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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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7
Conclusion: Good to Produce, Good to Share: Food, Hunger, and Social Values

At the beginning of this research, I attempted to link people's statements of being hungry (*malaje*) with food insecurity. Participant observation and analysis of quantitative data on the availability of food resources and a year of food consumption, however, did not provide me with a picture showing that Muntei residents have a serious problem with food shortage. The value of the Muntei people's claim of *malaje* is precisely what challenged my research to rethink the meaning of hunger, to reevaluate the questions on food insecurity, and to search for a new perspective capable of dealing with the complex socio-cultural roles and importance of food.

Taking up this challenge, the description and analysis presented in all chapters offer a concluding discussion on the cultural dimension of food and society in three main respects. First, the statement of being hungry does not merely refer to physical condition or signify food insecurity. The claim of being hungry is a socio-cultural statement. Second, food is an active agent that mediates human's social activities and is neither a cultural metaphor (good to think), nor a basic necessity (good to eat). By identifying this, the focus of this dissertation is not only on the amount, the size, the taste, the smell, the shape, the form of food people produces and consume, but also on the activities and social processes related to food production and consumption such as cultivating, cooking, sharing, and eating. Third, this dissertation tries to link up the activities related to production and consumption of food with the production of persons and reproduction of social institutions through the production of social values in the context of ongoing social transformation. These three main themes will be a starting point to engage with anthropological discussions on the role of food and social values in society, both on Mentawai Island and beyond.

7.1 The Socio-Cultural Meaning of *Malaje*

This dissertation showed that food for Muntei residents serves a purpose beyond providing nutritional sustenance. Being hungry (*malaje*) refers to a physical condition and is also a cultural statement. People use *malaje* when their bellies are empty. Although *malaje* is bound to the ingestion, it has little to do with food shortages. The claim of *malaje* does not refer to scarce resources, a mismanagement of food production, or nutritional deprivation. Muntei people have an abundance of food resources, especially staple foods (sago, banana, and tubers). The statement of *malaje* is strongly associated with the lack of sharing and eating food. It is in particular linked to the lack of sharing and eating the meat of domestic animals. This touches on a general discussion in anthropology on the meaning of people's statements on

hunger. When people suggest that they are starving they tend to relate it with a lack of meat despite other sources of calories and protein being available (Richards 1939; Holtzman 2009). Further, it supports the argument that the hunger for meat is, first and foremost, not a physical and ecological phenomenon, but a social and psychological one (Simoons 1994; Gell 1998).

The claim of *malaje* is deployed more as a social sentiment and moral-political evaluation of existing social relations, which are marked by lack of sharing or lack of unity. The statement *malaje* is not merely explaining the physical condition of an individual, but rather hints at the relations between persons and between individuals and the wider community. It is a qualitative and moral evaluation of ongoing social relations. People use the idiom of *malaje* to indicate that they have food, but they do not use it to renew existing relationships or establish new ones. In a more general sense, being hungry is a social comment on the imbalance between pursuing individual desires (associated with eating alone and keeping food for yourself) and collective demand (manifested in sharing and eating together). Existing between opposing worlds of keeping and sharing, individual autonomy and social collectivity, people rely on their food and feelings about hunger to manage the tensions produced by these desires.

The claim of *malaje* can be categorised as a kind of social sentiment in Durkheimian terms (1972, 219-220): "a culturally constructed pattern of feeling and behavior which constitute, initiate and motivate a person's actions upon the world." It is stated by individual persons but projected outward from the individual onto the social order. It binds individuals together and individuals with clans, or the Muntei settlement as a new community. As a social sentiment, the statement of *malaje* does not always mark everyday experiences (Fajans 1983, 178). It is in contexts where the boundaries between the ideals of the community and the daily actions of individuals are problematic, where sets of expectations are in conflict, where new activities are producing new values and old social values are threatened with transformation, that being hungry is called upon to express and mediate the situation. *Malaje* then defines the transformative value of social creation and the importance of food as an agent of social unity. The sense of hunger is articulated loudly when people sense a threat to that unity.

Arguing that hunger is a social sentiment allows me to contribute to the conceptualisation of hunger. Most interpretations of hunger, especially from a nutritional and evolutionary perspective, have an assumption that hunger is a universally biological phenomenon (Young 1986) while a political ecologist and economist have argued it is caused by scarcity and inequality of power (Lappe and Collins 1997). It is clear that the claim of being hungry in Muntei does not connect with the scarcity and unequal distribution of food. Muntei people have been, and are still largerly self-sufficient. The food regime that has caused deep problems in food distribution and access at global and national scale (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Edelman 2009) and caused global famine (Lappe and Collins 1997) has little impact on the local food system in Muntei. Generations of anthropologists have found that hunger is a culturally, socially and historically specific phenomenon. Audrey Richard, the pioneer of the anthropology of food suggests that hunger cannot be considered from a biological perspective alone, but must be regarded in relation to the specific 'social organization' such as kinship and tribal relations (Richards 1932). Others suggest that the obsession with food and hunger is a psychological coping mechanism within an unreliable and unpredictable environment, a primary symbol of lack of social control (Young 1971), associated with powerlessness (Harstrup 1994). The notion of hunger is a cultural ethos to control and master the anxiety and fear of life in which food is a basic necessity (Young 1971; Kahn 1994). It is also mainly seen as a way to control a person's appetite and desire as the supply of food is uncertain, subject to fluctuations, and insufficient. Certainly, the Mentawaians experience anxiety and fear in regard to food provision. Schefold (1982) describes the cosmological belief of the Sakuddei, a small group of Mentawaians living on the west coast of Siberut, explaining that they are constantly encountering an unpredictable and unconquerable

environment around human dwellings that are crowded by powerful spirits. Humans have to control their actions and balance their relations with spirits through elaborate taboos and rituals in order to take any resources for their livelihoods. However, my data shows that being hungry has little reference to physical or biological problems and had nothing to do with scarcity.

It seems that Muntei people's articulation of being hungry does not significantly relate with either the need to control human desire and activities, or the need to control the surrounding environment. Neither is related with the social control over limited resources. Muntei people have no cultural repertoire showing that desire for food and appetite has to be controlled or that ferocious eating is prohibited. There are no known elaborated cultural or social mechanisms to control gluttony and avarice except in the taboo period of *punen*. There are no regulations and prohibitions on the amount one eats and eating is never seen as essentially negative. There are no attempts to control human appetite. *Malaje* does not stem from the perception of an insatiable appetite. While there are strong social sanctions on consuming food privately, this is never associated with fear of scarcity.

Maektek (being satisfied), the opposite of *malaje* is always achieved when they have eating and sharing meat together. Being hungry is associated with the lack of sociality. It is manifested in the action of eating alone and the lack of eating together. Eating alone is seen an action that seeks to undermine the cohesion of community that can generate envy and resentment, which, in turn, leads to the dismantling of community. Distributing meat, sharing food, and organising ritual feasts are highly satisfying exactly because they bring people together. Being hungry or satisfied, therefore is neither a symbol that people's thinking is separated from the dynamic perpetuation and transformation of the social system (as the structuralists might argue) nor merely a result of food shortage and the miscalculation of food production (as the materialists may argue) nor the result of inequality of powers (as the political economists may argue), but rather is an integral part of a dialectical system which involves particular acts, behaviours, metaphors, social values, and social relationships and institutions.

Malaje and *maektek* adhere to the boundaries of the Mentawaian social order and come into play when the unity of community is threatened or penetrated in some way by excessive individual autonomy, and is enacted by sharing. Being hungry is not really a sanction against greed but a vehicle to motivate certain acts that maintain and transform political equality, preventing individual prestige from becoming a problem. To claim *malaje* is to qualify existing social relations in which social inequality is emerging, accompanied by intensive relations with the state administration, the market, missionaries and other external agencies. Incorporation into government administration, connections with external agencies, and involvement in cash crop production have produced internal variation and social differentiation. Some people have power and authority while others feel the are being subordinated. Some groups of people obtained prestige and desirable jobs and positions while others did not. It is not that Muntei residents have a problem with individual efforts to have wealth and positions. They lament that those who have more power and authority do not distribute their wealth. The value imbued in actions and products of new social relations is socially realised against the existing egalitarian value. The emergence of social differentiation and the lack of sharing create a crisis: *Malaje* is a state of social crisis and a way of expressing that social crisis. It is both a social condition that reveals the new social life in the settlement and a social warning regarding contemporary social life, which is marked and associated with the emergence of social inequality without a cultural institution to prevent it.

In this context, the statement of *malaje* and the complaint of lack of sharing meat may also be interpreted as a social demand. It is a statement to demand a better distribution of wealth from those that are seen as holding power—especially those who are wealthier or in a position of distributing state funds, and those who are successful in cash-crop production. The way in which people use the hunger for meat to articulate

the demands of social equality is typical of many egalitarian societies. Woodburn (1998) claims that the sharing of meat in immediate-return foraging societies is basically the result of the aggressive demand by individuals to receive an equal share. This demand is derived from the right which is attached to each person as a member of the community. Widlok (2012, 188) points out that sharing meat is neither just as a form of generosity, nor takes place under conditions of scarcity. Sharing meat is, in fact, obligatory and recipients feel they are fully entitled to the meat they receive.

The association of meat hunger and equal rights (Woodburn 1998; Widlok 2013; I use the term equality or egalitarianism) is particularly telling if we consider the distribution and consumption of meat in Muntei. Despite the fact that Muntei residents are not a hunter gatherer society, the way they treat persons who contribute food reminds us of immediate return foraging societies. In Muntei, those who do not have pigs or chickens and are not contributing domestic animals in the *punen* will receive the same amount of meat to those who contribute a lot. Indeed, the meat provider in Muntei is neither celebrated, nor thanked, and, in fact, has no choice over who will receive the meat and how much they will be allocated, as it has to be given to everyone who is either biologically or socially related (Widlock 2012). Having an equal portion of meat is a right held by everyone. Accusing wealthier and powerful people of eating *bulagat* and eating meat alone while lamenting their own hunger, is a critical statement in demanding equal rights amongst the residents of Muntei regardless of their specific identification (*uma*, *sarereiket-siberut*).

7.2 Good to Produce, Good to Share: The Social and Cultural Roles of Food

Conceptualising hunger as a social sentiment gives me an expansive understanding of the socio-cultural roles of food. Food is a substance which people produce and reproduce themselves through socially necessary activities such as gardening, cooking, sharing, and eating. All circular activities related to food are part of a total process of constructing persons and society, rather than merely the product of material substances. People consider sago, taro, and pigs as substances that create who they are. With these foods, they see themselves as a different group from faraway people (Minangkabau) who are pork haters and rice lovers or Western people who eat 'books' and bread, make metal weapons, and grow potatoes. However, neither the deployment of food to construct social identification, nor the food or the person in question remain static. The identification of *sasareu* is affected through physical substance but it is also produced socially through activities such as cultivating and eating together. Faraway people, therefore, is not entirely an essentialist categorisation.

The way Muntei residents deploy food to construct themselves as particular social actors is commonly found. As food literally constitutes the body of a person, there is always an intimate link between the body, food, and social identity (Meigs 1987; Jansen 2001; Carsten 2000). In many societies, people create, transform, and control their essences through food they produce and eat. They see their food as having both inherent and acquired attributes that associate with their own identity (Hastorf 2017). Melanesian societies believe that the attributes (greasy, wet, dry, clean, pure, hard, soft, dirty) of food (taro, yams, pigs, bananas) impart these qualities to those who ingest them (Young 1971; Meigs 1984; Kahn 1986). Young shows how Kalauna people distinguish different types of foods (hard and pure) and contextualise different categories of person (children, women), while among Wamiran, food is the vehicle for the production of women and men (Sahlins 1976; Kahn 1986). In the Malay world, people use rice and rice meal to construct their social and cultural identity (Janowski 2007a; Janowski and Kerlogue 2007) while in Eastern Indonesia, the consumption of sago or cassava cake (*embal*) contributes to the self-identification of being Inanwatan and Kei respectively (Oosterhaut 2007; Kartinen 2007).

However, I found that the usage of food in the construction of persons in Muntei is rather different to other societies in particular aspects. People barely touch upon the substantive qualities of food when they construct their personhood. Size and the amount of food are probably important, but to them it is activities that produce a variety of food resources in the garden that bestow value and prestige. Clearing forest, cultivating sago, and raising domestic animals set humans apart from animals and non-human agencies. The amount of necessary social activities to establish a garden and cultivate food resources gives food its social value. What underlies the process of food production and consumption is that all actions related to food provision generate the positive value for persons while all actions related to eating generate togetherness of the community. Autonomy is a central value for people since it gives a person the social prestige and status of a fully proper social actor. It makes each adult person who has his own family will have political equity. The social criteria upon which judgment about a person is made is revolves around the ability to produce food. Food is crucial in the definition of personhood: 'you are what you produce'. Cultivated food, hence, is the concretisation of the value of human actions and also the epitome of the value that human activities hold. In sum, food is good to produce, because food contributes to the production of a valued social persons.

Food, however, does not just transform individuals into socially valued and recognised persons. Food is also deployed to congeal sociality. It is a principal medium of socialisation. Food is processed and deployed to create, establish, and re-establish ties between families within *uma* and between *uma*. In terms of ethnographic findings, the role of food as a medium to both create new and re-establish social relations within and between communities is not entirely new. Generations of anthropologists have analysed that either staple food (sago, taro) (Malinowski 1935; Kahn 1986; Fajans 1997; Young 1971; Benda-Beckmann and Tale 1996; Oosterhout 2007; von Poser 2013; Battaglia 2017) and perennial fruit trees (durian, coconut, betelnut) (Peluso 1996; Rocheleau 1988, Fortmann, Antinori, and Nabane 1997) are not just a raw material for daily diet but a property that defines and determines social relations between social persons. My intepretation shows that all cultivated food resources not only have the capacity to develop social relations. More than that, food resources have the capacity to embody social values. First and foremost, we know that Muntei people do not have a meal alone. All cultivated and gathered plant and animal food has to be shared and eaten together. The social taboos against keeping food are values in themselves and decisively define the broader cultural concept of self and society. A social person always shares his/her meal. Food must be shared as the person's autonomy and social prestige attained through having and producing food have to be publicly recognised. It is through the sharing and giving of food to others that a person's autonomy and prestige have social value.

Sharing and eating together constitutes a key substance of Mentawaian kinship and is very much a social glue that holds *uma* together. Food is good to share because it is a medium for people to create and recreate their two basic and most important institutions: the household and the clan in which two dialectical social values are produced, and in which the Mentawaian whole, as a society with its key values, is constituted. Sharing food and eating together through daily meals and ritual feasts embodies the forms of the transformation of individuals implicated in the construction of the collective relations. At family level, people share food to create the parent-child bond and to perpetuate the family, which is founded upon biological relations. Through eating together in daily meals, people define a process of natural reproduction parallel to, and inseparable from, the social process of reproduction. At *uma* level, people share food and eat together in a ritual feast to transform individual autonomy into collective ideals and generate social renewal. Eating together is the ultimate way for people to generate the equality and eradicate hierarchy by transforming individual actions into collective structured ones. The sense of equality in the communal meals is largely conceived in efforts to repress individual prestige which is seen as a perverse version of the

very egalitarian ideals that were the basis of *uma*. Sharing and eating food together are a tangible rejection of images of selfishness, the danger of social hierarchy and the fear of social disorder. The importance of sharing and eating together for Muntei people echoes of what von Poser terms "moral foodways" (Poser 2013, 74). The term means that food and the way food is cultivated, exchanged and shared, generates and creates social interdependence. By eating sago, durian, pork or chicken, a social actor participates in the complex relations of exchanging and sharing that form the basis of community. The taboo of eating alone and the obligation of sharing and eating together is very much a societal strategy and the important social values, found in the myth of *sikameinan*, for creating solidarity and equality.

Sharing and eating food together are both a symbolic and concrete manifestation of the commitment to equality and the construction of autonomy of social actors within the limit of egalitarianism. The egalitarian ethos is generated through giving away food, but also ensures that food must be accessible for everyone. The ritual feast is the ultimate way for the people of Muntei to generate the ultimate egalitarian value by transforming autonomy of individuals into collective structured actions. Individual sacrifice and sharing personal wealth are not regarded merely as ways to get social or collective recognition, but also to dispel envy and social inequality, the ultimate threat to the unity of community. The ritual feast, thus, is a way for people to create and recreate the uma as a kind of community—an abstract form of aggregated individual human actions—as a whole and to ensure it is aligned with its key values. The emphasis on sharing food parallels their perspective of human nature: they see each person, and especially themselves, as innately a glory hunter and seeking social prestige above others (Schefold 1979, 1982). They integrate this understanding of the purpose of their food production for social prestige and individual glory with social values, which are those of sitting together, distributing the same amount of meat and enjoying the meal together.

The importance of eating together and sharing food in the construction of social value and social institutions echoes other findings universally found by generations of anthropologists. In diverse Southeast Asian societies, sharing of food in its various forms over time is crucial to forge kinship and ethnic identification. Among Kelabit in Borneo and Malay people in central Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, people who eat together, garden on the same land, and eat the same food are believed to share the same substance, the same identity and the same vision (Carsten 1995; Kerlogue 2006). Malay people see the blood, the substance that binds people together, is produced by the same food processed by the same people. The direct sharing of substance through food is an essential agent in the establishment of kinship relations. Among the Bosum people living on the Ramu River of northeast Papua New Guinea, exchanging and sharing food are the basic elements of relatedness and interdependence (von Poser 2013). Tending, producing, offering food, and consuming food are the sites for Bosum to form social relationships. For another Melanesian society, Meigs (1987) provides powerful examples of strong community boundary formation through eating together. Among Highland New Guinea societies, residents become family and village members not only through birth or marriage, but through being fed by the same person or eating food from the same land. Strangers can become kin through eating food produced on community lands and prepared by its members (Meigs 1987). In other communities, eating together could be an important sign of community definition, kinship, or even ethnic identification (Appadurai 1981; Mintz and DuBois 2002).

In analysing the value of food in Muntei, we have gained a deep insight into social processes of kinship, gender relations, construction of personhood, and reproduction social institutions, and the way in which they have engaged with social transformation. Hence, food is not just a symbolic (good to think) or basic material (good to eat) separate from the dynamic functioning of a sociocultural system. Food is a social agency which can be a reaffirming, transforming, or realigning social process. Food and related activities

are ultimately the medium through which the inhabitants of Muntei construct themselves, self-identify, express, and produce gender relations, reproduce their social institutions, and generate the ultimate value of their social production.

7.3 Food and Social Values: Understanding Human Relations

Studying Muntei people's relations with their food provided me with a deep insight into the dialectic tension between individuals and society among Mentawaians and beyond. Almost all anthropologists who have studied Mentawaians across the islands have observed that their social relations are characterised by the constant tension between rivalry and cooperation, peaceful co-existence and competition, jealousy and solidarity, individual autonomy and responsibility to communal interest (Loeb 1928, 1929a; Nooy-Palm 1966; Schefold 1973, 1982, 1991, 2017; Kruyt 1979; Reeves 2001; Hammons 2010; Persoon 2002). The Mentawaians prize individual prestige through traits such as competitiveness, individual prowess, and personal prestige. Yet, they appear to undermine individuality for the unity of the social group. They acknowledge the fundamental contradiction between individual desire and freedom and communal consensus and obligations.

This tension has generated questions about what exists in a system or institution that unites people amid the fundamental contradictions of these conflicts. Hammons (2010) implicitly calls it 'mimetic rivalry' (*pako* in local terms). He does not explicitly call it an institution but a 'cultural order'. Others do not have explicit terms for this tension. I suppose this is partly because they want to see a core idea or fundamental thought within the order. In contrast, I see the content of the social order or social structure not as core ideas or inert objects but as actions or activities. It seems to me that the tension is neither from institutional, nor cultural order, but perfectly illustrates what Nancy Munn (1986: 18) calls 'fundamental value processes'. Rivalry, competition, jealousy, and autonomy are terms strongly associated with human actions that generate hierarchy, an element of value creation (Graeber 2021, 52).

Actions that create hierarchy can transform the relative potency of person's action into concrete, perceptible forms. For example, Aman Limakok of Sakukuret produces social prestige (making your name, *pasingin onim*) by producing a lot of pigs. If he contributes pigs in a ritual, it is the act of giving that generates social prestige, and not the number of pigs he owns and/or produces and contributes. In other words, he has autonomy to decide to contribute or not. However, the acts to create hierarchy are limited by certain cultural governance premises with regards to the creation of equality or egalitarian value. For the Mentawaians, the dialectic of hierarchy and equality specifies the fundamental relations between persons, between families, and between families and *uma* as the community. Balancing the individual autonomy and the interest of the *uma* is perennial theme in Mentawaian culture. This is structured and enmeshed in their myths. In the most important myths telling of the origin of communal stuffs (the longhouse, the origin of pigs, the origin of *kerei*), there is a certain theme: the skillful protagonist is always killed by his community because the community is fearful that the skilful person will excel above others (Loeb 1929a; Schefold 1973, 2007; Spina 1982). The killing of the protagonist reveals the danger of individual autonomy.

My analysis on the relations of food and two dialectical social values considerably extends beyond the archipelago. Activities and idioms concerning food, sharing, and eating in Muntei are representative of widespread ideas where autonomy and relatedness mark the basic human conditions. A human always has the desire of having freedom and being autonomous. On the other hand, it is also universally acknowledged that each social person always tries to be recognised by others and is longing to be socialised and part of a collective entity. As a result, each human being in any given community has two differential

and contrasting social aims: autonomy and interrelatedness (Fajans 1983). Autonomy is generated from will and independence, associated with desire, authority, power, dominance, competitiveness, fame, and prestige. It has to do with self-assertion and self-aggrandizement. Nancy Munn (1986) defines autonomy as the extension of self into spacetime to encompass aspects of the sociocultural world outside the social actor's body. Activities that enhance prestige, power, and dominance frequently impinge on other social actors to maximise their own authority, independence, and will. There is inevitable friction arising between individuals, each of whom is constantly asserting her or himself vis-a-vis others. To foster assertion, aggression, and power, each society develops a tool. Cooperation, caring, sharing, interconnection are inverse patterns employed to tame autonomy and to produce interdependence and relatedness.

According to Fajan (1986), the tensions between the autonomy of the individual and egalitarian values of society are not always reflected in an explicit indigenous term, model, or cosmological belief. It is, rather, an analytical model of the implicit assumptions on which human activities are based. The terms are derived by inference from the repeated appearance of certain human actions and the symbolic terms in which these are expressed, which are apparently found universally in different societies from Australia and Melanesia to China (Munn 1986; Myers 1986; Schieffelin 1990). Autonomy and relatedness are abstract but culturally defined values which are attached to, and transformed into each individual through particular activities. Values in this sense are made real through the concrete activities of people (Fajans 2006; Graeber 2013). As any social activity is pulled over in two different poles of value, there is always a constant but inseparable tension between the values of autonomy, power, and authority and the need to relate and share, to love, nurture and show compassion for others. Each culture and society has a particular way to balance the value of autonomy and interrelatedness.

As I have shown, in Muntei the desire for social prestige and being equal is inseparable, but most of the time egalitarianism is the most encompassing and valued one. The desire for being politically equal is what motivates individuals to share their food and to eat together. The desire for relatedness through eating together is particular for Muntei residents but is also found universally, as sharing food is central in the creation of social life. Sharing food and eating together is considered the primal quality of human beings as it is the first and most common item in creating mutual obligation, cooperation, sociality and the basic foundation of morality, altruism, and any socio-economical-political system (Mauss 1970; Sahlins 1976; Woodburn 1998).

7.4 Concluding Remarks: Research and Action, Towards a Balanced Future

I started this research with the initial question of what kind of food do people in Muntei eat and how much. Ultimately, I ventured out to understand and write about gender production, kinship, social transformation, rituals, social exchanges, and social values. Looking back at the initial plan and proposal I wrote in 2012, I realise that I have detoured far from the initial departure point. My research proposal posed a question on how agricultural transformation, especially involvement in cacao production, affected the way people produce and consume food and expected to detect certain impacts of agricultural change on food insecurity. I was planning to use the political-ecology approach and to participate in agrarian transformation debates. Then, the cacao boom around Muntei abruptly ended. Many mature cacao trees are dying because of fungal attack and the lack of labour. People slowly stopped converting their sago gardens to cacao. Migrants abandoned their newly bought land. The majority of people have returned to their sago, fruit garden and coconuts, while a few others seek another cash crop.

The sudden changes that no one had anticipated brought a mixed surprise. It brought relief as I was very worried that the cacao boom might bring agrarian differentiation, capitalist relations, and the development of class in a classless society, as had happened in Central Sulawesi and beyond (Li 2002; 2014; Hall 2004). Yet, it also brought me hard times as I needed to reformulate my research. It forced me to redirect my questions, approaches, and theoretical guidance. This was more complicated as I had been already collected quantitative data on food intake in three families that was prepared in order to support my ethnographic description. I struggled for years to make a proper analysis of all ethnographic materials and the quantitative food intake data. I had to rethink and reformulate my research questions. I was forced to read and reread the literature on anthropology of food and to develop different tools to bridge the initial questions, arrange quantitative data I had gathered and accommodate the different types of ethnographic materials. In the end, the trajectory of my research offered me a different lens to understand the complex relations between people and the food they produce and consume, providing me with a long but enjoyable journey to produce a monograph which is totally different to what I envisioned eight years ago.

My trajectory is actually in no way strange for anthropologists who have studied the relations of food and society. There are a lot of stories of ethnographers who initially wanted to explore food only to find themselves writing on kinship, economics, politics, gender relations, and rituals. Audrey Richards (1932; 1939), the pioneer of food anthropology, set off in the 1930s to study the nutrition and food consumption practices of the Bemba in Zambia. After encountering unresponsive informants, she then shifted her topic to social organisation. Eventually, she produced a richly detailed ethnographic volume that discusses many aspects of Bemba society—kinship, rank, economy, marriage, rituals—while illustrating the central role of food. The opposite trajectory could also occur. Anna Meigs (1984) went to Highland New Guinea to study divorce and its function in the creation of social alliances among the Hua. She found, however, that no one wanted to discuss marriage separation: "instead they wanted to tell me about what they were and were not allowed to eat […]" (Meigs 1984, ix). She proceeded to study the daily food practices of the Hua. In so doing, she uncovered a richly subtle world of social meaning, bodily identity, and social interaction that opened up the Hua existence to her, from kinship to personhood to politics and, finally, to social alliances and divorce.

My research trajectory is just one example in the long list of cases demonstrating the intricate process of studying food in societies. The wonderful thing about studying food is that one can start with one thing and end up with another thing. Someone may start to study diet or nutritional issues but can end with analysing rituals, construction of personhood, or political systems. Food is a principal medium for social interaction, for human comfort and reassurance, for anxieties and fear, for political purposes, for enacting or resolving conflict; it is at the heart of the fundamental nature of our humanity. Moreover, many cultural aspects of food and food-related-activities are not always visible. Anthropologists have the advantage of methodologies to unpack these invisible practices. The broad and ever-surprising nature of studying food enables us to learn more about how people act out their social and cultural dynamics. Studying food allows us to understand the diversity and the complexity of culture and society. It can pull a researcher in unexpected directions and throw an anthropologist into unknown space. Indeed, it offers an intricate reward for understanding the hidden patterns behind social processes which are initially taken for granted.

Understanding cultural and social complexity of food-society relations is particularly important as I reflect on my experience in understanding food insecurity. And this is beyond the academic world. There are so many ideas, projects and practices of various actors in the real world which attempt to provide sufficient food for every human being and to resolve food insecurity. In this context, my research process and results may be interesting in at least three aspects. Firstly, they provide a challenge to a formal understanding of food insecurity. Official documents and much academic research on food security have mainly deployed

economic and nutritional perspectives. This can be seen from the indicators of food insecurity in terms of grain consumption, access to modern infrastructure, and relations to markets (McCulloh and Timer 2008; Maxwell 1992; FAO 1998; DKP 2015; 2014; Yates-Doer 2015). This is obviously not the case of Muntei and many other areas in Indonesia and beyond. The Mentawaian Islands and some parts of eastern Indonesia, which are categorised as areas with food insecurity, do not really have a problem with food. They are seen as experiencing food insecurity only because they do not cultivate grain, especially rice.

This is not denying the fact that many rural people do suffer malnourishment or lack of basic necessities. Indeed, people elsewhere have encountered crop failure, environmental destruction, and famine, especially in recent times when climate change has been in effect. Indeed, I showed there is a change in the diet of Muntei residents. Rice has become a more important staple in the meals, especially for young generations. Certain types of food such as reptiles and hunted game are no longer part of their meals while certain types of activities providing food (traditional sago processing, hunting) are no longer practiced. These situations may result in changing diet in the near future and lead to food or nutritional insecurity. Yet, I do believe it is very important to have specified, localised and culturally defined and contextualised what food security and insecurity is (Chao 2019a; Yates-Doerr 2015). The anthropology of food certainly can make "a significant contribution to understanding cultural aspects of food insecurity", as stated by Mintz and DuBois (2002, 111) almost two decades ago. Conceptually, food insecurity has often conflated to other jargon such as food sovereignty and is less clearly defined (Agrawal 2012). As a global issue, food security is often directed and oriented by macro-level policy, which was often not well-grounded in a bottom-up understanding of the foodscapes of those at whom it was ostensibly aimed (Pottier 1999).

I have shown that hunger in Muntei is not directly related to food insecurity status as is described in the Indonesia Atlas of Food Insecurity. My analysis provided an understanding of the meaning of hunger and challenges the official verdict of the status of food insecurity in a specific context. If levels of food security are to be raised successfully and the future generations in Muntei and elsewhere are to be made aware of their insecurity, a far more comprehensive development must consider people's conception of the environment, cultural meaning attached to foods, as well as ideas concerning control and human intervention in affecting production, distribution, and consumption of food (see Chao 2019b, 15). This is beyond just delivering subsidised rice or encouraging people to make their own paddy field or propose large scale plantations and forcing people to participate in commodity-based production as the Indonesian government has promoted. This is especially important in view of the present concern in Siberut Island with the ongoing debates of the possibility of replacing local resources management with large scale alternatives. As recently as January 2020, the central government accepted a 19,500-hectares forest estate proposal. Between 2010-2019, five companies proposed permits to secure 73,000 hectares across the Mentawai Islands for palm oil plantations (Puailiggoubat 2017). In the meantime, a national tourist project proposing to convert 3,000 hectares of forest and gardens into an international tourist destination with hotels, an airport, and resorts has been under review. The supporters of these proposals have argued that oil palm or tourist development would transform idle and underused land into productive areas. These exclude the district government attempts to set up plans to construct a paved road at the expense of forest areas and gardens across the island and to establish rice fields. All of those efforts are a continuation of the old ideology to replace inferior native food (sago, taro, banana) and local food systems with so-called modern resources (plantation, logging, rice production).

It is tempting to imagine how sago, taro, and fruit gardens around Muntei will be replaced by a plantation scheme. Or perhaps we do not need a much deeper imagination to see the consequences of large-scale resource exploitation on the island. Everywhere, from Brazil to Cambodia, or the Sahara, there have been cases in which agricultural land, previously under the control of native inhabitants, has been

handed over to large land owners and corporations for the production of currently popular commodities. While the native inhabitants produced export items that were consumed and enjoyed by affluent people living faraway, they eventually found themselves have very little to eat.

More than providing a deeper understanding of the importance of food, anthropological research can offer a platform to actually appreciate and defend local food systems. Any good ethnographer could contribute to the appreciation of any form of cultural practice by teasing out "the unacknowledged—or more often half-acknowledged—logic underlying it, and to make it clear to those who were never completely aware of what they were actually doing" (Graeber 2016; 5). Most of my interlocutors do not have the words equal to autonomy or equality to understand and be aware of the value of their gardening skills and what they are actually doing to provide food and share it with others. Through gardening and cultivating food, Muntei residents produce their social identity and reproduce and transform their own of society. Forcing people into dependency on plantations, the cash economy, and imported foods may entail more than a shift from economic self-reliance to economic dependency. In the case of my research, it certainly affects how Muntei persons and society are produced and reproduced. Dependence on external powers creates social hierarchy and eradicates people's ability to maintain their autonomy and political equality. Entirely replacing sago, taro, and pigs with only oil palm or another fast-growing species and persuading people to adopt rice-based meals would force them to define themselves and their relationships in terms of a symbol that is entirely different to their existing social values.

I agree with Sherry Ortner (2016) who argues that "the discipline of anthropology has been proceeding almost as if to prove to itself it is really on the side of the underdog" (Graeber 2016, 8). During my last visit in 2019, I had the opportunity to ask people about their response to the proposed oil palm plantation or forest estate. Most Muntei residents expressed their desire to own perennial cash crops and were tempted by the prospect of palm oil and the promise of a regular income. Yet, they are also suspicious of the risk of releasing their land and gardens to unknown people under the proposed plantations. In the end, instead of talking about the promise and prosperity of oil palm, people talk more about their sago, pigs, and gardens. Teu Rima, the shaman, told me that it was beyond his imagination that a vast area consisting of forest, sago and fruit trees would all be burnt and replaced with monotonous palm lines. He remarks that, as a Mentawaian, he cannot understand how he and his fellow residents would be able to cure their grandchildren without pigs or how they could arrange their children's marriages without sago and durian trees. Consider the powers and authorities that have designed Siberut Island as a state forest and have issued logging and forest estate permits, and who may grant licences for a plantation to operate in the immediate future. I hope that my dissertation offers a better understanding of the importance of gardens, the forest, sago, taro, and pigs to the future of Muntei and in general Mentawaians, and contributing a little to the defence of their food system against any unsustainable resource management platform.