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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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## SUMMARY

# Good to Eat, Good to Produce: Food, Hunger, and Social Values in a Contemporary Mentawaiian Community, Indonesia

This PhD study is about the role of food and food-related activities in the production of social persons, the reproduction of social institutions, and the creation of social values. This dissertation also seeks to understand the impacts of cash-crop production and government administration on the local food system and social values surrounding it. The research combines 15 months of participant observation, household surveys, archival study, and forum group discussions in Muntei, a settlement of 647 inhabitants in the southeast of the island Siberut (West Sumatra, Indonesia). It is also records and analyses a total of 3,030 meals over a year to get an overview of diet patterns at household level.

This dissertation starts with a riddle. People regularly claim they are hungry (*malaje*). This expression is deployed almost daily to explain various situations. The word is referred to when a person has not eaten. It refers to a situation when there is insufficient food. The word is often attached to a widower or children who do not have a wife or a mother to cook for them. However, it is more often employed by people wanting to make a social comment about not having sufficient meat to eat. The claim of being hungry seems to support the verdict of the *Food Security and Vulnerability Atlas of Indonesia* (2015), which classifies Siberut as an area of food insecurity. However, the statement of being hungry contradicts accounts by earlier observers, who describe the island as having abundant and diverse food resources. It also contradicts my own ethnographic material and food intake data.

Chapter 3 shows that the villagers have sufficient food from surrounding ecosystems, which are locally classified and divided into specific zones (sago gardens, taro gardens, forest gardens, forest, water bodies, the sea, small islets and mangrove forest), according to the animals or plants cultivated or extracted from them, and their arrangement. Sago gardens are essential domesticated zones and provide the most abundant plant food. Apart from sago starch, sago gardens supply sago grubs, a source of daily protein, and they bestow valuable non-edible products, including leaves for roofs and bark for walls and firewood. The second important staple, taro, is cultivated in taro gardens. The gardens are heavily domesticated, filled with banana, sugar cane, cassava, sweet potatoes, and ornamental plants. Forest gardens produce banana, cassava, yams, and sweet potatoes in the early years of cultivation (*tinungglu*) and a progeny of fruit trees (durian, jackfruit, rambutan, mango, Malay apple, langsat, common guava among others) in the later stage. Complimentary food, such as spices, vegetables, and medicinal plants, is readily available, seldom requiring people to venture far beyond home gardens. Sago, banana, tubers, and fruit trees are a

reliable food source, successfully competing with the weeds and grasses that grow wildly and quickly due to the humid and rainy climate. They suffer little damage from animals and other pests. They provide a stable output and are not affected by seasonal fluctuations.

Edible animals are obtained mainly from the freshwater zone. Small fish, mussels, clams, and shrimps are taken from small lakes, rivers, and streams. Sago grubs are semi-cultivated in the sago gardens while woodworms are semi-cultivated in the river nearby. Closer to the sea, people go fishing daily around their coconut gardens. They also occasionally organize a hunting expedition to obtain meat from the sea, especially turtle and dugong, when they are about to finish a religious ceremony. Saltwater fish are available daily from the market, provided by neighbouring fishermen. Chickens and pigs, two crucial domestic species, are kept and tended in sago and forest gardens. Although animal food is less plentiful than plant food, the community's advantageous location enables people to obtain meat regularly either from the market, their gardens, or from the surrounding environment.

Chapter 4 presents evidence that, in terms of consumption, people have three proper meals per day. Sago, taro, and banana are the main staples consumed and are occasionally supplemented with rice. There are always leftovers after every meal, which are collected and given to the dogs, pigs and chickens. People consume fresh meat in around 70% of their meals. Shrimps, frogs, and small freshwater fish are served mostly for daily meals, especially in families that retain the practice of working in the gardens, while saltwater fish from the market is the primary source of meat in the diets of non-gardening families. Involvement in cash-crop production and other non-gardening jobs, such as being a teacher or a village official, is a critical factor in providing access to saltwater fish. Hunted game has little significance in terms of diet as they are obtained just once or twice a year. People rarely consume fruit, but when it is available during the great fruiting season they enormously enjoy this complimentary food.

Given this demonstrated abundance of food, the riddle implies that being hungry goes beyond a physical and biological problem and is rather a social and cultural statement. The term *malaje* has a deeper meaning if we consider the cultural significance of meat and what it embodies. 'Proper' meat is pork, chicken, and hunted game, all of which are served and consumed together in religious ceremonies. The claim of being hungry is strongly associated with a person/family who lacks the ability to host communal feasts. No communal feast means there is no meat to be distributed, shared, and consumed. Hence, when people refer to being hungry, it is primarily a reference to a lack of social relationships, manifested in the absence of sharing and eating together. By seeing hunger as a social sentiment referring to a lack of sharing or the absence of social relations, this dissertation provides an expanded understanding of the socio-cultural role of food.

Chapter 5 describes how food is a substance that Muntei people use to produce and reproduce themselves socially through necessary activities such as gardening, cooking, sharing, and eating. Muntei people give gardening priority over other food-producing activities because it defines the socially perceptible qualities of themselves as human beings and as Mentawaians. Gardening sets humans apart from non-humans, as only humans can transform undomesticated space (forest) into domesticated spaces (gardens). Producing sago and keeping pigs sets the Mentawaians apart from non-Mentawaians. Furthermore, gardening is highly valued as it generates autonomy for a social person. The term autonomy is not an emic term postulated by Muntei people, but rather it is a term that I deploy to define those qualities produced by the relatively large amount of activities and time that people devote to producing food and gardens. The range of social activities they engage in with respect to food production is ultimately aimed at producing a social actor as the locus of decision-making. Being autonomous is the ultimate value for a social actor.

However, possessing plenty of gardens and food can also generate a negative valuation since it can be dangerous, subterranean, and a threat to the cohesiveness of the community. While having plenty of

food is dangerous, it is not the ultimate taboo. Eating alone is. Keeping food is strongly prohibited as it is the ultimate manifestation of selfishness, the extreme version of autonomy. Eating alone is felt to be anti-social and, thus, immoral. Sharing and eating together are essential cultural ways to forestall individual autonomy and prestige and to maintain equality. Sharing food and eating together in daily meals represent the most basic form of both autonomy and egalitarian values created in the family. Family meals have a fundamental structural significance for Mentawaiian practices of kinship. Food giving and sharing in daily communal meals are valued because they create and renew the social bonds between social persons. Food mediates, produces social bonds, and is imbued with social value.

Occasionally, lavish and ritualized communal meals at the community level (*uma*) generate social renewal. People produce food and eat, but when they share their food and eat together, the food they produce is valued beyond its materiality. During big feasts, all the food, particularly domestic animals, is removed from the person or family that produces it. A ritual feast is a socio-cultural institution created to transform individual autonomy into a collective goal. The food is distributed among all members of the group and consumed together. In this way, sharing and eating food together are social processes organized to generate social solidarity and a shared identity. The sense of communal solidarity in the ritual has primarily been conceived as an effort to repress individual autonomy, which is seen as a threat to the community's highly egalitarian ideals. Food has value as a transformative agent. It enables the group to enact a ritual feast and to transform individual autonomy, creating an event during which everyone is free from jealousy. The ritual feast is a tangible demonstration of the rejection of selfishness and the renewal of social order. Therefore, all circular activities related to food are part of a whole process of constructing persons and community, rather than merely the product of material substances. Producing food is inseparable from the qualification of the person, gender differentiation, labour division, and the reproduction of family as the basic social unit and the reproduction of *uma* as the essential social organization.

In Chapter 6, the dissertation analyses how contemporary notions of hunger are strongly associated with the imbalance and tensions between autonomy-egalitarian values within the community. The imbalance is related to the development of Muntei as a new community and particularly to the emergence of social hierarchy and inequality since people have been engaging with a commodity-based economy and state administration. The market and the state have affected how the villagers produce, distribute, and consume food, which, in turn, reconfigures existing social values. The involvement in cash crop production has particular consequences for food production and consumption and the associated social values. Intensive cacao cultivation has changed the valuation of the swamp forest, replaced sago gardens, and altered customary land tenure and turned pigs, the most important animals, into a pest. These transformations symbolically represent and manifest a significant shift in social life. Incorporation into the Indonesian state administration has created a sense of social hierarchy, an antithesis of the egalitarian ethos. The state administration has introduced new institutions such as village heads and schools. These institutions have offered positions for some villagers as powerbrokers for relevant government agencies and officials. The new authorities and institutions produce new elites. These elites are frequently accused of betraying the community and are commonly called 'money eaters'. 'Eating money' refers to selfishness and a lack of sharing. Both are anti-social and immoral acts. The accusation of 'eating money' is always used in the context of demanding fairness, equal rights, and a fair share.

The new social relations revolve around the market and the state and generate social values that emphasize individual household autonomy rather than the egalitarianism of *uma* in the settlement, putting autonomy above equality and creating a social hierarchy. *Uma*, as social organizations, might still be necessary for communal ceremonies, but there is a growing feeling that inequality within and between *uma* has become more visible. People build big brick houses for their individual families, not communal

longhouses. Some people get better jobs than others. Some *uma* are socio-politically more dominant than others. Being hungry is both symbolic and the actual cost of being paid in the pursuit of a better life in the government settlement, incorporation into the market, and the state administration. The settlement is a better place, but it is not a place where pigs can be raised. The settlement has a festive aura, but it is not a place where all residents enjoy regular consumption of pork and communal feasts. Living in a settlement contradicts the ultimate Mentawai social value of egalitarianism. The growing social hierarchy and uncontrollable autonomy create a sense of danger and a sense of hunger.

The cultural statement of being hungry in which people sense and make sense of their lives informs us of the importance of having a specified, localized, culturally defined and contextualized meaning what food security and insecurity is. Relying on a narrow nutritional perspective is inadequate in designing and delivering healthier food systems across local and global scales. It is necessary to consider the moral dimensions, sensory experiences, and the psychological aspect of food. Any food-related development project must consider people's conception of the environment, cultural meaning attached to foods, as well as ideas concerning control and human intervention with respect to the production, distribution, and consumption of food.