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Good to produce, good to share: Food, hunger, and social values in a contemporary Mentawaian community, Indonesia

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1
Introduction: The Riddle of Being Hungry and Questions on Food

1.1 The Riddle of *Malaje* (Being Hungry)

This dissertation studies the role of food in contemporary Mentawaian society. It is an independent study within a large research project that examines food security among indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia (the Mentawaians on Siberut Island, the Orang Rimba in Central Sumatra, and the Agta people of the North Philippines). I chose to study the Mentawaians living on Siberut Island as the subject of this dissertation. The main research question of the dissertation is 'How do the Mentawaians, the indigenous people of the Mentawai Islands, experience food insecurity/security?'

I received a most helpful clue about food insecurity in 2012, on the first day of my fieldwork for this PhD dissertation in Muntei, a settlement in the southeastern part of Siberut. The setting was not entirely unfamiliar. I had been to the settlement countless times and have a few close friends there. I had been invited that particular day by an old friend from the Saruruk clan. Having learned of my return to Siberut to undertake PhD research, my friend offered to let me stay in his house. His house was full of people. There were flowers everywhere. The women and children were wearing trinkets and sitting together on the veranda. Men were preparing chickens and two large cooking pots. Older men were drinking their coffee and sweet tea. There was a shaman (*kerei*) preparing his devices. He was there to carry out a healing ritual (*pabetei*) and to purify the house. I was told that my friend's granddaughter had broken her arm a few days before.

After a small performance and invocations, the shaman took a short rest and had his cup of coffee. I approached him and had a brief conversation with him. Whilst the host of the ritual and his oldest son went to fetch pigs from a local merchant as an offering for the ritual, the shaman, Teu Rima the shaman, quietly talked to me:

> It has been a long time since I saw you. Can you see that there have been a lot of changes? When you came here the first time, our village was full of bush (*maseksek*). Now, we get paved roads. We get rice from the government. Many brick houses have been built. Many parabolic antenna and TVs. Motorcycles roar up and down. We have a nice church. Young men and girls go to school on the mainland. Nobody is naked. We drink tea and coffee with sugar. But we are not happy. We are hungry (*malaje*). We rarely eat together. People keep their meat in their room.

The verbatim translation appears to contain an exaggeration. Nobody looks ill or malnourished. Sago, taro, and banana are still planted around the houses and settlement. Apparently, Teu Rima has a reputation for being a shaman who often complains about the meat provided by the hosts of the rituals he performs. Rumour has it that he would make an excuse not to come when he knew that the host sacrificed small pigs. Whether or not the words he said to me alluded to his particular attitude, when I later talked to others about his claim of being hungry, nobody in the village contradicted his analysis. Instead, nearly all the villagers I talked to about Teu Rima's comments admitted that it was true that people were hungry now. The residents of Muntei said they did not eat much meat and did not have as many ritual feasts as in the past.

The first day of my fieldwork was neither the first, nor the last time I encountered people talking about being hungry (*malaje*). Almost daily, Mentawaians invariably and unanimously used *malaje* to explain various situations. If a man is late in getting some food to fill his stomach, he says: "I am hungry (*malaje aku*)". If there is a little food but too many people waiting to eat, some will say: "We are still hungry (*malajeat kai*)". The word is also used to refer to the situation of a widower who does not have a wife, or children who do not have a mother, to cook for them. Furthermore, it is also employed as social commentary, like in the quote above. Hunger is used to describe a situation when people do not eat sufficient meat, or do not share meat.

Are the Mentawaians experiencing food insecurity? From an official perspective, the answer is probably yes. The Food Security and Vulnerability Atlas of Indonesia (Dewan Ketahanan Pangan 2014, 2015) labels the Mentawai Archipelago region as a priority area for improving food-related policies. According to the atlas, the Mentawaians are among the 20 million Indonesians who remain malnourished. This is the only region in the western part of Indonesia with the lowest rank for any indicator of food security. The atlas defines food insecurity as the physical condition occurring when people do not eat, or lack grain to consume. It clearly indicates that the production and consumption grain determine food insecurity. This can be said to be a bias towards grain production. All the regions coloured red in the atlas, mostly Eastern Indonesia and the Mentawai Archipelago, are not grain producers. The key staples in these regions are a variety of tubers, sago, and yams. The document also indicates that food insecurity is linked to access to modern infrastructure (roads, irrigation, electricity, internet access, markets).

The official concern about food insecurity in the Mentawai Islands is not new. Indeed, the lack of proper food is synonymous with Mentawaians. Since the 1970s, the national government, driven by a development ideology, has been preoccupied with the view that the Mentawaians are an isolated people (*masyarakat terasing*), living in a harsh and poor environment, constantly attacked by malaria and malnourished (Persoon 1998, 1994; Department Sosial 1987, 1998). Almost all of the development projects during the New Order regime (1968-1998), initiated by various government agencies, introduced rice and strongly encouraged people to make their own paddy fields (*sawah*). Subsequent regimes have retained the idea that the Mentawaian Islands are an area of food insecurity. Since 2004, the region has been a priority area for the RASKIN – Beras untuk Orang Miskin (Rice for the Poor) – programme, a national agenda run by the Ministry of Agriculture to provide cheap and subsidised rice in regions with higher risk of food insecurity. Over a ten-year period (2005-2015), more than 28.7 million kilograms of rice were transported and distributed among 27,000 households in the archipelago (Puailiggoubat 2013, 2015). In 2015, the central government introduced a programme in the region called 'Thousand Paddy Fields in the Frontiers'. Under the 'Developing from Marginal' agenda of the current regime, the Ministry of Agriculture has established the frontier area as a site of sovereignty, as well as a source of new production, by creating paddy fields (Puailiggoubat 2015).

Have the Mentawaians really experienced food insecurity? At the beginning of my research, I tried to elicit an oral history about past patterns of food access and availability. People in Muntei do not recall that

they have experienced food shortage. Nor they have experienced not having enough food in their life. Apparently, Mentawaian language does not have a term equal to the concept of food security/insecurity. The Mentawaians normally use the word plenty (*maigi*) and not so plenty (*tak maigi*) when they refer to the availability of food. Interestingly, my queries about food availability always found ambiguous answers. The expressions used to describe the amounts of food and patterns of consumption were full of inconsistencies. Not only did individual perceptions differ, but there were often contradicting accounts from the same person. Some people described an abundance of food in the past, lamenting the quality and quantity of food in recent times. The others claimed that food is more opulent in the recent times than in the past.

At the end of 2012, I tried to ask two women from different clans about the availability of food in the past and present. They both were once living on their ancestral land prior to moving to Muntei. Bai Nando, a 60-year-old woman from the Saruruk clan, who nostalgically recalled her days as a small girl living in an old settlement upstream, told me:

> It was a different life. Monkeys and deer were plentiful and close to our houses. Pigs and chickens roamed everywhere. We had frequent communal ceremonies with a pile of pork and chicken. Every time we went down to Muara, there were people from Saibi or Katurei selling turtles. The longhouse could not store the collection of turtle shells we had. So, we scattered them everywhere. In the great fruit (*rura*) season, all the fruit rotted. We did not have enough people to finish the durian and the jackfruit. In the dry season, it was easy to fish in the river and collect snails in the *monga* (estuary). Now, we never eat deer or monkey. People are too lazy to go to the forest. We are busy with cacao or *proyek* (government related infrastructure developments).

By contrast, Bai Mateus, a widow in her late sixties, originating also from a settlement upstream, talked of the lack of food in the past and the abundance of food in recent times.

> My grandparents told me that they were often hungry. They had to move occasionally. They were far from the garden they made because we migrated to other places. There was lot of conflict (*pasaggangan*). They were afraid that they would be attacked by strangers or enemies. We did not live peacefully. Pigs and chickens were always attacked by *oiluk*, a kind of disease. Taro fields were destroyed by other people's pigs. People were afraid to go to the sea. Now, we have a better life. Have you visited the sago and taro gardens? We have plenty. You already know lots of bananas and taro are rotting in the kitchen. We can't finish them all. Too much food. We do not need to go upstream to have pigs. You can ask Beni (a trader) for small or big pigs. Even if you pay later. Now people get fish from cacao money every day. You can even sell bananas and spend the money on pork.

Regardless of their memories, Muntei residents are eager to provide reasons for either the increase or the decrease in the amount of food. Individuals like the first woman quoted above, who recall past abundances, often attribute the present lack of food to the new way of life in the government-style settlement. In this case, she blames the influence of cash-crop production and accuses the government of persuading people to abandon traditional practices, such as tending pigs, hunting, and communal ceremonies and instead to embrace working on road construction or other government projects. Cash-crop production requires round-the-clock labour, which limits the time for hunting and fishing. It is argued that, today, the settlement is dependent on local stores and relies on instant noodles and factory foods, such as biscuits. Some people claim that they no longer produce their own food but are dependent on imported food.

Ironically, those who say that food supplies are increasing give the same reasons as those who say there is a shortage, albeit from a different perspective. In the second case, quoted above, the informant says that cash crops enable them to buy pigs. The new life in the settlement provides more security and opportunities. She can get food from both the market and their gardens. This ambiguity and inconsistency presented an additional riddle in my research.

1.2 Research Problems and Questions on Food

It seems that the claim of being hungry and the ambiguous perspective of Muntei's residents on their own food availability is in line with official concerns about food insecurity among the Mentawaians. This is particularly puzzling since there is no written or oral evidence of the Mentawaians living on Siberut having experienced serious problems with food shortages. The opinion and perception regarded the availability of food in the past and the present might be different but everybody in Muntei agrees that they have not experienced the difficulties of obtaining food. Malnutrition, famine and the shortage of food resources have not been a serious threat. On the contrary, earlier observers (Van Buuren 1932; Loeb 1928; Schefold 1973, 1991; Persoon 1994, 2001) describe the population of the islands having enormous and diverse food resources. My own long-term observations confirm that sago palms, bananas, and tubers are still plentiful, as are fruit trees. The available land is sufficient to feed the existing population. Each family has its own garden; everyone has access to communal land, where they can cultivate a combination of food and cash crops. Food, in the form of either living plants and animals, or ready-to-eat items, is regularly exchanged, either casually or through ritualised events. Kinship, reciprocity, and a sense of collective identity have persisted to ensure the norm of food sharing and ethical access to food resources. Why, then, do people in Muntei frequently describe themselves as being hungry?

Also puzzling is that the definition and the perception of food security assumed by Muntei residents is different to the definition in the aforementioned atlas. While the atlas claims that Mentawaians are insecure because of a lack of access to modern infrastructure and an insufficient consumption of rice, the direct quotes above tell us that they are hungry despite having access to markets, consuming rice, and enjoying the benefits of development. It is generally acknowledged by my informants that they are now better off. Development projects have delivered their promises. They now have access to roads, schools, and other modern infrastructure. Involvement with the market through cultivating cash crops provides an opportunity to add imported food to their nourishment. This is in contrast to the atlas, which claims that they lack modern infrastructure and access to markets, resulting in their food insecurity. Why, despite the abundance of food, do the residents of Muntei seem to support the government's verdict about their food insecurity, albeit for different reasons?

I feel that, for Mentawaians, the notion of being hungry references more than a lack or absence of food and goes beyond the physical condition. Indeed, I do not take the statement of being hungry as a sign of the lack or the absence of food, but rather, as a socio-cultural statement. To reveal the puzzle of *malaje*, this dissertation starts with an examination of a key question about food, the substance to which hunger is bound: As the most basic, concrete, and universal substance, what are the role and the meaning of food for contemporary Muntei people undergoing a social transformation? This key question is followed by four sub-questions:

1. What is the status of the availability and access to food resources in Muntei?
2. Is there any relation between the availability and access to food and the claim of being hungry?
3. What are the material and symbolic roles of food resources (both animals and plants)?

4. What are the social and cultural roles of food-related activities (gardening, exchanging, eating, and sharing, etc.) in Muntei's socio-cultural relations?

These questions strongly imply that food and hunger go beyond a physical and biological problem and are a social and cultural phenomenon. Hence, this dissertation slightly moves away from the initial plan to fully examine the formal status of food security/inscurity among the Mentawaians. Many anthropologists have showed that hunger, being hungry, and food usage are socially and culturally conceived (Richards 1932; Young 1971; Kahn 1986; Harstrup 1993; Yates-Doerr 2015). This dissertation follows the same assumption. Therefore, understanding the role of food among Mentawaian people solely through the quantity of comestibles they consume is inadequate. Applying and testing the formal definition and classification of food security/insecurity would do not do justice to the rich symbolic meaning and social role of food in a Mentawaian community and narrow the attempt to search the answers to those questions. To examine the deeper cultural roles of food, and to orient the direction of this dissertation, guidance from theories understanding the complex relations of food and societies is necessary.

1.3 Food to Society: Good to Eat, Good to Think, or Good to Produce?

The relationship between food and humans has been the subject of intense theoretical debates in anthropology. The relationship has also been deployed to examine large and varied anthropological problems relating key concepts, methodologies, and ethical issues (Mintz and Du Bois 2002, 100). In a long list of anthropological studies, human-food relations fall into two general theoretical endeavours and approaches: the cultural materialist approach, which looks for causal explanations, and a structuralist approach that is mainly symbolic and interpretive (Counihan and Esterik 1997; Mintz and DuBois 2002). Indeed, the recent development of food studies has seen a new approach such as the political economy perspective that has brought and problematized new terms and concepts, including food sovereignty and security (Edelman 2014; Patel 2009; Agarwal 2014) and critical food regime analysis (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; McMichael 2009). While I am fully aware of the importance of the political economy perspective in understanding the food system at a global scale, it is not directly relevant to the analysis of my ethnographic material. The Mentawaians have been, and are still, largely self-sufficient and do not suffer from the impact of the global food regime, at least until the period of my fieldwork. Therefore, I will present a brief summary of the virtues and the limits of perspectives that are directly speaking to my ethnographic material and that are relevant to the main perspectives that I will use to analyse and intepret my data. After explaining the structuralist and the materialist approaches, I will outline my own theoretical programme, which is inspired by the theory of actions and social values (Munns 1986; Fajans 1997; Graeber 2001, 2013).

Good to Eat

Marvin Harris (1979, 1985) famously theorises that eating habits and food usage are universally regulated by utilitarian principles. According to him, human behaviour towards food must be understood in terms of the total system of food production in any given society. People use, manipulate, eat, and share particular types of food in order to maximise benefits and minimise costs in terms of nutritional, ecological, or rational calculations (1985, 17). The selection or rejection of food resources is determined by the cost-benefit calculus of the society's entire constellation of material constraints and opportunities. The choice or avoidance of food, therefore, must be based not only on the direct benefits and cost calculations, but also the residual utility of an edible item or any part of the food that is not consumed. Furthermore, Harris has

devoted his academic life to showing that food availability universally determines human behaviour. All human technology and social practices (art, taboo systems, and religious sanctions) are produced to solve the practical problems faced by societies making the best use of their food resources.

Harris's theory is widely known as cultural materialist (hereafter, materialist). The assumption of the materialist approach is relatively modest and straightforward. Like all organisms, human beings must take energy from an ecosystem in order to live. Food is the essential source of energy provided by a given environment. The amount of food, however, is limited by natural factors, such as the land's fertility, the climate, vegetation and rainfall patterns, and population size. Logically, the availability of food in a given sociocultural system determines human behaviour and forces humans to adapt and to act accordingly. In this sense, the continued availability of food will be both limiting and enabling for human actions, behaviour, motivation, social institutions, and beliefs. In sum, food is important for human beings because it is good to eat (Harris 1985, 1).

The materialist argument is applied to a wide range of food preferences and avoidance. A classic example is the long analysis of the role of the cow in Indian culture. Harris (1985, 11-32; 1987) describes how the sacredness of the cow among poor Indian peasants is due to the importance of cattle as draught animals in the agricultural ecosystem. Indian peasants are forced to use cattle for ploughing and dairy products rather than slaughter them as meat. The beef taboo is a way to prevent the development of a slaughterhouse industry that would threaten the availability of draught animals for the peasants. Another example of this approach is a study on cannibalism among Aztec Indians (Harner 1977). Harner suggests that Aztec human sacrifice existed as a means of distributing protein among the elites in the Valley of Mexico. The lack of protein forced the Aztec elite to practice cannibalism in order to maintain their powers and, more broadly, their cultural system.

The elaboration of the materialist approach has significantly contributed to the anthropological study of food. This approach is seen as using a rigorous but grounded analysis, examining both qualitative and qualitative data rather than relying on interpretation. Some of Harris's work (1979, 1985, 1987) shows that anthropologists can explain certain cultural phenomena, such as cannibalism in Polynesia, the pork taboo in the Middle East, or dog meat avoidance in the United States, without invoking ephemeral causality or the notion of divine intervention commonly found in structuralism interpretations. Studies on the history of sweet potatoes in Papua New Guinea have sparked an ongoing debate about the relationship between food, population expansion, and the creation of specific cultural institutions (Watson 1977). From the materialist approach, anthropologists acquire the concept of human adaptation (Brookfield and Hart 1971) in understanding human-environmental relations. In a more advanced analysis, this approach provides a better explanation for pig-feasting rituals as a cultural mechanism for the distribution of protein and land distribution and a method of controlling population growth (Rappaport 1968). The basic concept of measuring food insecurity and, more generally, the methodology of nutritional anthropology, is developed from the humble materialist assumption.

This approach has its limitations, however. The materialist approach is accused of ignoring the creativity of human behaviour and actions while championing ecological determinism (Vayda 1987). In general, the materialist assumes that human behaviour is determined by what people eat or the amount of protein they distribute. In this theory, humans are not seen as being self-aware, but rather as passive agents driven by an empty stomach and simply adapting to a given environment. The infamous division of infrastructure and superstructure developed by Harris after Marx's concept (Harris 1979; Harris and Ross 1987) implies that the material sphere (the production of food or machine tools) is considered more fundamental than, and precedent to, the abstract sphere (the production of rituals, laws, or taboos). It sweeps aside the idea that food avoidance or taboos may have meaning for a society beyond the biological necessity. According to

Sahlins (1976), this approach sees that human's cultural creativity is determined by its material ability. For the materialist, material things are primal causes, since they answer more fundamental human needs. This is problematic as all material necessity produced by humans requires activities involving thinking, sensing, and other symbolic meditation (Graeber 2001).

Good to Think

The materialist's view is diametrically opposed to the view of the structuralists, who argue that eating patterns and food usage are based not on material necessity and cost-benefit calculations, but mental, symbolic associations, or moral codes (Lévi-Strauss 1966, 1970; Douglas 1972). The structuralist approach examines the human-food relationship by classifying and interpreting cognitive constructs believed to be held by a society. The underlying idea of this approach is that the human brain operates according to deep and unconscious thoughts. Different cultures organise their minds in different ways by using and mapping food in their systems of thought. This approach is directed towards the ways in which food items or activities are classified, prepared, and combined with each other in order to reveal how humans operate and organise their minds.

In his major work, *The Culinary Triangle* (1996), Claude Lévi-Strauss, the most prominent figure of the structuralist school, proposes that food preparation is a reflection of the structure of the human mind in relation to myths, food, and eating. It is claimed that how a meal is prepared and served can be a metaphor for society. Lévi-Strauss (1970, 1978) also identifies that the structures of human thought, the deep structures present in all human societies, are refracted through their food ways. To Lévi-Strauss, meals and their preparation are an organising structure, often arranged in binary oppositions and triads. He suggests that all food can be placed in one corner of the culinary triangle: raw, cooked, or rotten. Each category embodies the transformations brought about by human effort through the mastery of fire, making food edible at the same time as it changes the food's meaning. These fundamental categories were clarified through preparation in the triangle of food processes—roasting, boiling, and smoking. This triangle, therefore, not only explains cooking procedures but reveals the fundamental formal organisation of universal human ideas. Here, food and food processing are a metaphor or symbol for human thinking (Lévi-Strauss 1987). Food is not good to eat but good to think.

The structuralist approach has provided brilliant analyses of the formal principles underlying food in myths or food habits, discovering different hidden patterns of meaning. The structuralist has the ability to reveal the symbolic interpretation of food and to analyse many issues such as gender hierarchy and sexual antagonism (Kahn 1986). In Southeast Asian ethnography, the structuralist approach has revealed the symbolic link between rice/meat and male/female (Janowski 2007a). Another example of excellent analysis emanating from the structuralist approach is deployed by Mary Douglas (1984, 2001). Douglas shows at length how food studies can explain religious sanctions, moral conduct, and the broader definition of the social order. Certain foods are avoided, not because they are poisonous or have harmful elements, but because of the moral or social associations of the items and their context of acquisition. In Mentawai anthropology, Schefold's analysis (1982) of culinary codes in rituals shows that food symbolises the central binary orders of society: bad and good, cooperation and competition.

Like its materialist counterpart, the structuralist approach has often been accused of reductionism. The symbolic approach is seen to reduce all human products and actions into the structure of the mind. The structuralist approach separates cognitive formulas from social practices (Goody 1982, 30). Lévi-Strauss's triangle is, according to Goody, biased towards the French language and cuisine. Lévi-Strauss's binary structures and the culinary triangle schema are meant to be universal and timeless. Other societies require a more complex ordering for analysis through social practices. The structuralist approach sees food not as

an active agent, but as an abstract category that makes up a larger code of meaning. Therefore, any approach that stems from the structuralist theory would be unable to address change, let alone human agency (Gell 1998). By relating food and food related-phenomena to the structure of the mind, Lévi-Strauss and his structuralist followers ignore human behaviour, history and the social actor's actions as related to food. By ascribing human actions and behaviour related to food to the deeper structure of the mind, the structural analysis of food often becomes a thing unto itself, reducing practices and ideas to biological structures, as the mind itself is a biological phenomenon (Kahn 1986, 5).

The Limitations of the Structuralist and the Materialist

While these two approaches use opposing assumptions about food and society, both approaches actually share a basic assumption about what constitutes a human being. First, humans and food are passive agents upon which human actions and intentions have little influence. In the materialist approach, all the actions are responses to a given ecosystem while the structuralist approach ignores the role of food as a life-giving substance that humans use to build, establish, and maintain social relations. The latter approach ignores historical developments and human actions, and discounts the element of social transformation. While both approaches succeed in understanding our passive adaptation and contemplation of the world, they are unable to explain humans as active participants in it. Second, both approaches are unable to see the historical and processual aspect of social reality. Third, they overestimate the unity of sociocultural systems and the universality of cognitive orders.

Food and the human actions attached to it have been marginally connected to both approaches insofar as they focus on identifying a static and abstract 'sociocultural system'. There are several reasons for this interest in a sociocultural system. First, both approaches tend to clearly distinguish between the type of society in which most anthropologists live and the type that they study (Marcus 1986; Graeber 2001). It is always assumed that there are markers in the society under study that clearly differentiate between the society being studied and the society of the anthropologist. To categorise societies as systems implies that there are distinct borders and that they exist in relative isolation. Second, by looking for a certain sociocultural system, both the structuralist and materialist approaches invoke Durkheimian functionalism (Graeber 2001, 2013). Both approaches represent society as a means of social integration, and attribute food-and-human relations to contributing to the stability of the sociocultural system. The materialist approach constrains food-and-human relations to allocating food and other resources and adapting to the material world. The structuralist approach interprets food-and-human relations by categorising each component into an integrated system of meaning. The materialist approach analyses food-and-human relations by showing how social forms are made up of resources and food that determine the suprastructure. The structuralist approach analyses how social forms consist of symbolic elements that coexist as an integrated system of meaning. For all, however, the ultimate point is the same: to delineate a logically coherent and abstract system, which means moving away from the social actions of social actors.

Good to Produce: Food, Actions, and Values

There is a strand in the anthropology of food that tries to move beyond the static materialist and structuralist approaches. This third approach does not merely examine the symbolic aspects and metaphorical qualities of food resources (the colour, the smell, the texture) and the quantitative aspects (the size, the amount, the availability), but focusing more on the ability of food to facilitate humans' social actions and to generate social values. The basic premise of this perspective is that food is neither merely a metaphor for human thinking, nor a material needs-fulfilling biological necessity, but rather an embodiment of the social values that generate and motivate social actors to do particular activities (Munn 1986; Fajans 1988).

The key concept for this approach is human action and its transformative effect. Actions here are defined as any creative human energy that produces a product (object) and social interactions in which humans transform their lives to satisfy their needs (Graeber 2001, 2013; Turner 2004). Actions are necessary, since social actors must exert effort to produce basic necessities such as food and shelter, and fulfil culturally defined needs, including immaterial needs, such as satisfaction. By doing and producing something, social actors produce a system of social relations and organisations (families, clans, moieties, etc.) in which people coordinate productive and creative actions with one another. In cooperating with others, a social actor produces and defines him/herself in a certain way (be it as a peasant, labourer, carpenter, forest cultivator, gardener, hunter-gatherer) (Graeber 2013). In a larger context, the actions of doing and making create a structure or pattern that creates a certain collective identity as well as a general pattern that we often call society: whether Trobrianders, Jews, or Mentawaians.

The main differences of this approach to the structuralist and the materialist ones lie in the idea of social structure and the idea of human capacity. This approach does not focus on discrete orders (social structure, a social norm) but on the processes of actions. This approach interprets an abstract idea such as social organisation and society, as patterns of action or the coordination of activities (Graeber 2001). A social structure or society is seen as a set of transformations, based on a certain invariant principle in which the transformations are possible and reversible (Piaget 1970; Turner 1979, 2004). A pattern of action, whether simple or complicated, is how social actors continually redefine and remake themselves, as it is reproducing and transforming the larger context around them. While the actions of social actors can seem arbitrary and myriad, they are not just done for nothing, but intentionally aimed towards a social goal (Munn 1986; Graeber 2001). The form of the activities may be different and manifested in a different context, but in any society there is always an underlying pattern connecting them. For example, gardening, feeding children, and eating only cooked food at a ritual feast are different activities but they are connected by the importance of transforming natural products (forest, offspring, raw food) into social products (cooked food, a social person, a social event) (Fajans 1997, 1988). These actions constitute the structural frame and deeper layers of a social pattern. The coordination of these different actions becomes the basis of a community's social order. Yet, the order or structure must be understood as a contingent product or outcome of concerted social actions. By focusing on human activities, this approach sees that humans are more than just passive social actors determined by an abstract structure, whether it is a sociocultural system or cognitive structure, but as 'doers, creators and enjoyers of their human attributes' (Mapherson 1973, 4) and as both the producers and transformers of the abstract and determinant structures they have created.

The centrality of human actions is linked to the production of value(s). Value emerges in and from actions (Munn 1986; Graeber 2001, 2013; Lambek 2013). In and through actions, a social actor can transform his/her 'invisible potency into perceptible and tangible outcomes' (Munn 1986, 4), which have value. When a person offers an item of food or provides a curing ritual, it is not the food or a chant that generates value but the act of giving or the act of performing. Any action involving labour (making/producing something) and lying within the sphere of production and performative acts (speech, spreading rumours), which are deemed to lie outside that sphere (Lambek 2013; Otto and Willerslev 2013) generates a perceptible and tangible product. The two general forms of actions cannot always be separated, as value can be produced through both productive labour and acts (Lambek 2013). The measurement of a certain action and the value generated by it require an affirmation within a larger order of acts and persons (Munn 1986; Lambek 2013). This recognition is basic humanity, as a social actor's actions and their valuation never occur in isolation and outside social relations. The recognition and assessment of the acts mean that any social actor's action contributes to and constitutes the social system of objects, collective acts, belief, and

products, which we normally term in an abstract qualification such as 'system', 'habitus', or 'cultural order'. Hence, value is the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves and others.

In every society, certain key activities are essential because they are structurally and symbolically significant to others. Hence, the activities can generate social values—values held by the entire society. These activities have greater potential because they can be rendered socially concrete through the integration of the product of the action into wider relations (Munn 1986; Turner 1995; Fajans 1993a). The key activities can generate social values when they are immediately realised and recognised by others in the process of achieving public recognition. The values generated by key activities are essential to the viability of the society, since they create either a positive collective judgement or valuation, which perpetuates the process of communal identification, or a negative collective judgement or valuation that threatens the continuity of the collective's identity. Both 'positive and negative values can be transformed in the opposite direction through specific actions' (Munn 1986, 17-18). The dialectic relations of positive and negative values can be seen as moral-political problems through which a society constructs social values and order (Munn 1986; Graeber 2001). Social values circulate through human actions and they rapidly evaporate in the absence of such actions. Symbolically and materially, social values are represented by qualities embodied in certain socially valuable products (an heirloom, a number of sacrificed pigs, or in the quality of person). However, the heirloom or the animal offerings consist of the amount necessary social activities.

The focus on human activities and social values offers an entirely different lens through which to see the relations of food and society. While the structuralist and the materialist approaches start with a notion of 'society' and a 'sociocultural system', then ask how the availability of food or how a mental map of food hold society together, the actions approach begins by asking how 'society' is continually being transformed through various social actor's actions and the usage of food as a medium of transformation through certain key actions. Furthermore, the actions and value theory can bridge the limitations of the mental mediation of the structuralist approach and the eco-cultural determinism of the materialism approach, as this approach views a social act as a form of dialectical interaction between a subject (agency) and an external phenomenon (structure: society, ecology, availability of food, mental code).

The ability of food to mediate human actions and create value is due to the humble fact that every human is constantly doing something to obtain it. Food is a generic substance that has basic but universal attributes and properties. The importance of food as an ingested substance emerges primarily from human actions to produce it. When a person cultivates food plants or raises domestic animals and then consumes them, he or she is fulfilling his/her biological needs, as the process of cultivating and eating are entirely embedded in certain social relationships (land tenure, for instance). Moreover, this is not a sphere of activity that can be separated from family, kinship, or village relations. While doing something to produce food and then subsequently to eat it, an individual is also constructing him/herself as a person within the social structures that they are part of. In this sense, food enables humans to develop themselves, thus constituting their bodies and identities. Because food is produced through social relations, its attributes and the identity of the person who produces and eats it are always changing. Hence, food is essential to the dynamic of personhood construction (Fajans 1988; Mintz 1994; Hastorf 2017).

Second, the importance of food comes from its ability to mediate social relations between individuals, between an individual and a social group, and between social groups (Fajans 1988, 1993b). This ability means food can construct social values that, in turn, create social relationships, such as feeding, hiding, circulating, exchanging, keeping, sharing, giving, and eating. Take the example of feeding: the act of feeding children not only demonstrates that the parents have spent energy and productive activities in planting and harvesting, but that they also have the positive capacity to nurture and produce other human beings (Munn 1986; Fajans 1997).

The ability of food to create social value and mediate human actions and qualities determined by its attributes. First, food is a product of basic human labour, which gives practical meaning to the food, the activity involved (cooking, feeding, preserving, serving, etc.), and the needs it satisfies (Munn 1986). The whole range of activities involved in food production defines the value of food in general and certain foods in particular, both for the producer who produces it and the consumers who eat it. Second, food is "taken from organisms that have life properties (grow, die, sprout, rot, crawl) and have physical characteristics (wet/dry, hot/cold, smell, colour, appearance) all of which can symbolise salient social relationships, many parts of social life, and social values" (Fajans 1988, 160). Third, food and associated actions, such as feeding and eating, symbolise and embody social relationships, enabling food to constitute the identity of a person through sharing substances (Mintz 1994; Carsten 1995; 2000). Each social actor needs to eat, and while food can be prepared and enjoyed alone, many societies attach great social significance to (the rituals) surrounding preparing and sharing a meal.

Moreover, food can be deployed to delineate social groups and to mark social boundaries (Young 1971; Nihill 2001). Those who eat together create a division based on gender (women/men), social alliance (enemy/alliance), or ethnicity. A specific food can also be used symbolically to manipulate group boundaries. The ability of food to establish or negate social bonds, through transference or denial to an individual or group, is widely manipulated in most societies. For example, food preferences can reveal the status or social class of an individual. Food avoidance can be applied to certain groups or persons or prohibited in certain contexts. There is a myriad of taboos regarding food in every society employed to make cultural and social statements through the construction of distinctions and identities (Meigs 1987; Hastorf 2017). In any society, food is widely used and manipulated to maintain and create changes in its social life. It is also commonly deployed to mark the passage of life, i.e. marriage, procreation, pregnancy, death rituals (Carsten 1995; Tomas 1999; Janowski 2007b; Janowski and Kerlogue 2007; Kaartinen 2007). Food is a substance that fundamentally constitutes, sustains, and nurtures social persons while it simultaneously produces and reflects social categories, symbols, and values. It is an active substance used by social actors to change and construct themselves, orient feelings, motivate behaviour, and mediate social relations.

1.4 Methods and the Research Site

The dissertation is based on an ethnographic research of the Mentawaians living in Muntei, a government settlement in the southeast part of Siberut (Figure 2). The word Muntei has many references and illustrates the complexity and the expansion of a hamlet. In the text, Muntei can be either the village, the hamlet, the settlement, or the stream. Initially, Muntei referred to a government settlement located along the Muntei stream, officially established in 1981. Soon, the settlement became an official village comprising three hamlets (Muntei, Salappak, and Puro) in which Muntei was the centre. Salappak is located upstream, a day's walk from the centre; Puro is located downstream, an hour's walk from the centre. Since the Mentawaian Archipelago became a new district (1999), these hamlets have been expanded. Muntei hamlet has been multiplied into three new hamlets (Peining Butet, Muntei, and Pariok); Salappak has been divided into two hamlets (Salappak and Magosi); Puro became two hamlets (Puro 1 and Puro 2). The expansion of the hamlets reflects at least two things: the ongoing process of government intervention and the growth of the population. To avoid confusion, when the text refers to Muntei settlement, it is with reference to the hamlets of Muntei, Peining Butet, and Pariok and the inhabitants of these hamlets.

A Settlement as a Field Site

The choice of Muntei Settlement as a field site was directed and influenced by the research questions, which generally examine the importance of food for contemporary Mentawaians living in a government settlement. The selection of Muntei provides a window on understanding social transformations and on examining how food and its related actions contribute symbolically and materially to both the resistance to and accommodation of social changes. The settlement is close to Muara Siberut, the most important port and settlement on the island, where migrants, markets, churches, government and education services, and infrastructure are clustered. Being closer to the coastal area and to Muara Siberut, Muntei residents have been increasingly incorporated into a cash-oriented economy, a state-based administration, and multi-ethnic relations. This provides an excellent place to study how a Mentawaian community interacts with the outside world and how that interaction affects their relationship with food.[1]

Muntei is also an excellent example of a contemporary Mentawaian community with a heterogeneous background. The settlement is inhabited by Mentawaians originating from different autonomous social groups (*uma*/clans) from different valleys and sub-cultures and a handful of non-Mentawaians. The population of Muntei has tens of *uma*, who generally identify themselves as belonging to one of two larger groups: *Sasabirut* (people of Sabirut) and *Sarereiket* (people from Rereiket river). The *Sarereiket* are referred to as *orang ulu* (uphill people), and differ culturally from the *Sasabirut*. They originate from the area around the Rereiket River, speak their own dialect, and have developed slightly different customs (shamanic practices, housing) from the *Sasabirut*, a group of people living around the mouth of the Siberut River. In addition, a handful of migrants have been living in Muntei as teachers, traders, and nurses for the last couple of decades. As a multi-*uma* and multi-ethnic settlement, Muntei represents a common pattern for the history of Mentawaian settlements and their residents. Prior to the arrival of colonial rule or missionaries, people lived on their ancestral land, clustered around their kin group. They created collective dwelling places (*pulaggaijat*) during the later stage of a clan's migration, separation, and feuds. Such settlements might be occupied by people from different groups. The majority of *pulaggaijat* were then extended and administered by Dutch colonial officials in an attempt to pacify and bring the scattered population under greater governmental control. Ultimately, almost all *pulaggaijat* have been accommodated and established as an official village or hamlet by Indonesia's state administration.

The selection of Muntei was also encouraged by the scarcity of ethnographic accounts of Mentawaians living in a government settlement. Nearly all major anthropology texts on Siberut have been derived from two types or research: 1) fieldwork on either a single *uma* living on their ancestral land, far away from the government settlements (Schefold 1973, 1991; Hammons 2010); or 2) a general study of Mentawaians as a whole (Eindhoven 2002; Tulius 2012; Darmanto and Setyowati 2012; Rudito 2013). The only exceptions are perhaps Reeves's study of Mentawaians dwelling in a government settlement upstream of Madobak (1999) and Persoon's (1994) research that focuses on Maileppet, a neighbouring village of Muntei. This study aims to fill this gap in the contemporary ethnographic accounts of the Mentawaians and is particularly significant because virtually no *uma* in the Mentawai Islands are now living purely on their ancestral lands, outside the village administration. Ongoing social changes have encouraged certain groups, previously overtly reluctant to be under state administration, to settle in a village or hamlet. For example, the Sakuddei and Sakaliou, two *uma* that famously reject the presence of the state (Schefold 1991; Hammons 2010), have recently moved to a government settlement and are the most active clans demanding development and government interventions (Puailiggoubat 2013, 2015).

Lastly, Muntei was also chosen for a practical reason. I was familiar with the settlement long before I did my PhD research. I got to know Muntei and its residents in 2003, while undertaking research for

my undergraduate thesis. I visited Muntei during a break from my fieldwork in the upstream settlement called Ugai. I spent my Saturday and Sunday evenings playing football in Muntei, as the settlement had the best football pitch in South Siberut. Playing football is an easy way to socialise and be acknowledged by the indigenous population. Eventually, I developed a friendship with a number of the people in Muntei. Soon after, I graduated from Gadjah Mada University and returned to Siberut to work on a UNESCO project. While the project did not target Muntei, a young educated man and woman from *uma* Saruruk and Sakukuret in Muntei were recruited as staff on the project. The young Saruruk man became my close friend; indeed, he remains so and we consider ourselves to be *paalei* (befriended). Subsequently, I have visited Muntei regularly, to play football, enjoy afternoon tea, or attend a ritual feast. I have expanded my network and have established relationships with other families in Muntei, also with a view to improving my mastery of the Mentawai language, by learning the Sabirut dialect spoken by Muntei people.

Mastering the Mentawaian language is methodologically significant as I did not use an interpreter. Generally, older people, who were born in the former settlement and did not attend school, do not have a good command of Bahasa Indonesia. They encourage me to speak Mentawai and praise me whenever I talk to them in their language. They feel that I respect their tradition, want to learn about their culture, and have successfully immersed myself in their lives. I also deploy the Mentawai language during casual conversations with the villagers. It was the main communication device when I conducted a household survey. As Muntei's population is comprised of people from different backgrounds, I also used different languages with different people in various setting. Bahasa Indonesia was mainly used in formal or structured interviews with village officers, Batak or Niasan shopkeepers, a Javanese priest, and a Minangkabau teacher. In formal settings attended by many people, I used Bahasa Indonesia. If there were older people present in the meeting, who did not understand me, I asked a young person to translate. If they wanted me to address their concerns directly, I used the Mentawai language or simply went to his/her house to have an informal conversation. Young people preferred to talk in Bahasa Indonesia. They are more curious and ask questions related to my personal situation (education, living abroad). Occasionally, I employed both Bahasa Indonesia and Minangkabau language (Bahasa Minang) when I interviewed a Minangkabau cleric or a Javanese priest. These different ways of communicating with different people not only illustrates the diversity of people living in Muntei, but also represents a marker of aspiration. Older people feel enormous pride when there is an outsider willing to learn their language and tradition. Younger generations, who were born in the settlement and attend school, are mastering Bahasa Indonesia as a way to show that they are good and modern citizens who speak the national language and learn the national culture. For migrants, especially the Minangkabau and Javanese, speaking their mother tongue is a rare chance to enjoy conversing with emotions and humour, as they have to speak either Bahasa Indonesia or Mentawai with villagers. Nonetheless, these language issues support my methodological choice to research a contemporary Mentawaian community with a heteregeneous identity, diverse aspirations, and internal variations.

I do not claim that Muntei is a settlement that uniquely represents the entire Mentawaian population. The conventional framework of a single settlement-based ethnography has its own limitations. This dissertation does not illustrate the general picture of Mentawaian-food relations. The impact of external stimuli and the dynamic within Mentawaian society as whole have been uneven across the islands (see Persoon 1994; Eindhoven 2019). Each settlement (hamlet/village) in the islands has its own ecological terrain, internal social dynamics, and conjunctures, which produce different ethnographic settings. For example, Muntei does not share features with hamlets or villages in the interior or on the west coast of Siberut, where salt-water animals are a scarce resource, the influence of migrants is more limited, and

important cash crops (clove, coconut) have not grown well. At the same time, I reject the idea that an anthropologist is wrong for making generalisations about an ethnic group after fieldwork at a particular site (Glenn Reeves 1999). While it is correct that the Mentawaians identity has been shaped and constituted by colonial discourse and post-colonial development discourses, the use of the Mentawaians as a collective label for people who share an eponymous ancestor, have genealogical stories, claim a particular plot of land, and speak the Mentawai language cannot be completely abolished. All the indigenous inhabitants in Muntei identify themselves as Mentawaians.

I would claim that people in Muntei demonstrate a common and widespread—if not identical and universal—social identity and processes found throughout the Mentawaian Islands. They still have cultural and social attributes that resemble the general features of other Mentawaian communities in the past and present. Many cultural characteristics and social processes described in this dissertation confirm previous accounts (Loeb 1928; 1929b; Nooy-Palm 1966; Schefold 1973, 1970; Kruyt 1979) as well as more contemporary ones (Persoon 1994; 1995; 2001; Reeves 2001; Reeves 2001; Bakker 1999; Eindhoven 2002; 2019; Hammons 2010; Tulius 2012). In general, Muntei residents continue to interpret the world through a schema that remains similar to accounts described by earlier anthropologists and missionaries. Certainly, recent generations have given up some traditional activities. Any changes may be subsumed into the old ones, while old schemas are incorporated into new activities. Understanding the basic processes of the lives of the residents of Muntei offers insights into the underlying schemas and general patterns of other Mentawaian communities. However, when the reader reads the word 'Mentawaians' in this dissertation, it references and is limited to those in the Muntei settlement and its neighbouring settlements. At the time of my fieldwork, the settlement consisted of around 150 households (650 people). Since they have developed social relations with other people in an adjacent area, this description can also refer to an ethnographic account of about 3,000 Mentawaians living in the southeast of Siberut. Nonetheless, much of the analysis in this thesis will be relevant to a general understanding of Mentawaian-food relations.

Data Collection and Analysis

This dissertation is derived from three main periods of fieldwork comprising a total of 12 months of field research and an additional short visit (six weeks). The initial fieldwork was carried out from mid-May to early November 2012 while the third period of fieldwork was conducted from early October 2014 to early January 2015. In between, I conducted three months of fieldwork (May to July) in 2013. An additional visit was undertaken from early December 2018 to mid-January 2019, after I finished the data analysis and had the first draft of the monograph ready. My fieldwork was conditioned by the trajectory of my uncommon postgraduate training and scholarship, which did not lend itself to a single extensive field research. I had secured a PhD scholarship and had collected data on food before I did a master's degree. I used my master's thesis research as preliminary research for my dissertation. I carried out the second period of PhD fieldwork during field research on customary land arrangements in Muntei for this master's thesis (Darmanto 2016).

Fieldwork

The advantage of knowing and being known by people in Muntei, however, does not automatically make Muntei the easiest place to do field research. I started the first period of fieldwork in May 2012 by organising a formal meeting with the residents of Muntei in the Catholic Church after a Sunday Mass. I was advised by the head of village to use this occasion to inform the villagers about my presence and research. Village officers, schools, and other non-Catholic institutions have always used the Church to inform villagers about public issues. The Church is the most important public space in the village and the Sunday Mass is

the only occasion when the majority of Muntei people gather regularly. All *Uma* in Muntei have a member who attends the Church. Non-Catholic villagers would soon get the information regarding my research and presence from their Catholic families and friends.

The purpose of the meeting was to inform people of the aim, objective, and duration of my research, providing them with the permits I obtained from government authorities in the West Sumatra Provincial Office and from the Mentawai Archipelago's district officials. I also employed the meeting to ask for their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FIPC) (UN 2008; Persoon and Minter 2011). I explained what I expected from their participation and involvement in my research. I described the way I would obtain data (interviews, observation, etc.), the scope my research, and the possible benefits of the study for participants. I also promised to discuss and share the results of my research before submitting the final dissertation to the university. I also emphasised that all *uma* and families had the right to make their own decisions about whether to participate in my research or not. I then invited them to ask questions and express their thoughts on their expectations about my research.

Generally, all adult persons present in the church agreed to participate. However, there were some issues. Some prominent men questioned the difference between their consent and the formal permits I had obtained from the government. A man asked me why government staff in Padang, the capital of West Sumatra, or district officials in Tuapeijat, who have not set foot in the settlement and know nothing about the people there, have the authority to permit to me to study them. Others teased me about how much money I had spent to obtain these letters and questioned me seriously about why I would give money to the already-rich government officials, rather than give it to Muntei people themselves. Another man asked why I gave them the FPIC form for them to complete and sign. He was suspicious because this was the first time I had organised this kind of meeting and requested formal consent. Another man asked whether he would be given money and a free lunch after he signed the FPIC, as this was a standard procedure when participating in an NGO or development project meeting. Another man refused to fill in the FPIC as he thought that I would 'sell' him and the data I gathered from his family to the university. The main issue raised at the meeting related to why I needed a formal permit to study the villagers given that I already knew many of them and had been part of their lives for such a long time.

The formal nature of the meeting affected my conduct and the people's response to my inquiry. By bringing the paperwork, including the FPIC and asking for a formal meeting, a number of people felt that I had become a different person to the one they knew prior to me becoming a PhD student. Certain families also expected compensation from me for participating in my research. In response, I explained that I had a small amount of research funds. I could give it to the owner of the host family that I lived with or buy a box of cigarettes, drinks, or meal when I ask a person to be interviewed, or a family to be surveyed, or I could spend it on buying a healthy boar for the entire settlement during the New Year festivities. I also explained the limits of my scholarship. The research fund could help the village get a better soccer ball or a new volleyball net, but it was not enough to pay all the families in the settlement an equal amount of money. I explained my position as a student, which is both privileged and limited, like their own children who study at the universities on the mainland.

Their understanding of my position as a student gave me significant advantages. It was easier to talk and question people as a student, rather than as a government official or NGO worker. Villagers believed my research was done out of genuine curiosity and without any specific agenda, such as 'having a programme to deliver' or 'selling the information' for a proposal to a funding organisation. I started to work with certain *uma* and waited to see whether any person or family would decide to reject my research. After I abandoned all the formal procedures of 'standard' university research, most of the Muntei residents became relaxed and put their trust and consent in me unofficially. Observing and talking to people, selecting a household

to stay with, recruiting research assistants, paying certain families for recording their food intake, taking photos, recording the spells and invocations in a ritual, contributing and offering a gift for special events were all conducted in unofficial ways. Eventually, the majority of Muntei people saw no harm in sharing information, correcting me where necessary, and always welcomed me for a talk or a visit. They were keen to help me get the necessary data and always reminded me to finish my education on time. Moreover, some families used my presence to encourage their own children to take their studies seriously. They often asked me to give their children information about higher education in Java and abroad, as they wish that, one day, their children will follow my path and have the opportunity to study abroad.

Data Collection

I combined qualitative and quantitative methods in all three periods of fieldwork. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and rather informal small group discussions were the main methods used to gather qualitative data. Secondary sources (local newspapers, government documents, NGO papers) provided additional qualitative data. Household surveys and food intake records are the two main methods for gathering quantitative data on property and possessions, kinship, family size, and the amount of food families have and consume.

Qualitative Method: Participant Observation and Semi-Structured Interview

Participant observation is the main method of collecting ethnographic data (Powdermarker 1966). This method enables me to develop social relations with the subjects of my research but to simultaneously maintain the necessary distance from them. It allows me to closely observe, grasp, and experience people's daily activities but, at the same time, to analytically understand the pattern and ideas behind those activities. For most of my participatory observation, I stayed with a family of Saruruk for the first fieldwork and lived with a family of Samemek for the later fieldwork. The two *umas* are big groups consisting of tens of households. The clans also represent two basic social identities in Muntei. The Saruruk are considered to be *Sasabirut*, who have land around Muntei and are split into two factions; the Samekmek are referred to as *Sarereiket*, who initially had no land in the settlement and have not separated as the other large clans have done. Eleven out of the 16 Saruruk families have embraced Islam, while all the Samekmek families are devoted Catholics. By living with these two families from two different clans, I was able to closely observe the diversity of the families and their various activities regarding food production and consumption. For example, I was able to compare the differences and similarities in their livelihood strategies, eating habits, and the pattern of their communal feasts.

Even though I was staying with families from *uma* Samekmek and Saruruk, the settlement is small and I was able to extend my social network and observations beyond the two *uma*. In the settlement my presence was strongly felt as I had spent my days walking around, observing people's daily activities, participating in the activities, and talking to them. Despite the fact I did not have the same close relations in the settlement that I had with the *uma* of Samekmek and Saruruk, I did not feel that others were likely to behave differently when I was around. Stumbling across people's activities provides an opportunity to gather information and to observe social patterns in the most unconstrained way. More importantly, participating in the daily life of people in an informal manner allowed me to closely observe and participate in a wide range of activities and practices related to food in the nuclear family (*lalep*) as well as the whole *uma* and hamlet. This enabled me to discover patterns of activities that pervaded the relations of food and people. I discovered the importance of certain activities (gardening, feeding and sharing, eating together) that are vital to the development of people, families, and *uma*. These activities are not only important to ensure the availability of food, but also for the expression of ideals and ideas. Through understanding the daily activities related

to food, I could sense the deeper cultural schema and was able to generate a systematic description of the role of food in this community.

Participant observation allowed me to involve myself in community problems and issues. People saw me as a resourceful person who could help them with certain tasks. For example, I was perceived as having some computer skills and as being impartial in public issues. I was invited to be part of an ad hoc village committee arranging and managing the distribution of RASKIN and government hands-out during the flood disaster in 2012 and 2013. I had an opportunity to attend and observe a series of meetings held by Muntei and its neighbouring hamlets to discuss the problem of pigs destroying cacao gardens (analysed in Chapter 7). During the third fieldwork, I was appointed to a local church committee to manage the annual event of the slaughter and distribution of pigs. This level of participation allowed me to grasp the communal aspects of people's relationships beyond family and kinship.

Alongside my participant observations, I also kept a daily journal of generated reflections and questions. Those reflections and questions were explored through interviews, both informal and semi-structured. The latter method was selected and refined in context. Most of the time, an interview was not deliberately arranged. I waited for the right moment to interrupt a family meal or gardening activities with a question about a particular food, certain activities related to food, and the meaning attached to them. I did not lead the interview, only triggered a discussion with a short question and let the informant say what they knew. Often, it was not the right moment to ask a question. Some questions could trigger a lively discussion and lift the mood of surrounding people. In other cases, my questions or presence discouraged them and led them to abandon their conversations. In some cases, a list of questions was prepared on a particular topic for certain informants. The list focused on specific information but allowed open answers that may direct the interview towards other relevant information. This type of interview offered the participant in the research the chance to respond openly. For instance, a question, e.g. on the role of chickens and pigs in a certain ritual feast, could turn into a discussion about rivalry and the world of spirits. In most cases, the semi-structured interviews took place at night or at the weekend, when the interviewees returned from their gardens and stayed for Sunday Mass and to socialise in their settlement. When an interview started with a formal request, it always ended in an informal chat stretching late into the night or even until the early hours of the morning.

Quantitative Method: Food Intake Record and Analysis

A particular method of data gathering was also applied for quantitative data regarding the consumption of food (presented as the core of the food analysis in Chapter 4). The specific method deployed for measuring food consumption, namely, a food intake frequency survey (Ulijaszek 2004; Henry and Macbeth 2004) suits my ethnographic research. The frequency survey is 'designed to obtain qualitative, descriptive data on usual intakes of foods or classes of food over a long time period' (Ulijaszek 2004, 122). The data obtained is not about nutritional precision, but rather is a general overview of the food consumption that usefully accompanies the qualitative ethnographic and anthropological research. The frequency survey deploys a comprehensive list of food items familiar to the subjects of the research, to record their intake over a given period. This method is highly appropriate and useful to compare the food patterns of two or more groups within a population. In particular, the food consumption data are collected at the family level. The choice of analysing food intakes and a survey at the household level is based on the social fact that the core unit of the production and consumption of food in Muntei is the family (see Chapter 2, Section 2.2).

I selected three representative families to record their own daily meals for one year (1 January to 31 December 2013). All the items of food served at each meal were recorded by note takers who were members of each family. The recorded data can be obtained from a self-administered questionnaire and recorded

in the diaries of the subjects of the research, and revalidated through interviews. This method, without estimates of the portions' size, takes much less time and is therefore likely to be considerably cheaper. A detailed description of the method and the process of data collection is presented in Appendix 1.

The food intake data are then analysed. All the data are broken down into several common categories familiar to the people under study (staple foods, meat, fruit, vegetables, etc.). The data are analysed using the food frequency approach (Henry and Macbeth 2004). This type of analysis does not allow for the examination of the foods' detailed nutritional status and a precise analysis of energy expenditure, but it does enable one to understand the general pattern of food consumption in a certain period. This analysis is simple but adequate given that Mentawaians eat a variety of food at each meal, each item of which would need to be measured separately. The quantity analysis was not very detailed due to time constraints and because detailed measurements would contribute little to the general ethnographic analysis.

Household Survey

The other quantitative method is a household survey, which I carried out during the third fieldwork period. The survey is a modest endeavour to collect data on the possession of gardens, edible and non-edible resources, and household property in general. The survey was conducted among 45 households (one third of the total households). The survey was carried out during the later stage of the third fieldwork period, due to the availability of field assistants. For one to two hours, I and an assistant researcher sat on the veranda of the selected households, questioning the genealogy of the household, the income and expenditure, its gardens and possessions, and the location of the gardens. Genealogy and kinship data provided a better picture of how each household is linked to others, both socially and biologically. The distribution and lineage lines of the households are important as analytical tools to determine access to food. Details of income and expenditure provided information on economic relations, with specific reference to the cash economy, including subsistence or semi-subsistence activities (hunting, fishing, and gathering) and certain activities where people engaged in alternative uses of their labour.

The household survey data provide a direct indicator of variations in income-generating activities and provide insight into (potential) opportunities for socio-economic development. Data on gardens included the number of forest gardens, productive assets (including the number of traditional plants, such as durian and fruit trees and sago gardens), standing crops (the number of commercial crops per household—whether in fruit or not), and livestock. The data are useful for comparing the level of availability and access to self-procured food and food from the market. It also provides a broader picture of the availability and access to edible items, both wild and semi-domesticated animals and plants. I followed-up the survey with random, open-ended, and opportunistic interviews about people's knowledge of edible items, their function, and symbolism.

Secondary Resources

Written documents are important sources of information regarding the broader picture of development in the Mentawai Archipelago. Such documents include government reports, NGO's press releases and proposals, and news items in the local media. Their contents varied and gave broad perspectives on local practices and social dynamics. I obtained the data on the resettlement project in Muntei and its neighbouring settlement in the form of a microchip from Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) when I conducted archival research in 2013. Some history of the settlement had already been published in a sociological analysis of an ICDP (Integrated Conservation and Development Project) report and the dissertation of my supervisor (Persoon 1994, 1995). A handful of news related to Muntei was published in newspapers in the 1970s and 1980s. Most of the NGOs' proposals, policy papers, and press releases were obtained through old friends and the network that I have

established through years of working with UNESCO. The recent written documents about the government project for settlements are collected from village offices and the South Siberut sub-district Offices. All those documents provided historical accounts and allowed me to track down individuals who had been involved in various government and non-government development projects—ranging from the Otorita Pengembangan Kepulauan Mentawai (OPKM) to the distribution of RASKIN. The combination of written documents and interviews provide a more detailed perspective of the history of the settlement.

Another important written source is the local newspaper *Puailiggoubat*, published by the oldest and largest Mentawaian NGO, Yayasan Citra Mandiri Mentawai (YCMM). Through *Puailiggoubat*, I can trace all the news related to Muntei since 2005 and to check and validate all the information and data I gather during my fieldwork. For example, *Pualiggoubbat* gives the amount of RASKIN received by Muntei residents, or a rough calculation of the bananas sold on the market every week from 2006 to date. Sadly, the printed version of *Puailiggoubat* is no longer published. Instead, the editors and YCMM are focusing on an online platform through the portal MentawaiKita.com. The website is my staple if I am starving to know wahat is happening in the island.

Group Discussion during the Final Fieldwork

Finally, I paid a short visit between early December 2018 and the end of January 2019. I did not undertake participant observation or other forms of data collection during this time, but rather organised a series of small forum discussions with groups of women, young men, and adult men from various *uma* to revalidate my data, verify my analysis, and to obtain feedback from the general findings and arguments of my dissertation. This is part of the FPIC procedure explained and promised to the Muntei people at the beginning of my research. In the discussions, I also asked their opinion regarding the best use of their names and place names. Beyond Muntei, I conducted several rounds of limited group discussions with Catholic priests, NGO workers, district government officials, and other Mentawaian intellectuals, who provided a broader perspective on the Mentawaians relationship with food. These types of interviews and discussions provided me with regional understanding and a broader perspective on the social changes happening in Muntei and beyond in the last few decades.

1.5 The Organisation of the Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic overview of Muntei. It includes a description of the social history of the settlement, basic social relations, autochthonous and introduced sociocultural institutions, and the social transformations that have occurred over the last four decades after people moved from the old settlement to Muntei.

Chapter 3 qualifies the elements of food availability and accessibility. It describes how people have used and transformed the environment surrounding their settlement and established various productive zones for various food resources. This chapter provides a general account of the availability of animal, plant, and imported food, the changes to and the continuation of existing food production.

Chapter 4 examines a full year of daily meals among selected families. The analysis of food consumption gives a concrete picture of the status of food consumption at the household level. This chapter provides the variations in the edible matter consumed by families from different social groups, which have different strategies for their livelihoods.

Chapter 5 describes the value of food beyond its material substance. This chapter describes the role of food-related activities and the positive construction of personhood and the communal value. It outlines how food-related activities, especially gardening, are paramount to the definition of the people's humanity, to their gender differentiation, the valuation of a person, to the self-identification of being Mentawaians and to the construction of others. It also examines the importance of sharing and eating food together. This chapter describes how sharing and eating food together are strongly associated with solidarity and equality and a way to generate the most important social values.

Chapter 6 tries to make a deeper analysis between the availability of food, the statement of being hungry, and the production of social values amid ongoing social changes in Muntei, especially the emergence of social inequality. This chapter also provides an interpretative answer to the riddle of being hungry which starts the dissertation.

Chapter 7 draws a general analysis of the role of food in Muntei. It sums up the social and cultural meaning of being hungry and the importance of food-related activities in the production of social values. This chapter also provides remarks and reflections on food research on the island and beyond.