with the idea that has been adopted from other cultures, for instance from Christianity with its Bible. The story of Adam and Eve is currently quite common to influence the story of origin of local communities. As exemplified by Fox (1983: 15; 23) in his study on the island of Roti, the Rotinese community assimilates Biblical knowledge to their own culture, creating in the process a distinctive traditional culture. The assimilation of Christian cultural values to the local tradition does not only occur in the island of Roti but also in other communities that have been converted to be Christians. The majority of Mentawaians are Christians. I sometimes heard them telling me about the origin of Adam and Eve as the beginning of their existence. However, this kind of story of origin is not part of the content of family story that I investigate in this study.

In order to specifically look at the origin of different kin groups, I focus on specific family stories of origin. Fox assumes: 'Conceptions of ancestry are invariably important but rarely is ancestry alone a sufficient and exclusive criterion for defining origin. Recourse to notions of place is also critical in identifying persons and groups, and thus tracing origins' (Fox, 1996: 5). The family stories that tell about the origin of different kin groups are more relevant to be considered as historical narratives and also relevant to the study of family stories.

In this, the notion of genealogy is the basic concept for understanding the expansion of a family. Therefore, the notion of genealogy cannot be set apart from the notion of topogeny, as a family does not expand in one place but members of a family migrate to several different places. Accordingly, Fox introduces the notion of topogeny, which is 'the recitation of an ordered sequence of place names' (Fox, 1997: 8). Fox sees a topogeny as analogous to the

recitation of a genealogy (Fox 1997: 91). Both consist of an ordered succession of names. A topogeny can be seen as a means to order and transmit social knowledge. Both topogeny and genealogy are relevant for recollecting the migratory movements of the Mentawai ancestors. The ancestors passed through different places. The ancestors migrating from one place to other places are not always the same person.

As illustrated in family stories, the process of migration is usually carried out by several ancestors. Therefore, a list with different names of migrating ancestors is also part of the content of a family story. A storyteller has to systematically recollect the ancestors' names in order not to forget important events that have affected the family. Different plots of ancestral land are mentioned in the family story, and the place of origin from where the family commenced to expand, and current related kin groups are recollected properly.

Versions and themes of family stories

Many traditional and modern communities are still practising oral tradition. Some oral narratives belong to a community generally and some oral narratives belong solely to a particular family (or kin group). Members of communities and families are all concerned with the importance of oral narratives. They do not want the narratives to fade away from their knowledge, because most family narratives that recount significant events are historical to them. Particular oral narratives characterize the identity of families and communities. Therefore, traditional communities and families make an effort to maintain their particular oral narratives in order not to lose their identity.

A storyteller tells the stories to one or more individuals chosen to transmit the stories to the next generation. They narrate the stories to the next individuals who are chosen by talent or based on a particular social status. After passing through several generations, a family story or story of an important event that occurred in the community can be told by several individuals. Those individuals eventually tell slightly different versions of the same story. It is because words in family stories cannot be chosen for their exact sense or implication. Each storyteller has a particular way of telling a story and a storyteller's knowledge may have effect on words that they use to narrate their story. Storytellers' knowledge may affect word choices and they are aware of general themes of the story. The themes are important to be noticed and included in their storytelling.

Sometimes, a storyteller repeats the same word of action carried out by a main character told in a story. For instance, the storyteller narrates that the main character walked, walked, walked, and walked in order to be at a place, instead of telling that the main character walked for two or three days. The repetition of the same word indicates the duration of an action as well as attracting the attention of audience as the repetition of the same word is uttered in different tones.

One storyteller may focus on heroic actions of the important characters of the story. Another storyteller may concentrate on chronological acts done by the characters in the story. Another storyteller recounts occurrences like a particular conflict affecting the family or community. Although storytellers certainly narrate differing versions of the same story, they are concerned with keeping the important themes. What are considered the most important themes of a story regarding a family can be slightly different from those of a story regarding a community.

For a story regarding a family (kin group), ancestors' names, the place of origin, the family's communal properties, and the expansion of the initial family into several families are important themes. For a story about a community, several themes need to be told, including the place where the community lives and the names of the different groups of people that have built the community. In particular cases, other kin groups that do not have connection to a family story of a particular kin group are still able to tell the kin group's story. However, other kin groups do not fully recollect the details told in the story. General information is mostly mentioned during the telling while details are unknown. In another case, two different kin groups do not share the same origins and do not have any family connection but they can tell the same story. Due to migration, the groups have ever lived in the same place. A family story that initially belongs to a kin group has been heard and adopted by other kin groups. The other kin groups change slightly the story and later claim it as their family story.

Other kin groups sometimes slightly change the story by adding hilarious themes. The kin group's family story is not historical anymore. It is just an entertaining narrative to other kin groups. To other kin groups, the kin group's story does not have historical meanings and no specific reference of genealogy. To the kin group, the story is significant to be maintained and transmitted to the next generations as it provides important features of the kin group. This commonly happens in different communities.

James J. Fox (1979) finds out in his research the example of where a story is regarded as historical genealogy by a kin group and less significant or having another meaning by the other kin groups in the island of Roti situated in the southernmost of the Indonesian archipelago. The Rotinese community regards the story telling about a chronology of genealogy by reference to a particular ancestor. Fox writes that a particular genealogy is a direct uninterrupted series of names. "Any genealogy is an ordered succession of names beginning with the name of an apical ancestor and proceeding in a direct line to the name of the father of the person for whom the genealogy is intended" (Fox, 1979: 17). In this case, Fox additionally assumes "The authenticity of a particular narrative is assured if that narrative is told by the elder (or elders) who, within a lineage or clan, is considered to be the rightful (senior) descendant of the ancestor whose deeds are recounted" (Fox, 1979: 18). This means

the historical account of genealogy has particular significance to the clan (I use 'kin group' expressing a number of people living in a place because they share the same genealogical and social ties). Other narrators who are not descendants of the kin group may not easily tell this genealogy.

Social changes that have taken place within the community are another theme. Sometimes, a specific theme of a story regarding a community can be part of the content of a family story, as the family plays an important role within the community. So, there may be a variety of reasons for telling a story. Nevertheless, the general themes of the story cannot be omitted when the story is told. Themes of the story make it easier for storytellers to structure their story.

Members of a family or community can easily recognize themes of a story about particular events that have affected the family or community. The important themes of the story of an event are preserved and transmitted to following generations. Thompson (2000) assumes that they keep remembering key words. The current generation attempts to memorize what has been heard or learned from the previous generation. The nature of human memory plays a crucial role in the preservation of these historical matters. How do the memories of human beings preserve the past? This question brings me to look at the research done by Mary Margaret Steedly (1993) in North Sumatra among Batak Karo communities. To quote Steedly:

> Memory is never private property and experience is never a simple matter in this overinhabited terrain; voices are always multiple, fragmented, interrupted, possessed by the memories of other people's experience. The transfer and transcription of historical experience – in names, monuments, genealogies; in collective fantasy and in the regulated social intercourse of everyday life; in law, property, and desire; in stories inhaled with the common air of a shared place or time – is the moment through which subjectivity is produced (Steedly, 1993: 22).

In short, the memories of human beings are collective and social, delimited by particular groups of people, spaces, places, and times. Halbwachs (1992: 53) calls this 'the framework of collective memory', which confines and binds our most intimate remembrances to each other. Furthermore Halbwachs writes 'The collective framework of memory is the result or sum or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society.' Thus, as Coser writes, '[collective] memory needs continuous feeding from collective sources and is sustained by social and moral props' (Coser 1992: 34). Collective memory manifests itself in the traditions of families and different social groups.

Transmission and memory

Memory plays an important role in preserving past events. The interconnections of memory, cognition and past events help people to understand about themselves. Language allows us to reconstruct our past and storytelling allows us to be familiar with the past events at every moment.

Speaking of memory and oral tradition, Carsten (1995) looks at the case of certain Southeast Asian peoples who have been represented as afflicted by 'structural amnesia' or 'genealogical amnesia', forgetting who their ancestors were. Referring to the Malaysian island of Langkawi, Carsten (1995: 319) writes that people from other parts of Southeast Asia had come to Langkawi for a variety of reasons. They currently affirm themselves as Langkawi people, instead of seeing themselves as coming from Sumatra, Singapore, or Malaysia. According to Carsten, new generations of migrants in Langkawi are not interested in maintaining their initial origins in order to be acknowledged politically as Langkawi inhabitants. Consequently, 'there is no systematic attempt to maintain tradition or memories of ancestors who have come from elsewhere' (Carsten, 1995: 320). In this case, they not only created kinship through a social and political context, but also established a newly created shared identity (Carsten 1995: 318: 329-330; see also Geertz and Geertz 1964 for a Balinese context of 'genealogical amnesia').

However, the question is how far the communities are able to reduce the memory of their past if they have a strong connection to their ancestors and ancestral culture. With reference to the Rotinese, Fox (1980: 65) states 'By reducing the memory of the past events to the merest anecdote, a rich oral tradition is able to embellish ancestral action in accordance with the needs of members of kin groups that suit present circumstances.' In order to explain this phenomenon, I follow the idea of Halbwachs (1992: 172) that forgetting almost always results from a distraction, which is often explained by the disappearance of frameworks of memory or a part of them, either because people's attention is no longer able to focus on them or because it is focused somewhere else. So, the issue of forgetting is political.

Instead of forgetting, most people try to remember the important events of their past. Davis and Starn argue 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' (1989: 2). People refer to particular places and moments that may remind them of certain occurrences and they convey those matters in storytelling. Davis and Starn (1989: 5) note that people remember events that occurred in the recent past, which were experienced by themselves, as well as events in the 'old past', which have been undergone by their ancestors. I see this as historical representations in places and time through the power of recollecting the past experience of different family generations. Seeing this, I agree with Fentress and Wickham (1992) that family stories are mnemonic devices for bringing past events to the present. Family stories rep-

resent the high potential of human consciousness of past events. This is one of the characteristics of stories: to manifest cognitive functions of human beings (Rubin, 1995: 302-303).

Cultural objects are not to be categorized as part of oral tradition. However, a lot of objects serve to remind people of something. Particular objects are made for particular events and the events have their stories. Communal objects are important to a community because objects refresh people's memory of particular past events. Objects and events become arranged in people's thought in order to remind them about the chronological order of events and the names and meanings of the objects themselves and the events, all of which contribute to their identity.

Hoskins (1998: 9) notes, objects can be invested with great significance, in both the collective representation of the past and the individual storing of biographical memory. Cultural objects are mnemonic devices. Hoskins (1998: 3) states that particular objects may clearly expose which kin groups are perceived as sharing the same relationship ancestrally, and which kin groups are perceived as 'other'. So cultural objects may help people to remember their relatives. Past occurrences can be materialized in the present in the form of historical accounts, cultural objects, and storytelling.

1.3 Research methods

My research included 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. Most of the published documents were found in Leiden University Library and in the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) in the Netherlands. Most of the unpublished documents, such as government reports, local statistics produced by government agencies, and private research enterprises, were gathered in Indonesia. I also took the opportunity given by Professor Reimar Schefold to look through his private collection of stories gathered during his fieldwork in Mentawai between 1963 and 1976.

I closely inspected maps of the Mentawai Islands drawn in 1930–1934 by the Dutch colonial government, found in the collection of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) in Amsterdam. Place-names and topographical features mentioned on those maps helped me locate settlements at that time. I found clues to changes in place-names and the significance of the changes to the current situation in Mentawai. Place-names mentioned in family stories are noted on maps showing the geographical expansion of Mentawai ancestors in Chapter 9.

1.3.1 Fieldwork

I spent three periods doing fieldwork in Siberut, Sipora, South Pagai, and North Pagai. The first visit, for six weeks in 2002, was 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. Most of the stories are ones that give information on early migratory movements, the splitting up of initial kin groups, and the occupation of various places in the Mentawai archipelago. During the last period of fieldwork, for three months in 2006, I focused on conflicts over ancestral and private lands.

Before conducting fieldwork, I was already familiar with particular family stories that tell that the first people of the Mentawai Islands lived in Siberut in a valley called Simatalu. According to these stories, the first settlers departed from a place of origin on Siberut and moved south over the island. They first inhabited Siberut, and most of the groups remained in Siberut while a few families pioneered and moved on to the island of Sipora. The majority of the kin groups migrating to Sipora stayed there, while a few moved further, to the Pagai Islands. Even after these groups had occupied the Pagai Islands, the waves of migration did not stop. Some of the families residing in Siberut later followed the path of their relatives who had left to settle in Sipora and Pagai. Sometimes, though that happened rarely, families that had gone to live in Sipora or Pagai returned to Siberut to visit their relatives. Those residing in Siberut were pleased to find out what had happened in Sipora and Pagai, owing to the return of their migrating relatives.

After studying these stories illustrating the course of migration towards the south, I eventually started focusing on Sipora. The geographical position of Sipora in between Siberut and Pagai was an ideal place to start the fieldwork as well as to assess Mentawaians' memory of the past and find out whether Mentawaians would remember or forget their origins. I hoped that kin groups in Sipora would inform me about their ancestors and the location of their ancestral lands. Based on the information gathered on Sipora, I selected several kin groups of Mentawaians. I then attempted to reconstruct the family relationships that may exist among these kin groups. I asked members of the kin groups I had selected to advise me on which individuals or storytellers I should get in touch with in order to get information about their ancestors' migratory movements.

After getting information from these individuals, I went on to locate other groups that might have links to these kin groups. After exploring Sipora, I returned to Siberut in order to trace the information mentioned in the kin groups' stories. I started by investigating villages in the southern part of the island. Thereafter, I gradually explored the middle part of Siberut before eventually reaching the northern part of the island. I ended my exploration in villages on the west coast of the island. After completing my fieldwork in Siberut,

I went to the Pagai Islands, where I spent several weeks exploring the main villages of North and South Pagai.

1.3.2 Data collection

I had a certain familiarity with villages of the Mentawai Islands because of my travels over the islands while carrying out research for my bachelor's degree in 1999. I got in touch with different kin groups easily, as they knew me as a Mentawaian. In order to interpret cultural values and stories told in different dialects, I relied on my knowledge and experience as a Mentawaian. My training as an anthropologist allowed me to make use of different approaches in the process of data collection. I explained my background and made contact with informants several times so that they became better acquainted with me. This created more understanding among us. 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: 147-8)

By following such guidelines, I was able to gather a lot of significant oral accounts.

While gathering information from Mentawaians, scholar–informant relationships frequently shifted to friendship between us as fellow Mentawaians. However, I had to be aware of what I was recording. I kept my attention focused on the goals of the interview. Nevertheless, because of my being Mentawaian, information was gathered more easily. The interview was the most important technique in collecting my data. Following a few suggestions by Bernard (1994: 208-215), I did not make structured questionnaires but prepared a few major questions that guided me in interviewing my informants.

Most informants were above fifty years of age. Some informants were literate, as they had attended primary school for a few years when they were young. The rest were absolutely illiterate, especially those above seventy years of age. Those who were illiterate usually did not know exactly when they were born. To indicate approximately when they were born, some informants referred to the times when Dutch colonists or Japanese soldiers were still occupying the Mentawai Islands, or they recounted an event at the time of their birth, according to what their parents told them later.

Whether literate and illiterate, the key informants had a variety of occupations, and included a retired head of a governmental village, a retired policeman, a schoolteacher, a government official, a kin group leader, a sub-district

employee, a shaman, a church elder, and a head of household. I carefully noted whether informants did or did not once visit their place of origin. A small number of informants had visited their places of origins once or twice in order to visit relatives and become familiar with ancestral places. However, many informants had never visited their place of origin. This point is crucial for my research. If my informant has never been to his place of origin, yet the family story he tells is very similar to the family story told by his distant relatives in that place of origin (and he has never met those relatives), then the story is more likely to be reliable, or to contain accurate information. If, on the other hand, my informant has visited his relatives and heard their stories, the chance is great that the story he tells will be influenced by the stories he heard from his relatives.

My fieldwork was not one long success story, however. I occasionally came across difficulties in collecting information. Sometimes I figured out 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 has commented on such nonverbal sources of knowledge (1986a: 4): '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.

As another example of this, some Mentawaians residing in Sipora and Pagai did not forthrightly tell me their family stories, as they knew I was a Mentawaian from Siberut. I fully understood that they might be suspicious about me in telling me their family stories. They saw me as a Mentawaian from another kin group and from another island of Mentawai. Instead of answering my questions, they sometimes told me insignificant stories. This showed their unwillingness to tell me important stories. I recognized the meaning of such behaviour because I had experienced it in other circumstances. Nevertheless, 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.

After interviewing, the majority of them were grateful to receive a small gift for their time. They did not regard it as payment for what they had told me, but regarded it as accepting a gift from 'a new friend'. A few informants were eager to endow me with their hospitality and they insisted on doing that for free because I was carrying out research on Mentawai. For them, such research is essential in the effort to sustain Mentawai culture. In fact, very few people have spent time researching the historical aspects of Mentawaians.

1.3.3 Data analysis

The process of collecting data is dissimilar to the process of presenting data. Although I began my research in Sipora, my interpretation of data began with accounts gathered from Siberut island and further to Sipora and Pagai. I thus followed the migratory movements of the majority of Mentawaians as told in their family stories. All stories were transcribed directly in the Mentawai language, as they were recorded, and translated by me into English. Sometimes, I added some explanation of circumstances occurring during the interview. This helped me to understand particular cultural contexts while the storytellers narrated their stories. In fact, a cultural context can be easily recognised by noticing community's daily activities. However, particular cultural values need to be approached in certain ways in order to fully grasp their meanings. Even though, the ways do not always cover the whole aspects of culture of a community. By reading *The Interpretation of Cultures* by Geertz (1973), I realize that 'Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete' (Geertz, 1973: 29). Nevertheless, I try to closely bring the meaning of particular Mentawai culture to the scholarly discussion of oral literature.

For the safekeeping of secrets of the families that allowed me to record their stories, particular details of their stories such as the exact boundaries of plots of ancestral land and information on headhunting raids are not revealed clearly. Some individual names of ancestors are also hidden, as some particular cases of headhunting raids involving the families' ancestors are still open. In fact, some kin groups whose ancestors were victims of headhunting raids still keep the memory of those events, even though the headhunting tradition was ended several generations ago. Someday in the future, these families will ask kin groups that killed their ancestors for payment (compensation) for the deaths.

Stories are analysed in order to find out their main themes. Those themes include migratory movements of the ancestral families and kin groups' own-

ership of plots of ancestral land. In relation with the migratory movements, I provide maps, based on the family stories.

1.4 Organization of the book

The book is divided into three parts and each part comprises three chapters. The first part provides discusses social organization and Mentawaians' cultural values with specific regard to land and family stories. In Chapter 2 I describe geographical features of the places where the research was carried out. The ethnography of Mentawaians is important to the present in order to be acquainted with their socio-cultural characteristics that make their culture different to other cultures of island populations off the west coast of Sumatra (Persoon and Ossewijer, 2002). This matter is examined in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4 I focus on stories telling about the origins of the first inhabitants of Mentawai, to find out how Mentawaians think of their origins and how their origins may be linked to where their ancestral lands are located. Mentawaians consider their plots of ancestral land important, carrying a lot of meanings. To Mentawaians, their ancestral lands are material in the sense that they can physically return to the land where their ancestors commenced the life of their kin group. Their ancestral lands are also abstract when they imagine the place and its surroundings by listening to stories about their ancestors. In the three chapters of the second part, I focus on family stories telling about the geographical and genealogical expansion of several Mentawai kin groups. I present and examine several versions of three selected family stories of past occurrences: the mango story, the pig story, and the wild boar story. The three stories share certain themes. They all describe conflicts that pushed a kin group to move away from its initial place in order to seek new dwelling-places. Some of these migrating kin groups passed through several dwelling-places before eventually settling down permanently. The stories also describe the plots of land occupied (in the past) and claimed by the kin groups. Another function of the stories is to explain or document how new kin groups came into existence. They all started from a handful of initial kin groups.

Nevertheless, each story contains information that differentiates it from the other stories. The mango story shows the agricultural aspect of Mentawai culture. This story is analysed in Chapter 7 together with other stories and oral narratives of Mentawaians. The pig story speaks of animal husbandry in Mentawai and also exemplifies the process of migration and separation of families of a kin group, which is looked at in more detail in Chapter 9. The wild boar story in Chapter 7 portrays the process of hunting in the traditional situation. The story is used in Chapter 10 in the discussion of current conflicts over land. In the discussion of family stories in Chapter 8, I identify themes and characteristics of each of the three main stories. The process of migration and sep-

aration of kin groups is the subject of Chapter 9, and is relevant for claims made to particular plots of land. Current conflicts over rights to particular plots of land are described and examined in Chapter 10, where two cases are discussed at length. One case represents the traditional situation and the other represents the current situation, where the government intervened in the land conflict by changing the location of a traditional settlement and by mobilizing groups of people living in the interior of one of the islands in order to occupy a government village. While discussing the current conflicts, I also show how family stories are used to help a kin group win the conflict. The conclusion presents some answers to the main research question and correlates empirical and theoretical discussion with the research findings.