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

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7 Conclusions

My thesis evolves around the wish to understand the dynamics of local politics in the Mentawai Archipelago during the era of *Reformasi*. In seeking to address this research question, I have investigated both the political and the cultural dimensions of regional autonomy and decentralisation by focussing on the actions of a particular group of Mentawaians, whom I have called the Mentawaian elite. In order to understand how the elite exploited the opportunities created by encroaching global discourses and profound changes in the national political context, I have researched the background, composition and nature of this elite stemming from a strictly egalitarian but otherwise highly diverse and fragmented society. I have investigated how this elite localised the global discourses and political changes by giving them their own cultural stamp. I have furthermore researched how they coped with the challenges and dilemmas attached to their new, self-acquired political position and based on what considerations they made which decisions. The longer view has allowed me to realise that what I have observed is not exclusively the result of the decentralisation agenda. Regional autonomy certainly was a catalyst for accelerated, fairly chaotic political and administrative changes. But, as my thesis shows, profound social change was already taking place before decentralisation was at the horizon. The establishment of the Mentawaian elite itself was not solely a product of regional autonomy. The elite was already in the making long before regional autonomy was introduced and should therefore be understood as a product as well as a producer of social change.

The Mentawaian elite

In the preceding chapters I have described the Mentawaian elite as a group of young, formally educated, politically engaged Mentawaians. While this broadly holds true for the majority of the people on whom the main part of this thesis is based, we need to realise that the Mentawaian elite is in no way a static, homogeneous group of youngsters, all heading for the same goals. What has become obvious from the preceding chapters is the fact that the nature of this elite as well as the alliances formed by this group are subject to constant change. Quite similar to Mentawaian society itself, the Mentawaian elite is of a heterogeneous composition in which mutually independent individuals occupy

substantially different stances and positions. The Mentawaian elite as I have described it consists of men only, the majority of them being Mentawaian and several of mixed descent. Although there are some women involved in the activism and politicking as I have described in the previous chapters, the positions they occupy and their actions undertaken are fairly uninfluential. The majority of this elite considers itself Christian. While a small, but rather vocal part of this group adheres Islam. After regional autonomy was introduced, the majority of the Mentawaian elite individuals became politicians and civil servants. Others, however, refrained or distanced themselves from participation in local politics and the bureaucracy. They became involved in local businesses while others remained active within one of the local NGOs.

What all these people, despite their differences, do have in common is the fact that they are all of the opinion that the Mentawai Archipelago is in need of speedy development. They also share the opinion that this development should not be brought by outsiders, but should be based on the aspirations of Mentawaian society itself. Mentawai should be developed on its own pace while Mentawaian identity should be preserved of even revitalised. Paradoxically, the main impediment to the development issue lies in this accordance. What exactly enhances development is a question that different people have a fairly different answer to. The same goes for Mentawaian identity.

The making of a self-conscious elite

The colonial powers as well as the Indonesian nation state have portrayed the Mentawaians as 'modernity's other', 'a-political savages' lost from the mainstream of progress and development. With their culture and lifestyle branded as inferior, the Mentawaians have been subject to various civilisation and development policies especially radical during the *Orde Baru* regime of the 1970s and 1980s (Persoon 1994). Various projects and programmes have altered almost every aspect of Mentawaian daily life during those years. Ranging from food to religion and from clothing to social structure, basically everything has been subject to forced change and even suppression (Persoon 1994). Large-scale commercial logging has decimated the forests - of major importance in the traditional livelihood system of the Mentawaians - especially on the southern Mentawai Islands of Sipora and the Pagai Islands and to a lesser extent on the island of Siberut. Both the logging and the governmental development schemes, often implemented by their Minangkabau neighbours, have deprived the Mentawaians of large parts of their environment and eroded their cultural and ethnic identity. As a result they learned to understand themselves as third-rate citizens while building a fairly antagonistic relationship with their Minangkabau neighbours. The Mentawaians, however, have found multiple ways to deal with these (sometimes forced) changes. While some have chosen to retreat in order to continue their forest-based lifestyle, others have embraced modernisation or parts thereof. Some choose to become Christians, others have chosen Islam as their new faith. All these changes and transitions and the multiple ways in which the Mentawaians have dealt with it, have created large intra-cultural variation.

From the 1970s onwards, gradually increasing numbers of Mentawaians started to head for the Sumatran mainland in search of secondary and at a later stage even tertiary education (Schefold 1988). On the mainland they came in contact with other ethnic groups present in the city more intensively than ever before. In order to survive in the city of Padang, these young Mentawaians had to adapt themselves to the cultural codes of the majority population of that city, the Minangkabau (Eindhoven 2007). During my field research I have seen these young Mentawaians struggling with their forward position in otherwise fairly hostile surroundings. I have frequently heard them denying their Mentawaian identity while in search for jobs, favours or friends. Many of them told me that renouncing their identity felt like treachery, but that they saw no alternative. On many occasions I have found their situation quite sad. Many of the young Mentawaian students faced severe financial problems as a result of which their standard of living was quite miserable compared to that on the Mentawai Islands where food is plentiful and housing generally rather spacious.

Their stay in Padang, on the other hand, also triggered increased intra-ethnic contact with other Mentawaians, originating from different Mentawai islands and clans they sometimes never heard of before. Despite the fact that old prejudices proved hard to do away with, these contacts certainly broadened their view on their fellow Mentawaians and even created a certain group sense. In chapter two I have described how intra-ethnic animosities make it fairly impossible to construct the Mentawaians as a homogeneous ethnic group. While residing in Padang, however, fellow Mentawaians were regarded as allies. The Catholic church, prominently present in Padang with its schools and boarding houses, frequently visited and inhabited by Mentawaians, has certainly helped to built and nurture this Mentawaian group sense (Coronese 1986). While turning the Mentawaians into devote Christians, the Catholic church has also supported and encouraged the Mentawaians to hold on to their Mentawaian identity. Extracurricular activities and sport events organised by the church, as well as the establishment of local NGO Yayasan Laggai Simaeru, were all initiatives by the Catholic church adding to the cultural consciousness and the strengthening of the Mentawaian community in Padang.

Their increased levels of education combined with increased inter-ethnic as well as intra-ethnic contact formed the start of a process the literature has described as ethno-genesis, an increased ethnic self-consciousness or cultural reflexivity (Eriksen 2010 [1993], 2014 [2007]). Different from their parents, these young Mentawaians, both physically as well as psychologically distanced from their background, now became able to analyse that background more profoundly and eventually turned them into self-appointed spokesmen for their elders and siblings on the Mentawai Islands. When I came to Padang for the first time in 1997, I was able to witness a group of Mentawaians that rose against the marginalised position of the Mentawaians within larger Indonesian society. They disapproved of their exclusion from local politics and bureaucracy. They increasingly vocalised their resentment against ill designed and poorly implemented development programmes within the Mentawai Archipelago. They questioned the establishment of the Siberut National Park (especially the inclusion of their settlements within the park was perceived as an unjust impediment to their pursuit of livelihood and development) as

well as the large scale logging concessions active on their islands from which little to no returns were ever enjoyed in Mentawai. Consequently they demanded more Mentawaian involvement in decision-making processes and more participation in local politics. Eventually their claims evolved in a lobby for political and bureaucratic independency of the Mentawai Archipelago from the Minangkabau dominated district of Padang-Pariaman.

Being involved in local NGOs

In the face of rather poor job opportunities in both Padang as well as back home on the Mentawai islands, many of the formally educated Mentawaian youngsters got themselves involved in local NGOs. Whereas in many cases the establishing of their own NGOs was foremost meant as an income generating activity, their own political agenda became marginalised. Instead of formulating their own objectives and gather the funds needed to implement their own programme of work, leaders of local NGOs busied themselves networking, trying to get themselves involved in programmes designed by others and most important: financed by others.

This stance rendered these local NGOs vulnerable to the programmes of work of larger, mainly overseas donors, the majority of them involved in nature conservation. These international conservation agencies, among which we find influential organisations such as the Asian Development Bank, the Rainforest Foundation Norway, the UNESCO and Conservation International, have a tendency to render the responsibility for the implementation of their programmes in the hands of local NGOs. In their belief that local partners, due to their supposed vicinity to local communities, are far better equipped to successfully implement their programmes, donors tend to bypass the agendas (if present) of local NGOs and to overrate the competencies of local NGO staff. In chapter four I have described how the vicinity of local NGO staff to local communities in Mentawai is questionable and sometimes even non-existent. I have also described how the co-optation of local NGOs by overseas donors created a comprehensive collection of local NGOs of which the majority actually serve no other purpose than to deliver a local workforce responsible for the actual implementation of the donor programme. This has led to dissatisfaction on behalf of basically all involved. Unwilling to let go of their assumption that local NGOs are basically doing good, donors become increasingly disappointed by the way in which their programmes are implemented. At the same time donors do not seem to be interested in capacity building and/or proper monitoring and evaluation of their programmes. In doing so they create little opportunity for adjustment and improvement. Local NGO staff on their turn often find themselves in situations where they are expected to deliver performances they do not master and on many occasions the issues at hand are not of their interests. This leads to situations were uninspired, unskilled staff is working on the implementation of projects of which the results are not important to them. The projects and programmes of the overseas donor are merely perceived as an income for those involved in the local NGOs. Last, but not least, are dissatisfied local communities. Local communities often feel as toys in the hands of both donors and NGO staff. Local communities are often poorly instructed. They have to do things and leave others without proper explanation why. They, however, know all too well that there are considerable amounts of donor money involved in the projects and programmes implemented within

their communities. They also know that they are the last in line to benefit from these funds. Local communities tend to distrust NGO staff, accusing them of skimming project funds and blaming them for the ill implementation of projects. In order to get at least something out of the projects implemented in their villages, local communities display counterproductive behaviour and often simply refuse to come into action unless they are paid for their activities. Now that local communities expect payment for their participation in project activities, they – quite like the NGO staff itself – suffer from high project dependency. The incentive to improve their lives and to come into action on their own initiative has almost completely disappeared. They simply sit and wait for the next project to come their way.

The involvement of the educated Mentawaian youngsters in local NGOs has connected these Mentawaians to the international discourses of environmentalism and indigenous peoples. Quite in contrast with the Indonesian government, the majority of the international donors involved in Mentawai, perceive the Mentawaians as an indigenous people and as crucial partners in nature conservation. Like many indigenous peoples, Mentawaians hold a strong entitlement to their land/territory, based on a history of continuous occupation and active transformation of the landscape. It is furthermore a fact that the majority of Mentawaians is heavily dependent upon their environment for subsistence as well as income generating activities. But despite the intense connection to their land and their extensive knowledge of the environment, Mentawaians are not to be understood as intrinsically motivated conservationists. Despite the fact that many scholars have already long time ago warned against indigenous communities constructed as homogeneous 'green noble savages', environmentalists still seem to find it difficult to let go of this 'ecological myth' (Kuper 2003; Milton 1996; Persoon 1991). The beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples, which environmentalists interpret as ecologically harmonious, do not work in the way that environmentalists expect. Rather than providing a blueprint for ecological conservation, contemporary practices of tradition in the context of livelihood are practiced as a means through which actions in the environment, destructive actions included, can be negotiated (Perez 2010). Throughout this thesis I have illustrated that Mentawaians cannot be considered as time-less, homogeneous people. They are people subject to change, influenced by globalisation, modernisation and Indonesianisation. In enforcing the perceived partnership between indigenous peoples and environmentalists, the latter are confronted with conflicts of interest between their own goals and locally defined ideas of progress and development (Perez 2010). This stance has certainly placed environmentalists active in Mentawai at odds with the Mentawaian community in general and the local NGOs in particular and has in the end led to their retreat from Mentawai altogether.

The politics of identity

One of the first priorities after the district of *Kepulauan* Mentawai became a fact, was to exclude outsiders, the Minangkabau in particular, from positions within the local government as well as the local bureaucracy. These people were no matter what to be

replaced by fellow Mentawaians, *putra asli daerah* (sons of the region). The question of whether or not these Mentawaians were actually available and equally capable of successfully accomplishing the tasks attached to these positions, was completely bypassed by the omnipresent wish to 'Mentawaianise' the local political and bureaucratic order (Puailiggoubat 2002j). The fact that the governor of West Sumatra installed a Minangkabau interim *bupati* (head of district) provided him with accusations that he was not really a protagonist of development in Mentawai and that he only wanted to continue to use the archipelago for the development of the Sumatran mainland. The interim *bupati*, Badril Bakar, became captured in a vacuum in which he was unable to actually govern the Mentawai archipelago. The governor did not allow him to act and the Mentawaian people were not inclined to accept him as their new leader as he was not of Mentawaian descent. After persistent protests, the governor gave in to the Mentawaian call for a *putra asli daerah* as their *bupati*. In April 2001, governor Zainal Bakar installed Antonius Samongilailai, a Moslem Mentawaian originating from Sipora.

Being Christianised ever since the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of Mentawaians experiences Christianity as an integral part of their identity. In chapter two I have described how the Mentawaian belief system, *arat sabulungan*, has been repressed and replaced by Christianity and, at a later stage, Islam. Due to the fact that by far the majority of Mentawaians choose to become Christians, Christianity became their new collective identity that made the Mentawaians imagine their community as homogeneously Christian. This new consciousness was an assertion of their unity and difference directed at the power of Islamic outsiders, focussed primarily on the Minangkabau. It is therefore that in political negotiations, the Mentawaians use their Christian identity to differentiate between themselves and Islamic outsiders. However, as I have shown in chapter five and six, reality is more complex than this imagined us against them. Antonius was a fellow Mentawaian, but he also adhered Islam. His appointment as interim *bupati* caused disagreement within Mentawaian society about the question whether or not he should be supported as their new leader. While the Islamic part of Mentawaian society was inclined to support Antonius, the majority of Christian Mentawaians remained negative.

Besides religion, origin and kinship have proven to be very important aspects in ethno-political negotiations in the Mentawaian context. In chapter two I have described how and why Mentawaians hold various persistent prejudices against fellow Mentawaians originating from different islands or regions within the archipelago. One's origin almost automatically determines one's character and eventual political or bureaucratic performance. Generally people are more inclined to include people originating from the same island or area as they themselves originate from within their circles. Kinship and institutionalised social ties are probably the most important identity aspects with which Mentawaians differentiate amongst themselves. Mentawaian society consists of a multitude of clans that hold a historically embedded aversion and distrust against each another. As a result people, women in particular, enjoyed little mobility, rarely visited people in other villages and watersheds, let alone other islands within the archipelago. With the clan furthermore perceived as a closed, self-governing entity, Mentawaians tend

to have an antipathy against basically everyone originating from a different clan trying to exert power over them. These sentiments obstruct cooperation and certainly influence the choices people make when voting or forming political and/or economic alliances. As a result, local politics and bureaucracy in Mentawai are highly fragmented and lack a long term vision and clear goals. People do not trust each other and experience difficulties when in search for cooperation. Constituencies on their turn display a tendency not to trust their leaders as long as they are not members of their own clan. The installation of Edison Saleleubaja dumbed the call for *putri asli daerah*, but simultaneously started the discussion on the island of Siberut whether or not this Protestant reverend originating from Sipora would actually be inclined to involve the primarily Catholic population of Siberut in his development plans for the new *kabupaten*.

The identity of politics

After Edison Saleleubaja and his vice *bupati*, Aztarmizi, had taken office in late 2001, the economic, political and bureaucratic development of the archipelago became their first priority. Despite their elaborate vision and mission statement, their plans lacked a practical implementation scheme. So without tangible objectives they made a head start with the setting up of a bureaucratic structure. Whereas the Mentawai Archipelago had had long been part of the district of Padang-Pariaman where governmental and bureaucratic facilities had almost exclusively been located on the mainland, the new *kabupaten* lacked these facilities in every way. In order to establish a sound political and bureaucratic structure, the Mentawai Archipelago received a generous budget, *anggaran belanja,* from Jakarta. The small and somewhat insignificant harbour village of Tuapeijat was chosen as the new political and bureaucratic centre of the archipelago. Whereas clean water, electricity, basic infrastructural facilities and the necessary government buildings and offices had to be developed from scratch, the development of Tuapeijat formed a priority on the development agenda as a result of which the development of other regions in the archipelago somewhat fell into oblivion.

The set up of the bureaucratic structure itself turned out to be rather problematic. Despite the fact that so many people wished to become a civil servant, Mentawai lacked sufficiently educated people to fill all the available positions. As had been the case with the choice for the *bupati*, the appointing of bureaucratic staff was also subject to ethnic sentiments. Rather than being elected for substantive reasons, people were selected or rejected from the civil service on the basis of religion, *asal-usul* (origin) and kinship. Whether or not one actually passed the examination to qualify for the application as a civil servant was sometimes rather a formality than a real part of the selection procedure. This caused unrest within society and various people started to distrust their government. Despite the problems staffing the offices, the bureaucracy continued to expand. The continuous focus on the expansion of bureaucracy should not be mistaken as governing. Politicians were eager to fulfil their promise to make development available to all Mentawaians by creating jobs and material benefits. This, however, had little to do with sound governing, but hinted more in the direction of buying off constituency support and

granting claims made by friends and relatives (see also Simandjuntak 2013). Moreover, the continuous expansion of the bureaucracy led to a top-heavy structure characterised by hidden unemployment. Whereas there were so little paid job opportunities within the Mentawai Archipelago, the state became perceived of as the prime employer (Choi 2011). Due to the delayed finalisation of new government buildings and offices, many government officials as well as administrative staff remained in Padang. As a result government was almost never present in Mentawai and offices were either empty or staffed with people who actually had no idea what was expected of them.

The messy and delayed establishment of the archipelago's governmental structure went hand in hand with its ill government. Plans of work were never really produced and budgets and financial reports were always late, incomplete and often missed a link with reality. Every now and then new regulations were passed through parliament, but as soon as the new legislation became operable, more than once the government lacked the means and the manpower to actually implement them properly. The significant lack of governmental strength became painfully obvious when the local government, in their search for *pendapatan asli daerah* (locally generated revenues), tried to tax the local tourist industry. The mainly Australian businessmen active in surf tourism in the Mentawai Archipelago cleverly evaded local taxation schemes with the support of the provincial government. Acting as petty kings, the foreign businessmen were simply not taking the local government nor their new regulations seriously. Local government officials, often interested in the job rather than the tasks it encompassed, had no clue how to stand their ground against the aggressive attitude of the foreigners and the provincial government. Instead of entering a confrontation, local bureaucrats and politicians strategically choose to collaborate in order to get at least something for themselves out of the negotiations. So, if local revenues in the form of taxes, retribution and the results of local assets management, were generated they often disappeared in the pockets of bureaucrats and politicians instead of in the archipelago's treasury. Corrupt practices like these are by politicians, civil servants and even many people outside the bureaucracy, understood as an asset to the job and have, together with political power and decision-making processes, decentralised as well (see also Simandjuntak 2013). It were especially the members of the DPRD who proved to be prone to corruption while holding a strong position vis-à-vis the executive part of government. Until direct elections were introduced in 2005, *bupati* were elected by the DPRD rendering them vulnerable to extortion and bribery. Edison became *bupati* through a bought off vote, probably paid for by the logging industry and thereafter he experienced regular clashes with the DPRD about his budget proposals and annual financial accountability reports. Threats and bribery were part of these clashes. Together with the above mentioned lucrative private-public arrangements individual members of the DPRD served their own interests especially. They enjoyed self-granted privileges like motorcycles, computers, mobile telephones, cars, houses and holidays disguised as *studi banding* or *perjalanan dinas.* When asked, people certainly reject this short-term opportunism of their leaders, but at the same time they will not fail to participate in similar practices may the occasion arise. Corruption did not thus remain limited to the local government, but affected basically everyone. Lucrative public procurements in mainly infrastructure resulted in an increase in contractor companies, but simultaneously in very

little infrastructure of good quality. The skimming of infrastructure projects by contractors has enriched many at the expense of the public interest.

While the shortage of *pendapatan asli daerah* remained poignant on every annual budget, the Mentawai Archipelago remained heavily dependent on the annual allowance from Jakarta. Bureaucratic sabotage, corrupt power politics, short term opportunism and the absence of a shared vision of the future have most certainly contributed to the uncertain political as well as economic development of the archipelago (see also Kingsbury & Aveling 2003; 2008).

The establishment of electoral democracy is considered one of the greatest achievements of the political reforms in Indonesia since 1998 (Schulte-Nordholt 2008). In theory, local elections fit with the logic of good governance and democratisation. After all it is up to the people to determine their leaders. However, when taking a closer look at the electoral processes within the Mentawai Archipelago it becomes painstakingly clear that its democratic component is weakened by party politics, corruption, collusion and nepotism. Co-opted within political parties, the Mentawaian elite busied itself with the distribution of power and the access to state resources amongst themselves. The choice for a particular political party was almost never based on that party's political ideology, but almost always on the availability of eligible positions on the electoral lists. These party politics and the fact that only few considered the relationship with their constituencies and the actual governing of the archipelago their prime tasks, raised questions about whom the Mentawaian elite is actually representing. They were so occupied trying to secure their own positions, that considering the possible interests of others – even that of their constituencies – was considered a nuisance. The fact that the local government in Tuapeijat turned down the plan to 'return to the *laggai*' gave proof of their unwillingness to accept, or at least look into new forms of bottom up government. Rather than giving local government, as West Sumatra did, its own cultural stamp, it was rather bluntly decided that Mentawai was to stick to the village structure as imposed upon them during the first decade of post-colonial government. Electoral democracy has certainly given the Mentawaians the chance to eliminate ill-performing and/or corrupt administrators from their government, but simultaneously the nature of the relationship with their leaders is holding them back in being all too critical. Their leaders are after all also their kin with whom they wish to maintain friendly and equal relationships.

Decentralisation was believed to empower local communities and strengthen citizenship. While regional autonomy has certainly brought politics to the local level, common people in Mentawai have always been and remained distant from the state. Common people are not part of the politicking processes taking place behind the scenes and remain to perceive government and politics as realms of which they are not part. Government and politics are seen as distant spheres where the privileged make a living (see also Simandjuntak 2013). In the rare event of local communities acting against decisions made by their kinsmen active in local government, it becomes painstakingly clear that the egalitarian and fragmented nature of Mentawaian society is restraining critical individuals within local communities to speak out against their leaders. The independent

clan structure of society and the lack of leadership within clans hinder local communities in making their voices heard. This, however, does not mean that local communities are without an opinion. Dissatisfaction with the functioning of the local government often lingers in foal gossiping and slandering.

At the base of the empowerment of local communities and strengthened citizenship are local NGOs. NGOs in general were assigned the important role to facilitate democracy and good governance. Their alleged proximity to local communities and their commitment to empower the marginalised generated optimism that NGOs would contribute to strengthening of Indonesian civil society (Antlöv 2003; Aspinall & Fealy 2003). Local NGOs in Mentawai, however, have experienced a drain of their activists who gravitated towards the new political and bureaucratic positions that became available after decentralisation. NGO activities thus declined and some NGOs even ceased to exist altogether (see also Hadiwinata 2003). The NGO sector in Mentawai has weakened beyond the point were these organisations could have been able to check on the accountability of their government. Their inability to formulate and establish political alternatives has everything to do with the way in which Mentawaian NGOs functioned before decentralisation. Being largely dependent on external funding and occupied with issues of a more global character, Mentawaian NGOs lacked autonomy to set and pursue their own local (political) agenda and long-term objectives.

The independent clan structure of Mentawaian society itself is another important aspect in the explanation why the strengthening of a sense of citizenship is lagging behind in Mentawai. Bureaucrats and politicians in particular agonise over the question what unites Mentawai and the Mentawaians. In earlier days the common denominator was quite easily determined. It was all about the Mentawaians against the aggressive outsiders. Regional autonomy, preceded by profound social changes, has tremendously complicated this rather clear and convenient arrangement. The processes of decentralisation, which emphasise difference rather than solidarity, have sharpened not only inter-ethnic, but intra-ethnic and religious boundaries as well. Decentralisation has reinforced the independent nature of the various clans in Mentawai and has certainly sparked their mutual hostility. Motivated by the intrinsic nature of the clan structure of Mentawaian society, ingredients for a strong and relative autonomous civil society are lacking in Mentawai. In Mentawai, decentralisation has politicised the clan rather than that it has brought about a strengthening of civil society.

Mentawai became a *kabupaten* early during *Reformasi*. Even before the laws on regional autonomy and decentralisation became operable, the Mentawai Archipelago detached itself from the mainland-oriented district of Padang-Pariaman. The early independency of the archipelago was met with great enthusiasm on behalf of basically all involved. But its actual implementation dealt with a number of problems. Problems that were initially thought to be childhood diseases, but later proved to be rather persistent. Regional autonomy in Mentawai came early and it came quick. The interim government triggered a multitude of protests and political turmoil rather than an opportunity for a gradual takeover of the power by the Mentawaians. With the provincial and Padang-Pariaman

governments unwilling to let go of the Mentawai Archipelago, the Mentawaian elite, fed by the trauma of their earlier ethnic and political marginalisation, went to the limit in eliminating all outsider influences from their local government. But the Mentawaians lacked manpower, sufficient education and political as well as bureaucratic experience. With no other example than the authoritarian *Orde Baru* regime during which they had matured, the new leaders easily lapsed into old patterns. Top-down governing and project orientation were the rule rather than the exception. The lack of clear plans of work in combination with loads of money and very little monitoring and evaluation led to an easy decline into corrupt practices that were basically left without reprisals. Stemming from an egalitarian society organised around kinship and origin (*asal usul*) in which one clan never exerted power over another, the new self-appointed political elite experienced difficulties in binding constituencies outside their personal circles. This fragmentation of the local political realm was especially problematic in the event of local elections. In order to get elected, local politicians not only needed to mobilise various ethnic and religious sentiments but also a lot of money in order to support their campaigns. The need for funds rendered politicians vulnerable to generous investors who were not always supporting the most ideal development schemes for the Mentawai Archipelago.

The development of identity

In the run-up to regional autonomy and decentralisation, local NGO Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM) tried to get Mentawai connected to the pan-Indonesian discourse of *masyarakat adat* and the connected global discourse of indigenous peoples by building a relationship with and becoming a member of the Jakarta-based NGO Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN). In an effort to accommodate the indigenous discourse in the local context, YCM created Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Peduli Mentawai (AMA-PM), a representative body of ambassadors from the various local communities on all four Mentawai islands. As soon as Mentawai became an independent *kabupaten*, the new leaders failed to see the benefits of the equation between *adat* (local customs) and indigeneity. For reasons explained in chapter one, playing the indigeneity card is of little effect in Indonesia whereas indigenous issues are considered not applicable to the nation. While *masyarakat adat* on the other hand was a growing and increasingly influential identity marker in political negotiations within other regions in Indonesia, the new Mentawaian leaders felt little enthusiasm in coming to the fore with their *adat* identity. After all the Mentawaian *adat* had been stigmatised as backwards and unworthy for decades. And the need for ethnic distinction in order to justify the archipelago's independency from the mainland district of Padang-Pariaman was annulled as soon as Mentawai became a *kabupaten*. The local government did not accept AMA-PM as an unofficial advisor to the government. Instead of benefitting from the information they were provided with by AMA-PM, the local government perceived AMA-PM as an unrecognised group of people trying to be difficult and obstructing solutions to the 'real problems' the archipelago faced.

Decentralisation led almost everywhere in Indonesia to an increase in exclusive religious and ethnic identity politics at regional level, sometimes expressed in terms of *adat* (local customs) (Acciaioli 2001). Avonius (2004) has explained how the use of *adat* has helped communities in North Lombok to demarcate the social and political landscape in that region. The use of *adat* rhetoric proved to be helpful in determining one's own group and certainly formed an opportunity to exclude perceived outsiders from that group. The Mentawaians have certainly used ethnic sentiments to carve out a new *kabupaten* and subsequently exclude the Minangkabau from the governing of the new district. For reasons explained in chapter six, the equation of *adat* with indigeneity discouraged the use of *adat* in further political negotiations in Mentawai as well as in West Sumatra. Both societies did not want to become associated with notions of indigeneity. The Minangkabau felt that their culture would be downplayed if associated with indigeneity. For the Mentawaians the use of *adat* came too close to the idea long imposed on them that their *adat* was worthless. Furthermore, in societies were *adat* forms part of the explanation why certain individuals exert power over other individuals within that society, *adat* forms a handy tool in the hands of ambitious elites. The Mentawaian elite, however, stems from an egalitarian society consisting of a heterogeneous collection of independent clans. The Mentawaian *adat* system, *arat sabulungan* offers no legitimisation for one person or clan for that matter exerting power over another person or clan.

The moment the Mentawai Archipelago became independent the call for development while retaining Mentawaian identity ensued. There was a problem laid in this intention that had everything to do with the core of Mentawaian identity itself and its perceived incompatibility with development. The local custom and belief system, *arat sabulungan*, is what is generally perceived of as the core of genuine Mentawaian identity. However, *arat sabulungan* and basically all that it encompasses, its physical manifestations first, have been marginalised and even forbidden as backwards and savage. In chapter 2, I have described how the Mentawaians have learned to understand themselves as people caught in a backward tradition, lacking the proper incentives to progress and develop. With the very core of their identity eroded only very few Mentawaians nowadays still seem to know and understand what exactly contains *arat sabulungan*. Perceived as backwards and unworthy, Mentawaians are in general not very eager to demonstrate their identity openly.

Modern Mentawaians rather ride a motorcycle than to peddle along the river in a dugout canoe and they rather buy and eat rice than to go over the laborious processing of the sago palm in order to eat sago. Traditional communities living in the interiors of Siberut, still involved in these kinds of activities, are on the one hand perceived as the living bearers of genuine Mentawaian identity, on the other they are seen as odd relics from ancient times. These people are often looked at with a mixture of affection and compassion. Whereas traditional Mentawaian culture and identity are, even by the majority of Mentawaians themselves, perceived as backwards, most tangible aspects of Mentawaian culture and identity are banned from the political sphere. One simply does not come to the office wearing a loincloth or a full-body tattoo. Some, more innocent symbols of Mentawaian culture and identity, however, are still appealing to the modern Mentawaian. The wearing of glass beads and flowers behind one's ears during public

performances is an accepted means for politicians to express and emphasise their Mentawaian identity and their connection with their constituencies. Some Mentawaian politicians appreciate and use traditional communities for their symbolic value. The pretended close proximity to traditional communities is often used by politicians to convince the public of their stance (development while maintaining Mentawaian identity) and their respect for what is at the core of Mentawaian identity. That their involvement in traditional communities is mainly symbolic became painfully clear when an UNESCO consultant tried to negotiate with the new local government about a forest school programme meant for children living in the interior of Siberut. An education project, ran parallel to the larger conservation programme, would facilitate the need of children living within traditional communities to enjoy formal education that would otherwise remain out of their range. After the consultant had rudely been ignored by the head of the education department several times, he was eventually told that it was not the responsibility of the UNESCO to provide these communities with formal education. It was said that if traditional communities living in the remote interiors of Siberut wished to enjoy formal education, it was up to them to come out of the forest and resettle there were their children could enjoy formal education.

When asked the new leaders always claimed that they were protagonists of development while retaining the Mentawaian identity, but they never came with innovative plans or policies supporting these ideas. The cultural gatherings, workshops and contests that were organised every now and then can hardly be understood as serious attempts to solidify Mentawaian identity. However, what these seemingly a-political gatherings, often sponsored by the government do, is creating a sense of community that might come handy with the next elections. The identity aspect of these gatherings is reduced to mere folklore.

The identity of development

In their vision and mission statement, *bupati* Edison and his vice-*bupati* Aztarmizi claimed to relief the Mentawaian people from their 'backwardness' (*keterbelakangan*) and 'isolation' (*terisoliran*) through both social and economic development. By the end of their term in 2006 Mentawai would be a prosperous (*sejahtera*), independent and self-sufficient (*mandiri*) society. But what exactly these visions would consist of and how they would be brought about remained vague. In practice the ideology of development was mainly understood as modernisation that on its turn was translated into the more obvious metaphors of progress. Development remained lingering in the physical development of the archipelago. And this physical development on its turn was mainly focussed on infrastructural development and the development of Tuapeijat, the district's new political and bureaucratic centre. This focus on physical development triggered many to establish their own contractor company in order to get their share in the generous development budget of the new *kabupaten*. Often unhindered by relevant knowledge, the people involved in these businesses were primarily interested in getting the governmental development projects assigned (*dapat proyek*) to their companies. This project orientation in which the budget assigned to the project is of more relevance than the content and the

result of the project itself, turned the awarding of projects in an income generating activity and often led to project results of abominable quality.

One could say that development is considered successful when the individual rather than the collective has gained from it. Project budgets were often skimmed to such an extent that there was very little money left for the actual implementation of the project. Individuals involved in the projects, however, often saw their personal needs (mobile phones, expensive sunglasses, motorcycles, etc) satisfied by the project. This approach led to people wearing expensive sunglasses while riding motorcycles along roads that were in such a bad shape they could barely be called roads. The poor quality of the infrastructural projects and the continuous absence of the development of public services of course led to protests and society blaming the local government for their ill development plans and projects. While people accused their government of self-enrichment and nepotism, local communities became accused of laziness and lack of self-reliance. Instead of waiting for their government to implement the next project, local communities were called upon to (*mandiri*) and spur their own development. Due to their learned project dependency the post-colonial government had brought about, this call was something local communities were completely oblivious to and only strengthened them in their conviction that local government only acted for their own good.

The fact that development is considered a government project, a sense of ownership is lacking. This viewpoint, added to the culturally inspired lack of interest in maintenance of whatever kind is rather counterproductive for development and especially not cost-effective. Traditionally the Mentawaians carry out very little maintenance. They simply lacked the products to carry out maintenance on their premises. While building materials have always been available in abundance, that what was broken was simply replaced. Garbage has always been 100% biodegradable, so there was never a need for a proper garbage disposal system. Garbage simply decayed there where it was left. Now that the composition of garbage and construction waste has changed, construction sites and gardens fill with plastics, cement, glass and household waste. The environment is polluted while so far no one really thought about the introduction of a garbage disposal system. Various new government buildings in Tuapeijat were never used or degraded at fast pace because they were never cared for. The renovation or upgrading of these buildings was never an option. Once deserted buildings remained empty and new facilities were built in a different location.

International conservation agencies saw in regional autonomy and decentralisation a chance for a more sustainable development of natural resources all over Indonesia. It was believed that people would feel more responsible for their natural environment as soon as they would have ownership of the resources within that environment (see Eindhoven 2009). But in many cases regional autonomy and decentralisation led to a rush for the regions natural resources (DTE 2000a, 2000b). The often unsustainable exploitation of natural resources was considered one of the easiest ways to generate locally generated income (*pendapatan asli daerah*). In Mentawai the economic development scheme was almost solely based on the exploitation of the archipelago's natural resources. These

economic development plans including forestry, fisheries, mono-culture plantations and the surfing industry, all heavily dependent upon foreign investments, left little opportunity for sustainable development. Let alone nature conservation. Until new legislation was adopted in 2005, *bupati* were allowed to issue small so-called IPK logging concessions. In Mentawai multiple of these concessions were issued by Edison in the period 2001-2005. These logging concessions up to 100 hectares were often connected to government construction projects and despite the fact that they were only small, these concessions caused considerable damage to Mentawai's forests. On top of this damage, concessions more often than not worked illegally outside their concession area. Despite occasional protests by local communities living in the vicinity of the concession areas, these illegal practices were condoned by the authorities as they were often involved in the logging sector themselves.

This was different with the large-scale logging concession in the hands of the Padang-based university, Andalas. Issued by Jakarta, this concession bypassed all regulations with regard to regional control over natural resources as laid down in the regional autonomy laws. This, of course triggered protest from the public as well as the local government who saw their authority undermined by Jakarta. But despite the case against Jakarta being plausible, logging activities started in late 2001 soon after interim *bupati*, Antonius had, under pressure of the governor, signed the agreement with the concessionaire.

The large international conservation agencies active in Mentawai during *Reformasi* were chasing the facts. They failed to see and/or acknowledge that local communities were changing at fast pace and the local NGOs with which they had been working together during the last decade became – due to the transfer of activists and staff to the *kabupaten*'s civil service – empty shells in only a few months time. Unable to anticipate on the social change that was taking place, they failed to timely rethink their assumptions and re-design their plans of action. Instead they held on to the method of co-optation, now trying to buy-off the local government. The new local government, however, turned out not be interested in a partnership with the conservation agencies. Eventually the conservation agencies, deeply distracted, withdrew from Mentawai.

Mentawai in contemporary academic debate

The processes of democratisation and decentralisation that were introduced in Indonesia after Suharto had to step down from power in 1998 have increased scholarly interests in political developments in the regions. Indonesia observers have put regional autonomy to the test of democratisation, good governance, the strengthening of civil society and sustainable natural resource management in a variety of regions in Indonesia (e.g. Bakker 2009; Hadiz 2007; Haug 2010; Van der Muur 2019; Vel 2008). Due to the localised flavour of regional autonomy, their observations highlight a variety of aspects resulting in a divers body of literature. All this literature brings several general tendencies of regional autonomy to the fore and allows me to position Mentawai within the broader context of decentralised Indonesia.

Two decades have passed since Indonesia turned from an authoritarian, highly centralised state into one of the world's largest democracies. The processes of democratisation and decentralisation have promoted and established an increase in civil liberties which led to a much more vivid public sphere characterised by increased public debate. The introduction of direct elections has furthermore brought politics to the local levels of administration, altering the relation between the centre (Java, Jakarta) and the outer regions, and has intensified political participation in general (Berenschot et.al. 2017; Haug et.al. 2017).

Unfortunately, however, in many regions local politics have been hijacked by local elites displaying predatory government practices that were common under the *Orde Baru* regime (Bakker 2009; Eindhoven 2007; Hadiz 2007; Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007). Direct elections have done little to curb the dominance of the elites and their patronage politics (Van Klinken 2009; Schulte Nordholt & Van Klinken 2007; Simanjuntak 2010). What Hadiz (2010) has called 'predatory elites' are winning elections by dirty politicking characterised by money politics and sometimes even forcefull persuasion of their constituencies (Aspinall & Van Klinken 2010). The general public and voters in particular are lured but simultaneously kept at bay by policy poor rhetoric that does, however, appeal to certain ethnic sentiments (Schulte Nordholt 2008, 2012) and implies promises of preferential access to state resources. Political activity is often geared towards the facilitation of clientelistic exchanges between politicians and their constituencies rather than facilitating substantive public debate or developing programmatic policy agendas. As a result popular representation comes across as invalid and genuine democratisation itself is often questioned (Berenschot et. al. 2017).

The current state of affairs and the conclusions drawn from it raise questions about the form of and the way in which people in Indonesia experience citizenship. Why is it that, despite decentralisation and democratic reform, citizens in Indonesia do not seem to be able to resist, let alone end, the predatory and clientelistic practices of their political elites? According to Mietzner (2011) the persistence of these practices cannot solely be attributed to weak or non-existent civil society institutions or the shameless self-enrichment of the elites alone. After all, constituencies now have the power to vote all too corrupt politicians away (Schulte Nordholt 2012). Citizenship is generally studied and put to the test along Western parameters with little attention for the form of citizenship in a predominantly clientelistic political context such as in Indonesia (Berenschot et.al. 2017). What is needed is a reconceptualisation of citizenship and research that studies every-day interactions between citizens and the state rather than deviations from abstract Western notions of citizenship.

For Mentawai the introduction of regional autonomy foremost meant liberation from the Minangkabau hegemony, islamisation and state enforced development and civilisation programmes. From being excluded from the process of nation building, regional autonomy was believed to turn the Mentawaians into full-fledged citizens. As soon as the Mentawaians took over the management over the archipelago a powerful triad of politicians, bureaucrats and business elites ensued. Characterised by collusion, nepotism and corruption this triad excluded ordinary citizens from its midst and simultaneously

ensured the already weak judiciary not to mingle with their practices (Aspinall & Van Klinken 2010). With the law being a random and unpredictable institute, ordinary citizens rather avoid the abstract legal system. In the face of rather weak state institutions, citizens enter into clientelistic relations with known individuals in order to realise or protect one's rights. Politicians may or may not be elected based on their capacity to solve daily problems and provide personalised access to state resources. (Berenschot et.al. 2017). The egalitarian clan structure of Mentawaian society seems to have narrowed this form of citizenship down to kinship. The absence of society-wide uniting identity markers has probably also contributed to the seemingly weak Mentawaian civil society. As the epilogue to this thesis will show, contemporary developments in the Mentawai Archipelago are urgently requesting further research in this field.


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