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## Summary

*Products and Producers of Social and Political Change. Activism and Politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago* is about a generation of young, formally educated and politically engaged Mentawaians. My interest for this group of people was awakened when I first visited Padang, the provincial capital of West Sumatra, in 1997. It was then that I recognised that these people were involved in a, yet ill-defined, strive for more access to the resources of the local state. Divided over seven chapters, this thesis describes and discusses their intensifying quest for their increased partaking in the local political and bureaucratic machinery and their aspirations and attempts to develop the Mentawai Archipelago without the loss of their Mentawai identity.

The Mentawaians, living on the four Mentawai Islands that constitute the Mentawai Archipelago located some 100 kilometres off the west coast of West Sumatra, form a heterogeneous ethnic group consisting of some 170 politically autonomous clans. Traditionally the egalitarian Mentawai society is unfamiliar with any authority above the level of the clan (*suku*). The inclusion of the Mentawaians within the Indonesian nation state has introduced new administrative and authoritative units (e.g. the village (*desa*), the district (*kabupaten*), the province and the state) that exist alongside the clan structure. Mentawaians have long been excluded from local bureaucracy and politics on the basis of their alleged insufficient notion of what proper Indonesian citizenship encompasses.

Colonial as well as postcolonial rulers have constantly portrayed the Mentawaians as primitives in need of civilisation and a proper religion, as backward, isolated communities (*masyarakat terasing*) in urgent need of an upgrade towards full Indonesian citizenship. On the contrary, international discourses common in circles of the global indigenous peoples rights movement and the environmental movement tend to categorise the Mentawaians as a-political noble green savages, intrinsically sustainable environmentalists trying to carve out a living in a forested environment otherwise considered to be under serious threat. As a result of these contradictory views of who the Mentawaians are and who they should be, the Mentawaians have seen themselves confronted with Christianisation, Islamisation, the introduction of formal education, forced resettlement, levelling cultural policies of the postcolonial state, large-scale commercial logging, conservation efforts by international conservation agencies, the installation of a national park on the island of Siberut and increasing (ethno)tourism. Especially the invasive development and civilisation

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programmes of the postcolonial state, altering and/or eliminating almost every aspect of their traditional lifestyle, were introduced without the consent of the Mentawaians and have caused the Mentawaians to perceive themselves as second-class citizens not worthy of partaking within the modern Indonesian nation state.

From the 1980s onwards a growing group of formally educated Mentawaians started to question their exclusion from local politics and decision-making processes and their subsequent social marginalisation from larger society. Their critical voices, misinterpreted by influential overseas donor agencies, were bended towards the goals of these agencies mainly aiming at the conservation of Mentawai's natural resources, the forests standing on the island of Siberut in particular. The international attention for nature conservation has led to a multitude of otherwise aimless local NGOs, all trying to obtain a share of the conservation pie. This relationship between local NGOs and generous overseas donors has certainly delayed the large-scale commercial exploitation of Siberut's forests, but has simultaneously created a gap of distrust between local communities and their fellow Mentawaians involved in the local NGOs. Based on incorrect assumptions, donor agencies have overestimated the competencies of NGO staff and the capacity of NGOs in general to implement their projects. Donor agencies started to withdraw from Mentawai during the early years of regional autonomy when the local NGO sector started to fall apart as NGO staff transferred to positions within the local government and bureaucracy.

The Southeast Asian economic and financial crisis of the late 1990s that hit Indonesia hard brought an end to the authoritarian *Orde Baru* regime of president Suharto in may 1998. A wave of democratisation and decentralisation then swept through Indonesia, transforming Indonesia in one of the world's largest democracies. The introduction of regional autonomy (*otonomi daerah*), transferring much of the former central government's authority to the regions, was probably the most influential reform policy during the first years of *reformasi* (reformation). *Kabupaten* (districts), being the main recipients of the new authority, became important regional centres of power.

The newly acquired importance of the *kabupaten* not only triggered an increase in their numbers Indonesia-wide, but also caused an upsurge of both old and new local elites, formerly excluded from power by the highly centralistic system, (re)turning into ruling elites. These shifts in power constellations have turned the *kabupaten* into important sites of regional power struggles in which the elites tend to play a role of major importance, mobilising ethnic and religious sentiments to achieve their goals.

In some of the new *kabupaten* formerly marginalised ethnic minorities have become local majorities within the new district's borders. This development was especially within international circles of indigenous peoples rights protectionists and conservationists received with optimism. Self-government and increased property rights were believed to improve the stance of marginalised ethnic minorities vis-à-vis the Indonesian unitary nation state and simultaneously discourage unsustainable natural resource exploitation. Local elites, however, display a tendency to act in their own interest and in that of their protégées, excluding others on the basis of kinship and ethno-religious sentiments, creating new forms of marginalisation.

For the young, formally educated and politically engaged Mentawaians the introduction of regional autonomy formed an important window of opportunity. After intense lobbying on behalf of a small group of politically engaged Mentawaians, the Mentawai Archipelago became a politically and bureaucratically independent *kabupaten* in October 1999, seeing itself freed from decades of cultural, political and economic hegemony of the mainland oriented Minangkabau. After the initial euphoria had died down, Mentawai saw itself confronted with the laborious task to build a *kabupaten* from scratch.

During what should have been a sort interim period, a local parliament (DPRD) was to be installed that on its turn would be responsible for the election of a new *bupati* (head of district). The governor of West Sumatra choose to install a Minangkabau interim *bupati* responsible for this job. This decision met with intense resistance from the Mentawaians. Still traumatised by the Minangkabau interference within their territory the Mentawaians feared that a Minangkabau *bupati* would install a Minangkabau dominated DPRD rendering the independence of the archipelago futile. Frequent public protests directed at the governor as well as at the interim *bupati*, demanding a *putra asli daerah* (literally: 'native sons of the area/region' e.g. Mentawaians) for a *bupati*, made it impossible for the latter to fulfil the tasks he was appointed for. The composing of the DPRD as well as the development of the governmental complex in the new district capital Tuapeijat met with serious delay due to the turmoil around the interim *bupati*. As a result the administration could not be moved to Tuapeijat and thus remained in temporary offices in Padang. In April 2001 the governor gave in to the protests and installed a new interim *bupati*. Despite being a Mentawaiian, the Islamic signature of this second interim as well as his alleged advocacy of the logging sector again triggered public resistance against the appointment of this second interim. Together with the new interim *bupati*, a new DPRD was installed in April 2001. In a controversial election this DPRD voted for a new *bupati*, a Protestant reverend originating from the island of Sipora, who was installed in November 2001, two years after the Mentawai Archipelago became an independent *kabupaten*.

Expectations were high and the public was confident that the development of the Mentawai Archipelago would take a flight now that local government had largely been taken over by Mentawaians. But the task at hand was overwhelming and the new politicians and administrators were lacking experience and monitoring, resulting in a messy, uncontrolled situation in which people were mainly acting in their own interests.

The establishment of a bureaucratic structure along with the proper facilities was one of the first priorities of the new government. A generous annual budget from Jakarta was received in order to finance the new bureaucracy. Whereas the Mentawai Archipelago lacked basic infrastructure and suffered from poor or even absent education, healthcare and transportation facilities, the local government's initial focus was on the physical development of these sectors, changing the entire archipelago in an enormous construction site. The development of government and housing facilities in Tuapeijat as well as the expansion of transportation facilities between the mainland and the Mentawai Archipelago and between the Mentawai Islands themselves were prioritised. At a later stage a network of roads in and between villages was developed, triggering

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a overwhelming increase in motorcycle ownership. Still later education and healthcare facilities were constructed and finally some attention was paid to the development of public facilities such as electricity, running water and telecommunications. Without proper monitoring and control, occasional contractor companies – often unhindered by any knowledge about constructing – skimmed many of the infrastructural projects to such an extent that only a fraction of the initial budgets were left for actual construction. Projects were often delivered in questionable condition as a result of which people were not eager or even simply unable to start living or working within the new facilities. With little to no maintenance many of the newly constructed facilities deteriorated without ever being used officially.

Due to the fact that there were so little paid job opportunities within the Mentawai Archipelago, people were eager to become a civil servant. Despite the fact that becoming a civil servant was high on the priority list of many Mentawaians, the *bupati* experienced difficulties filling the available positions. Mentawai lacked sufficiently educated people to fill all vacancies and simultaneously the appointing of bureaucratic staff was 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 and the first signs of distrust amongst the public with regard to their government became visible. Apparently unhindered by the shortage of capable candidates for the civil service, the local government continued to expand the local bureaucracy, as a result of which the state became the prime employer within the Mentawai Archipelago. 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. The continuous expansion of the bureaucracy led to a top-heavy structure characterised by hidden unemployment and offices staffed with people who actually had no idea what was expected of them.

The messy and delayed establishment of the archipelago's political structure and bureaucratic system went hand in hand with its ill government. A general vision and mission statement issued in October 2001 indicated a strong focus on the socio-political and economic development of the Mentawai Archipelago. Detailed plans of work were, however, never really produced and budgets and financial reports were always late, incomplete and often missed a link with reality and therefore suggested corrupt practices. Every now and then new regulations were passed through parliament, but as soon as the new legislation became operable, more than once the bureaucratic machinery lacked the means and the manpower to actually implement them properly. The significant lack of both governmental and administrative strength deepened the mutual distrust between the executive and the legislative part of the local government as a result of which governing became nearly impossible. Local government officials, often more interested

in the job rather than the tasks it encompassed, continued to linger around in Padang and were thus frequently absent from Mentawai while engaged in paid-for holidays disguised as *studi banding* (comparative studies) or *perjalanan dinas* (official travels). It were especially the members of the DPRD, holding a strong position vis-à-vis the executive part of government, who proved to be prone to corruption. As a result of overt corrupt practices and more concealed lucrative private-public arrangements, individual members of the DPRD enjoyed self-granted privileges such as motorcycles, computers, mobile phones, cars and even houses.

Self-government was believed to lead to the development of the archipelago without the loss of Mentawaian identity. In practice it turned out to be rather complicated to find a solution for the paradox raised by the postcolonial government especially. Half a decade of aggressive development policies had learned the Mentawaians that in order to modernise they had to let go of their traditional forest-based lifestyle and all socio-religious aspects attached to it. With the core of their identity eroded, Mentawaians experience difficulties combining development and modernity with their identity as Mentawaians. Eager to let go of everything that possibly connected them to the *masyarakat terasing* (isolated community) discourse current during the *Orde Baru* period, the new local government has consciously chosen not to link itself with AMAN, a national organisation committed to reinforce the rights, existence and autonomy of *masyarakat adat* (*adat* communities) nation wide.

Instead, local leaders have organised various cultural gatherings, workshops, and song and dance contests. But these government-sponsored activities can hardly be understood as serious attempts to reinforce Mentawaian identity. The sense of community that is certainly created through these seemingly a-political activities should rather be understood as an investment to be put to use during the next elections. The identity aspect of these gatherings and activities is reduced to mere folklore, sometimes displaying invented aspects of tradition rather than aspects of identity that were once part of the Mentawaian *adat* (customs, tradition).

The prospect of the extraordinary elections of 2004 added yet another sentiment to the politicking that had taken place so far. Mentawai had to be physically as well as mentally prepared for these elections. Campaigning and protest actions against the state of affairs with regard to the preparations occurred simultaneously showing tremendous division within Mentawaian society and new forms of marginalisation in the sense that local communities were barely granted the opportunity to partake in the political negotiation taking place.

Decentralisation and regional autonomy were 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. The independent clan structure of Mentawaian society itself is important aspect in the explanation why the strengthening of a sense of citizenship is lagging behind in Mentawai. The processes of decentralisation, which emphasise difference rather than solidarity,

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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.