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## 3 Education

### ***16-IX-2002, Sakaliou, Siberut***

Today I am travelling on foot from Ugai to Sakaliou. My travelling companion, Yohannes, is a 28 year old man from Ugai. People usually call him 'Bigen', because he has this habit of dyeing his hair with a product that goes under the brand name Bigen. Despite the fact that I found his nick name and the practise on which it was based highly amusing and everybody called him Bigen, which initially had me convinced that his real name was Bigen, I myself never dared to call him by his nick name directly.

Yohannes is a teacher in Sakaliou for the so-called Pinatoro Uma project, a forest school project instigated by UNESCO. Yohannes is walking three times a week from Ugai to Sakaliou. The walk, that normally takes a little more than an hour, mainly goes along a small trail through fields, gardens and secondary forest. Today we spent nearly two hours to reach Sakaliou. The fact that the travel takes almost twice as long as usually has everything to do with the fact that I cannot walk and talk at the same time. And I have a lot of questions to ask.

During our walk Yohannes explains me that the majority of children living in the interior of Siberut do not receive any formal education. Though, according to Yohannes, the children are eager to learn, practical objections often refrain them from actually going to school. The public school in Ugai is out of reach for many living in this region, simply because most parents do not want their children to linger around for hours in gardens and secondary forest. Though certainly not all, some parents living in the interiors told me that formal education was something superfluous, because they themselves felt perfectly capable of teaching their children everything necessary for a life in the forest. Going to school furthermore requires school uniforms, shoes, books and writing materials, for which finances are often lacking. And sometimes people feel that the limited monetary resources they do have are better spent on things considered more important than formal education. In order to tackle some of these objections, the forest school in Sakaliou is easily accessible. Participation is non-committal. Uniforms and shoes are not needed. Books and writing materials are provided and classes are only three days a week during the early morning hours.

When we arrive in Sakaliou, Yohannes is immediately surrounded by children who are obviously very fond of him. We install on the veranda of one of the large *uma*, drink coffee and Yohannes is playing guitar. As soon as I bring out one of my note books to write down some of the things discussed with Yohannes, I immediately have a friend. A five-year-old

boy nestles on my lap and wants to show me his writing skills and drink my coffee. In little time I gather more children who have brought some picture books and they start teaching me some Mentawaiian. My notes will have to wait until tomorrow when these kids will all be in class with Yohannes.

## Introduction

Formal education is a factor of major importance in the emergence of the self-proclaimed elite. Formal education within the Mentawai Archipelago, however, has a shallow history and has never reached a quality level comparable to that of education available on the mainland. Though already introduced by the Dutch at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was only from the 1970s onwards that more comprehensive education facilities became available for a gradually increasing number of Mentawaians. Whereas the education facilities within the Mentawai Archipelago were not expanding beyond the level of junior high school until the late 1990s, school children wishing to further their education had no other option than to travel to the mainland and engage in education there. By far the majority of those Mentawaians seeking education outside the Mentawai Archipelago have ended up in the city of Padang where they had to carve out a living for themselves amidst the ethnically, culturally and religiously distinct Minangkabau dominating daily life in this city.

Those Mentawaians currently involved in politics and administration, were among the first Mentawaians who came into contact with the standardised formal education system that was gradually introduced in Mentawai from the 1970s onwards. In order to understand the emergence of the political elite, it is important to take a look into their educational background. This chapter describes their involvement in formal education in Mentawai, followed by a description of how this first generation of Mentawaiian students have experienced the continuing of their education outside the Mentawai Archipelago. This is also why this chapter is limited by a time frame that roughly spans the period 1970 - 2000. After 2000 many of these formally educated Mentawaians became involved in local politics that then became accessible to them.

Apart from looking into their educational background this chapter also looks into how these young and educated Mentawaians became conscious of their ethnic and religious identity. Strengthened by various initiatives of mainly the Catholic church young Mentawaians residing in Padang started to bond, regardless their origin from what island within the Mentawai Archipelago. The church also supported them to persevere within the Islamic society of the Minangkabau and taught them to organise themselves and to be proud of their Mentawaiian cultural background.

The information presented in this chapter is almost solely based on data I gathered during fieldwork. As a result I used only few references writing this chapter.

## Formal education in Mentawai

Until the early 1970s there were only very basic education facilities available within Mentawai. The level of education did not expand beyond that of elementary school, basically only enabling the Mentawaians to learn to read, write and calculate. People used to call this type of education *sekolah rakyat* (grassroots school). Whereas the largest part of the education facilities within Mentawai was in the hands of the Protestant and Catholic churches, a solid portion of this early curriculum was filled with religious education. The Protestant missionaries, however, never really expanded beyond the harbour village of Nemnem Leleu (North Pagai). As a result they only served a limited number of people living in the near vicinity of this harbour village with the basic education they had on offer. The Catholic missionaries, on the other hand, had installed mission posts with educational facilities in Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Sioban and Sikakap. They furthermore had several elementary schools installed within the settlements located in the nearby hinterland of these harbour villages, which saved the locals from hour-long walks to the mission posts near the coast. Education was initially in the hands of the Italian missionaries themselves and was later taken over by the Batak and Javanese teachers the missionaries had brought along with them.



School building in Labongkurong and governmental primary school in Muara Saibi, Siberut.



From the 1970s onwards the curriculum became standardised and all educational institutions, including those of the Christian churches had to comply with the examination standards as set by the Indonesian government. This meant a serious increase in the variety of courses. Of course *bahasa Indonesia* (Indonesian language) and *Pancasila* (philosophy of the Indonesian nation state) became part of the standardised curriculum. But other subjects like geography, biology, history and even English were also included. Six years of elementary school became obligatory as well as the use of a school uniform. In accordance with their own policy, the Indonesian government built elementary schools (*sekolah dasar* – SD) in every (official) village within the Mentawai Archipelago and the Padang-Pariaman administration sent in teachers of mainly Minangkabau origin. It was also from the 1970s onwards that the Protestant as well as the Catholic church started to build boarding houses in their respective mission posts enabling more children from the hinterland to engage in education in these harbour villages.

Although the facilities were there, actually going to school remained difficult. Stemming from a subsistence economy, people were struggling to find the financial means to pay the school fees, uniforms, shoes and learning materials. And despite the expansion in facilities, still many people remained to live quite far from the nearest school. Children sometimes needed to walk for hours along the muddy trails in the forest before arriving at school. An alternative of course was to subscribe to one of the Christian boarding houses, but additional finances were required to stay there, again adding to the already difficult financial situation. And although the churches also allowed payment in kind (e.g. sago starch, fish and coconuts), the costs involved in a subscription to one of the boarding houses remained an obstacle for many Mentawaians. As a result of the difficulties experienced, many Mentawaian children did not go to school on a regularly basis or did not even go to school at all. Classes constituted of children of mixed age and some children only entered elementary school when they were already relatively old. It was only in the late 1980s that junior high school (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama* - SMP) became available in Mentawai. The Protestant church started a SMP in Nemnem Leleu. Governmental SMP (SMP *negeri*) were built in Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Sioban and Sikakap. In the early 1990s the Catholic missionaries also opened a junior high school in Muara Siberut. This SMP, named Yos Sudarso, initially operated under the auspices of the Catholic SMP, also named Yos Sudarso located in Padang. Later during the 1990s SMP Yos Sudarso in Muara Siberut became an independent school under the umbrella of the Catholic education organisation Yayasan Prayoga.<sup>92</sup> Since the early 1980s several Islamic schools (*madrasah*) have been installed in several of the main harbour villages. Religious education forms the larger part of the curriculum in these *madrasah*. I have not

<sup>92</sup> Initially, all education activities were directly controlled by representatives of the Catholic Church itself. Whereas the faith-based schooling industry kept on growing, Yayasan Prayoga was established in 1962, which from then on was responsible for all administrative matters with regard to education and the development and maintenance of the various Catholic schools and boarding houses in Mentawai as well as those on the Sumatran mainland. While at first the Catholic Church remained responsible for the finances needed, nowadays, Yayasan Prayoga is a more or less financially independent (Catholic) education organisation.



Catholic boarding complex in Muara Siberut (By: Juniator Tulus).

encountered with Mentawai students involved in education in one of these *madrasah*, neither was I informed by anyone who knew of Mentawaians going to the *madrasah*. The *madrasah* are mostly used by children of the Islamic migrants residing in the harbour villages.

With the faith-based schooling system within the Mentawai Archipelago never expanding beyond the level of SMP, Mentawai only knows governmental senior high schools (*Sekolah Menengah Atas* – SMA). Just before the Mentawai Archipelago detached itself from the Padang-Pariaman administration, governmental senior high schools (SMA *negeri*) were opened in Muara Siberut, Muara Sikabalan, Sioban and Sikakap.

Though some individuals in the interiors of Siberut think about formal education as a superfluous luxury, in general most Mentawaians have a positive attitude with regard to formal education. When finances are tight (which is often the case) Mentawaians, however, show a tendency to prefer to invest in their sons' education rather than in that of their daughters. This has everything to do with the fact that after marriage, Mentawai women become part of the clan of their husband and so are her children. Daughters are thus not the first to invest in, whereas in all probability the possible returns will not be shared with the members of her father's clan. Formal education as such has, however, never been perceived as something negative though in some cases it may be perceived of as something that is not part of the basic needs.

The foreign, Batak and Javanese missionary teachers have always been held in high esteem and the position of teacher has long been an outstanding and much respected position among the Mentawai communities. In earlier days the local teacher enjoyed considerable respect and revenues (e.g. lodging and food) from the local communities. The local teacher was perceived of as a knowledgeable and wise person. The teacher was the one informed, the one you could trust and turn to with your questions and problems, and maybe he would lend you some money. Over the years, however, the position of the teacher has somewhat lost of its initial prestige. Where the quality of the education offered by the religious institutions was and remains to be thorough, the governmental education has experienced a downturn during the last two decades of the previous century. The predominantly Minangkabau civil servants brought in from the mainland by the Padang-Pariaman administration were not always sufficiently motivated to fulfil the laborious task of teaching in Mentawai where conditions were harsh compared to those on the mainland. Compared to the missionary teachers working under the close supervision of the bishop and the local priests, the *pegawai negeri* (civil servant) teachers were neither controlled nor evaluated. Whereas there was nobody there to guide their activities, many civil servant teachers became indolent, showing up late or not showing up at all and sending school children back home already at eleven o'clock in the morning. During Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month, teachers returned to the mainland for several consecutive weeks. Until the administrative independence of the Mentawai Archipelago in 1999, teachers joining the civil service had to collect their salaries in Padang. In those days the return trip to Padang could take a week at least; during which school children in Mentawai enjoyed unofficial holidays. As there were little to no study books available, school children were solely dependant upon the knowledge of the teachers. While the teachers' furlough periods in Padang kept on extending, Mentawai children enrolled in the governmental schools did not work through the whole curriculum and turned out to be seriously handicapped when trying to proceed education elsewhere.

## Secondary education outside Mentawai

Junior high school became available in Mentawai in the late 1980s and senior high school only in the late 1990s, so those children who wished to enrol in secondary education before that time had no other option than to transit to the mainland. While the financial means to engage in education on the mainland was lacking for most Mentawaians, the majority of the children that did go to the mainland did so with the support of either the Protestant or the Catholic church. Though not an obligation, most Mentawaians thus also enrolled in one of the church-based schools, rather than in one of the governmental facilities that are plentiful on the mainland. In addition to the schooling facilities, the churches also offered a secure place to stay in one of their boarding houses. Whereas the churches were aware of the difficult financial situation of most Mentawaians the churches quite often offered dispensation of the payment of school fees to those people that simply lacked the finances to pay for education.

The Protestant church had a fairly solid basis amongst the Batak communities in North

Sumatra and instead of expanding their facilities within Padang, the Protestant church preferred to send promising Mentawai students on an individual basis to either Pematangsiantar or Medan (North Sumatra) in order to engage in education there. In North Sumatra, these students were placed in boarding houses amongst predominantly Batak children. The only Protestant senior high school (*Sekolah Menengah Atas* – SMA) in Padang is in the hands of the independent Protestant organisation *Yayasan Kristen Kalam Kudus*. This school was opened in the early 1990s. The Protestant church furthermore ran one boarding house in Padang, but this facility was meant for boys only and was closed in the late 1990s.

Those Mentawaians involved in the Catholic schooling system, however, did not need to travel far, because the Catholic diocese had created ample educational facilities in Padang. Once arrived in Padang, Mentawai girls enrolling in Catholic education could choose from either SMP Maria (initially only accepting girls) or SMP Yos Sudarso where both boys and girls were received. Mentawai boys could choose from either SMP Yos Sudarso or SMP Frater, a junior high school connected to the seminary Maria Nirmala. This seminary was, however, closed in the late 1980s after which SMP Frater became a general Catholic SMP where nowadays both boys and girls are welcome. After the closure of the seminary in Padang, boys who had their sights set on an education in theology from then on had to enrol in the Catholic seminary Pematangsiantar in North Sumatra. Though in theory there were options to choose from, in reality only very few Mentawaians went to SMP Maria or SMP Frater. The level of education within these two junior high schools was significantly higher than that in Yos Sudarso. The majority of the Mentawai children were almost automatically subscribed to SMP Yos Sudarso. Apart from its convenient location close to the girls' boarding house, SMP Yos Sudarso was furthermore believed to be a better choice for the Mentawaians who were portrayed as less knowledgeable.<sup>93</sup> In this view Yos Sudarso offered an adapted curriculum especially meant for the Mentawai children helping them to cope with the higher standards of education in Padang.

After finalising the SMP, school children could further their education within the Catholic SMA Don Bosco or the popular teachers training college (*Sekolah Pendidikan Guru* - SPG) Xaverius, leading to a career in education. Half way the 1990s SPG Xaverius became SMA Xaverius, a general (Catholic) SMA. The majority of Mentawaians enrolled in Catholic education choose to enrol in SPG Xaverius rather than in SMA Don Bosco. SPG Xaverius would educate them to become teachers and the obligatory *ikatan dinas* attached to this type of education was by many Mentawaians perceived of as a guarantee for employment after graduation. Apart from the choice for a general SMA, girls could after SMP also enrol in specialised training to become a nurse in the *Sekolah Perawat Kesehatan* – SPK located in Palembang and Medan. Boarding houses were also conveniently available in these cities. After three years of intensive study many of these girls became nurses in one of the

<sup>93</sup> Compared to the mainly Chinese children that were also enrolled in these junior high schools, the Mentawaians were indeed less knowledgeable. While many of the Chinese children had enjoyed a solid elementary education and some four to six years of all kinds of extracurricular activities, most Mentawaians had only encountered with the absolute basics of elementary school.

Catholic health clinics in Mentawai or the Catholic hospital, Yos Sudarso in Padang. Being conscious of the fact that they were perceived of as less knowledgeable and the fact that they indeed quite often stood to lose in the competition against their better educated fellow students, many Mentawaians struggled in order to keep up with the pace. Far away from family and familiar friends, life in the boarding houses was not necessarily pleasant. Outside the boarding houses, one had to deal with the city where most of the pleasures and the entertainment the city had on offer remained, due to a lack of finances, outside the range of the young Mentawaians. Many of them were frustrated and coping with high stress levels and some even lost faith in themselves all together. As a result many dropped out of secondary school before obtaining their diploma.

Quite like the Christian initiatives, the Islamic movement has also invested in education for reasons of religious expansion. Over the last few years the Islamic movement has been quite successful amongst Mentawaian youngsters seeking education outside the Mentawai archipelago. Local organisation, *Yayasan Pembinaan Masyarakat Mentawai* – YPMM (Organisation for the Founding of the Mentawaian Society), has under the charismatic leadership of Bakri Tasirebbeb, proved to be a strong protagonist of the spread of Islam through education.<sup>94</sup> Although this organisation has no education facilities under its supervision, they are, in close cooperation with the earlier mentioned Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, running two boarding houses (*panti asuhan*) in Padang, solely meant for children originating from Mentawai. Mentawaian youngsters residing in one of these Islamic boarding houses are automatically members of *Yayasan Panti Asuhan Anak Mentawai*, a subsidiary of YPMM. Only in return for their conversion to Islam people can make use of these facilities. Currently, a little over 60 children are enrolled in this boarding house, the majority of them originating from Mentawai. Once administered to one of the boarding houses, one of which meant for boys and the other for girls, the young Mentawaians are thoroughly indoctrinated with the norms and values of good Islamic faith. These messages are intensified with an extremely negative stigmatising of those who drop out (*murtat*) from Islam and people of different beliefs (*khafir*). Blessed with plenty of devoted enthusiasts and backed up by a secure financial basis, the Islamic movement grew more and more influential over the last two to three decades. The ‘everything-paid-for’ education packages in return for conversion to Islam offered by YPMM, are of course tempting. While some Mentawaians have praised this opportunity and grabbed it with both hands, others speak of it as yet another Islamic conspiracy to undermine Mentawaian culture and identity.

### **Boarding houses**

For both the Christian churches as well as the Islamic movement the boarding houses serve an important role in the enlargement and the consolidation of their carefully built faith communities. Because of the presence of the boarding houses, especially the

<sup>94</sup> The word ‘founding’ refers here to the educating and civilizing of the Mentawaian communities in a religious sense. Bakri Tasirebbeb, a former government official originating from Aceh, has been active in Mentawai for already over thirty years. Due to his convincing social work during these three decades, local communities have accepted him as a member of the Mentawaian community, emphasised by giving him a Mentawaian name: Tasirebbeb.

churches have been able to attach their followers to the education facilities they have on offer and simultaneously create solid faith-based communities.

For those children who went to one of the Christian boarding houses, independency started at an early age. Some Mentawai children already entered boarding school while still in elementary school in Mentawai and were released from it only after finalising SMA in Padang. Life in the boarding house thus determined several years of their early youth. Away from their parents and other family they had to comply with the rules and regulations of the missionaries. Daily routine was strict and left, except for Sunday afternoon, little time for leisure activities.

In the boarding houses the Mentawai children got in contact with children of different ethnic background (e.g. Javanese, Batak and Niassans), but also with fellow Mentawaians originating from different Mentawai islands. These increased interethnic and intra-ethnic contacts not only broadened their sense of others, but moreover so made them aware of the different manners of people that were to be considered Mentawaians like themselves. What most Mentawai children, despite the intra-ethnic differences had in common was the fact that their parents often encountered difficulties in paying for the boarding school. As a result many Mentawai children built a debt with the diocese in Padang that often had to subvene to get the boarding schools' finances in order.

While the Catholic boarding schools in Mentawai are still in full operation, both the Catholic and the Protestant boarding schools for boys in Padang were closed in the late 1990s. These closures have contributed to the phenomenon of young Mentawaians increasingly finding resort with family or friends already living in Padang. The Catholic boarding school for girls and the two above mentioned *panti asuhan* are still operational until this day.

### ***Ikatan dinas***

Those Mentawaians that enjoyed formal education from the 1970s throughout the 1980s were almost without exception relying heavily on the facilities offered by the Protestant and Catholic churches. The churches offered thorough education and with their boarding houses and frequent dispensation of tuition fees, they made the education they had on offer available for basically everyone willing to enrol. From those students that had engaged in pedagogic, health care or religious education, however, the churches asked something in return from those who had enjoyed their support. The fulfilment of the so-called *ikatan dinas*, a debt servitude was applicable to those people that enjoyed senior high school education in one of the religious institutions in one of the studies mentioned above. According to the three-plus-one agreement people had to fulfil four years of service for the church for every three years they enjoyed support from that church.<sup>95</sup> Whereas the *ikatan dinas* should most advantageously serve in the interest of the church (e.g. expansion and consolidation), many young school children were geared in the direction of pedagogic, healthcare and religious education and later send off as teachers,

<sup>95</sup> A senior high school (SMA) education, finalised without delays, takes three years in Indonesia.

nurses, pastor and reverends to those areas in the Indonesian archipelago there were still to be brought to Christianity. With only few role models to tap inspiration from, most of the early Mentawai children were indeed educated to become teachers, pastor or nurses. It was then in the capacity as pastor, teachers and nurses that these early students returned to Mentawai after the completion of their senior high school education. While the Batak and Javanese missionary teachers were not always too fond of serving their *ikatan dinas* in the Mentawai Archipelago, because of its geographic isolation and backward nature, for most of the educated Mentawaians the *ikatan dinas* was one of the only few job opportunities within the Mentawai Archipelago. Though a moral obligation, the *ikatan dinas* ensured these young graduates of a job and a small salary. With little to no job opportunities for secondary education graduates within (and outside) the Mentawai Archipelago at that time (1980s through the 1990s), the *ikatan dinas* formed an excellent opportunity for these young Mentawaians to gain some work experience after which one stood a better chance to become a civil servant, the ultimate dream of many. While they could have stayed in the service of the church, many of the early Mentawai graduates have after the fulfilling their *ikatan dinas* indeed applied for a job as a civil servant (*pegawai negeri*). Positions in the local bureaucracy (mainly as teachers) were and still are wanted because of the more attractive salaries, retirement schemes and the favourable general conditions.

Nowadays the *ikatan dinas* is no longer obligatory for people that engage in church sponsored senior high school. People simply need to pay for their education with the church. Dispensation of the schooling fees, which used to be the rule rather than the exception in earlier days, is now only granted in extraordinary cases in which people are absolutely not able to pay the school fees. Currently there are so many Mentawaians available that finished senior high school, might the church need a new teacher, they can simply hire someone qualified for the job. The *ikatan dinas* has, however, not yet fully disappeared. People that nowadays enjoy a scholarship from the church in order to enrol in higher education (either in a religious or in a governmental institute) on the mainland are still obliged to fulfil the *ikatan dinas*.

## Higher education in Padang

After finalising secondary education many Mentawaians returned to Mentawai where the majority of them, in the absence of other employment, engaged in a life of farming and fishing like their parents. Not so much encouraged by the prospect of such a traditional life, a number of Mentawaians decided not to return to Mentawai. They stayed in Padang and tried to find higher education, employment or a combination of both. Those students enrolling in higher education and the subsequent choice for a (temporary) life in the city saw themselves confronted with several intellectual, mental, financial and practical challenges.

Application to one of the universities or colleges in Padang requires a certain standard of grades obtained in senior high school. Due to the earlier experienced educational

disadvantages, many Mentawaians did not meet these standards and were as a result quite often not able to enrol in the university of their choice. In such instances, one could try to subscribe to one of the private education institutions that are manifold in Padang. Some of these institutions have indeed more flexible subscription standards, but are in general also much more expensive than the governmental institutions. The majority of the Mentawaians enrolling in higher education choose for a study in the humanities, law or social sciences, avoiding the exact, engineering and bio-medical sciences. This can in all probability be traced back to the deficiencies in their secondary education where qualified teachers in physics, chemistry and mathematics were often lacking. Other popular choices were studies in education, politics and government, the travel and tourist industry, agriculture and fisheries, journalism, economics and accountancy. The choice for a certain study was pragmatic rather than based on personal qualities and often inspired by the prospect of employment in a particular area.

After one managed to be accepted to any of the higher education institutions in Padang, the problem of how to pay the college fees was the next problem to be dealt with. Scholarships covering (part of) the college fees could be obtained from the Catholic diocese, Yayasan Prayoga, the government and the Islamic YPMM. These scholarships were exclusively meant for those with outstanding secondary school results and unable to cover the college fees by themselves. The Catholic diocese and Yayasan Prayoga of course only supported Catholics, while the scholarships from Yayasan Prayoga were furthermore earmarked for those students enrolling in advanced studies in education. Scholarships from Yayasan Prayoga automatically led up to the obligatory fulfilment of the *ikatan dinas* after graduation. While this was for reasons explained above considered a plus in earlier days, nowadays the *ikatan dinas* is considered to cause a delay in obtaining real employment, which in many instances means becoming a civil servant.

In order to obtain a scholarship from YPMM, one had to converse to Islam. Apart from full scholarships, YPMM also offered welcoming Islamic host families in Padang as well as in other places on the mainland for Mentawaians engaging in higher education. In contrast to the scholarships from the churches and the government the YPMM scholarships were all inclusive. They almost always covered the full tuition fees and were furthermore inclusive of the costs involved in staying with a host family. Although both Mentawaiian men and women were welcome to apply for these scholarships, YPMM seemed to have a slight preference for female students to grant the scholarships to. According to Bakri Tasirebbeb this had everything to do with the above discussed Mentawaiian preference to rather invest in the (higher) education of their sons than in that of their daughters. YPMM has jumped into this gap by focussing on Mentawaiian women. In order to ensure that these carefully invested-in women did not run off back to Mentawai after their graduation, YPMM went at length to actively push these young Mentawaiian females to find themselves an Islamic husband from the mainland. Rumour has it that intentional early pregnancies refrained these young Mentawaiian women from returning to Mentawai. True or not, fact is that marrying young Mentawaiian girls is an official strategy (by *Dakwah Islamiah Indonesia*) in the expansion of the Islam within the Mentawaiian area (Mas'ood Abidin 1997: 156).

For a scholarship from the government one had to go through the procedures as set by Mentawai student union, *Ikatan Pemuda Pelajar Mentawai* (IPPMEN). Procedures at IPPMEN were, however, not always that transparent. There was a general feeling that the most active and most politically engaged IPPMEN members kept the scholarships mainly for themselves and their closest friends and relatives. Several of IPPMEN's most active and politically engaged members had lobbied intensively for these finances with the government in Padang-Pariaman and apparently felt that they now had the right to allocate the governmental funds to their own discretion.

Like in secondary school, in university again, many Mentawaians experienced serious difficulties in keeping up with the pace. Their interim grades were often not sufficient to move on to the next level. As a result of which tests had to be re-examined, slowing the intermediate progress and eventually delaying graduation. Due to the slow intermediate progress, extra semesters had to be taken. This again involved an additional financial burden added to the already rather difficult financial situation most Mentawaians experienced. This has in many instances lead to Mentawaians temporarily dropping out from university in order to find the finances to pay for the extra semester first. Despite all difficulties, the number of permanent dropouts has remained low. Most of the Mentawaians that started a university study also finalised it, though in general it took them several years more than most other students.

## Life in the city of Padang

### *A place to stay*

Whereas the boarding houses in Padang are meant for children involved in secondary education only, one of the first concerns that needs to be solved if one wishes to stay in Padang in order to follow higher education is finding oneself a place to stay. The earliest group of Mentawaian youngsters certainly experienced the most severe difficulties in finding themselves a place to stay. With little to no family or friends living in the city to refer to, they had to find their way all by themselves. While few of them managed to continue to make use of facilities of the Catholic church in return for some small services for the church, the majority of them had to find host families to stay with. In Indonesia it is not uncommon to rent a room in someone's private house. This so-called *indekos* (room and board) is a popular though relatively expensive way for students to stay in the city where their university or college is located. Whereas many Mentawaians feared to be Islamised while staying with a Minangkabau family, they preferred to stay with the Christian Batak or Chinese rather than with the invariably Islamic Minangkabau. The Mentawaians often ended up *indekos* with families of lower social and economic status that offered relatively cheap accommodation. In these cheaper places sanitary and cooking facilities were often of poor quality or lacking altogether. And although *indekos* suggests that meals are included in the rent, this was quite often not the case either. *Menderita* (misery) was the word I most often heard when Mentawaians were talking about the circumstances in which they had to live in Padang. And indeed the places in

which they had to live were often not more than sheds with a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling for lighting, diminishing opportunities to study to an absolute minimum. Running water was sometimes available, but more often it had to be obtained from the main building. Moreover, many of these *indekos* were located at inconvenient (with regard to accessibility and proximity of public transport) and even dangerous places. I visited many Mentawaians who lived *indekos* on the hill, notorious for its landslides, south of the Batang Arau river. Though aware of the possibly fatal danger they involved themselves in, many Mentawaians told me they simply had no other opportunities living in the city. Mentawaians *indekos* thus needed to be inventive and willing to take a chance in order to make things work. Most of them struggled continuously to make ends meet financially. Some of them, however, were lucky and found accommodation with better positioned families. Yudas Sabaggalet, the current *bupati* (head of district) of the Mentawai Islands, for instance, was more or less adopted by a wealthy Chinese family that took him in as if he were their own child.

Those Mentawaiian students that came to Padang at a later stage had almost without exception already one or more acquaintances in the city. The fact that they could connect with relatives or friends considerably eased their search for a place to stay. Instead of ending up *indekos* on an individual basis, the joint renting of whole houses became fashionable. This clustering together with family members already residing in Padang, sharing the costs for food and lodging, enabled them to help each other out on a more communal basis. But despite the mutual support these occasional households are still strongly characterised by an everlasting shortage in finances. Responsibility for the payment of the bills is taken by rotation or opportunity and almost without exception surrounded by severe financial stress, debts, arrears, last minute payments and lucky shots (e.g. paying the electricity bill with the wins from the (illegal) lottery). While several members of these households were working temporarily or on a more permanent basis they enabled others from within the household to go to school or university. The next semester or the next year positions may be conversed. The predominantly unskilled and low-paid jobs that these people engaged in vary from porter in the harbour to employee in one of Padang's many restaurants and hotels. Many Mentawaians have also found temporary jobs with one of the local Padang-based NGOs or within the organisation of the Catholic church.

### ***Interethnic contact***

Living in the city of Padang is a guarantee for an increase in interethnic contact. At schools, universities, boarding houses, within host families, at their work and even while doing the groceries at the market, everywhere the Mentawaians have to deal with people of different ethnic origin and different religious beliefs. The largest and most influential group in Padang are the Minangkabau. And they are simultaneously also the most complicated group for the Mentawaians to deal with. Although daily contact between the Minangkabau and the Mentawaians in Padang is fairly friendly on the surface, their relationship is characterised by deep running antagonisms and distrust. The Mentawaians coming to Padang tried to comply with the Minangkabau codes of conduct as much as possible. Many Mentawaians learned to speak the Minangkabau language quickly. And

in order not to be judged as poor, dirty and backwards at first instance, the Mentawaians often disavowed their Mentawaian identity within the public domain. Mentawaian clan names for instance had little to no differentiating power outside the Mentawai Archipelago other than that the people using them became classified as second-class citizens. Mentawaians in Padang thus preferred to introduce themselves by their Christian or Islamic names only. Many of the Mentawaian youngsters that came to Padang during the last three decades of the previous century almost invariably told me that they had felt bad about the fact that they had thought that renouncing their cultural and ethnic identity had been necessary in order to stand their ground amidst the patronising Minangkabau. Despite their perceived superiority many Minangkabau are a bit afraid of the Mentawaians as a result of which the Minangkabau tend to avoid the Mentawaians whenever possible.

Relations with the ethnic Chinese residing in Padang are of a different order. Generally, the Mentawaians feel comfortable in the vicinity of the Chinese. Despite the perceived stinginess of the Chinese, the Mentawaians consider the Chinese allies, at least in terms of food (pork) and religion (Christianity). The Chinese also serve as an inspiring example for the Mentawaians when it comes to cultural resilience and fellowship. Despite the strong suppression of their cultural expressions during the *Orde Baru* regime, the Chinese managed to maintain a strong pride in their cultural distinctiveness. The strong community sense of the Chinese has certainly helped them in doing so and the Mentawaians admire them for this quality.<sup>96</sup> The Chinese on their turn think of the Mentawaians as simple and honest people, similar to the Niassans. The business and wealth-gaining minded Chinese, however, also believe that the egalitarian Mentawaians with their incomprehensible tendency to share cause bad fortune. For the Chinese, contact with the Mentawaians on a daily basis is thus fairly acceptable, but doing business with a Mentawaian on an equal basis is considered impossible. For the same reason, marrying a Mentawaian is considered marrying down and should thus be avoided. The Chinese see themselves as superior in the relationship with the Mentawaians, but simultaneously they feel a certain connectedness and compassion with the Mentawaians that like the Chinese have endured decades of cultural and religious suppression.

Just like the Mentawaians, the Niassans form a small, but steadily growing ethnic minority in the city of Padang. Quite like the Mentawaians, the Niassans also come to Padang in search of education and paid labour. Different than on the Mentawai Islands, land is a scarce resource on the island of Nias and most natural resources (mainly timber) have been depleted. The magnitude 8.6 earthquake of March 2005 caused Nias a further setback in the already stagnating economic development. This event led to a sudden peak in the number of migrants from this island heading to Padang. Long before the Niassans and the Mentawaians came in touch with each other on the mainland they

<sup>96</sup> The Chinese in Padang know two larger associations and countless smaller family and interest group based organisations. HTT (Himpunan Tjinta Teman) is facilitating Chinese ritual burials. HBT (Himpunan Bersatu Teguh) is a general Chinese association organising cultural festivities like Chinese New Year and *Barongsai* (lion dance) contests.

have learned to understand each other in both congenial as well as hostile terms.<sup>97</sup> Due to the alleged ancestral relation both Niassans and Mentawaians often perceive of each other as somehow being related. In addition to the possible ancestral link, they also often say that they are *sama sama orang pulau* (both islanders), proudly uniting them in some sort of mutual understanding about what life entails stemming from an island. But despite the similarities and the possible ancestral connection, the Mentawaians and the Niassans do not seem to have a tendency to join forces while being in Padang. In general the Niassans are perceived of by the Mentawaians as brutal, ruthless and out of control people especially when acting in a group. The Niassans are furthermore believed to be out for Mentawai brides, a feature they are detested for by the Mentawaians. So the Mentawaians tend to stay out of sight of the Niassans whenever possible telling nasty stories about them in order to discourage the Mentawai girls from chatting up with the Niassans. And the Niassans on their turn feel no urge to link up with the suspicious Mentawaians whom they generally perceive of as being bold and uncivilised.

### ***Student union IPPMEN***

IPPMEN, short for Ikatan Pemuda Pelajar Mentawai (Union for Young Mentawai Students and School Children) was founded in 1982 by a group of young Mentawai students that were then residing in Padang. IPPMEN was the first and has long been the only Mentawai student union in Padang. Whereas many of the earliest Mentawai school children and students residing in Padang felt somewhat uneasy within the urban environment, IPPMEN was established as a formalised opportunity for these people to gather and to support each other, simultaneously creating a sense of togetherness. IPPMEN was founded for all Mentawaians residing in Padang, regardless of their origin, religion or intended length of stay in the city. Out of the more than 500 members listed in 1997, only some 20 to 30 individuals were actively involved in activities for or in cooperation with IPPMEN. Although in theory, every Mentawai heading for the mainland was automatically considered a member of the IPPMEN community, in practice many of the Islamic Mentawaians have long felt at odds with the predominantly Christian members within the organisation. Such was to change when IPPMEN became chaired by the Islamic Kornelius Muslim Sabailatti from 1995 till 2000, but by then much of the organisation's initial lustre, relevance and influence had long gone. The funding that IPPMEN had long received from the Catholic church was also stopped in the late 1990s, though this probably had more to do with the misuse of this funding by IPPMEN's

<sup>97</sup> There goes a myth telling that Aman Tawe, father of Tawe, at a certain moment in time migrated from Nias to Siberut. Together with his family and several others he brought from Nias, he settled in Simatalu and expanded from there over all four Mentawai Islands, forming the ancestors of the people that nowadays live on the Mentawai islands. These Niassan migrants used the name of Aman Tawe to indicate both themselves as a people and the islands they had invaded. The phonetic similarity between 'Aman Tawe' and 'Mentawai' serves as 'proof' for this mythical ancestral link between the Niassans and the Mentawaians (Sihombing 1979, Tulus 2013). Another myth, however, tells about a less harmonic encounter between the Niassans and the Mentawaians. The myth tells about how long ago a group of Niassans sailed to Siberut and came ashore in Simalegi. They went upriver where they encountered with the locals living there. They entered into a long lasting violent fight after which the Niassans were eventually driven of the island and went back to Nias (personal communication with Tulus 2013).

earlier leading figures, than that it was a result of the fact that the organisation became chaired by a Moslem.

As a student and youth union, IPPMEN focussed on the Mentawaian school children and students in Padang and the problems they encountered with. With the modest, but regular financial aid that IPPMEN received from the Catholic church and some occasional funds obtained from foreign donors, IPPMEN tried to tackle or at least diminish difficulties such as the troublesome transportation facilities between Padang and the Mentawai Archipelago, the poor student housing facilities in Padang, the lacking of governmental financial support for their studies, their fear of being Islamised while residing in the city, Mentawaian girls getting pregnant before finishing their education (sometimes even before finishing high school) and the emergence of drug abuse amongst some of the young Mentawaians in Padang. Whereas, according to IPPMEN's most active members, the origin of many of these problems needed to be sought outside the Mentawaian community, they started to seek contact with the local government in Padang-Pariaman in order to get their fears, hopes and demands across. Apart from the student related issues, IPPMEN also called the local government to account for their stance with regard to the Mentawaian community as a whole. IPPMEN stated that the fact that local government bodies still perceived the Mentawaian culture and *adat* as pagan and backwards jeopardised the position Mentawaian individuals as a citizen and simultaneously formed the basis on which less fortunate governmental policies were based. In this light the pan-Indonesian family planning programme *Keluarga Berencana*, was rejected by IPPMEN as not applicable to the Mentawaian community amongst whom population growth was (and still is) low and child mortality high. IPPMEN, together with national NGO SKEPHI and London-based NGO SOS Siberut, furthermore set face against the provincial Department of Transmigration for their condemnable plan to introduce a considerable number of bachelors to the Mentawai Archipelago to 'assimilate' with the local girls or order to rapidly and effectively upgrade the Mentawaians from their state of backwardness (Persoon 1996). Backed up by the two other NGOs, IPPMEN started a flaming letter campaign. After some politicians in the higher echelons had denied that such a transmigration plan had ever existed, the plan melted into thin air. The local government in Padang-Pariaman, somewhat impressed by the complaints filed by the vocal members of IPPMEN, as a result formalised their relationship with IPPMEN. From 1992 onwards IPPMEN was granted the responsibility over the organisation of the earlier mentioned scholarships for students enrolled in higher education. And on the basis of annual program proposals IPPMEN then also started to receive some financial aid from the Padang-Pariaman administration in order to cover their overhead costs.<sup>98</sup> Having experienced that vigorously filing your complaints may lead to a pay off, some members of IPPMEN started a defamation campaign against logging company PT Minas Pagai Lumber Corporation (MPLC) in 1994. The protests against this large logging company

<sup>98</sup> This money was part of the so-called Dana Pembinaan Pemuda dan Karang Taruna, which is money directly received from the central government allocated for sport and other creative activities among the younger generations within the district. Until IPPMEN explicitly asked for the Mentawaian share of this money, Mentawai had never received any of it.

active on the Island of South Pagai, were redeemed through an agreement according to which IPPMEN received four million rupiah (some 450 Euro) a month. In order to make sure that the promised amounts of money kept on coming in, MPLC was regularly warned for local communities on the brink of revolting against them (probably inflamed and thus only to be curbed again by IPPMEN itself) or threatened to be scandalised. In return for their low profile acting, several of the more vocal IPPMEN members were silenced by MPLC offering them scholarships on an individual basis. Several years later, during the late 1990s, then chairman of IPPMEN, Cornelius Muslim Sabailati, linked the student organisation to PT Mudam Sati, another logging company running a logging concession on the Island of Sipora. Both MPLC and Mudam Sati, competing over the concession areas that were available at that time, tried to shed a negative light over one another's activities by paying IPPMEN for ventilating negative publicity with regard to the other party. After some time IPPMEN had degraded itself to a puppet in the contest over resources between MPLC and Mudam Sati.

Protest against MPLC came to a climax in July 1998, when a crowd of students gathered by IPPMEN, after a protest session at the governor's office, headed for the MPLC headquarters also situated in Padang. Protesters denounced the plundering and deprivation of Mentawai's natural resources as well as the disruption of Mentawaian culture and society by MPLC ignoring the rights of local communities and the agreements made with them. The MPLC management reacted by stating that MPLC was working in line with the permit the company obtained from the Ministry of Forestry and that they therefore did not share the view of the protesters claiming that MPLC should be withdrawn from Mentawai on the basis of illegal activities. The MPLC management, however, declared their readiness to concretise some of the claims made by local communities on the Pagai islands. Therefore Cornelius Muslim Sabailati, and vice chairman, Levi Sirirui, were invited to meet with the MPLC management again within three days after the protest. Unwilling to wait for another three days to continue negotiations, IPPMEN further increased the pressure on MPLC by multiple protest actions in both Padang and on Pagai during the following days. By occupying the local MPLC office in Sikakap, IPPMEN even succeeded in forcing MPLC to temporarily stop their logging activities until new and satisfactory agreements between them and the Mentawaian communities were made. Later in July 1998 an agreement between IPPMEN and MPLC was signed according to which MPLC was to actively appoint Mentawaians in their work force, construct a road between the ten villages in the concession area and pay Rp 8.5 billion of overdue compensation to the various clans in the concession area. The agreement further stated that IPPMEN was to manage and hand out 54 full scholarships for Mentawaian students. MPLC simultaneously committed itself to finance the IPPMEN secretariat in Padang. Finally, the agreement stated that the Mentawaians (who exactly is not specified) would get a fair share in the shares of MPLC (Singalang 1998b). Striking is the fact that the shares-agreement became organised by Koperasi Induk Mentawai, an especially for this business newly established corporation under the administrative wings

of Badan Musyawarah Masyarakat Mentawai (BM3).<sup>99</sup> Only a few months later Cornelius Muslim Sabailati, who was a long-term protégé of Bakri Tasirebbeb, became the new chairman of BM3. Despite the agreement with MPLC, IPPMEN's protest against the logging corporation continued way into 1999. When MPLC stopped logging activities in early 2000 – part of their concession area (unofficially) been taken over by Mudam Sati – IPPMEN as an organisation and several of its leading members suffered a considerable loss in permanent income on which they had been leaning heavily over the last years. This financial crisis together with the already questionable reputation of several of its members, eventually led to the downfall of IPPMEN. Due to a lack of leadership and funding, the organisation ceased to exist, but was never officially closed down. Ever since IPPMEN's deterioration multiple other student organisations and student focus groups have emerged. Apart from the officially registered Forum Mahasiswa Mentawai (FORMMA), the Islamic student organisation Himpunan Pelajar dan Mahasiswa Islam Mentawai (HIPMIM) and the Jakarta-based Ikatan Mahasiswa Mentawai Jakarta (IMMJ) there are nowadays dozens of occasional gatherings and Facebook-based student groups, some of which will be discussed later in this thesis.<sup>100</sup> Despite the inglorious ending of IPPMEN, this organisation has certainly been a breeding ground where self-conscious Mentawaian individuals have learned to organise themselves, to find funding needed for their organisation and activities, to put their personal experiences into words and to negotiate their collective wishes and constraints with the ones in power.

## **The role and influence of the Catholic church**

During a symposium held in Padang in 1981 Stefano Coronese (a Catholic pastor active on Siberut) already suggested that the Christian churches in Mentawai have been extremely important in unifying the Mentawaians, granting them with a sense of ethnic consciousness and citizenship (Persoon & Schefold 1985: 105). The Catholic diocese in Padang has indeed been an influential factor in the lives of many Mentawaian youngsters that came to Padang to further their education. Apart from granting these young Mentawaians the chance to educate themselves, the Catholic church has also actively involved many Mentawaian youngsters in their activities, enabling them to earn some money while simultaneously gaining some experience in organising, building leadership skills, negotiating and communicating. In a joint fight against Islamisation, the Catholic church has simultaneously actively supported the Mentawaian youngsters in Padang to regain their cultural pride and to revive some aspects of Mentawaian culture and identity.

<sup>99</sup> Badan Musyawarah Masyarakat Mentawai (BM3) is a consultative body with an Islamic signature founded by the earlier mentioned Bakri Tasirebbeb. BM3 was established in order to strengthen democratic decision-making processes with regard to local politics and economic development.

<sup>100</sup> HIPMIM is a Mentawaian student organisation with an Islamic signature (although they explicitly claim not to exclude people with other religions) established in the initiative of Marfendi, a member of the DPRD Sumatra Barat. Besides the spread of Islam in Mentawai, HIPMIM is mainly interested in a strengthening of human resources. HIPMIM aims at as many tertiary educated Mentawaians as possible. University students can therefore count on the support of HIPMIM for their education. In return for their support HIPMIM expects their members to be active in the development of the Mentawai Archipelago.

### ***Laggai Simaeru insert***

From the early 1980s onwards the church's social commission (Komisi Sosial – KOMSOS) has been responsible for the production of the church magazine *Gema*.<sup>101</sup> Until the late 1990s this magazine came with an insert called *Laggai Simaeru* (literally: beautiful place) especially meant for the Mentawaian public. The responsibility for the content, formation and production of this insert was in the hands of several Mentawaians working for KOMSOS. A Niassan has long been responsible for the illustrations within *Laggai Simaeru*. Whereas this insert was produced by and meant for the Mentawaian public, all texts within it were in the Mentawaian language. The articles and fixed columns with which *Laggai Simaeru* was filled were written around a theme that was determined in advance. Every monthly insert of *Laggai Simaeru* came with a new theme that was always somehow connected to the broad topics of Catholicism and society or, preferably a combination thereof. Insert *Laggai Simaeru* consisted of a booklet of some 15 pages in A5 format. Though *Laggai Simaeru* was meant as an insert that came with the magazine *Gema*, the public was also enabled to buy just the insert or 1000 Rp (0,10 Euro in 2004) a copy. In theory both *Gema* and *Laggai Simaeru* were distributed in Padang as well as on the Mentawai islands, but apart from in Muara Siberut and Muara Sikabalan, I have never seen it for sale elsewhere in the Mentawai Archipelago. Although people on the southern Mentawai islands knew about the existence of the insert most of them declared that they had not seen another issue for months. When talking to people at KOMSOS they admitted that KOMSOS experienced quite severe problems in maintaining the appearance and the distribution of the magazine. According to many of the people I talked to this was due to a shortage in finances. Others added that the shortage in workforce at KOMSOS as well as the indolence of some of the people responsible for the production of articles and interviews were other important factors explaining the problem. Since most of the Mentawaians working for KOMSOS moved to jobs with the Mentawaian administration after 2000 and the appearance of *Laggai Simaeru* had become superfluous due to the introduction of *Puailiggubat*, a monthly magazine by local NGO Citra Mandiri, KOMSOS decided to stop producing the insert in the early 2000s and concentrated from then onwards on the production of *Gema* only.

### ***Siaran Mentawai***

Apart from the production of the insert, the Mentawaian people working at KOMSOS were also responsible for the composing of a short radio programme broadcasted by Radio Dikara Bawana, an independent radio station operating under the supervision of the Padang diocese. This radio programme, called *Siaran Mentawai*, made by and meant for the Mentawaian public in Padang but moreover for the people on the Mentawai Islands, was broadcasted three times a week. Each *Siaran Mentawai* was announced by an openings tune consisting of the rhythmic sound of the Mentawaian *kateuba* (small drum). The programme made use of the Mentawaian language. During the 20 minutes

<sup>101</sup> *Majalah Gema* is a 10-15 pages monthly magazine produced by the Catholic diocese in Padang. Written in Indonesian this magazine offers information and articles on different topics. Topics range from reports and announcements of activities organised by the diocese through religious, social, economic and environmental issues.

that the programme lasted, various subjects among which education, health and culture are most popular, were treated. The Sunday edition of the programme always handled about religion. The programme offered a mix of news and information transfer, discussion and recommendation through short talk shows, and Mentawaiian music (both popular and traditional). Apart from several Mentawaians there was only one person originating from Flores involved in the broadcasting of Siaran Mentawai. During the years that followed the independency of the Mentawai Archipelago, all Mentawaiian employees, apart from the only Mentawaiian female that worked on the production of Siaran Mentawai, left KOMSOS, transferring to employment in the civil service. Both Laggai Simaeru and Siaran Mentawai were successful productions. Especially the radio broadcast was something that I learned to understand as something that was appreciated by many Mentawaians. The fact that the radio programme was easily accessible through the use of the Mentawaiian language and presented news and information that had the interest of most Mentawaians, I have seen many Mentawaians turning up their radios when the *kateuba* was heard. Due to the earlier mentioned transfer of many of the employees and the shift in interests from 2000 onwards, KOMSOS saw itself forced to also stop with the production of Siaran Mentawai in the early 2000s.

#### ***Kaderisasi, workshops and other social gatherings***

Since the late 1980s social organisation Keluarga Katolik Mentawai (KKM) organises regular meetings, social gatherings and sport activities for all Catholic Mentawaians (or anyone somehow involved with a Catholic Mentawaiian) residing in Padang. KKM is not an officially registered organisation, but rather a loose gathering of people taking the initiative to organise activities for their associates. KKM has always been headed by a Mentawaiian, but for lack of interest KKM is currently headed by a Catholic Chinese married to a Mentawaiian. One of the most conspicuous activities organised by KKN is the

Radio Dikara  
Bawana



so-called *kaderisasi* (social education) gathering, almost without exception sponsored by the Catholic Komisi Kepemudaan (youth commission) of the Catholic diocese. *Kaderisasi* is especially meant for young Mentawaian students. The gathering provides them with ideas about the responsibilities they have towards the Mentawaian community whereas they are the future of the Mentawai Archipelago.

Social gatherings and support group gatherings are also organised by KKM as well as meetings requested for by the Mentawaian Catholic community on the instance of a marriage or a funeral. Sports and leisure activities are also on the agenda of KKM. In return for the payment of a small fee, the diocese makes their sport facilities available for the activities of KKM. Several times a week the Mentawaians can gather on the sport fields near Yos Sudarso hospital and St. Yusuf boarding school in order to play volleyball or soccer. The sports activities are much in demand among the young Mentawaians because it offers them an opportunity to relax and be amongst other Mentawaians. At the soccer field they could loose some of their frustrations, forget about their problems for a while and just be together casually.

#### ***Yayasan Laggai Simaeru***

Being stigmatised as backwards and, despite Christianisation, still perceived as without a proper religion, many Mentawaians experienced a serious identity crisis. Especially those Mentawaians residing in Padang were downplaying their cultural and religious identity in order to fit within the urban context. It was especially during the 1980s and the 1990s that the Catholic church feared to loose its Mentawaian adherents to the powerful and convincing Islamic conversion activities. Therefore the Catholic church decided to boost the anchoring of the Catholic faith as an intrinsic part of Mentawaian culture and identity. Different from Islam, Protestantism and the Indonesian nation state, the Catholic church allowed and now even started to promote Mentawaian culture and identity to partake in Catholicism.

With this task of promoting Mentawaian culture and identity and intensifying the connection with Catholicism, Yayasan Laggai Simaeru (YLS) was founded in the early 1990s and initially operated under the auspices of the Catholic Diocese in Padang. Under the spirited leadership of Pastor Ciroi, several young Mentawaians were involved in the implementation of the YLS activities organised to highlight Mentawaian culture and identity. It was pastor Tonino Caisutti who was mainly responsible for the funding of YLS and its activities. Mentawaian song, dance and traditional clothing competitions as well as story writing and poetry contests making use of the Mentawaian language were organised. In the YLS office a collection of Mentawaian artefacts was built. Most of the objects within this collection were of little to no value whereas they contained of kitchen utensils and some hunting gear only. Some objects used by the preparation of sago starch were probably considered too large in their original form and were thus displayed in miniature versions. This looked rather odd and some of the objects were (at least to me) no longer recognisable as the tools they were supposed to represent. The objects were, however, displayed in a nice glass showcase that made the objects look more interesting than that they actually were. A small library containing information about Mentawai and

Mentawaian culture and identity, almost without exception written by outsiders, was also set up and regularly complemented. Especially the copies of *Mainan Bagi Roh* by Reimar Schefold formed a source of annoyance as they just kept on disappearing from the library. But whereas the YLS office served as a meeting point for many without much control, nobody ever found out who never returned the books. Since the early 2000s the library also holds a modest collection of CDs with Mentawaian pop music.

After an internal conflict in the late 1990s, Yudas Sabaggalet, till then working for YLS as a secretary, managed to take over from the mainly Chinese people involved in the YLS board and became the first Mentawaian director of YLS. Although changes in vision and approach were expected after this change in leadership based on internal friction, no major changes in performance could be detected. Yudas, however, did try to gather all activities related to Mentawai undertaken or financed by the Catholic diocese (including the production of *Majalah Laggai Simaeru* and *Siaran Mentawai*) under the auspices of YLS. Although YLS was welcome to contribute to *Majalah Laggai Simaeru* and *Siaran Mentawai*, neither of these responsibilities were ever fully transferred to YLS. Yudas thus decided that YLS should produce its own magazine, innovatory titled *Majalah Laggai Simaeru*. Due to shortage of input for the magazine, only few editions of *Majalah Laggai Simaeru* are produced during the early 1990s.

When Yudas Sabaggalet left YLS in order to start a new NGO with his friend Kortanius Sabeleake, Bastian Sirirui took over the leadership of YLS. During Bastian's leadership YLS started to drift. Bastian felt the need to broaden the scope of YLS' vision and mission, but was seemingly not able to make up his mind about the direction in which the organisation were to move. The initial focus and activities of YLS began to faint while Bastian's primary interest was in networking activities with the Kalimantan-based NGO *Pancur Kasih*. When Bastian eventually left YLS in order to start his own organisation, rumour has it that he took a large amount of YLS funding with him, allegedly used as investment for his newly founded organisation. While nobody seemed to know what really happened, fact is that the Catholic church withdrew its funding for YLS after Bastian had left.

It was elementary school teacher, Salvator Sakoikoi, originating from Sikakap, Pagai, who took over from Bastian Sirirui. Salvator, interested in education, managed to interest UNESCO in the partaking of YLS in their non-formal education programme that was implemented alongside UNESCO's general programme since 2000 onwards. This so-called *Pinatoro Uma* (enlightened clan/house) project was aiming at 'the empowerment of the traditional Mentawaian communities and their indigenous customs' through an increase in literacy (UNESCO 2001: 20). The main assets of this project were the production of a non-formal curriculum for elementary schools and the implementation of three so-called Community Learning Centres (CLC) in Rereiket on Siberut.<sup>102</sup> When UNESCO withdrew its Canadian field staff responsible for the implementation of the non-formal

<sup>102</sup> The three CLCs, located in Buttui, Attabai and Sakaliou were built by the local communities and served as school buildings where local children were provided classes in *Bahasa Indonesia*, mathematics, reading, writing, and Mentawaian culture. Three local teachers were employed by UNESCO in order to teach local children ranging from 4 to 10 years old.

education project, the responsibilities for this project were gradually handed over to YLS from July 2002 onwards. But the YLS staff performed unsatisfactorily and through their unprofessional behaviour threatened to jeopardise the position of the teachers active in the CLCs. The YLS staff was clearly not experienced enough to manage a project of this scope and complexity. Due to the disappointing results and considerable overspending on one of YLS' first field activities, UNESCO saw itself forced to prematurely withdraw the *Pinatoro Uma* project from YLS and hand it over to another local NGO (Direktorat Pendidikan Masyarakat 2002).

With the withdrawal of UNESCO, Salvator decided to accept a job as a governmental teacher on his island of origin, Sikakap; a job opportunity he had been looking forward to for a long time. Pastor Emilius Sakoikoi took over from Salvator, but due to a lack in finances and a clear programme of work there have not been many activities ever since.

### The social ecology of the city

Many of the Mentawaians who came to Padang during the 1970s throughout the 1990s told me that they while residing in the city had often felt lonely, insecure, fearful, downright stupid and continuously confronted with a worrisome shortage of finances. In the midst of plenty, the Mentawaians remained spectators, not able to fully participate in the wealth and modernity of the city. Many of them indicated the Catholic church and their fellow Mentawaian also residing in Padang as their only anchors in an otherwise fairly hostile environment. Whereas the Mentawaians were invariably perceived of as an inferior ethnic group, it was especially in the city that they became subject to exclusion, discrimination and disrespect. It was in the city that these Mentawaians were most strongly confronted with their marginality. Such pressure comes with social and psychological consequences. As a result many Mentawaians start to deny their cultural background while in public and quickly adapt to the predominantly Minangkabau rules of conduct. Dependant on the context in which they had been in Padang, the Mentawaians who resided in Padang changed. Many of them reported to me that their stay in Padang had caused them to alienate from their Mentawaian identity and cultural background. When (temporarily) back in Mentawai they experienced an uncomfortable detachment from their friends and families in Mentawai who often perceived of their change as being *sombong* (presumptuous). They were often told that they didn't know their 'house' anymore, plaintively hinting at a disrespect with regard to their parents and other close family.

Despite (or perhaps as a result of) the fact that many of them report bitterness, disappointment and frustration, there is also a certain enlightenment and determination to be sensed among the Mentawaians residing in Padang. The social ecology of the city, stimulating their growing cultural self-consciousness or reflexivity stimulated by augmented interethnic contact and increased analytical power engendered by literacy, created a sense of community and simultaneously changed the perspective of the young Mentawaians residing in Padang. Their engaging in ethnic competition has made them

more aware of themselves and turned ethnicity into something salient to them. Their vision on Mentawai has simultaneously changed with it. Many of them started to reflect (some more systematically than others) on their culture and their position as a distinct ethnic group in a wider context. They increasingly questioned their exclusion from local politics and decision-making processes and their subsequent social marginalisation from larger society. They agreed that the Mentawaians were indeed less knowledgeable and their islands less developed, but they also argued that these are not intrinsic features of Mentawai culture and identity, but rather the result of ill government planning and poorly executed government projects. They began addressing their government in Padang-Pariaman to come forward with changes and real development planning for the Mentawai Archipelago.

## Conclusion

Formal education has been of major importance in the emergence of the self-proclaimed political elite that nowadays rules the Mentawai Archipelago. Though formal education was already introduced by the Dutch at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was only from the 1970s onwards that formal education within the Mentawai Archipelago slowly began to develop. Junior high school became available in Mentawai during the 1980s. It was only during the 1990s that senior high school became available. Anyone wishing to enrol in either junior or senior high school before its availability on the islands had to go to the Sumatran mainland. Many Mentawai youngsters went to Padang with the help of the Christian churches or the Islamic movement. Especially the Catholic church supports the Mentawaians in their struggle to carve out a living for themselves amidst the predominant and significantly different Minangkabau. The Catholic church also supports them in maintaining their cultural and ethnic singularity and helps them to organise within church supported organisations and activities. The Christian initiatives have gradually lost some of its influence. Due to tight finances the Christian churches have felt the necessity to close some of its facilities, especially in Padang. Whereas finances are not an obstacle for most of the Islamic schooling initiatives, they have gradually increased their influence amongst the Mentawaians. Though most Mentawaians do not wish to get involved in Islam, because they perceive of islamisation as a fundamental undermining of their Mentawai identity, gradually increasing numbers of young Mentawaians apply for the all-inclusive and everything-paid-for scholarships offered by the Islamic initiatives. After their graduation from high school many Mentawaians have returned to Mentawai where some found employment as teachers or nurses. Others, who were reluctant to return to Mentawai stayed in Padang and tried to find employment there or enrolled in higher education. Both turned out to be difficult amidst the little supportive Minangkabau.

Apart from the Minangkabau, the Mentawaians residing in the city of Padang also came in contact with the more friendly ethnic Chinese, increasing numbers of Niassans and Mentawaians originating from other islands within the Mentawai Archipelago. The increased inter- and intra-ethnic contact that is part and parcel of the ecology of the city has made those Mentawaians residing in the city more ethnically conscious and created a

sense of community amongst them. Their increased cultural self-consciousness sometimes lead to a denial of their cultural and ethnic background. On the other hand, however, this reflexivity combined with their increased analytical power generated by literacy, caused this group of Mentawaians to increasingly question their exclusion from local politics and decision making processes and their subsequent marginalisation from larger society. They experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the way in which the Mentawaians have been perceived and treated by outsiders. Student organisation, IPPMEN was among the first Mentawaian organisations that, apart from student affairs, also dealt with broader social issues such as the loss of cultural, religious and ethnic integrity, the discriminatory treatment of the Mentawaians as second-class citizens, the political marginalisation of the Mentawaians and the generally ill designed development schemes implemented in the Mentawai Archipelago.

