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

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Summary

This is a study of oral tradition. In this study, I draw attention to family stories related to historical events and social issues of contemporary Mentawaian kin groups. I give descriptive answers for the central research question of how and to what extent oral narratives are involved in dealing with current issues about place of origin, the notion of identity, and discourses about land and land rights in Mentawai society.

During fieldwork, I collected family stories telling about the lives of ancestors of contemporary Mentawaians, including their geographical and genealogical expansion. The family stories also tell about the origins of those ancestors. During archival study at libraries in the Netherlands and Indonesia, I also focused on stories of origin. In Chapter 4, I look at stories of origin describing different places where the various family groups first settled in the Mentawai Islands. The current owners of the family stories indicate the first location of their earliest kin as their own place of origin. That place is also presumed to be the location of their ancestral land.

According to these family stories, starting from the different places of origin, the ancestors of current Mentawai kin groups began to expand to other places in the Mentawai Islands. The stories presented in Chapters 5 (the mango story or *sipeu*), 6 (the pig story or *sakkokok*), and 7 (the wild boar story or *siberi*) in this book were recorded from kin groups living in several different villages of the Mentawai Islands. These family stories exemplify three different aspects of traditional Mentawai culture. The mango story (*sipeu*) belongs to several kin groups. The kin groups proclaim to have no family connections to each other. In the various versions of the mango story as presented in Chapter 5, each version places the blame on a different individual for having caused the mango incident. Due to this incident, the ancestors migrated to other places in Mentawai. Differences in the versions of the mango story as told by the different kin groups signify the separation of the kin groups, even though the groups all claim to have started from the same origin, the valley of Simatalu.

A second story, described in Chapter 6, is the story about a dispute about a pig (*sakkoko*) between two kin groups. This story is also known by several different, genealogically connected kin groups who were initially settled in the valley of Simatalu. Due to the dispute about the pig somebody was murdered, whereafter one of the rivalry kin groups left the valley, fell apart in various smaller kin groups and were scattered all over the island of Siberut and later also spread to the southern Mentawai islands. All versions of the family story about the pig dipute point at the same ancestor as the instigator of the fight, but after the kin group that left the valley became dispersed the family stories

also start to show significant differences. This is certainly due to the fact that the different sub groups migrated in different directions and to different islands, claiming places that have not been occupied before.

The last story is about the wild boar (*siberi*). It originally belonged to one initial kin group. The versions of the wild boar story discussed in Chapter 7 were recorded from kin groups whose ancestral family initially lived in the valley of Simatalu. The wild boar story tells of the older kin member's failure hunting wild boar in the forest. The old man did not succeed in catching and bringing home any wild boars although he had found several wild boars lying unconscious under a tree in the forest. Female members continuously humiliated the man by laughing and singing, over and over again reminding him of his failure. When the man can no longer bare the humiliations he and his nuclear family leave the kin group and start their wanderings all over the island of Siberut. The old man eventually dies in Taileleu. His offspring has continued to migrate until they eventually ended up in the places where they still live today.

Of course, the initial kin groups dis not migrate all at the same time. Some sub groups left earlier than other did. Especially during these earlier migratory movements, the ancestral groups claimed the places they occupied for longer or shorter periods of time as theirs. Because of these migratory movements, the various kin groups were after a certain amount of time, able to claim various plots of land, sometimes at rather long distance from eachother, as their property. Today, only some of these plots of land are still occupied and lived on by their initial owners. Much of the land the Mentawai Archipelago is nowadays occupied and used by kin groups who migrated at a later stage in history. However, all plots of land, even those not directly occupied or used, are still considered the property of the initial settlers. Due to the various migratory movements the different subgroups regularly came into contact with each other again, causing not only hostilities but sometimes also new alliances as a result of which new kin groups were sometimes created.

In order to preserve information about family matters, Mentawaians keep telling their family stories through generations. By doing so, the significance of family stories is ensured to reach the current generation. A limited number of family members are seen as the storytellers of a kin group. The rest of the family members are seen as listeners. For them, the purpose of listening to the storytellers is mainly in order to be acquainted with the past events described in the stories. However, they are not responsible for telling the family stories to the next generation of storytellers. This is the task of the storytellers themselves. Storytellers have ample knowledge of their family stories and they know what to tell and what to hide, on a given occasion, while keeping in mind what the essential interests of their kin group are.

As discussed in Chapter 7, a family story in Mentawai has a number of features characterizing it as a separate genre within the Mentawaian oral tra-

dition. Mentawaians take care of their family stories better than other kinds of oral narratives. Mentawaians regard their family stories as different from myths and legends, which also exist. Family stories are sources of information about past occurrences. Family stories serve as historical accounts, because Mentawaians do not have a written tradition. They rely on family stories for defining their rights to particular communal heritages (especially land) and for distinguishing relationships among related kin groups that became separated from each other long ago.

In Chapter 9, I examine two essential matters transmitted through the family stories; the geographical and genealogical expansion of Mentawaian kin groups and their claims to ancestral land. Several places mentioned in the family stories are used to chart the course of migration and the separation of the initial families into several kin groups.

As explained in Chapter 10, family stories are still frequently used in gatherings where conflictious claims with regard to certain plots of ancestral land are about to be solved. Such conflicts primarily emerge when two or more different kin groups claims rights to the same plot of land. In order to determine which of the kin groups is the rightful owner of the land involved, their storytellers should present their family stoy as convingly as possible. In a number of cases, the information distilled from the family stories can indeed be used to indicate the rightful owner to the land. In other cases, sometimes even despite the information in the family stories is enough to indicate the rightful owner, the problem remains unsolved after which the different kin groups often remain in conflict with each other for a long time.

In the concluding chapter, I focus on the role played by family stories in resolving social conflicts among kin groups in Mentawai. The power of human memory plays an important part in maintaining and transmitting the significance of past events. As a historical account, a family story must be properly preserved by its owners by carefully transmitting the content and significance of the story to following generations. For particular reasons, like clarifying the relationship of kin groups that were separated long ago, a family story cannot be simply changed and manipulated by its owners because it is an important identity marker of the kin group.

The Mentawaian family stories carry various features that distinguish them from other forms of oral narratives. A family story tells the history of a certain family group according to historical events and the strategic use of place names. In this sense the family stories are an important meaning according to which certain claims with regard to ancestral land can be justified. Simultaneously the family stories are an important source of information with regard to identity, thus forming a verbal reflection of the kin groups' identity. In the field of oral tradition, family stories can thus be regarded as a specific genre of oral narratives. When studying oral narratives it is, in my opnion, important

to pay special attention to family stories. Not in the last place so, because the communities still using family stories frequently consider them indispensable.