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

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# 11

## Conclusions

Three aspects of Mentawai culture and society have been discussed extensively in the preceding chapters: preservation and transmission of Mentawai oral tradition, especially family stories; early migratory movements of Mentawai ancestors and their inhabitation of different places as told in family stories; and traditional landownership and the resolution of current conflicts over land. These three themes are closely interrelated and they are all related to Mentawaians' memory of the past.

### 11.1 Oral tradition and stories of origin

Vansina states that 'without oral traditions we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world and we would not know them from the inside' (Vansina, 1985: 198). He also writes, 'oral tradition is so rich that one cannot study all its facets in single short study' (Vansina, 1985: 201). Responding to those words, I have attempted to understand the multifaceted aspects of oral tradition by taking an opportunity to get familiar with a type of oral tradition, which is a group of Mentawai family stories. Family stories in Mentawai have never been evaluated beforehand.

To Mentawaians, their oral tradition explains how they came to belong to different kin groups, and it talks about other social matters pertaining to the different kin groups – the genealogical bonds existing among related kin groups, and the kin groups' ancestral lands. As told in family stories, ancestors of different Mentawai kin groups departed from different places of origin. According to the family stories, social conflicts sometimes occurred within a kin group or between two kin groups residing in the same valley.

In order to prove their connection to their ancestral land, current members of a kin group try to recollect what their ancestors have told them about neighbouring kin groups when their ancestors still lived in previous places, and to remember the descriptions of the natural surroundings of their ances-

tral lands. Since there is no written evidence of ancestral land claims, family stories are frequently used as evidence of a claim to a particular plot of land. In Mentawai, storytellers communicate their understanding of a past occurrence with particular gestures, facial expressions, and changes in tone of voice, indicating tension, anger, sadness or happiness. Mentawai storytellers express the feelings and thoughts of their ancestors as if they were the ancestors themselves. They vividly bring the perspective and thinking of their ancestors to their audience. Storytelling in Mentawai conveys the significance of the past to the present, comforting reassurance about the kin group's existence. Family stories not only provide a particularly rich source of knowledge, but also express a group's communal identity.

Regarding the content of their stories, Mentawaians have a category of mythical narratives telling about the origins of human beings, plants, earth, sun, stars, animals, and so on. Mythical stories about the origins of Mentawaians as an ethnic group are also part of this category. These mythical narratives are all called *pumumuan*. The stories are shared by all Mentawaians, and tell how the first Mentawaians occupied the Mentawai Islands. However, they do not tell us the factual places of origin of current Mentawaians. The mythical stories of origin just mention some places where the first people came from before populating the Mentawai Islands and which valleys in the Mentawai Islands they settled in.

The origin of Mentawaians is recounted not only in the mythical narratives called *pumumuan*. In addition, there is a category of narratives, which I call family stories. Each kin group has one or more stories of origin of their own kin group. The stories are part of their collection of family stories. Such stories can be found in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Some of the family stories belonging to individual kin groups also mention the origin of their more distant ancestors. Some kin groups share the same ancestral origin, referring to a particular valley where their ancestor commenced to live and where members of the current kin groups believe their ancestral lands to be located. The family stories comprise features of the kin groups.

## 11.2 Mentawai family stories

To Mentawaians, family stories are important historical accounts. In Chapter 8, I have described the characteristics of Mentawai family stories by examining several versions of three family stories. The differing versions remind us of the complexity and diversity of family stories in Mentawai.

In daily practice, a few crucial elements of family stories are often hidden from particular members of the kin group and from members of other kin groups. This is done in order to protect the family members of a kin group as

well as to protect particular secrets of the kin group from other kin groups' interest. However, this manner alters listeners' attitude towards a family story, as they do not get the complete information of the family story. Members of a kin group thus have different views of a family story. Some listeners are interested in specific conflicts in order to understand why their ancestors departed and split into different families and currently exist in different kin groups.

Others focus on location of plots of land as they view land currently as important for the economy. A few others regard the genealogical links existing among the related kin groups as the important point of the family story; the stories may help them find relatives living elsewhere on the Mentawai Islands. Several families want to become acquainted with cultural values told in the family stories because they can learn from them and make use of them as guidelines for social conduct. A storyteller may focus on a certain theme because of some current situation.

Elder members of a kin group transmit family stories to the younger generations. Several youngsters who have listened to the stories will some day take over the tasks of the older storytellers. Then it will be the youngsters' turn to tell the same stories to upcoming generations. Because of their ability in speaking and telling family stories, these individuals are frequently regarded with respect and admiration by other family members. Because of their talent and their position, a few individuals have a great opportunity to tell family stories. In Mentawai, skilled and talented storytellers also hold a special status in their kin group, being called *rimata* (ritual leader) or *sikebbukat uma* (elder of a kin group). This small number of people are the leading individuals in social and ritual events. Males are more often chosen to be storytellers of family stories than females.

In Mentawai, what storytellers tell about a past event reflects more than their personal interpretation of the event, it also reflects their understanding of the environmental surroundings. While the storytellers narrate an event, their detailed description of the place shows their familiarity and knowledge of the place. Storytellers' personal experience enriches their presentation and enhances their narrative. Mentawaiian storytellers first mention the place name. Sometimes, they mention the names of individuals who found and claimed that place. And then, they describe the landscape of the place in order to communicate the quality and importance of the place.

The appearance of differing versions of a family story in Mentawai shows that storytellers differ in their aptitude for recollecting and recounting past events. The existence of different versions of a family story reflects the fact that storytellers' ability to recollect past events varies. Some storytellers have a good memory for remembering details of past events. Other storytellers only remember the general outline of a past event. Particular storytellers focus on telling the entire historical journey of their ancestors. They often remember lit-

tle more than place-names and destination of the migration. Storytellers with extensive knowledge and a good memory tell a longer story. They not only remember place-names and the direction of migration, but also know how their ancestors came to possess certain plots of land and what verbal agreements were made about them. Family stories function as a source of information that can be interpreted in different ways by storytellers and listeners. Members of a kin group consult their family stories to find the resolution of particular social problems as well as learning good social and cultural manners from the stories.

### 11.3 Family stories about ancestral migration

Mentawai oral tradition – family stories – functions as evidence of reuniting and splitting up of kin groups living in different places after separating from each other. In the ancestral migration of Mentawaians as discussed in Chapter 9 and as told in the family stories presented in Part Two, two major things occurred during the early migratory movements: kin groups split up and kin groups claimed plots of land.

In the process of genealogical expansion, some families remained in the place of first settlement while others looked for other places to live. The families in the place of origin or first settlement sometimes created a new kin group. Meanwhile, the migrating families who had left for a new place rarely returned to the first place, especially if their decision to depart was instigated by a crucial or sensitive conflict like the humiliation of particular family members.

When migrating families decided to pursue different directions, they sometimes decided to split up again even though they had created a new kin group. Later, in new places, these families created new kin groups. As discussed in Chapter 9, genealogical and geographical or topographical expansions of Mentawai kin groups are depicted as a process of family diffusion. The notions of topogeny and genealogy (Fox 1997) are both used in Mentawai family stories. Genealogy in Mentawai is not only an ordered succession of personal names but also an ordered succession of kin group names. Family stories report changes in kin group names. Family stories preserve such important information in structured words. As discussed by Fox (1979), to be a history, a narrative (or a family story) must establish a chronology (in the course of time) and a location (in place-names). Family stories reflect specific reflections of the past.

In the course of migration, kin groups found some plots of land. After claiming an area, a kin group sometimes divided into several families who all migrated to different destinations. At the new places, these families sometimes found empty (unclaimed) land. Today, many generations later, current mem-

bers of a kin group may be living in different places and have several plots of (communal) land located in widely separated places. Mentawaians give names to newly claimed places in order to maintain the kin group's identity and association with those places. Although related kin groups were separated from each other long ago, they often continue to remember who their ancestors and relatives are and where their relatives are currently living and what their kin group names are, as well as remembering where their ancestral lands are located. Information about such matters is currently captured in their family stories.

After living in several different places and passing through many generations, related kin groups sometimes find each other again and re-establish connections. We cannot easily recognize the genealogical link between related kin groups, because each kin group has its own name. The different kin group names do not indicate their ancestral connection. However, by listening to each kin group's family stories, we can figure out how one kin group relates to other kin groups. And sometimes a kin group has no ancestral connection to other kin groups.

#### 11.4 Family stories and social conflicts over land

A comparison between the current size of the population of the Mentawai Islands and the availability of land indicates the islands are still sparsely populated and that land is still widely available. One might then conclude that current Mentawaians should not have any problem finding a plot of land to occupy. However, this is not the case, because every single plot of land on the islands already belongs to a kin group. The ancestors of the various kin groups claimed one plot of land after another in Mentawai ever since departing from their places of origin, until all the land on the islands had been claimed. Land-ownership is passed on through the family from one generation to the next. This all means that other people and kin groups who have arrived more recently in Mentawai have very limited access to acquiring a plot of land.

Land means much more to the Mentawai community than common cultivable ground where they can open gardens and plant valuable trees and crops. As described in Chapter 3, in traditional land tenure in Mentawai, land means the life of the kin group. Most of the time, land is owned collectively by all male members of a kin group. Some kin groups own extensive land while others possess only a few small plots, just enough for a homestead.

Family stories not only provide kin groups with the necessary information for resolving social conflicts, but also precisely define the family relationships existing among related kin groups and their rights to particular plots of land. There are cases of kin groups who are related ancestrally, as they are descended from the same ancestral family, but who nevertheless do not share the same

ancestral land because the ancestor who originally found and claimed the land is not the ancestor who has a direct genealogical connection to the other relatives. Only direct descendants of the ancestor have a clear entitlement to such plots of land. Other relatives may use the land, while recognizing that the land actually belongs to the relatives who are descended from the ancestor who first claimed the land. These matters can be clearly arranged without conflict as long as all the kin groups correctly remember the family stories of their ancestral land and their ancestral connections.

Traditionally, male members of a kin group, especially those who are married, have equal rights in the ownership of their kin group's ancestral land. Male members are responsible for upholding their kin group's identity and maintaining their kin group's inheritance, in such a way that the inheritance can be completely passed on to the next generation. Mentawaians do not entitle female members to own rights to ancestral lands. Nevertheless, female members are fully allowed to take advantage of these lands by freely exploiting them, planting and harvesting crops on them.

After several generations, social transactions remain in Mentawaians' memories. However, human memory can be deficient in preserving all significant details of past occurrences. This is a major factor in conflicts over land. This is caused by what Carsten (1995: 318, 329-330) and Geertz and Geertz (1964) mean by the word 'amnesia'. 'Amnesia' refers to the phenomenon of crucial information fading in people's memory. People can forget important things and in Mentawai this sometimes happens naturally and sometimes happens politically. People's memory cannot retain all details of past occurrences. For example, the precise location of far-away plots of land and their boundaries are often incompletely recollected. The group currently using the land (while not owning the land) frequently claims ownership of the land or claims exaggerated boundaries for their land. Halbwachs (1992) has noted that the forgetting or deformation of certain recollections is explained by the fact that the frameworks of memory change from one period to another in order to meet the different needs of communities.

Although imperfect human memory may result in incomplete recollection of the past, family stories became an important medium for preserving knowledge of significant matters of the past. The important task of maintaining the stories is delegated to particular individuals, usually those who have proven abilities in telling stories and who have experience, talent and knowledge. Prominent storytellers have to tell correctly about the land and the migration of their ancestors. I therefore agree with Steedly (1993: 239) that, 'Stories are not simply products of individual imagination; nor are they transparent reports of "what happened" to a certain person at a certain time and place. They exist within socially constituted patterns of domination and subordination, and within culturally defined patterns of meaning.'

The comprehensive knowledge of storytellers from a kin group involved in a social conflict over land will be a great advantage for their kin group in defending their ancestral land from being reclaimed by other kin groups. The memory of knowledgeable storytellers plays noteworthy roles in preserving these important historical accounts. The way Mentawaians maintain their ancient traditions, memories of their ancestors, and their families' past experiences are a systematic attempt to remember features, contents, forms, meanings, and purposes of family events. Family stories are actually the verbal form that expresses a Mentawai kin group's identity. To Mentawaians, family stories are a source of inspiration in coping with current circumstances.

### 11.5 Role of family stories in conflicts over land

In current conflicts over land rights affecting Mentawaiian kin groups, family stories and people's memory of the past play an important role. I have presented and discussed two cases in Chapter 10 to examine the role of family stories in resolving conflicts over land. These two cases illustrate the situation where family stories provide kin groups involved in disputes with the necessary information for understanding their conflict and finding possible resolutions of the conflict.

In the case of conflict over land in Saibi Muara, family stories make it possible for the descendants of the initial landowners to claim particular plots of land in Saibi Muara, and reject the attempt of other kin groups that tried to claim the land after the initial owners left it unattended. Because the latter kin groups do not have a complete story supporting their claim to land in Saibi Muara, they had to give up their claim to the land. So, family stories clearly are important accounts for distinguishing Mentawaiian kin groups from each other and for establishing who may or may not have rights to particular plots of land.

In a conflict, a kin group needs prominent storytellers who can accurately remember detailed information about the group's land claims and ancestors. I observed that the majority of storytellers are able to recollect eight to twelve generations of ancestors' names, along with the names of several places that their ancestors passed through during migration.

In a land conflict, if a storyteller can tell a set of family stories pertaining to the contested land convincingly and in great detail, it helps his kin group defend their rights to the land. Usually, an individual or two of the group are appointed to represent the rest of group members in order to negotiate the dispute that the group is dealing with. That individual is not necessarily the oldest member of the group. A person considered to have talent and charisma to debate and respond to any questions from the other group is usually an appropriate person to represent the rest of his relatives. The person has to speak

forcefully, expressively, and persuasively in public. The person should have experience dealing with an opposing group. Sometimes the opponents try to put the other group in the corner in the meeting by asking difficult questions. The group representative does not stand alone in the face of these questions. He can ask other members of his group to give necessary support during the meeting. The family stories told in the course of resolving the current land conflicts are thus highly politicized in order to suit the interests of each group involved in the conflict. Different kin groups, different personal names, different place-names and a series of events involved in the conflict make these cases complex in Mentawai. Regarding the politicizing of storytelling, I therefore agree with Ernst (1999: 88) saying that a (family) story can be messy, contested, and full of ambiguities.

During the process of resolving a conflict, an external party, consisting of one or more individuals from other kin groups, mediates between two opposing groups. This person or group is called *sipatalaga* (mediator). They guide the process of resolving the conflict and judge all the accounts presented during the meeting. The head of the village or other official authorities can also take on the role of *sipatalaga*. They have traditional knowledge of dealing with social conflicts. They are acquainted enough with the case and what is more important, they are accepted by both opposing groups to mediate the conflict. The *sipatalaga* deals not only with members of the two opposing groups but also with storytellers with a great knowledge of their kin groups' history. The two storytellers are chosen to represent their respective kin groups in order to win the dispute. To wisely deal with these people is an essential task of the *sipatalaga*.

The third party does not declare which group is the winner of the case. They evaluate all the evidence and information and then return to the opposing groups with a recommendation and ask those groups themselves to discuss and decide which kin group is the winner. If the two opposing groups accept the recommendation of the third party, the case is closed, but if one of the groups keeps denying the truth of the stories, they look for another way to resolve the problem. Most of the time, if the groups cannot agree, they undergo a particular truth-finding ritual called *tippu sasa* as a final attempt to resolve the conflict.

In this last resort for resolving a conflict, even if the groups decide to carry out this ritual, it does not guarantee that the group will be able to end the conflict. In the end, it depends on the people themselves whether they accept or deny the information presented in the meeting. In one of the cases I studied, the groups never came to agreement about their competing claims to land.

I conclude that family stories about land are indeed useful in establishing which plots of land a kin group owns and which kin groups share rights to ancestral land.

## 11.6 Family stories and Mentawaians' memory

Oral tradition and people's memory of the past play an indispensable role in contemporary Mentawaiian society in dealing with questions about place of origin, the notion of belonging, and discourse about land and land rights. Mentawaians view a family story as a source of information about crucial elements of their tradition and about features of their identity. Mentawaians consult their family stories for guidance about good social and cultural manners. They take care of their family stories just as other societies value written accounts. Mentawaiian family stories serve as historical accounts, and comprise important social agreements as well as important conversations and noteworthy events in their ancestors' lives.

While telling their stories, Mentawaiian storytellers reproduce ordinary conversations, which they believe to be the words of their ancestors. Sometimes, they illustrate how their ancestors acted while accomplishing the particular actions like killing their opponents in a headhunting raid. For example, they repeat and imitate the performances of their ancestors and they retell their ancestors' words. In that sense, Mentawaiian oral tradition fits the concepts of the verbal formulations, performances and events described by Bauman (1986).

One circumstance where memories of the past are particularly relevant is in conflicts. A conflict reminds people of events that happened in the past. Storytellers are called in. A storyteller remembers place-names, ancestors' names, cultural objects, borders of ancestral land, their ancestors' migratory movements, and the crucial issues and reasons for past family conflicts. By means of stories, Mentawaians turn to past events and learn something from them in order to effectively cope with their current situation.

However, the recollection of the content of a family story is not always systematic and consistent. Sometimes, a storyteller can only remember the names of his great-grandparents. Another storyteller of the same kin group may recollect seven to ten generations of ancestors. 'There are people in many communities across the world who can recite a genealogy or their ancestors back ten generations or more, and yet others who can barely remember their grandparents. This is not because they have a good or bad memory' (Tonkin 1992: 110). However, in my experience, a storyteller's recollection of past events may not be complete if we look only at what the storyteller immediately remembers when a researcher asks about historical matters. The storyteller's recollection of the past becomes more structured and more complete if he is given more time to recollect what he has been told.

Mentawaians preserve their historical occurrences by repeatedly telling their stories to younger generations in order to be able to use them when needed in the future. Bruner (1986a: 18) argues that stories serve as meaning-generating interpretative devices which frame the present within a hypothetical

past and an anticipated future. However, Mentawaians not only verbalize past happenings in storytelling, but also live with them in their daily activities. For example, when hunting in the forest, an older hunter may remind the younger ones that this is ancestral land of their kin group, and tell stories connected to that land. As Tonkin says, 'To tell history is to act, but in a verbal mode' (Tonkin, 1992: 11). Nonetheless, I agree with Confino who writes 'Not everything is a memory in the same way' (Confino, 1997: 1387-8), because people live their lives through historical occurrences and a variety of current realities.

In opposition to remembering, forgetting also plays an important role in Mentawaiian oral tradition. Mentawaians sometimes hide particular events from other people. In this way, the events may be forgotten. It may happen unintentionally if a storyteller does not completely tell how an event occurred. An example is information about a headhunting raid or an interfamily assault. Mentawaians do not often talk about assaults and headhunting raids that their kin group has carried out towards other kin groups (Schefold, 2007). By hiding details of the event, the elders are trying to protect the rest of the family from being hunted by the kin groups that were the victims of these raids. As long as the victimized kin group is not aware of the identity of those who carried out a raid or assault, they will not know who to take revenge on and the descendants of the kin group who carried out the raid will be safe. But if this information becomes known, then there is the chance that revenge will be taken. So storytellers may omit details of raids and assaults carried out by their ancestors. As children hear only part of the details of the event, they may not know how to defend themselves when descendants of the victims come to take revenge.

Mentawaians thus do not want to remember particular events if they think these events could have bad consequences for their family members. This is frequently the case with the recollection of shameful actions or vicious headhunting raids. Another category of information that is often forgotten is information about ancestors who are not related directly. Current generations of kin groups remember ancestors from whom they are directly descended. But they often forget details about ancestors who separated from the original kin group and created new kin groups for themselves. Even some ancestors in the line of direct descent may be forgotten: Mentawaians frequently declared to me that they do not know the name of the father of their prominent ancestor. Some ancestors are forgotten because they did not make any significant contribution to the group. In short, Mentawaians recollect the names of their ancestors irregularly.

Notions of forgetting and remembering discussed by Janet Carsten (1995) and Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn (1989) resemble the cases I have come across in Mentawai. Mentawaiian kin groups deliberately preserve the memory of a significant number of elements of the past because these el-

ements are important to them. And they simply forget other elements that are insignificant to them. Present landowners do not forget details about their land because the land is their life, their identity and their inheritance from their ancestors. Forgetting and remembering is closely related to social and political intentions. So, to remember or to forget particular historical events has to do with a kin group's political survival strategy.

In short, what do family stories mean for Mentawaians? A group of family stories is one of the elements forming the identity of a kin group. Other elements are plots of ancestral land and genealogical ties that the kin group shares with other kin groups. Storytellers make an effort to remember details of family stories and the different events that comprise the stories. Contents of family stories explain a lot of things, like ancestors of contemporary Mentawaiian kin groups, their places of origins, and past family conflicts. Family stories also describe the migratory movements of those ancestors, as they commenced to move out from different places of origin to current settlements.

Moreover, family stories tell about plots of land located in the homeland as well as other places the ancestors claimed during migratory movements. They tell about the splitting up of the kin group into new kin groups in separate locations, as the families migrated and expanded genealogically from a few initial families to tens of kin groups currently. Family stories furthermore reveal the relationship of related families. Family stories tell the locations as well as the way a kin group acquired possession of particular plots of land. Family stories also clarify why two similar kin groups do not necessarily share the same ancestral family. Themes of the stories differ from one kin group to another, because kin groups experienced dissimilar past events and they may have had different origins and destinations of migration. Family stories contain dissimilar elements and thus serve to distinguish one kin group from the other.

Mentawaians' conflicts over land exemplify a situation where family stories reveal people's relationship with their dwelling-places, natural surroundings, ancestors, and past events. Family stories also signify how far people are able to recollect their memory of past events. Mentawaians consider family stories and other verbal arts as an essential and major form of culture as well as a source of information about historical occurrences. They maintain their verbal culture by telling their family stories properly. Mentawaians carefully transmit their verbal culture to the next family generation.

Finally, Mentawai family stories represent the high potential of human consciousness. Family stories in Mentawai reflect contemporary people's memory of the past as well as their political need when faced with the current changes in Mentawai to be able to decide which of the kin groups share genealogical bonds and ancestral land. Mentawaiian kin groups greatly appreciate their family stories as a key element of their identity.

