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Products and producers of social and political change: elite activism and politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago, Indonesia
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1 Introduction

Introduction

This thesis deals with a generation young, formally educated and politically engaged Mentawaians and their strive for more access to the resources of the local state. Due to the increased analytical power of this group of Mentawaians that I indicate as a local elite, they increasingly acted against their exclusion of political decision-making processes with regard to the Mentawai Archipelago (Map 1).

The Indonesian central government has long excluded the Mentawaians from formal local politics and administration because they were regarded as backward people who had missed out on modernisation and development. They were considered a-political primitives and therefore incapable of occupying political and/or administrative positions. This all changed when, as a result of the pan-Indonesian switch to a more decentralised form of authority, the Mentawai Archipelago was granted autonomous district status in late 1999. The political rearrangements that were triggered by this event marked a milestone in the political history of the Mentawai Archipelago that had been ruled by the mainland oriented Minangkabau and Batak for decades.

This momentum formed an important window of opportunity for the elite group of Mentawaians as the new power constellations allowed them to take over from the political establishment in the archipelago. This self-appointed political elite then plunged into the complexities of the political and administrative reorganisation of the Mentawai Archipelago. On paper their main objective was to uplift the Mentawai Archipelago from its perceived underdeveloped status while maintaining or even reviving their Mentawai identity. What followed was a period characterised by intense politicking during which ethnic and religious sentiments were mobilised in order to achieve goals that were personal in many cases and often bypassed the main objective to develop the Mentawai Archipelago in a joint effort.¹ Renewed conflicts over the use of the environment and quickly spreading corruption, collusion and nepotism were also part of the political processes.

¹ Politicking is a term I borrowed from Davidson (2005, 2007). I use the term politicking in order to hint at activities directed towards acquiring power and influence, and activities undertaken for political reasons or ends such as campaigning for votes, making speeches, or otherwise promoting oneself or one's policies in order to achieve one's own goals.

While this thesis oversees some 20 years of politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago, its main focus is on the period 1997-2004. This time-span allows me to gain insight in the background of the Mentawaian elite and simultaneously covers the first, most crucial and politically turbulent years of regional autonomy and decentralisation also called the era of *Reformasi* (reformation). Rather than testing whether or not the rearrangement of existing force fields brought about by decentralisation and regional autonomy has been the long awaited panacea to cure the negative effects of the Indonesian strive for unity in diversity – which it is not – this thesis offers an in-depth portrait of a generation of Mentawaians that is as much a product as well as a producer of social and political change. The compilation of data presented in this thesis has been informed within an anthropological and scientific context, where certain questions are considered more relevant or worthwhile than others. This thesis furthermore builds on an extensive amount of mainly anthropological literature about the Mentawai Archipelago and its inhabitants. Instead of sifting and deepening all this literature, this thesis makes use of the information presented in these writings and I will provide the reader with adequate references whenever needed.

Background

It was in 1997 that I went to Indonesia for the first time. After a two-month intensive *Bahasa Indonesia* language course at the governmental Universitas Andalas (UNAND) in Padang, I went to the Mentawaian island of Siberut in order to conduct field research for my master thesis (Leiden University). During my stay in Padang, however, I had already come across several Mentawaians residing in Padang more or less permanently. In preparation for my upcoming research on Siberut I befriended several of these generally young Mentawaians. I visited their houses, boarding schools, offices and got myself involved in their leisure activities and sports, building quite intense relationships with some of them.

While I saw many of these young and educated Mentawaians struggling with their paradoxical position as forward migrants in an alien context that regarded them as second-class citizens at best, I also recognised that several of them were obviously involved in a, yet ill-defined, strive for more access to the resources of the local state. Although I was certainly not the first to notify the presence of this specific group of Mentawaians residing in the city of Padang, it was only during the second half of the 1990s that their acting against the appropriation of their local government and the ill development planning for their region by the Indonesian nation state, denying the Mentawaians full Indonesian citizenship and the returns of the exploitation of the natural resources within their archipelago, started to show the contours of a social movement. Although my master thesis (Eindhoven 1999) handled a fairly different topic, my interest for this group of young people was certainly awakened and I found myself able to also note down some of my observations with regard to this group of people during this first seven months stay in Indonesia.



The Mentawai Archipelago, West Sumatra²

Only few months after my return to the Netherlands in January 1998, president Suharto was forced to step down from power. After more than thirty years of authoritarian rule Suharto's *Orde Baru* (New Order) regime gave way to the era of *Reformasi* (Reformation), signing a pan-Indonesian switch to a more decentralised form of authority subsequently followed by the introduction of *otonomi daerah* (regional autonomy). Even before Law 22/1999 on decentralisation of the state administration became operative in 2001, then-president Habibie granted the Mentawai Archipelago autonomous district status in October 1999. This event marked a milestone in the political history of the Mentawai Archipelago and triggered immense turbulence at all levels in the local bureaucracy. Before I was admitted as a PhD student to the Amsterdam School for Social Science

² Source: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Straat_Mentawai#/media/File:Mentawai_Islands_Map.png (visited 25 september 2018).

Research (ASSR – University of Amsterdam) in November 2000, I went back to Padang and Mentawai two times. The first time as a tourist in 1998-1999 and as an Advanced Master Class student attached to the Research School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies (CNWS – Leiden University) in March 2000. It was during these visits that I was able to witness ongoing events first hand. I became aware of how the changes in the political climate in Indonesia had broadened and accelerated the ethno-political agenda of the young, educated Mentawaians residing in Padang. I then realised that the administrative independency of the Mentawai Archipelago was not just an occurrence in its political history being thrown at the Mentawaians. It were these young and educated Mentawaians that had been actively involved in the acquiring of the archipelago's detachment from the mainland oriented district of Padang-Pariaman. It was there and then that I decided that my PhD research would be devoted to the ethno-political activities of this particular group of Mentawaians.

When I again returned to Padang and Mentawai as a PhD student in 2001, the politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago had come to a full swing. Many of the young and educated Mentawaians I had become familiar with during previous years, now occupied political and administrative positions that had never before been available to the Mentawaians on such an overwhelming scale. People were falling over each other in order to secure the available positions for themselves and their protégées. The situation was tense and chaotic. People were either in- or excluded from partaking based on various ethnic and religious sentiments. They struggled with politicised notions of identity and the old issue of how to progress and foster development while maintaining their cultural identity. What, in my opinion, makes this group of Mentawaians so worthwhile to study is the fact that these people operate right on the intersection of a number of important discourses. First, these people are responsible for localisation: the reinforcing and emphasizing of local cultural identity further reinforced by processes of decentralisation and regional autonomy. Second, they have to deal with the forces of Indonesianisation: the promotion and unification of the country's mainstream culture, political system and economy. Finally, there is the discourse of globalisation, which consists of an assortment of discourses concerning various aspects of culture and society, the global biodiversity conservation discourse being the most important for this thesis.

Literature review and conceptual framework

From the perspective of the state

In his book *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (2010) Eriksen argues that people otherwise known as first nations, aboriginals, ethnic minorities, hill tribes, scheduled tribes, tribal or isolated people, fourth world, autochthonous, and cultural or national minorities are in fact products of processes of modernisation, the spread of the capitalist mode of production and consumption and their integration into a system of nation states. States have a tendency to create nations – bounded entities of ethnically more or less homogeneous populations living in circumscribed territories over which the state wishes to exert absolute power. The very process of nation building requires all living within state

boundaries to become 'citizens'. In order to create a save, national unity all residents have to subsume to the processes of nation building aiming at a national, modern culture, not disturbed by deviating ethnic loyalties. (Bodley 2011; Eriksen 2010; Scott 1998, 2009). Nation states, especially post-colonial nation states are furthermore constantly seeking for prestigious levels of progress and development. Based on quantitative development theories of the 1960s and 1970s, many developing countries and countries in transition measure levels of development along indicators solely translating economic growth such as income per head and gross national product (Duncan 2004: 3-5; Nicholas 2000: 43-46). Some people, however, do not automatically fit into these dominant discourses of national unity and modernisation and have turned into a disturbing factor in the nation building process. Those people that do not meet the acquired levels of development considered necessary to contribute to nation building, are considered 'traditional' and / or 'underdeveloped'. These traditional communities are believed to have cultures that are antagonistic towards the competitive values of capitalism and the privatising logic of entrepreneurship (Brown 2003). Traditional communities furthermore have ethnic loyalties perceived as deviating and are generally considered a hazard to the sovereignty of the nation state. When nation states are under the impression that they cannot modernise effectively with communities like these in their midst it is likely for state resentment against these people to intensify (Duncan 2004; Endicott & Knox Dentan 2004; Niezen 2003). The peculiar and pressing attachment that many traditional communities tend to have towards their lands is furthermore particularly disturbing to nation states wishing to exploit natural resources available on these lands (Nicholas 2000: 60; Persoon *et al.* 2004; Scott 2009). As Maybury-Lewis (2002) has made explicit, it is especially when the state meets with obstructions in the exploitation of natural resources available within the territories of these people that governmental pressure on these people to assimilate into broader society increases (see also Bodley 2008).

Traditional communities are assumed to lack initiative and innovative power to develop on their own and therefore have to be developed. Many postcolonial nation states worldwide have developed various policies with regard to traditional communities. The often significantly different lifestyles of traditional communities, considered not worthy of participation in a modern nation state, have triggered nation states to implement levelling policies in order to alter or even eliminate these lifestyles (Duncan 2004). Besides downright genocide and enforced displacement, Eriksen (2010) mentions policies of assimilation, domination or segregation and the more complicated strategy of adopting an ideology of multiculturalism - where citizenship and full civil rights need not imply a particular cultural identity, or a decentralized federal model providing a high degree of local autonomy - in order for nation states to gain control over those people prominently representing worrisome ethnic and cultural variety.

Especially the policies aiming at assimilation, widespread in Southeast Asia, are generally understood as a strategy that should lead to equal rights and improvement of the social position of the targeted minorities. Reality, however, shows that policies of assimilation often lead to suffering and loss of dignity on the part of the traditional communities because in the process they are taught to understand themselves, their culture and

lifestyles in mainly negative terms (Bodley 2008). The causes for the widespread disintegration of traditional communities within the nation state are quite paradoxically to be sought in the efforts of that very same nation state to attach citizenship to all its residents. The current marginalised position of traditional communities and their coming into existence as a category are believed to be caused by their, often unfortunate and incomplete, integration into the nation state (Bodley 1999; Endicott & Knox Dentan 2004; Eriksen 2010). It is due to states' efforts to integrate their minorities into the nation state and into the capitalist mode of production and consumption that traditional communities have come into conflict with their respective nation states most seriously (Niezen 2003). Minorities acting against what they perceive of as violations of human rights and the denial of the right to self-determination, soon came to be stigmatised as antagonists of modernity, as opposed to development, non-progressive, and anti-governmental accordingly.

An act of denial

Over the past five decades traditional communities all over the world have been united under the globally recognised term 'indigenous peoples'. This politically charged category enabled the international community to speak on behalf of these socially and politically marginalised people (Niezen 2003; Sawyer & Gomez 2012). Indonesia's legal system, however, does not meet an equivalent for the internationally recognised and highly politicised category of indigenous people (Li 2000). While the Indonesian government has claimed all Indonesian citizens – except for the Chinese, Arabs and Westerners residing in Indonesia – to be indigenous to the country, Indonesia does not acknowledge indigenous peoples as defined by international institutions, laws, and conventions (Persoon *et al.* 2004). Whereas Indonesia does not acknowledge the internationally recognised concept of indigenous peoples applicable to the country, the Indonesian government subsequently has – quite dissimilar from the situation in the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand – no official body dealing with indigenous ethnic minorities, nor does it recognise certain ethnic groups as having special legal privileges on the basis of their indigeneity (Duncan 2004: 92). Those people in Indonesia that could classify as indigenous people were, according to Suharto's *Orde Baru* regime, in official documents referred to as *masyarakat terasing* (isolated communities). Being classified as *masyarakat terasing* was foremost a statement about a group's socio-economic status and level of incorporation into the nation-state. Unlike the Malay *Orang Asli*, being classified as *masyarakat terasing* was not associated with any particular legal status or limitation on civil liberties (Endicott 2016; Nicolas 2000). Technically and legally, individuals labelled as *masyarakat terasing* enjoyed the same rights and privileges as every other Indonesian citizen (Duncan 2004: 92; Persoon *et al.* 2004). Cleverly omitting foreign interference within domestic affairs, Indonesia has never ratified neither of the conventions by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), nor has it partaken in the 1993 United Nations Year of the Indigenous Peoples and the subsequent United Nations International Decades of the World's Indigenous Peoples.³ To the surprise of many Indonesia did vote in favour of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights

³ The United Nations organised two successive Decades of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The first International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) and the second International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (2005-2014).

of Indigenous Peoples, but also simultaneously stated that the use of the term indigenous peoples rendered the declaration inapplicable to the Indonesian context.⁴ The fact that many of the international treaties and conventions have not been ratified by Indonesia has severely paralysed the internal discussion around indigenous peoples and has limited the direct impact of the guidelines and principles offered by these treaties to a minimum. The topic has, however, continuously and increasingly been on the agenda of large international institutions. Many of these institutions – of which the most important and influential are the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) – have expressed their concern with regard to the position of indigenous peoples in Indonesia and have issued policy statements regarding indigenous peoples.⁵ Despite the impact being minimal, it is precisely through the policy guidelines of these multilateral development agencies that the trickle down effect of the international discourse on indigenous peoples within Indonesia has been most influential (Persoon *et al.* 2004: 37).

Significantly different: masyarakat terasing

Soon after the Japanese capitulation in 1945, Indonesia declared independence. Eager to construct a coherent unitary nation, everybody within the former Dutch colony was forced to take on an identity as an Indonesian citizen. Whereas the new leaders considered the abundant ethnic diversity present within Indonesia a potential threat to the country's sovereignty, they started to promote and emphasise an invented national ideology with subsequent values and goals immediately after independence (Holtzappel 2003). This national culture project promoted the creation of a national identity worthy of a modern state; a process in which as disturbing regarded ethnic attachments were transformed into proper citizenship. In contrast with the attitude of denial of ethnic diversity prevailing in the Sukarno era, the *Orde Baru* regime – installed after the 1965 coup attempt - used the more devious strategy of disempowerment and incorporation.⁶

The national culture project, however, proved to be a discriminatory process. While some cultures were actively stimulated and supported to partake in and contribute to the process of nation building, others were forcefully excluded. The lifestyles of the latter, among which we can find Dayak (Kalimantan), Kubu (Sumatra), Baduy (Java), Asmat and Dani (Papua), Minahasa (Sulawesi), and also the Mentawaians (West Sumatra) were considered backward and unworthy of partaking in the national culture project. These people were considered to have lost track from the mainstream of national progress and development. As a result these people had to cope with outdated self-sufficient

⁴ Plenary report on vote 13 September 2007 (United Nations 2007).

⁵ See for instance ADB (2002) Country Report Indonesia and ADB (1999) Policy Report on Indigenous Peoples.

⁶ In order not to get into conflict with ethnic loyalties the *Orde Baru* regime did not only 'domesticate' (Scheffold 1998: 260) and de-politicise ethnic identities; their aestheticised 'peaks' were being enlisted to contribute to the process of nation building (Picard 1997). By actively supporting a certain selection of regional cultural expressions, morality and political correctness were controlled while ethnic ways of life were reduced to tourist friendly manifestations. (Yampolsky 1995). The ethnic variation present within the country thus became the main feature of Indonesian national culture, very well disseminated by the national motto: *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity).

modes of production and consumption, unacceptable animistic belief systems, narrow-minded social systems in which contact with other ethnic groups is virtually absent, (semi) nomadic lifestyles, primitive clothing, low quality food, little food security, simple housing, poor healthcare systems, illiteracy, ill developed sense of beauty and art, non-monetary economic systems, little consciousness of state and nation, poor defence strategies, and little opportunity to develop. Their geographic isolation was supposed to be the main cause of their backwardness and also the reason why these people became eventually known as *masyarakat terasing* (isolated communities).

Masyarakat terasing became classified as a social, religious and agricultural problem, hampering the effective modernisation of the nation state itself (Persoon 1994: 67).⁷ It was therefore that Indonesia's most repressive assimilationist policies were directed towards *masyarakat terasing*, forcing them to give up their traditional lifestyles and reunite with the national mainstream of progress (*kemajuan*) and development (*pembangunan*). The design of the various development and civilisation programmes that were to transform *masyarakat terasing* into respectable Indonesian citizens, was foremost the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and to a lesser extent that of the Ministries of Forestry and Religion.⁸

In a country as ethnically diverse as Indonesia, it remained rather vague who exactly qualified as *masyarakat terasing*. The term *masyarakat terasing* as described in the Social Minister's decree 5/1994 referred to 'groups of people who live or are nomadic in geographically remote and isolated areas and are socially and culturally alienated and/or still underdeveloped compared to other Indonesian communities in general'. The underdevelopment in the definition referred to health, education, housing, clothing, and lifestyle. The Indonesian National Agency for Development Planning (BAPPENAS) has also put forward some characteristics of the so-called isolated people: they 1) live as nomads or are scattered in small groups, 2) are dependent on nature through hunting, fishing, gathering, and swidden farming, 3) have low healthcare and environmental standards, 4) have a low standard of housing, 5) have limited knowledge and technology, 6) have animistic belief systems, and 7) are strongly tied to their culture and beliefs which isolates them from the rest of society (ADB 2002: 4).⁹

The Indonesian Department of Social Affairs has over different periods in time classified 1-1.7 million people – divided over 80 to 100 different ethnic groups – as *masyarakat terasing* (Li 2001; Persoon *et al.* 2004: 22). The spread of *masyarakat terasing* over the country is a very uneven one. A disproportional part of the *masyarakat terasing* is living

⁷ Indonesia's stance and policies towards *masyarakat terasing* have certainly not been unique. Nicholas (2000: 46) explains how the Orang Asli in Malaysia have been subject to what he calls the 'cultural-assimilationist approach'. Similar to Indonesia, Malaysia regards the lifestyles of Orang Asli, and the attachments they have to their territories impediments to modernisation.

⁸ Until 1983 the Ministry of Forestry has been part of the Ministry of Agriculture. It has been acting as an independent ministry ever since (Persoon 1994)

⁹ See also Persoon (1994: 65-67) and Duncan (2004) for an elaborate discussion of the terminology.

in the Papuan provinces (an estimated 600,000 individuals) and the province of East Kalimantan (400,000 people). The remaining half million people are scattered all over the country.¹⁰ In official documents some 80-100 differing groups of *masyarakat terasing* are mentioned.¹¹ Regardless of how *masyarakat terasing* were counted and classified, it was generally agreed upon – not only among policy makers, but also among anthropologists, linguists and other scientists – that this group of people represents an enormous cultural diversity. Included are dispersed hunters and gatherers (Orang Rimba or Kubu, Punan, Sakai), sea nomads (Orang Suku Laut or Bajau), and various types of shifting cultivators (Dayak, Dani, Mentawaians).

The highly divergent lifestyles of these peoples were considered especially not worthy of partaking in the national culture project. The Indonesian state, constitutionally obliged to guarantee all its citizens access to general processes of progress (*kemajuan*) and development (*pembangunan*), has issued various policies in order to guide these people back into the mainstream of national progress and development, the rationale for which is rooted in the state ideology of nation building, development and modernity. The subsequently developed civilisation and development programme of the Ministry of Social Affairs thus aimed at permanent settlements in sufficiently large social units, increase in production capacity, expansion of societal life outside the direct family group, increase of the rationale and dynamic mental capacities, erasure of the tribal worldview and way of life, development of norms similar to the rest of the country, increase consciousness of state and nation, and the development of a monotheistic religious life (Persoon 1994). To guarantee the effectiveness and efficiency of the governmental civilisation and development programme, people were gathered together in permanent settlements – so-called resettlement villages – where proper houses built according to a uniform design, healthcare and religious facilities, and educational institutions were made available simultaneously. As soon as people were transferred from their former settlements to the new resettlement village, additional projects aiming at the total abandoning of tribal practices set off. Formal education was introduced. Shifting cultivation and hunting practices were replaced by an agricultural system aiming at the production of cash crops and rice. Social life was to be expanded beyond family ties through the introduction of a social system based on the so-called principle of *gotong royong* (solidarity, cooperation). After five years, when transformation towards the new modern lifestyle was considered satisfactory, resettlement villages lost their status as project villages and became normal villages under regular bureaucratic rule.

The agricultural problem is rooted in the fact that a considerable number of *masyarakat terasing* is practising swidden agriculture – better known as shifting cultivation. Extensive

¹⁰ Officially there are only six provinces that do not harbour *masyarakat terasing* of their territories; these are Lampung, Bali, Central and East Java, and the two urban provinces of Jakarta and Yogyakarta.

¹¹ These countings are, however, not taking into account the highly complicated situation in Papua for which it is estimated that this province alone harbours some 200 dissimilar ethnic groups that classify as *masyarakat terasing*. The Papuan diversity is, however, for the sake of clarity often reduced to a more manageable number of ethnic clusters in which several smaller ethnic groups are gathered together.

literature on this agricultural practice has indicated that this agricultural practise – as long as it is practiced in a sustainable, non-pioneering manner – proofs to be an excellent way to minimise soil erosion and general depletion of the ecosystem (Conklin 1961; Dove 1983; Schieffelin 1975). The Indonesian government, however, believes that these practices lead to a serious loss of precious timber growing in the area – timber which could otherwise be used for the gathering of national revenues.¹² In Indonesia, land under swidden agriculture was considered not to be cultivated in a proper manner and was therefore considered *tanah kosong* (empty land). *Tanah kosong* was furthermore automatically considered state-owned land. As a result, people living on these lands were denied the acknowledgement of ownership over lands they, according to their customary laws, perceive as their property (Bakker 2009). From a governmental point of view these people are thus using land and timber illegally. This is the reason why these people also became to be known as *peladang liar* (wild, uncontrolled, undomesticated agriculturalists) or *penebang liar* (illegal, uncontrolled loggers) (Acciaioli 2001: 61). The Ministry of Forestry has been responsible for a lot of the resettlement projects, especially popular during the 1970s, that should have changed the shifting cultivation practices of these people into sedentary agricultural systems bound to the market. People were encouraged and sometimes even forced to produce cash crops. The selling of their products would automatically introduce *masyarakat terasing* to the monetary economy. Precious timber would at the same time be saved from illegal exploitation and could thus be put under legal logging concessions.

The first principle of Indonesia's national philosophy called *Pancasila* – that is the belief in a supreme God – is considered extremely important.¹³ Nowadays Indonesia knows six officially recognised religions: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.¹⁴ Whereas a lot of *masyarakat terasing* did not adhere to either of the five religions that were recognised during the New Order, they became classified as *suku suku yang belum beragama* (ethnic groups that do not have a religion yet) (Persoon 1994, 2004). The belief systems of these people are often qualified as inferior superstitions and people practising these belief systems are therefore subject to, sometimes forceful, projects of conversion. Soon after Indonesian independence a decree was issued stating that everybody should adhere to a proper religion. This call for religion (*agama*) was simultaneously an implicit call for and thus the acceptance of progress, modernisation, and other nationalistic ideals (Atkinson 1983: 633). While the Ministry of Religion itself was barely involved in processes of conversion, the Indonesian

¹² One of the most important national development strategies adopted by Suharto's Orde Baru government to increase foreign exchange revenues, was through the sale of timber obtained from logging concessions issued by the (Gunawan et.al. 1999: XV)

¹³ The Pancasila consists of five principles. These are: the belief in a supreme God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy and social justice (Holtzappel 2003).

¹⁴ During the New Order Era, Confucianism was not recognised as an official religion as it was regarded as being closely related to Chinese culture – not to be promoted during the New Order era. Presidential decree 6/2000 has once again included Confucianism in the list of officially recognised religions in Indonesia (Binawan 2011: 371)

government has encouraged missionary activities (usually Christian) among *masyarakat terasing*. The Indonesian government of course aimed at the total elimination of the as inferior perceived local belief systems, but while the nominal acceptance of a new religion was in many cases realised without real obstructions, the erasure of all encompassing conceptions with regard to the acquaintanceship with contemporaries, the natural environment, and ancestors was in many cases less convincing. In many cases old and new belief systems tend to coexist as more or less separated domains from which individuals can yield according to experienced needs. The allowed level of syncretism is then again heavily depending upon the permissiveness of the missionary organisation. Islamic and Protestant organisations have in this regard been much less tolerant towards traditional religious expressions than Hindu and Catholic organisations. The Karo Batak (North Sumatra), Ngaju Dayak (Central Kalimantan), and the Toraja (South Sulawesi) have even been able to modify their traditional belief system in such a way that they were accepted as variants of Hindu Dharma (Ramstedt 2004). Although some internal restructuring has certainly been needed in order to obtain this new status, these people were at least no longer perceived as pagans in urgent need of conversion.

Shifting political contexts

Although the eventual downfall of Suharto's *Orde Baru* regime can largely be explained by looking at the dynamics of Indonesian domestic politics, the importance of external influence in the country's affairs cannot be denied (Van Dijk 2001). Anwar (2001) for instance explains that the ending of Suharto's rule can partly be explained by fundamental changes in the international system after the end of the Cold War. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 deprived Indonesia – known for its strong anticommunist ideology – from its function as shield against communist expansion to the south. The political and strategic importance attached to Indonesia by the United States did not only materialise in large scale economic loans and grants, but was also manifested in political support for president Suharto and the Indonesian military. The international Cold War dynamics thus provided a permissive environment within which an authoritarian political system, such as Indonesia's *Orde Baru* regime, could flourish. The collapse of communism considerably diminished Suharto's value as a de facto ally of the United States and the West as a whole. The post Cold War international agenda, which prioritises democratisation, human rights, environmental protection, transparency and good governance all directly went against Suharto's political and economic interests. Instead of adapting to the major global changes, the *Orde Baru* rulers took on a defensive attitude towards the criticisms that were increasingly being levelled against them. External pressures on Indonesia to reform its political system and improve its human rights practices were regarded by the government in Jakarta as interferences in Indonesia's internal affairs that had to be rejected by all means. This attitude put Indonesia in an increasingly difficult situation, particularly as international donor organisations started to link economic assistance with human rights and other non-economic issues.

Supported by the post Cold War agenda, intellectual discourses about democratisation and human rights became increasingly prominent and sophisticated in Indonesia. The since the early 1990s expanding clusters of pro-democracy and human rights groups

became increasingly active in facilitating anti-governmental street demonstrations and protests (McVey 2003).¹⁵ Describing the *Orde Baru* regime as totalitarian and fascist, these groups attempted to unite all forms of pro-democracy movements in order to increase pressure against Suharto's government and his family business interests (Aspinall 1995: 34). From the mid 1990s onward NGOs, openly challenging the government by demanding political liberalisation, started to mushroom all over Indonesia giving witness of what Appadurai (2000) has called 'globalisation from below'. This 'grassroots globalisation' consists of the emergence of institutions concerned with mobilising highly specific local, national, and regional groups on matters of equity, access, justice, and redistribution. These organisations have complex relations with the state, with the official public sphere, with international civil society initiatives, and with local communities. Sometimes they are uncomfortably complicit with the policies of the nation state and sometimes they are violently opposed to these policies. Sometimes they have grown wealthy and powerful enough to constitute major political forces in their own right and sometimes they are weak in everything except [or even in] their transparency and local legitimacy' (Appadurai 2000: 11-12). While there is no accurate data on the exact number of NGOs in Indonesia available it is believed that the number of NGOs has grown from some 10,000 in 1996 to around 70,000 in 2000 (Hadiwinata 2003: 1).

Though not very outspoken yet and certainly not very influential at a political level Indonesia's indigenous peoples also saw an increased number of opportunities to express their views at international forums and to contribute to policy decisions by important multilateral development banks like the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) during the 1990s. Despite the increased opportunities, Indonesia's indigenous peoples had no national organisation through which they could address the international community. Furthermore there was no representative body at the national level that could draw Indonesia's indigenous peoples together in order to take a more powerful stand in political negotiations with the state. There was a clear need for a pan-Indonesian organisation supporting the indigenous peoples in the country. It was in 1993 that a first step in this direction was taken.

Jaringan Pembelaan Hak-Hak Masyarakat Adat (JAPHAMA), the Indigenous People's Advocates Network grew out of a workshop organised by Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI), Indonesia's leading environmental organisation. During this 1993 meeting held in South Sulawesi it was decided that indigenous peoples in Indonesia needed a network to help protect, defend and study their rights. More than 30 NGOs, individuals and community groups joined the network ever since. JAPHAMA was responsible for a re-entering of the terminology of *masyarakat adat* within the public

¹⁵ Among which we find INFIGHT (Indonesian Front for the Defence of Human Rights), LPHAM (Institute for the Defence of Human Rights), Aldera (Alliance for People's Democracy), PIJAR (Information Centre and Action network for Reform), PIPHAM (Centre for Human Rights Information and Education), and PRD (People's Democratic Party) (Aspinall 1995: 34)

arena.¹⁶ Although the *masyarakat adat* discourse was used within the Indonesian bureaucracy throughout the 1970s, 1980s and even somewhat into the 1990s, the term was only partially accepted. The bureaucratic interpretation of the term excluded nomadic people from the definition, automatically implying that these people did not have rights over their territory and the natural resources therein. The ability of self-governance, which constitutes the core of *masyarakat adat* was, however, an insurmountable thorn in the eye of the Indonesian administration. Therefore the term never really popularised. Using the term, raising underlying issues with regard to autonomy and autochthony of particular groups within Indonesian society remained to be interpreted as subversive, a threat to national unity and integration, and as against development throughout the 1990s. JAPHAMA was, however, one of the first institutes that dared to use the term more openly again, encouraging its underlying notions of autonomy and autochthony. JAPHAMA defined *masyarakat adat* as 'groups of people who have intergenerational origins in a certain geographic territory and also have their own value system, ideology, economy, politics, culture, society and territory' (ADB 2002: 5). Throughout the 1990s JAPHAMA has been active in four fields of work: 1) the strengthening of the indigenous community by organising meetings with and between *masyarakat adat*, conducting strategic planning and jointly studying their use and management of local resources; 2) the building of support by identifying relevant participants for the network, promoting the network's ideals, spreading information and forming an alliance to support *masyarakat adat*; 3) the critical analysis of policies with regard to indigenous peoples' rights, the relationship between the state and *masyarakat adat* and the simultaneous drafting of alternatives and; 4) the building of capacity of network participants (DTE 1999b).

Regional autonomy and the upsurge of identity politics

The shifting international political context and the developments it caused in the Indonesian domestic sphere coincided with a deep monetary crisis that swept through Asia from mid 1997 onwards. Suharto and his authoritarian *Orde Baru* regime, fostering corruption, collusion and nepotism (*korupsi, kolusi dan nepotisme* - KKN), were held responsible for the fact that Indonesia was the country hardest and longest hit by the crisis. The economic crisis took a turn for the worse when the Rupiah collapsed in late 1997, thereby further eroding the legitimacy of the *Orde Baru* government in general and Suharto in particular (Anwar 2001; Holtzappel 2009). In a number of incidents in major cities in Java and Kalimantan, urban popular protests turned into mass violence against

¹⁶ The term adat community originally stems from a legal discourse that goes back to the Dutch lawyers Van Vollenhoven & Ter Haar (1962) who introduced the term *rechtsgemeenschappen* (literally: legal communities) in the early 20th century. The term is interchangeably translated as 'autonomous group' or 'autonomous community'. Indonesian law experts translated the term later into 'adat community' or 'adat law community'. The term *rechtsgemeenschappen* was used to indicate those communities in the Dutch East Indies who had established their own local legal regulations and social control system. These communities were considered able to govern themselves and their environment according to local rules and regulations. The adat or self-governing community is thus autonomous, but also autochthonous; the latter referring to the fact that the existence of such groups is not derived from an external power, but from these communities themselves (ADB 2002: 4-5).

the Christian and Chinese minorities (Van Klinken 2003, 2007). Concurrent mass student demonstrations in the streets of Jakarta, culminating in their occupation of the Peoples' Consultative Assembly building, eventually forced Suharto to step down from power in May 1998, handing over his position to vice president Habibie (Anwar 2001).

After the fall of Suharto's *Orde-Baru* regime, Indonesia entered into a turbulent political era that was called *Reformasi* (reformation). This period (1998-2004) was characterised by a wider range of political freedoms, but at the same time also by high political instability (Holtzappel 2009).¹⁷ The most important reformative measures taken during this period were taken by the Habibie presidency (May 1998- October 1999). Press freedom, the freedom to establish political parties and free national elections were amongst these reformative policies (Vel 2008). The Habibie government furthermore pushed two important laws through parliament in the last months before the June 1999 elections, which set in motion a process of administrative decentralisation (Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007: 12). Law 22/1999 on decentralisation of the state administration involved the actual transfer of formal administrative and political authority from the centre to lower levels of government. Decentralisation made the *kabupaten* (districts) and municipalities responsible for various areas including infrastructure, healthcare, education, culture, trade, agriculture, industry, investment, tourism, employment, environment and land issues formerly administered by Jakarta. Jakarta continued to oversee foreign affairs, national defence and security, monetary and fiscal policy, religious affairs, macro-economic policy, justice and religion. The second dimension of regional autonomy enacted under law 25/1999 concerned the balance of finances between the centre and the regions. Law 25/1999 stipulated that 25% (90% of which had to be allocated to the districts and municipalities) of the net domestic revenue would be channelled to the regions. This meant that decision-making power over 75% of the state revenues would remain with Jakarta (Schulte Nordholt 2012: 230). Resource rich regions were to profit from decentralisation, because law 25/1999 allowed them to keep 15% of oil, 30% of gas and a whopping 80% of logging, mining and fishing revenues. Districts and municipalities poor in natural resources had to manage on the annual allowance from Jakarta, *dana alokasi umum* – DAU, which counted on average for 80% of the total revenue at the district level (Schulte Nordholt 2012: 230). Provincial governors were described to act as coordinators of the decentralisation processes (Sakai 2003).

The actual transfer of formal administrative and political authority to the lower levels of government at the provinces, districts and municipalities was implemented within twenty months only between April 1999 and January 2001. Whereas many districts lacked the capacity to meet with the demands of this large-scale and far-reaching operation many scholars consider it a small miracle that this massive operation did not lead to a total collapse of the Indonesian nation state (Schulte Nordholt 2012). The hasty introduction

¹⁷ Despite the fact that there is no official closing of the era of reformation, many consider the age of Reformasi terminated with the direct election of president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2004. The spirit of radical reform that drove the process of democratisation had reached its highest point with these direct elections.

of regional autonomy had everything to do with the political unrest in the country. Strengthened demands for independence in Aceh and West Papua were joined by calls for a federal system from Riau, Maluku, North Sulawesi and East Kalimantan (Down to Earth 2000). These alarming and potentially disrupting claims for greater political and financial autonomy at the provincial level were cleverly omitted by the central government's decision to target a lower administrative level, the *kabupaten* (district) and the *desa* (village) as the key levels for regional autonomy (Von Benda-Beckmann & Von Benda-Beckmann 2001).

Decentralisation and regional autonomy, however, also triggered a rather unexpected intensified request from many regions in Indonesia that wished to become autonomous provinces and *kabupaten* (districts). This process, called *pemekaran* (literally: blossoming), ensued the rapid increase in the number of administrative units. In only a few years time seven new provinces were carved out of the existing twenty-seven and the number of *kabupaten* (districts) and municipalities increased from 300 to 440 (Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007). The pan-Indonesian process of administrative fragmentation - some have even characterised *pemekaran* as 'administrative involution' - was largely driven by the interests of local elites who often used ethnic and religious repertoires to express their personal ambitions, achieve their political goals and mobilise popular support (Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007: 19).

The upsurge of local elites caused an overall increase in exclusive regional identity politics often related to and derived from older (colonial) concepts and categories, sometimes expressed in a peaceful revival of *adat* (custom, tradition), sometimes erupting into violent conflicts (Schulte Nordholt 2008; Van Klinken 2003).¹⁸ Phrased in modern terminology like 'grass root mobilisation', 'bottom up development' and 'community empowerment', the widespread revival of *adat* consciousness triggered by regional autonomy was seen as a moral alternative for the corrupt *Orde Baru* regime. The legal recognition of *adat*-based rights was furthermore seen as device to reclaim ancestral land that had been claimed by the state (Davidson & Henley 2007). This expectancy was also the reason why the introduction of regional autonomy was received with great enthusiasm, especially in international circles of environmental agencies. Convinced of the idea that the lifestyles of *adat* communities were intrinsically sustainable, rendering the decision-making power over natural resources in the hands of local communities would be a powerful incentive for local communities to care for and make use of these natural resources in a sustainable manner (DTE 2000a; DTE 2000b). Regional autonomy, enacted under law 25/1999, however, also enhanced the partial withdrawal of subsidies from the centre. Simultaneously, the power to seek income-generating activities was laid with the district authorities, creating an arena in which a struggle for resources was virtually guaranteed (Eindhoven 2009). Regional autonomy indeed triggered an Indonesian-wide rush for the natural resources available at the local level.

¹⁸ Van Klinken (2007) has described how in West and Central Kalimantan, Central Sulawesi and the Moluccas, the transition to decentralised rule led to the eruption of violence. Violent conflicts fuelled by ethnic and religious sentiments caused 10,000 casualties and 1.3 million refugees (Van Klinken 2007: 4).

Several NGOs have taken up the opportunity to voice their claims towards greater legal recognition of *adat* (tradition, custom) and *adat*-based rights to natural resources (Acciaioli 2000). An important example of this development is the creation of the new pan-Indonesian organisation AMAN (*Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*), officially translated as the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago.¹⁹ AMAN was the result of a week long ‘Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago,’ which was held in the prestigious Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta.²⁰ According to a report written by Down to Earth (1999b), a London-based support organisation, ‘this congress marked a milestone in the development of the indigenous peoples’ organisations in Indonesia, as this was the first time that so many representatives of indigenous peoples from all parts of the archipelago came together.’²¹ In the previous era such a meeting would have definitely been looked upon as subversive and anti-governmental. Major elements of the declaration, which was issued at the end of the meeting argued for less repressive governmental policies, the recognition of the right to cultural identity, to ethnic language and religion, and most of all the right to the land and its natural resources and protection of intellectual property rights. These rights were argued to be of universal validity, comparable to the rights of individuals as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (AMAN 1999; DTE 1999b). AMAN’s membership is open to any community identifying itself as *masyarakat adat* and collectively agreeing with the principles, vision, and main objectives of AMAN. That these criteria have led to a number of subscribers to AMAN that far exceeds the number of *masyarakat terasing* as classified by the Indonesian Ministry of Social Affairs is remarkable (Li 2001). By the end of 2001 AMAN claimed to represent at least 5 million people indicating themselves as *masyarakat adat*.²² As mentioned before, although the terms *masyarakat terasing*, *masyarakat adat*, and indigenous peoples are certainly not

¹⁹ AMAN is an independent organisation acting as a medium through which *masyarakat adat* can reinforce their rights, existence and autonomy. AMAN’s main objectives were noted down as follows: 1) reviving *masyarakat adat* rights to manage their own socio-economic, legal, and cultural systems, including control over their land and natural resources as well as other livelihoods through advocating appropriate government acts, 2) mainstreaming *masyarakat adat* aspirations in political processes, 3) urging the government to withdraw any law that denies the existence of *masyarakat adat*, 4) renegotiating management of *masyarakat adat* resources that have been used for public as well as private sector based projects, 5) eliminating military involvement in civil society, 6) informing the government in taking decisions in disputes concerning *masyarakat adat* rights in self determination, 7) rehabilitating victims of human rights violations, and 8) encouraging the government to sign and respect international treaties ensuring *masyarakat adat* rights such as the ILO Convention 169 and the UN Draft Declaration on Indigenous Peoples Rights (AMAN no date; DTE 1999b).

²⁰ JAPHAMA played a major role in the planning and organising of this first Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (KMAN I).

²¹ Down to Earth is a London based NGO preoccupied with issues concerning ecological justice in Indonesia. Down to Earth monitors and campaigns primarily on the social and human implications of environmental issues in Indonesia. They aim to support civil society groups and provide an international voice at the levels of national governments, foreign companies, aid agencies and international funding institutions. Their main focus is the right of the rural poor and indigenous peoples of the ‘outer islands’, which are all other islands but Java, to determine their own futures.

²² Early in 2017 AMAN mentioned that 2304 *adat* communities, with a total of some 17 million individuals, were registered to AMAN as members (AMAN 2017).

mutually exchangeable categories, because they stem from different sources and their respective utilisation pursues different goals, it might be called striking that there is such an increase in voluntary membership. During the first Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago, AMAN has called for the recognition of the cultural diversity and the particular territorial attachment of *masyarakat adat*. It is precisely this call for recognition of certain cultural features and practices, deemed illegal and subject to harassment and displacement during the *Orde Baru* regime, that has triggered people to rally themselves under the banner of *masyarakat adat*. These developments once more indicate that boundaries of more or less defined parts of society are much more permeable and changeable than they might seem to be at first glance (Li 2001).

Decentralisation was believed to lead to transparency and accountability on behalf of local governments (Antlöv & Cederroth 2004). But decentralisation did in many instances not result in good governance. This was partly caused by the general lack of administrative expertise at the local level. But the decentralisation of corruption and other (bad) *Orde Baru* practices, that also characterised regional autonomy, were certainly debit to the larger part of the disappointing performance of local governments. Lucrative private-public arrangements in which bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen participated were the rule rather than the exception. Especially the establishment of new districts involved the construction of new administrative centres. It was here in particular that the connections between bureaucrats, politicians and businessmen proved profitable (Schulte Nordholt 2012). Government construction contracts, especially at the local level, are considered one of the primary methods of distributing patronage (Hidayat 2009).

Whereas until 2005 local parliaments (DPRD) elected the new administrators, the former had a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the latter. Candidates running for office often had to pay large sums of money in order to win the majority of votes. In many cases candidates did not have these funds themselves, turning them into playthings in the hands of those willing to invest in the election. These elections were often accompanied by violence and intimidation (Hadiz 2003; Hidayat 2007; Schulte Nordholt 2007). Once elected, mayors and *bupati* were still influenced by extortion by the local parliaments who made them pay for the passing of local regulations and the approval of budget proposals and annual accountability reports. Steadfast administrators could count on an impeachment by the DPRD on their behalf. A revision of Regional Autonomy Law 32/2004 resulted in direct elections for governors, mayors and *bupati* (Buehler 2007; Mietzner 2009: 345-9; Schulte Nordholt 2008a: 234-7). Direct elections would strengthen the position of governors, mayors and *bupati* and would reduce the corrupt practices of local parliaments vis-à-vis local administrators. The new law gave administrators a popular mandate, released them from the obligation to present annual accountability reports to the DPRD and took away the parliamentary power to impeach the administrators (Buehler 2007; Schulte Nordholt 2012: 236).

In the literature the process of decentralisation in Indonesia is often equated with democratisation and a rise of civil society (Antlöv 2003; Aspinall 2000; Aspinall & Fealy 2003; Kingsbury & Arief Budiman 2001; Liddle 2001). Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken (2007:1), however, argue that the decentralisation of a former authoritarian central

government does not automatically lead to democratic rule at the local level or a strengthened civil society. However, the elite capture of local power can not nearly be equated with democratisation, but should rather be understood as a rearrangement of existing force fields (Choi 2011, Kingsbury & Aveling 2003; Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007). The new political niches that ensued from regional autonomy have created new power constellations and reformulated modes of representation that are not necessarily democratic. Decentralisation was believed to bring the state closer to the public, but the clientelistic practices of the elites seem to have refrained local communities from full participation in the political processes that were key during *Reformasi*. Local elites display a tendency to act in their own interest and in that of their protégées, excluding others on the basis of kinship and ethno-religious sentiments (Vel 2008). Local communities were more often than not left out of all this politicking. Local communities were at best unsatisfied spectators who were mobilised every now and then, when the political elite was in need of their votes (Von Benda-Beckmann & Von Benda-Beckmann 2009).

The introduction of an electoral system was believed to increase democratisation in Indonesian politics. But as soon as political support becomes a currency of patron-client transactions in which money-politics play a major role, democratisation can be questioned (Simandjuntak 2013: 99). During the era of *Reformasi*, money-politics became applied on a much larger scale than before and got a second boost when direct elections were introduced in Indonesia in 2005. Barker & Van Klinken (2009) argue that regional autonomy and electoral democracy have blurred the boundaries between state and society. Some scholars have used the term ‘patronage democracy’ to describe the new power constellations in the regions (Van Klinken 2009: 145). Patronage democracy combines patron-client relations with electoral democracy, putting greater emphasis on the bargaining power of clients (common people) vis-à-vis their patrons (political elite). But patron-client relations are often embedded in ethnic and religious terms and specific regional settings that strongly emphasise differences instead of unifying characteristics, therefore erasing the possibility of the rise of a strong, relative autonomous civil society (Schulte Nordholt 2012).

Indigenous elites

According to Eriksen (2010) it is only during a process of profound cultural change that ethnic minorities may start to assert their identity and reflect systematically on their culture. Here we touch upon what Eriksen has called the paradox of ethno-politics. Modernisation may be believed to reduce the scope of cultural variation. But at the same time the emerging self-consciousness or cultural reflexivity brought about by literacy, various forms of sustained interethnic contact and rapid social change engendered by modernisation has inspired the genesis of ethnic identities stressing cultural uniqueness. It is this very process that Eriksen indicated as ‘ethnification’, but could also be referred to as the ‘politicisation of culture’. The outlined paradox is laid in the fact that ‘the leaders of a dominated group must master the cultural codes of the dominant group in order to present their case efficiently’. As Eriksen has put it: ‘in order to save a culture, one must first lose it’. It is this elite group of leaders that needs to deal with this seemingly impossible issue for which they constantly have to position themselves somewhere on the

continuum of which total alienation and complete affiliation constitute the outer limits.

This almost automatically leads us to the problem of authenticity that is involved in ethnogenesis. To effectively mobilise politically, elite groups need allies. Indigenous elites worldwide have benefitted tremendously – though not without pitfalls – from international support networks of ecologists and indigenous rights activists. In accordance with transnational discourses valid within these circles of human rights lobbyists and environmentalists, indigenous elites have used essentialism in defining their identity, securing their recognition and the valorisation of their diverse and distinctive traditions. In Eriksen's (2010) words: 'they have reified their culture in order to use it in political and other strategic negotiations'. The reification of indigenous cultures is for the greater part based on what is perceived as their authentic tradition by outsiders. This sharply pictures the question of (indigenous) identity being determined by the group itself or by other institutions, such as foreign donor institutions and/or influential researchers. With the concept of 'indigenous peoples' being a postcolonial product stemming from the West, indigenous identity is heavily inspired by romantic western notions of the 'noble savage' and the 'intrinsically ecologically sustainable primitive' (Kuper 2003; Li 2007). As Conklin (1997: 711-15) explains in her article on Amazonian activism, these western-based images and concepts related to so-called indigenous peoples and environmentalism have become effective symbols in native activism. According to Conklin these 'transnational symbolic politics propel native activists to present themselves and their causes in terms of essentialisms that fit into the narrow imaginative space allowed for indigenous activists in popular Western imaginations'. Despite the fact that this stance has served many indigenous elites well, the fact remains that many of the most influential arguments for indigenous rights rely on invoking idealised and homogenised images of static cultural traditions in which, according to Western ideas, authenticity is located. Kuper (2017) is even taking this argument a little further by stating that indigenous elites represent a world that is the opposite to our own – imagined as rapaciously materialist. This ideal world is, according to Kuper, solely constructed to suit the 'Greens' and the anti-globalisation movement. Spokesman of indigenous peoples might thus very well be products of political parties and NGOs advocating the agenda's of those movements (Kuper 2017: 216-218).

Representativeness and accountability are two more issues indigenous elites have to deal with. Indigenous activists represent their group of origin in both national and international negotiations, but often lack a defined mandate by that group to act and make decisions on its behalf. As a result of their forward position within society, indigenous leaders often stand at relative distance from the group they represent and are as a result often self-appointed. This automatically leads to questions with regard to their representativeness. Local communities, governments and donor agencies alike are often occupied with the question of representativeness of indigenous leaders. To either support or discredit an indigenous leader or activist, community members, donors and governments use representativeness, or lack thereof, as a way of expressing their agreement or disagreement (Dahl 2012). Members of indigenous elites moreover often disagree among themselves about representativeness. They may disagree between themselves about

strategies, tactics, means and objectives of their cause and question the integrity and accountability of others. Bitter conflicts coloured with mutual suspicions are the result. When the opinion of the group they represent is not sought after, the representative becomes an entrepreneur seeking personal win or the realisation of one's own (political) goals. Barth (1969) already emphasised the entrepreneurial role in ethno-politics: 'the mobilisation of ethnic groups in collective action is effected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise and is therefore not a direct expression of the groups' cultural ideology, or the popular will'.

The position of masyarakat adat in post-New Order Indonesia

The establishment of AMAN has certainly increased public awareness around the issue of *masyarakat adat*. In all AMAN's official documents the term *masyarakat adat* is used. Based on the definition used by JAPHAMA, AMAN defines *masyarakat adat* as those communities whose lives are based on customary rights to certain lands which have been handed down through generations. These communities exert sovereignty over these lands and the natural resources it encompasses. Their societies and cultures are regulated by *adat* law and *adat* institutions which sustain the continuity of these communities. (AMAN 1999). In an effort to push for the recognition of the new *masyarakat adat* terminology it was stated during the first Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (KMAN I) that *masyarakat adat* would no longer recognise the state if the state was not willing to recognise them as such and grant them the specific rights that pertain this status (DTE 1999b). In a reaction to this announcement both a presidential and ministerial decree were respectively issued in September and October 1999 stating that the term *masyarakat terasing* would be changed into *masyarakat adat terpencil* (remote *adat* communities). According to the Ministry of Social Affairs this switch in terminology proclaimed a new vision and a more participatory approach in the development of these communities (Duncan 2004: 91). The inclusion of the word *adat* is certainly to be understood as a kind of recognition that these people are more than just isolated; the principle that founded earlier governmental policies towards *masyarakat terasing*. These people were now acknowledged to have customs, a culture, and a particular way of life. Although this change in terminology is certainly a sign of governmental willingness to come to terms with *masyarakat adat*, the indigenous peoples movement in Indonesia is still disturbed by the fact that the idea of indigenous peoples being peripheral is still pertained in the official terminology. According to the indigenous peoples movement in Indonesia the change of the negative term *terasing* (isolated) into the more neutral *terpencil* (remote) is just a cosmetic modification. The renewed terminology still ventilates the idea that Indonesia's indigenous peoples are both physically and mentally too far away from the centre, where development, modernity, and mainstream society prevails (Duncan 2004: 91).

Another important change that ensued as a result of increased pressure from societal organisations working on behalf of Indonesia's indigenous peoples is the political breakthrough that occurred during the 1999 elections when five seats in the *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Republik Indonesia* (MPR, or People's Consultative Congress)

were reserved for representatives of *etnis minoritas* (ethnic minorities), one of the societal groups represented within the MPR.²³ All five positions have been taken by representatives of ethnic groups that were classified as *masyarakat adat terpencil*: that is a Baduy, an Orang Rimba (formerly known by their colonial name: Kubu), a Papua, a Dayak, and a Sangir. Although political impact remained limited (representatives of ethnic minorities only occupy five out of a total of 695 seats in the MPR), it was significant that indigenous peoples, though under the banner of ethnic minorities, were included in this governmental body.²⁴ But while hopes were set on these five representatives, it is also believed that these people (some of them well known to and formerly actively involved in AMAN) have shown some unexpected shifts in attitude. Once in power, some of them have easily forgotten the cases and issues for which they had been fighting not so long ago (Personal communication with Abdon Nababan, 2003, head office AMAN, Jakarta). It is only after the fall of president Suharto's authoritarian *Orde Baru* regime in May 1998, that Indonesia's indigenous peoples have entered the international arena where indigenous peoples issues are debated. Indigenous peoples in Indonesia have little experience in expressing themselves under the banner of indigeneity and their participation in international forums and networks often does not go unproblematic. Such we can read from the Papuan participant to the 2005 first Workshop of the Regional Network for Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia, who was denied permission to leave the country by the Jakarta authorities.²⁵ The very fact that only few days after the workshop an international solidarity meeting on West Papua was to be held in Manila had alarmed the authorities and made them decide to refrain Papuan citizens from travelling abroad until further notice.²⁶

The Indonesian government still struggles with the question of how to relate and react to the alternative (mediated) imaginations and manifestations of communities within society. While the Indonesian state has certainly tried to develop new structures and procedures

²³ Article 1 of the 1945 Constitution states that Indonesia is a republic with sovereignty vested in the people to be fully exercised by an elected People's Consultative Assembly, which is the highest political institution in the state. Since the Assembly holds the supreme power in the state, the people voice their political and social aspirations through this body. The major tasks of the Assembly are to sanction the Constitution, decide the Guidelines of State Policy, and elect the President and Vice-President for a term of office of five years.

²⁴ Societal group representation in the MPR was eliminated in 2004.

²⁵ The 1st Workshop of the Regional Network for Indigenous Peoples in Southeast Asia was held from 18 through 22 April 2005 in Cabagan, the Philippines. The network was an initiative by the joint research and education programme (CVPED) of the Isabela State University (The Philippines) and Leiden University (The Netherlands).

²⁶ The Fifth International Solidarity Meeting on West Papua was held in Manila over the weekend of 29 April – 1 May 2005. Although the Indonesian government had tried to convince the Philippine government to cancel the meeting, the event went ahead. Representatives from some fifteen, mainly Asian countries attended the meeting which called for an intensification of the international campaign supporting the aspirations of the West Papuan people, a ban on all military cooperation and arms sales to Indonesia, the release of all West Papuan political prisoners, and stronger support for West Papuan women's rights and empowerment groups.

that are supportive of the nation-wide call for democratisation, the introduction of regional autonomy probably the most influential measure, some issues have remained poignant. On 9 August 2006, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in his barely groundbreaking but nevertheless remarkable speech, acknowledged that the traditional rights of *masyarakat adat* have often been ignored, even violated and disrespected. He said that arrangements for these communities needed to be better and that they should be given their traditional rights. The greater interests of nation and state should, however, not be forgotten and *masyarakat adat* needed to be motivated in order to play an optimal role in national development (DTE 2006b). The very fact that the president paid some attention to this issue is positive, but at the same time his speech was basically reiterating the opinion that both the nation and the state take precedence over the interests of individual communities. It is precisely this stance that has been used to justify the systematic exploitation of natural resources, whilst impoverishing those people claiming to hold customary rights over these resources. Especially the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to land have remained extremely weak under Indonesian law.²⁷ As mentioned earlier, Indonesia did vote in favour of the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, but simultaneously rendered the declaration inapplicable to the Indonesian context. Indonesia, however, stated that it would continue to promote the collective rights of indigenous peoples (United Nations 2007).

While tangible progress is still slow, the growing collective awareness of indigenous peoples in Indonesia and their increased level of organisation has certainly given them the confidence to stand up for their rights. Due to the fact that Indonesia, like any other country, can no longer deny the influential power of the transnational public sphere, the Indonesian state can no longer suppress ethnic groups' utterances of identity without attracting immediate negative attention of the international community. The Indonesian government is increasingly forced to initiate policies that guarantee the right of ethnic minorities to participate in the post-Suharto restructuring of the Indonesian state and nation.

Research questions and methodology

Ever since the first time I went to West Sumatra in 1997, I have been intrigued by the unique generation of young and educated Mentawaians and the extraordinary position they occupy within society. Educated and cradled in a context where sustainable development and democracy were highly shared values, many had high expectations of this extra-ordinary group of Mentawaians, I chose to call the Mentawaian elite, taking over from the political establishment in 1999. With little to no experience in politics and administration they plunged themselves into the complexities of the political and

²⁷ In May 2013, the Indonesian Constitutional Court determined that customary forest (*hutan adat*) is no longer part of the state owned forests. This ruling came in response to a judicial review submitted by AMAN. This means that *masyarakat adat* are now recognised as rights bearing subjects entitled to land, resources and territories (Rachman & Siscawati 2017).

administrative reorganisation of the Mentawai Archipelago. During this process they were bound to meet difficulties measuring up to the not necessarily congruent expectancies of both outsiders and fellow Mentawaians. So in 2002 I went to Indonesia again with the wish to understand the dynamics of local politics in the Mentawai Archipelago during the first years after the introduction of regional autonomy. What actually happened on the ground, who was involved in what manner, leading to what kind of power constellations? I decided to approach these research questions by focussing on the on the daily activities of various members of the Mentawai elite involved in this politicking. This approach raised subsequent research questions about the elite itself. What constitutes the background, composition and nature of this elite stemming from a strictly egalitarian but otherwise highly diverse and fragmented society? How did this elite exploit the opportunities created by encroaching global discourses and profound changes in the national political context? How did they localise these changes and discourses by giving them their own cultural stamp? Based on what considerations did they make what kind of decisions? And how did this elite cope with the challenges and dilemmas attached to their new, self-acquired political position during the first turbulent years of regional autonomy and decentralisation, also called *Reformasi*?

Field research

This thesis is based on several extensive field research periods conducted in 1997-1998, 2000, 2001, 2002-2004, 2007 and again in 2014. The longest non-intermittent field research periods specifically undertaken for this thesis were conducted from January 2002 through March 2003 and from February 2004 until January 2005. Field research was conducted in the city of Padang as well as on all of the four Mentawai Islands. A minimum of research was conducted in Jakarta.

The largest part of the data on which these writings are based was gathered in Padang, for the simple reason that my research subjects were most of the time also residing in this provincial capital. Conducting fieldresearch in Padang was rather easy. Due to the fact that I had lived in the city before in 1997-1998, I rather easily found my way around and also got in touch with people quite straightforward because I was already acquainted with many of them.

Due to my earlier visits and various intensive language courses, my conduct of *Bahasa Indonesia* had reached higher levels of fluency by the time I got involved in field research again in 2002-2004. Therefore, in Padang I was able to conduct research completely independent without the help of an interpreter or an assistant. Fieldwork on the Mentawai Islands, however, is of a different kind. It is intensive, physically trying and much more expensive than research in an urban context such as Padang. On the Mentawai Islands, I almost always worked with one or more assistants. Most of the data and research insights as well as most of the more practical do's and don'ts within the Mentawai context I obtained from working with various assistants. It is therefore that all of my field assistants, some of whom have become very close friends over time, are of indispensable value. My assistants often assumed more than one role at a time, as they acted as my host, guide, interpreter, cook, boat operator and moral support. The

latter task might sound like a joke, but it most certainly is not. Conducting anthropological field research in a context like the Mentawai Archipelago is not only a physical and methodological quest, but simultaneously a psychological encounter with least expected and sometimes highly annoying personal characteristics of both the researcher and the researched. Despite the annoyances, in Mentawai I felt included and inspired while having a tremendous amount of fun at the same time.²⁸

As a female researcher in a male dominated research context I never felt uncomfortable or left out. Most of my informants saw no harm in sharing information with me, probably because they never really perceived me as a foreign female researcher, but rather as the partner of a fellow Mentawaian. I met Juniator Tulus in Padang in 1997 and we have been partners and colleagues ever since. We were married until 2014. Being Juniator's partner has probably opened doors that otherwise would have remained closed for a white, somewhat tomboyish woman from the Netherlands.

Official permits for conducting research in both Padang and Mentawai were obtained from the concerning authorities through the intervention of Andalas University under whose supervision my research fell officially. Obtaining a research permit for the Mentawai Islands met with some difficulties in the sense that the office from which I should obtain such a permit was non-existent at that time. Eventually I obtained a research permit from the *kabupaten's* secretary in person, because he was at that time the only person with access to a computer and a printer. Officially I should have then obtained similar research permits from every sub-district (*kecamatan*) office of every *kecamatan* I visited and from all the village heads of every village I visited, but I thought that a bit too laborious.

My field research combines the qualitative anthropological research methods of participant observation, unstructured interviewing and direct, reactive observation (Bernard 2006). People thus always knew I was there and why I was observing them. The fact that I had built up trust and familiarity in the field, convinced me that people were not likely to change their behaviour while I was around. It probably would also have been impossible for people to never let their guard down during the two years I was around. I travelled around, visited places and talked to people in an informal way. Apart from some of the government officials and bureaucrats I almost never made official appointments for interviews. I never recorded any of the interviews or informal talks on tape. Sometimes I noted down some of the information while conducting the interviews, but most of the time I systematically worked out the newly gathered information afterwards. Following people around, talking to them while they were going about their daily routine offered me information in the most unconstrained way. I spent considerable time in the offices of local

²⁸ A smile still comes to my face when I think about the time that I attended this 3-day meeting in Tuapeijat where I was lodged in a newly built family house that, in time, was supposed to be rented out to one of the encroaching civil servants. Unfortunately, the house was not yet equipped with some proper sanitary facilities as a result of which one of my temporary roommates somewhat sheepishly confessed to me and my husband that he, realising that he was out of other options, had been swinging his excrements sealed in a plastic bag out of the window the previous night.

NGO Yayasan Citra Mandiri and Yayasan Laggai Simaeru and more than once I was part of fieldtrips, protest actions, social gatherings and official meetings organised by these NGOs. In the course of time I noted down the life histories of some 25 Mentawaians who occurred prominent in the field to me. These life histories offered me insight in their individual background, education, career, perceptions, dilemmas and dreams for the future. Though interesting as life histories may be, I have not used this methodology in the same way as, for example, Grallert (2000), who dedicated her whole research to the life story of one Mentawaian youngster, Levi.²⁹ For me, the life histories I recorded served as a means to get insight into how Mentawaians residing in Padang experience daily life, of how they perceive themselves, their stance in wider society, their relationships with others (both Mentawaian and non-Mentawaian) and their perspective on the future of the Mentawai Archipelago. These 25 individuals are very much part and parcel of what I call the Mentawaian elite in this thesis. The Mentawaian elite, however, consists of many more individuals than the 25 persons I looked into in more detail. The Mentawaian elite is not a bounded group in a sociological sense, but rather a category of independent individuals with fairly divergent backgrounds and ideas about the future. I have chosen to call them an elite because they form a small group within Mentawaian society that stands apart because of their educational qualifications. Their increased analytical power eventually allowed several of them to take over from the political establishment and become a political and administrative elite themselves.

Written sources

While being in the field I gathered almost everything being written about Mentawai in the local newspapers. The Padang-based NGO, Yayasan Citra Mandiri supported me a lot in this process of gathering written sources, because they were also scanning over the local newspapers, extracting whatever articles about Mentawai, and collecting them in handy finger-thick compilations called *clippings*. People at Yayasan Citra Mandiri were happy to allow me to make photocopies of their *clippings* as I every now and then helped them out scanning the newspapers for more articles.

In May 1999 Yayasan Citra Mandiri came with their own newsletter; an A4 sized leaflet of some 10-12 pages, soon replaced by a real tabloid sized newspaper that initially appeared only once a month. At a later stage this newspaper called Puailiggoubat appeared every fortnight, which it still does until this very day. With the appearance of Puailiggoubat, a newspaper by and meant for a Mentawaian public, but nevertheless written in *bahasa Indonesia*, my life as a collector of data became a true feast. Data and information were now readily available and the only thing I now needed to do was to read, absorb and crosscheck. Apart from being a source of information and a guide in field research, Puailiggoubat itself also became subject to research, findings of which can be found in chapter 4 of this book.

²⁹ Levi Sirirui unfortunately died only shortly before Bettina Grallert was able to finish her master thesis devoted to the life of Levi. As I myself have known Levi only for a short period of his life, Grallert's thesis offers valuable insights in the political aspirations of this inspiring young Mentawaian.

The Internet

Puailiggoubat has also been online since 2003. Information on the website was, however, dated and incomplete. It was only in 2010 that Puailiggoubat online made a major leap forward, publishing every story that had appeared in the printed version. In October 2015, YCM launched a new web portal called MentawaiKita.com. This web portal replaced Puailiggoubat.com, but still presents an electronic version of the newspaper every fortnight. MentawaiKita.com is a fairly professional website that brings the latest news from Mentawai including pictures and often critical analyses. These online developments have enabled me to follow the latest developments within the Mentawai Archipelago more easily than ever before. Apart from Puailiggoubat, which kept me posted long after I had left the field, various social media platforms, of which Facebook is probably the most influential, kept me in touch with my research topic. Although, over the last few years I have only superficially held track of the lives, activities and careers of my former research informants, the Internet did enable me to keep track of the main developments.

The process of writing

For various reasons the process of writing this thesis has been long and can hardly be called straightforward. The fact that the writing of this thesis has taken such a long time can be considered both positive as well as negative. Negative in the sense that over the course of time certain finesses may have gone lost. The focus on and the in-depth involvement in my research subjects simply are no longer as sharp as it used to be 10-15 years ago. However, being slow in noting down research results can also result into something positive. I have been able to follow my research subjects over an extended period of time. Such has given me the opportunity to write a thesis that, rather than depicting an issue pinpointed in time, describes people and events and the way in which they have developed over time.

The frequent and extensive periods of fieldwork allow this thesis to be a 'thick description' of my observations. According to Geertz (1973) thick description in anthropology offers detailed and contextualised descriptions of observed events relevant for the research at hand. Thick description is furthermore composed of commentary and interpretation. Following Geertz, this ethnography shows, rather than tells, what I have been able to observe while being in the field. I, quite straightforward, offer a comprehensive picture of human behaviour and the circumstances and mechanisms responsible for its taste and colour. Whereas some may classify the behaviour I describe as less amiable, I would like to stress that it is not my intention to discredit anyone whose conduct is discussed in this thesis and neither should it be read with such a desire.

Some notes on the text

In this thesis all of my informants are mentioned by their real name. As Mentawai covers a relatively small community and most informants are, or have become public persons over time, using pseudonyms would be futile. In some cases I have chosen to present sensitive or non-confirmed information in such a way that it cannot be traced back to specific persons. While my research quite straightforward highlights several less

enviable aspects of human behaviour (dishonesty, egocentrism and deception) and dirty politicking (corruption, collusion, nepotism and money politics), my research explicitly offers no value judgement. My research simply tells about the everyday practices of a generation of politically engaged Mentawaians as they appear to me. It is not my wish to discredit anyone whose behaviour is discussed in this report and neither should my thesis be read with such a desire.

Italics are used for both Mentawaiian as well as Indonesian words.

Research locations

My research includes two localities: the city of Padang and the Mentawai Archipelago. While my research is foremost focussing on Mentawaians residing in Padang, as a result of which my fieldwork was mainly concentrated in this city, I have, as already indicated above, also spent considerable time on all four of the Mentawai islands. In the following section I will briefly describe both localities in terms of their most important historical, geographic, administrative, governmental, economic, demographic and cultural features.

The Mentawai Archipelago

The Mentawai Archipelago, consisting of four large islands (Siberut (4480 km²), Sipora (845 km²), North Pagai, and South Pagai (together 1645 km²) and several smaller islets, is situated in the Indian Ocean approximately 100 kilometres off the west coast of West Sumatra. The Mentawai Islands are characterised by a rough topography with hills rising steeply, the highest 'peak' located on Sipora rising some 450 metres above sea level. The coastline on the eastern side reflects the continuing tectonic movements in the region, contributing to a very irregular coastline with many bays, capes, islets, coral reefs and mangrove forests. By contrast, the more stable west coast is straight and lined with virtually unbroken broad sandy beaches, but steep cliffs and rough seas make it difficult to access the islands from the west coast. The rough seas that surround Mentawai have only recently turned the Mentawai Archipelago in one of the world's most spectacular surfing hotspots. Though the surfing industry is mainly off-shore and foremost in the hands of Australian businessmen, the locals benefit sideways by selling the surfing tourists locally produced food and souvenirs and sometimes offering them lodging when they come ashore. Due to the fact that the Mentawai Archipelago is located within a seismological active area, the island chain is characterised by frequent earth tremors and occasional earthquakes, sometimes accompanied by tidal waves (WWF 1980). On 26 December 2004 a massive undersea earthquake with a magnitude of 9.1 centred in this zone west of Sumatra, triggered a large tsunami that inundated coastal areas throughout the Indian Ocean region and caused widespread death and destruction. Quite surprisingly, the Mentawai Archipelago was, apart from some damaged houses on Siberut's north coast, barely affected by this catastrophe that was mediated at length. The more recent earthquakes of 2007 and late 2010, with magnitudes of respectively 6.8 and 7.7 gained little media attention but did cause quite severe infrastructural damage on all Mentawai Islands. Moreover, over 500 people lost their lives in the 2010 quake (Puailiggoubat 11/2010).

All four Mentawai islands have originally been bedecked with lowland dipterocarp forest.³⁰ Due to large-scale commercial logging during the last five decades the forests on all four Mentawai islands have been seriously affected, but those on Sipora and the Pagai Islands in particular. The forests on the island of Siberut have long been protected by various conservation efforts where leading international conservation agencies like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Conservation International (CI) have been involved in. Logging was even totally banned from Siberut by presidential decree in between 1993-1999. Regional autonomy, however, lifted the ban, resulting in international conservation agencies withdrawing from Siberut while loggers rushed in to strip the remaining forests on Siberut (DTE 2000a). Since 2000 two large-scale commercial timber companies have been operative on Siberut, Koperasi Andalas Madani (KAM) and PT Salaki Summa Sejahtera (PT SSS) with concession areas of 45,650 ha and 49,440 ha respectively. Due to community opposition and pressure from conservation activists KAM was forced to close down in 2007. PT SSS, active in north Siberut is currently still operative (Syofiardi Bachyul et al. 2015). Apart from the large-scale commercial logging operations, local government has since 1999 also issued dozens of so-called *Izin Pemanfaatan Kayu* (IPK) concessions to local companies (DTE 2006a).³¹ In order to regulate the sprawl in IPK concessions, Jakarta withdrew the issuing of these concessions again from local governments in 2005.

With a total population of 76,000 individuals, the autochthonous Mentawaians form with an estimated number of nearly 70,000 people still a majority within their own territory (BPSKKM 2011). An estimated 10% of the total population is of non-native origin. Amongst these migrants we find Batak, Minangkabau, Javanese and Niassans, most of them residing in the five larger harbour villages of Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Sioban, Tuapeijat, and Sikakap. Although various popular mediations may make us believe otherwise, only a very small part of the population is still residing in their elevated communal longhouses (*uma*) scattered along the riverbanks. These 'traditional' communities, consisting of an estimated 3000-5000 individuals in total, are residing in the up-river areas of Simalegi, Simatalu, Sagulubbe and Rereiket; all located on the relatively remote western half of the island of Siberut. Whereas only on Siberut patches of relatively undisturbed forest are still standing, allowing these people to live a more or less traditional forest-based lifestyle, it is only in these forested areas on Siberut that we can encounter with these traditional communities.

The majority of the Mentawaians nowadays lives in one of the 43 official *desa* (villages) or *dusun* (hamlets). Although 20 out of these 43 villages are located on Siberut, this island is still the least densely populated island with only 9-10 people per square kilometre. With only 13 villages, the island of Sipora is with 27 people per square kilometre the most

³⁰ Lowland dipterocarp forests are composed of an exceptionally high number of plant species and are furthermore characterised by the presence of a variety of tropical hardwood trees (mostly Dipterocarpaceae and Euphorbiaceae), much sought after by the timber industry (WWF 1980).

³¹ IPK is a wood utilisation permit, allowing its holder to harvest timber from areas that have been slated for conversion. IPK concessions most often do not exceed 100ha each.

densely populated island within the archipelago. The most densely populated area (34 people per km²) within the archipelago is, however, still to be found in the sub-district of Sikakap on North Pagai (BPSKKM 2011). From the 1970s onwards this area is the centre of the logging business on the Mentawai Islands, attracting not only local people, but also a lot of migrants from outside the Mentawai Archipelago.

Having been Christianised ever since the beginning of the 20th century, nearly half of the Mentawaians, the majority of them residing on Sipora and the Pagai Islands, are nowadays officially registered as Protestants. A little over 30% of the total population adheres to Catholicism, the majority of them living on Siberut. Only 19% of the total population, half of which – some 7,500 individuals – belonging to the migrant population, is registered as Muslims (BPSKKM 2011).³² Whereas *arat sabulungan*, classified as a local animistic faith, is officially prohibited since 1954, figures with regard to practitioners of this local cosmological system do not appear in the statistics. Forming the core of Mentawai culture, the sphere of thoughts and attitudes that constitute *arat sabulungan* or parts thereof is – despite repression and radical change – still traceable in many practices of daily life.

The traditional livelihood system of the Mentawaians is based on simple but effective agriculture and animal husbandry supplemented by hunting, fishing and the collecting of forest products (Persoon 1994). Despite various changes made in the settlement patterns of the Mentawaians, 87% of the population is until this very day still primarily involved in agriculture, horticulture, forestry and/or fishery (BPSKKM 2011). The fact that these apparent independent sectors of economic activity are clustered as one in the statistic overviews of the Mentawai Islands, points at the fact that these different economic sectors are currently still integrated in the livelihood system at household level. Hunting, the collection of forest products and the care for the semi-wild, free roaming pigs have lost their significance to most communities who transferred to the villages (Persoon 1998b). Traditionally only coconuts had commercial value in the Mentawai context, but later copra and also rattan and agarwood were bartered with the traders in the harbour villages in return for articles that could not be produced locally (machetes, iron cooking pans, gongs, knives, tobacco, textiles, glass-beats, and salt) (Persoon 1991). From the 1950s onwards, the introduction of cash crops (cloves, nutmeg, betel nuts, patchouli oil and cacao), pelagic fishing and seasonal and temporary jobs in the logging sector and tourist industry provide the Mentawaians with a modest, yet uncertain and irregular cash income. Their inclusion within the monetary economy has simultaneously evoked their taste for modern and luxurious products such as canned food, sunglasses, flashlights, radio's, chainsaws, outboard engines and more recently: TV sets with the accompanying dish antennas, CD players, mobile phones, (motor)bicycles and even cars.

Until the turn of the century the only more permanent paid positions available within the Mentawai Archipelago were those created by the church. Some of the Mentawaians

³² Both Islam and Catholicism were introduced in the 1950s as opposed to Protestantism; introduced already at the beginning of the 19th century.



Rattan in Salappa, Siberut.

who enjoyed the education offered to them by the church have become pastoral workers, reverends, nurses, or primary school teachers themselves, gradually replacing their mainly Batak and Javanese predecessors. Positions within the local bureaucracy have only sparingly been available to the Mentawaians. Lack of interest, exclusion and the fact that adhering Islam has long been obligatory in order to be able to apply for those positions, have withheld the Mentawaians from these occupancies. Since the turn of the century, however, the expanding administration within the politically autonomous archipelago has given many Mentawaians the opportunity to become a civil servant within the Mentawai Archipelago.

Both geographically and administratively the Mentawai Archipelago is part of the province of West Sumatra. Since October 1999, the Mentawai Archipelago forms one of the twelve autonomous *kabupaten* (districts) that constitute West Sumatra. The harbour village Tuapeijat located on the island of Sipora is since then serving as the district's administrative and governmental centre.

Regional autonomy has particularly spurred infrastructural development within the archipelago. Over the last 15 years local government initiated the construction of government offices, roads, harbours, hospitals and schools all over the archipelago. The most radical change took place in Tuapeijat. In less than two years time Tuapeijat was changed from a small and relatively insignificant coastal village into the archipelago's political and administrative capital. A completely new governmental complex was built just

outside the village centre, consequently bringing in hundreds of government officials and civil servants all seeking for residence, transportation and public facilities.

Transportation facilities between the Mentawai Islands and the Sumatran mainland have been very poor until the late 1980s.³³ When the Mentawai government transferred to Tuapeijat in 2001, transportation services between Padang and Mentawai as well as those in between the Mentawai Islands have significantly increased.³⁴ It was also then that the Mentawai government introduced several polyester ferries meant for the transportation of passengers only. Just lately, the airstrip on the island of Sipora has been revived.³⁵ Since early 2014 charter flights to and from Padang are offered up to three times a week. While the airfare is still beyond the reach of most Mentawaians, this means of transportation is almost solely used by tourists and some government officials.

Transportation on the different islands has long been on foot along one of the many trails or logging roads or by dugout canoe only. Local government has made a start with the construction of a road network in order to ease transportation. The roads built are, however, often of inferior quality and are subject to little to no maintenance. As a result the new roads quite easily fall prey to wet weather conditions and the correspondingly soggy soils. To the disappointment of all, many roads have quickly turned into mud trails again. With the recent construction of cemented roads and paths in and in between villages and settlements many people have bought themselves a bike or a motorcycle. While only very few people in the harbour villages now own a car, intensive traffic is still absent on the Mentawai Islands; if only because one cannot go anywhere beyond the paved roads within the villages.

Electricity and running water can until this day only be found in several larger harbour villages like Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Tuapeijat, Sioban and Sikakap. Muara Saibi finally received government sponsored electricity in 2017. A landline connection was already available in the 1980s in Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Sioban and Sikakap. Mobile telephone connections can nowadays also be found in these villages as well as in several of the main sub-district villages, such as Tuapeijat and Muara Saibi. Basic banking and postal facilities are still only available in Muara Siberut, Tuapeijat and Sikakap.

The city of Padang

Padang, officially labelled as *kota yang tercinta* (the beloved city) is located on the west coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Apart from the landmass on the mainland, the municipality also includes 19 small offshore islands mainly used for recreational purposes.

³³ It was only in 1987 that a wooden ferry, equipped for the transportation of both cargo and passengers came into service between Padang and Mentawai (Persoon 1994: 261).

³⁴ Despite the fact that Siberut, Sipora, and the Pagai Islands are all part of the Mentawai Archipelago and inhabited by Mentawaians, these islands have long been rather isolated from each other. Contact, interaction and transportation between the Mentawai Islands have always been minimal.

³⁵ The airstrip created in the 1970s in order to conveniently fly in logging personnel, fell out of business from the 1980s onwards.

Padang is located on a floodplain that borders the Indian Ocean and is intersected by several rivers. On the south side the city is bordered by forested hills and in the east by the Bukit Barisan mountain range, which enables the city to expand in northern direction only (Colombijn 1994).

With an average of 4300mm of rain per year Padang is one of the wettest cities in Indonesia and, because of its location on the floodplain, prone to inundations. The geographic location of the city near the so-called Java Trench, a deep and seismically active subduction zone, where the seafloor of the oceanic tectonic plate is being forced towards and under the more stable continental shelf, renders Padang extremely vulnerable to earthquakes and tsunamis. Colonial reports make notice of the fact that in both 1797 and 1833 Padang was completely inundated by tsunamis that followed heavy earthquakes. On 30 September 2009, Padang was again hit by an offshore earthquake, fortunately not followed by a tsunami. But this 8.9 magnitude earthquake caused some 25% of Padang's infrastructure to be destroyed, especially hitting the densely populated city centre. Most of the damage caused by this hazard has been cleared or repaired. But in some instances people have simply continued their daily activities right on top of the rubble caused by the quake, seemingly ignorant of the potential danger they are in.

Currently the city is inhabited by a little over 830,000 people, the majority of which belongs to the Minangkabau ethnic group. Though scattered all over Indonesia, the Minangkabau consider West Sumatra their homeland (*ranah Minang*) and are proud of Padang; a city that is considered to be one of the cleanest and best organised cities in Indonesia. With the Minangkabau forming the overwhelming majority in Padang, their cultural habits and religious choices are most influential in the city. The Minangkabau are strongly Islamic with a tendency to cling on to more strict traditions of sharia.³⁶ The Tionghoa (ethnic Chinese), who migrated to Padang soon after the Dutch installed the first trade post there in the 17th century, form the second largest ethnic group in Padang. They have clustered together in Chinatown located in the southwestern part of the city where many old buildings constructed by the Dutch traders over 200 years ago are still standing. Under the New Order regime public expressions of their culture, religion, and language were forbidden. As a result many ethnic Chinese adopted Christianity, but secretly continued to hang on to various Buddhist and Confucianist traditions. As elsewhere in Indonesia, the Chinese are mainly involved in trade and business. As an outstanding, often successful non-indigenous ethnic minority, the ethnic Chinese have triggered ethnic violence against them several times in history (Jacobsen 2005). The latest and rather severe nationwide outburst of ethnic violence inflicted upon the Tionghoa dates from May 1998 when people from the wider public, unsatisfied with the speed with which political changes at the national level were made, molested, raped and even murdered members of the Chinese ethnic community while simultaneously destroying their properties (Coppel 2008). While violence against the Tionghoa in Padang remained limited, the Padang Chinese have in fear of more ethnic violence more or less imprisoned

³⁶ As opposed to secular legislation, Sharia refers to a body of moral and religious laws derived from religious prophecy (particularly the Quran and the Hadith) (Binawan 2011).

themselves in their houses now further fortified with high, barb-wired concrete walls and bubble-locked iron gates. The era of *Reformasi* has, however, also brought many new freedoms for the Tionghoa who now more openly display their cultural, ethnic and religious features. Sadly, the 2009 earthquake also destroyed the old See Hin Kiong temple in China town. Due to the more permissive atmosphere of the post-New Order administrations, the Padang Chinese have rebuilt a truly magnificent temple.

Due to its large deep-sea harbour, Teluk Bayur, Padang has always been a trade centre. Apart from the harbour that simultaneously supports the produce of agricultural products in the rural hinterlands of the city, Padang's economy is also one of industry and service. A cement plant, located in the hills to the southeast of the city, producing cement since 1910 is the oldest cement plant in Indonesia extracting some 5.2 million tons of cement a year through open-pit mining. Harboursing five large universities and several higher educational institutions Padang certainly serves as an educational centre for the West Sumatran region.

Outline

In the following six chapters of this thesis I describe how a group of formally educated, politically engaged Mentawaians have used the opportunities brought about by regional autonomy and decentralisation in order to serve their political and personal agenda's. Despite the fact that the constitution of this group is rather heterogeneous, throughout this thesis I call this group the local elite.

Chapter two describes several ethnographic features of the Mentawaians which I consider important for the informed understanding of the choices made and identity politics used by the local elite in their negotiations. Chapter two furthermore gives an overview of how the Mentawaians have been perceived by outsiders and how these views have influenced the stance of the Mentawaians in broader Indonesian society. Understanding this background will lead to a greater understanding of the way in which Mentawaians think about themselves, of how they present themselves and of how they handle the difficult question of whether they should choose the path of progress and modernisation or hang on to a traditional forest-based lifestyle.

Chapter three consists of an explanation of how formal education as an important part of modernisation processes taking place in the Mentawai Archipelago can be seen as the main factor in the emergence of the local elite.

Chapter four investigates how and why the local elite was involved in the establishment of various local non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The influence that the global discourse on biodiversity conservation had on these local NGOs is also part of the descriptive elements of chapter four.

The introduction of regional autonomy formed the window of opportunity for the local elite to finally access the resources of the local state. Chapter five describes how

Mentawai was one of the first regions to separate from the administrative unit they had been part of during the previous *Orde Baru* period.

Chapter six documents how the local elite has governed the politically and administratively independent Mentawai Archipelago during the last years of the period called *Reformasi*. The end of the reformation period coincided with the end of my last field research. This is also where the descriptive elements of this thesis end. Politicking in Mentawai, however, has certainly not come to an end. In an attempt to bridge the years that lay between the end of the period described in this thesis and the present day, the last chapter is followed by an epilogue.

In the epilogue I address contemporary issues with regard to politics and administration and development, the two main issues of this thesis.

