MYRNA EINDHOVEN

New colonizers?
Identity, representation and government in the post-New Order Mentawai Archipelago

Sedang bicarakan situasi politik di kepulauan ini [...] boleh dibilang bisnis seperti biasa. Dulu kami digigit kucing, sekarang digigit anjing, rasa sakitnya sama aja.

Talking about politics with regard to this archipelago [...] it may be said it is business as usual. In earlier times we were bitten by the cat, now we are bitten by the dog, both are equally painful. (Liong Hamid Satoko, December 2002, Saibi Samukop.)

Introduction

Even before Law no. 22/1999 on decentralization of the state administration became operative the then-president Habibie granted the Mentawai Archipelago full independent district status at once.¹ As a result of intense lobbying on the part of various local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Mentawai Archipelago finally detached itself from the mainland district of Padang-Pariaman on 9 October 1999 (Mimbar Minang 14-10-1999).

The Mentawaian case, a pioneer project within the pan-Indonesian process of administrative fragmentation or pemekaran, is foremost the result of activities by local elites entangled in a contest for political positions. The whole process is characterized by intense political turmoil and all kinds of exclusionisms on the basis of various ethnic sentiments.

The detachment of the Mentawai Archipelago from the mainland district Padang-Pariaman marked a long awaited shift in political power over the ar-

¹ Most of the data used in this chapter have been gathered during extensive field research in Indonesia in 2002-2003 and late 2004. Earlier versions have been presented during the EUROSEAS Conference 2004 in Paris and the Renegotiating Boundaries workshop 2004 in Jakarta. I would like to thank the Renegotiating Boundaries workgroup and Juniator Tulius for their inspiring comments and valuable additional insights.
Map 3. Mentawai Archipelago and West Sumatra
New colonizers?

chipelago. Local elites have been able to take over the political power from the mainland Minangkabau who had been ruling the archipelago for decades. The Mentawaians were euphoric now that they finally saw themselves freed from their ‘colonization’ by the significantly different – in cultural as well as religious senses – mainland Minangkabau. Now that the initial excitement over the new district has died down, new patterns of power and representation have become visible, but at the same time old modes of representation and familiar administrative styles suggest a strong continuity with New Order politics.

The processes of decentralization currently taking place in Indonesia are believed to empower local communities and stimulate greater accountability by local governments, and have therefore often been equated with democratization and the strengthening of civil society (Aspinall and Fealy 2003:1-14; Antlöv and Cederroth 2004, see also H. Schulte Nordholt 2003). Closer investigation of the experiences within the Mentawaian communities, however, raises the question of whether and to what extent these new power constellations and reformulated modes of representation fulfil the aspirations of the Mentawaian constituencies.

During the shift in local power relations, the notion of identity has been politicized. The term *putra asli daerah* (literally: autochthonous sons of the region) is omnipresent in negotiations over political positions (*Puailiggoubat* 4(March 2002):2). It is only *putra asli daerah* that should control local governments, because only they are believed to be able to secure privileged access for their communities in the allocation of economic resources and government positions (Aspinall and Fealy 2003:6). Regional autonomy and decentralization have also resulted in a renewed interest in *adat* (tradition, custom). Local NGOs have taken up the notion of *adat* to voice their claims for greater recognition of certain local traditions and *adat*-based rights over natural resources (Acciaioli 2001). Placing *adat* in the middle of the decentralization discussion is a powerful political act, because *adat*, in public discourse, is considered to originate from below. During Suharto’s authoritarian, top-down New Order regime, *adat* was ‘domesticated’ and de-politicized by the state (Schefold 1998). Only its aestheticized ‘peaks’ were enlisted to contribute to the process of nation-building (Picard 1997). Recently, however, *adat* has required new symbolic and rhetorical importance which fuels political activity related to the administrative changes and political interests.

While these processes have certainly opened up new opportunities for some, others stand to lose their grip on the political process. While local elites are engaged in political negotiations it appears that local communities do not seem to be able to fully partake. Those prominently involved advocate *adat* and the privileges due to the Mentawaian community, but at the same time they view the new opportunities from a variety of interests, trying to find structures most sympathetic to their own interests. Ordinary people are
at best spectators, informed only when major decisions have already been taken. Common people thus easily develop cynical views about the political rhetoric which emphasizes *adat* and the bottom-up character of the whole decentralization process (Von Benda-Beckmann 2001).

Local NGOs tend to play a Janus-faced role within the whole process. Harbouring the majority of the local Mentawai elite and having access to both the financial and the infrastructural means, many local NGOs have been recently transformed into political strongholds, bypassing their intermediate civil society function (Eindhoven 2002).

This chapter starts with an overview of the situation in which Mentawaians found themselves while the archipelago was still part of the district of Padang-Pariaman. I will address the problematic inter-ethnic relations between Mentawaians and Minangkabau people. I will also briefly discuss government policies with regard to the Mentawaians as a typical group of people in Indonesian society. In the next section I shall discuss the genesis of a critical elite among the Mentawaians and what kind of activities they deployed under the banner of the local organizations IPPMEN and Yayasan Citra Mandiri. The third section explores the creation of the district of Kepulauan Mentawai and the rush for *putra asli daerah* that ensued. This will be followed by an account of how members of the Mentawai elite have taken up their new role as politicians. I then discuss the role and position of both local NGOs and local communities. The chapter will conclude with an overview of the political situation in the Mentawai Archipelago now that the initial turbulence raised by *pemekaran* has died down.

*Mainland colonizers*

Both geographically and administratively the Mentawai Archipelago is part of the province of West Sumatra and was until late 1999 part of the district of Padang-Pariaman. The Mentawai Archipelago, consisting of four larger islands (Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai) and several smaller islets, is situated in the Indian Ocean approximately 100 kilometres off the west coast of Sumatra. The autochthonous Mentawaians form a majority within their own territory, with an estimated 70,000 people. A still insignificant number of migrants from West and North Sumatra, Java, and Nias reside mostly in the harbour villages.

While Mentawai was still part of Padang-Pariaman district, the archipelago covered nearly 80% of the territory of the district and was responsible for almost three quarters of the district’s total revenue – the export of dried coconut, rattan, and especially timber being the most important sources of income. Although insignificant in number, migrants almost completely controlled trade on the islands. It was they who enjoyed the surplus, leaving the Mentawaians
as ill-paid suppliers of rough materials only. With the migrants having their family and business interests abroad, most of the proceeds generated on the islands never returned to Mentawai. This, together with the unequal redistribution of taxes and reforestation budgets, turned Mentawai into an area where exploitation was rife while structural investments were absent.

Within Padang-Pariaman district, political power was invariably in the hands of the Minangkabau – the dominant ethnic group in West Sumatra. Due to a lack of education, experience, and ambition, the Mentawaians have not been able to take up positions in the administrative machinery. Nor was there ever any real attempt to interest Mentawaians in these functions (Persoon 1994:227). One had to be a Muslim in order to be able to apply for the function of civil servant, and this made it virtually impossible for most Mentawaians to apply for government positions. Being Christianized since the beginning of the twentieth century, most Mentawaians nowadays see Christianity as an integral part of their identity. There are several cases known where Mentawaians have converted to Islam – or at least changed their Christian names into Islamic ones – in order to qualify as a government employee. However, the number of Mentawaians involved in local government remained low, and where they were granted the opportunity to take up a position in the bureaucracy they did so at the lower administrative levels.

Government offices were located on the Sumatran mainland, so all administrative matters for the Mentawai Archipelago had to be arranged on the mainland in either Padang, West Sumatra’s capital city, or Pariaman, some 60 kilometres north of Padang. In earlier days a trip from one of the Mentawai Islands to the mainland took at least a fortnight and involved transportation costs and maintenance that were beyond the reach of most Mentawaians. This left many Mentawaians without proper administrative evidence of their citizenship like birth certificates and marriage documents, leading to problems when travelling, seeking higher education or marriageable partners outside the Mentawai region.

As part of its ideology of national development, the Indonesian govern-

---

2 Compared to Protestantism, both Islam and Catholicism were rather late in targeting Mentawai. While the first German protestant missionary disembarked at North Pagai in 1901, Islam did not enter Mentawai until 1952 (Persoon and Scheffold 1985:xv) and Catholicism started activities only in 1954 (Coronese 1986:29). In 1954 the local religion, arat sabulungan, was prohibited. During the so-called Rapat Tiga Agama (meeting of the three religions) it was decided that every Mentawaian had to forswear arat sabulungan, and had to embrace either Islam or Protestantism (Sihombing 1979:99). Later Catholicism was added as an official choice. Islam among the Mentawaians has taken a flight with the organized activities by Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (pan-Indonesian organization responsible for the spread and maintenance of the Islamic religion within the Indonesian Archipelago) which started in the late 1960s (H. Mas’ood Abidin 1997). The Islamic initiatives have been particularly influential on the island of Sipora and to a lesser extent on the Pagai Islands.
ment has identified certain groups of people as backward and lost from the mainstream of national progress and development. Their isolation was supposed to be the main cause of their backwardness and also the reason why these people became known as *masyarakat terasing* (isolated communities). The government has developed various development and assimilation programmes to modernize these people and turn them into proper Indonesian citizens. Mentawaians affected by these government policies have learned to understand themselves in mainly negative terms. As *masyarakat terasing* the Mentawaians have been stigmatized as a social, religious and agricultural problem (Persoon 1994:67-120), practising a lifestyle that should be done away with as soon as possible.

With the responsibility for governing the Mentawai Archipelago in the hands of the Minangkabau, it was to a large extent also the Minangkabau who were responsible for the implementation of these special development and assimilation programmes. Convinced of their cultural and religious superiority, these mainland civil servants were eager to implement the government’s development and civilization policies amongst the Mentawaians. But the implementation met with practical obstructions. The abundant free-roaming pigs, harsh environmental conditions, and a population perceived to be unfriendly and potentially dangerous turned the Mentawai Archipelago into a very unwelcoming place for the predominantly Islamic Minangkabau. Consequently not many Minangkabau traders dared to expand their businesses into the hinterlands of the islands and Minangkabau civil servants were rarely present on the Mentawai Islands and were ruling the archipelago primarily from the Sumatran mainland. Development projects in the fields of infrastructure, agriculture, and education were finished in haste, completed with inferior materials, prematurely abandoned, or even never implemented. In practice the development of the area was tuned in to the needs of the Minangkabau community residing on the islands. Physical development was confined to the construction of sub-district level government offices, mosques, schools, healthcare facilities, and basic infrastructural facilities in the harbour villages. This led to enclaves of migrants residing in the harbour villages surrounded by poorly serviced local communities.

**Critical voices**

During the late 1980s growing dissatisfaction emerged among a small but growing number of Mentawaian intellectuals. They started to question the ongoing erosion of their cultural identity and the incompetent and corrupt governmental practices of Minangkabau officials. Eventually they started a lobby for more Mentawaian involvement in local politics.

Due to various religiously based initiatives, opportunities for education
within and outside the Mentawai Archipelago have increased significantly since the early 1960s. As a result an ever increasing number of young Mentawaians managed to finish higher levels of education. When transportation facilities between the Mentawai Islands and the Sumatran mainland improved during the 1980s, the number of Mentawai students seeking education on the mainland increased rapidly. However, once arrived on the mainland, they encountered many problems: poor housing facilities in the city of Padang, the general shortage of finances, the fear of being Islamized, the emergence of drug abuse amongst some of the young Mentawaians, and the omnipresent disdain for their being Mentawai. With their substantially different culture and lifestyle, the Minangkabau tend to look at the Mentawaians with a mixture of repugnance and fear. Convinced of their own cultural and religious superiority, the Minangkabau tend to perceive Mentawaians as a pagan, primitive and dirty people, still in close contact with nature and the spiritual forces it may encompass. This leads to the belief that Mentawaians have control over certain potentially dangerous spiritual powers. The Minangkabau therefore prefer to avoid open conflict and overt aggression with regard to the Mentawaians. The idea of the Mentawaians being dirty is foremost based on their habit of keeping pigs and eating pork, which is *haram* (prohibited) in Islam. The Mentawaians in turn generally perceive the Minangkabau as religious fanatics. Moreover, the Mentawaians consider Minangkabau to be an unreliable and murderous people. Minangkabau are known for their ability to inflict disease and even death upon weak or unprotected persons. As a result of these interethnic animosities, many young Mentawaians have long denied their own cultural background in order to be successful in the Minangkabau-dominated environment on the mainland.

The ecology of the city, together with the growing analytical capacities of the Mentawaians residing in Padang, made these people more sensitive with regard to notions of ethnic identity. Resulting from this increasing ethnic consciousness, the growing group of Mentawai students and scholars residing in Padang started to cluster together and organize themselves along ethnic lines. Detached from their families, their wish to organize themselves was in the first instance the product of their feelings of uneasiness, loneliness

---

3 Protestant and Catholic missionaries have upgraded the education system and offered possibilities for higher education elsewhere. Islamic organizations increasingly also try to get a grip on the Mentawai community through education programmes.

4 Mentawaians generally perceive Islam and processes of Islamization as dangerous forces from outside, from which one has to abstain in order to avoid detachment from the Mentawai self. Mentawaians adhering to Islam are, of course, not similarly convinced of this loss of ‘pure’ Mentawai identity. Though growing at a considerable rate, the number of Mentawai converts is still small and they generally have a hard time to publicly defend themselves as equally Mentawai.
and uncertainty over their lives and futures, but soon political dimensions emerged as well.\(^5\)

In 1982 IPPMEN, short for Ikatan Pemuda Pelajar Mentawai (Association for Mentawai Youth and Students) was founded by a group of Mentawai students residing in Padang. Initially IPPMEN was meant as a forum through which Mentawai students could gather in order to discuss, process and analyse their lives in Padang. In the early 1990s, however, IPPMEN began to comment on government policies regarding Mentawai and the position of Mentawai individuals as citizens in the broader Indonesian society. In several letter campaigns IPPMEN criticized the Padang-Parian bureaucracy for its unwillingness to develop the Mentawai Archipelago. While agreeing with the commonly accepted idea that the Mentawaians were engaged in a struggle through which they tried to escape from their backwardness (keter-belakangan), ignorance (kebodohan), poverty (kemiskinan), and general state of misery (kemelaratan), IPPMEN also stated that these features should not be understood as an intrinsic part of Mentawai culture, but were a result of imperfect, inappropriate and ill-adapted government policies, especially with regard to education and economic development of the Mentawai region. The Minangkabau administrators were simultaneously accused of perceiving the Mentawai Archipelago as an income-generating area where the existence of a distinct ethnic group was only a disturbing factor in the exploitation of the natural resources. Somewhat impressed by the actions undertaken by these young intellectuals, the government of Padang-Parian started to formalize its relationship with IPPMEN in 1992, as a result of which IPPMEN received some financial aid in order to finance their activities.\(^6\) In the early 1990s the Padang-Parian administration even installed an assistant district head who was burdened with the pressing issue of development in the Mentawai Archipelago. However, due to a general lack of direction, a crisis in management, mutual distrust, and the contested involvement of some of IPPMEN’s leaders in the logging sector, IPPMEN has over time lost most of its initial significance and credibility. But it cannot be denied that IPPMEN was the cradle for a new generation of self-conscious Mentawai individuals. Through their involvement in IPPMEN many young Mentawaians learned to organize themselves, to put their personal experiences into words and to negotiate their collective wishes and constraints with those in power. The dignity of Mentawai culture and identity and their exclusion from sharing the revenues generated

---

5 Ikatan Pemuda Pelajar Mentawai (IPPMEN), Padang, Voorstel voor internaat en secretariaat, project proposal, 1989.
6 This money is part of the so-called Dana Pembinaan Pemuda dan Karang Taruna (Youth Development Fund), which is money directly received from the central government for sport and other recreative activities among the younger generation within the district. Until IPPMEN explicitly asked for the Mentawai share of this money, Mentawai had never received any of it.
through the exploitation of the natural resources present in the Mentawai Archipelago are recurring central points in these negotiations.

These critical voices tuned in nicely with international movements promoting the conservation of the world’s cultural and natural heritage. In contrast to the government’s point of view, international agencies perceive of the Mentawaians as another example of a marginalized indigenous people entrapped in a hostile nation state that is held responsible for the destruction of the natural habitat of these peoples. From the late 1970s onwards several international organizations have been active on the Mentawai Islands. Amongst others, more established organizations like Survival International, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Conservation International (CI) have been – and some of them still are – running various programmes and projects in Mentawai (see also Persoon 1998).

Due to increased contact with these large international organizations the Mentawai elite learned to present themselves as a genuine indigenous people living in an endangered tropical rainforest. While making use of this internationally accepted discourse on indigenous peoples and nature conservation, the Mentawai intelligentsia has been able to generate considerable amounts of money from international donor agencies involved in nature conservation and the empowerment of indigenous peoples. Especially during the late 1990s the Mentawai elite has institutionalized itself in various local organizations; one of the most prominent being Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM, ‘Vision for Autonomy’ Foundation).

In July 1995 Kortanius Sabeleake’ and Yudas Sabagggalet, both formerly active in IPPMEN, founded Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM). It focuses on advocacy and economic development of the Mentawai communities through just and competent use of the natural resources within the Mentawai Archipelago. YCM aims at empowerment of the Mentawai community through collective, community-based agricultural activities supported by technical assistance, advocacy, education, training and credit facilities. YCM’s goal is not only to empower the Mentawai communities in a material sense, but also to awaken Mentawai ethnic consciousness through its activities. According to YCM ‘the empowerment of adat communities lies in the understanding of one’s rights and duties, not only as a member of the local community, but also as a citizen within the context of the Indonesian nation state’. The use of the word adat (custom, tradition) is clearly a political statement. Instead of using the much-contested terminology masyarakat terasing, YCM already in 1995 started to use the term masyarakat adat (traditional, indigenous com-

7 See also http://www.lp3es.or.id/direktori/data/sumbar/sumbar_005.htm (last accessed 22 August 2006).
community), which is considered more respectful. After Yudas Sabaggalet left the organization in 1998, Kortanius Sabeleake' became the executive director of YCM, a position he occupied until late 2004 when he became head of the district parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD). Over time YCM has been working with an ever-changing staff of some 20 persons, of which nearly a third work in the main office in Padang, another third in the editorial office of the newspaper Puailiggoubat, published by YCM, while the last third is active in the field. YCM has been involved in a great variety of activities, among which we can find advocacy with regard to land disputes, mapping of traditional territory, agroforestry, pilot studies and more in-depth research. Unlike IPPMEN, YCM’s activities are almost solely determined by their sponsors (UNESCO, German Embassy, Forestrade) and more powerful counterparts like Lembaga Riset Advokasi (LRA, Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy) and Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia (WALHI, Indonesian Forum for the Environment).

In 1997 YCM made a start with the creation of a local council of experienced adat leaders, the dewan adat, an idea that they copied from the more experienced, Kalimantan-based organization Pancur Kasih.\(^8\) By late 1997 YCM had established dewan adat in several villages on Siberut. The dewan adat is supposed to strengthen the position of local adat communities vis-à-vis government institutions, and to lobby local government bodies with crucial impulses from the bottom level of Mentawaiian society (Puailiggoubat 6(May 2002):8). In the beginning of 2002, however, the idea of dewan adat still had not found general acceptance yet. The dewan adat in the villages mentioned earlier where still struggling with their legal position. There was little to no cooperation between dewan adat and local NGOs other than YCM, and in the mean time the dewan adat were still waiting for its official acknowledgement by the local government. At the time of writing the factual implementation of dewan adat seems to have completely failed (Puailiggoubat 49(1-14 June 2004):5). Although in theory government officials support democratic strengthening and bottom-up strategies and activities, they tend not to be enthusiastic about such things. Government officials do not recognize the dewan adat as a serious initiative, but as another vagary by YCM, initially leading to disappointment and later to indifference on the part of those involved.

Since 2001 YCM is closely linked to the Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN).\(^9\) The cooperation with RFN has significantly influenced the position of

---

\(^8\) See also Tanasaldy in this volume for more information about Yayasan Pancur Kasih.

\(^9\) The Norwegian Rainforest Foundation, active in Indonesia since 1997, is an environmental as well as an aid organization that works for the protection of the rainforests and its rich resources for coming generations. To achieve this goal, the Rainforest Foundation supports indigenous and forest peoples that live in and off the forests in their struggle to protect the environment and attain respect for their human rights. (http://www.rainforest.no.)
YCM. The Rainforest Foundation is not only a prestigious international partner, but also a generous donor. The Rainforest Foundation Norway has more than doubled the budget for YCM from US$ 50,000 in 2001 to US$ 110,000 in 2002.\(^\text{10}\) Lately YCM has invested considerable amounts of money in the bureaucratic expansion of the organization. In the second half of 2002 a new office was opened in Maileppet on the island of Siberut and a start was made on the building of another new office in Tuapeijat on the island of Sipora, which was operational at the time of writing. There are still plans to open a third office on the Mentawai Islands in Sikabaluan in the northern part of Siberut Island. Late in 2002 the editorial office of *Puailiggoubat* detached itself from the main YCM office in Padang and took up residence in an office in the vicinity. Especially the new office in Maileppet has raised negative publicity. The fact that the office seemed ready for use for several months, yet was still not operational on a day to day basis at the end of 2002, set evil tongues wagging. Malicious suggestions that YCM actually did not know what to do with the money they collected in the name of the local communities, that the money had been invested in a useless expansion of real estate, which was probably only meant to benefit the personal interests of YCM members, were much in the air. Besides, a considerable number of people involved in YCM campaigned quite intensively during the latest elections for district parliament. Although there is no direct proof for this accusation, local communities strongly believe that the RFN funding has largely been used for these personal political campaigns. Just like IPPMEN in earlier days, YCM is now generally believed to create fame and personal gain by selling the image of indigeneity and endangered natural environments to large donor organizations, without ever really taking local communities into account. In other words: the credibility and accountability of YCM is under increased questioning, not only among local government officials, but also – more alarmingly – among local communities on the Mentawai Islands.

The rush for putra asli daerah

After the fall of Suharto’s authoritarian New Order regime the initial, somewhat concealed, lobby for more Mentawaian political involvement changed into a blatant request for the rigorous detachment from Padang-Pariaman district as a completely new district. When the Mentawai Archipelago was eventually granted district status in October 1999, people immediately started falling over each other in order to guarantee the most profitable positions for either themselves or their protégés. In contrast with what the Mentawaian elite had been lobbying for, the governor of West Sumatra installed Badril

\(^{10}\) http://www.rainforest.no.
Bakar, a fellow Minangkabau originating from the Sumatran mainland, as interim district head for the new district Kepulauan Mentawai. Local NGOs and several politically engaged individuals were disappointed by the installation of this interim district head. For the majority of Mentawaians, still traumatized by non-indigenous, Islamic Minangkabau rulers, it was obvious that their district head should be a Christian and above all a putra asli daerah (indigenous person). Being a Muslim and a member of the commonly distrusted Minangkabau, Badril Bakar was the first target for the local NGOs. Their hostility towards him withheld him from a more energetic performance and was definitely among the several reasons why he was dishonourably dismissed in April 2001 and sent back to the mainland.

With Badril Bakar gone, the governor appointed a second temporary district head. This time he was a Mentawaian, Antonius Samangilailai, former sub-district head of South Siberut, originating from Sipora. Although a Mentawaian, his Islamic image and the fact that Antonius was widely believed to be the timber companies’ right hand man made his appointment controversial as well. Many considered Antonius and the governor hand-in-glove when it came to logging matters in the Mentawai Archipelago.11

Soon after Antonius was appointed interim district head, elections for the DPRD were announced. This became the moment when the political turmoil came to a climax, because the new members of the DPRD would be responsible for the constitution of the local government and the election of a permanent district head. A feature of striking importance in these political negotiations was the omnipresent call for putra asli daerah to take up this most influential position. The use of the term putra asli daerah is to be interpreted in ethnic terms, primarily differentiating between the Mentawaians and the Minangkabau. Whereas the initial lobby for more local political involvement was directed against the unreliable and corrupt Minangkabau administrators, it was a common wish that local politics now also had to be taken over by sincere and trustworthy local persons, putra asli daerah.

Who is considered putra asli daerah, is, however, a matter of highly local perspective. For many local communities, notions of belonging – rather than ethnicity – lie at the heart of their experienced identity. Mentawaians tell a myth in which at a certain moment the population on Siberut became involved in a serious dispute, which after some time had all the features of a real civil war. After a great wave of violence, people tended to stay out of sight of possibly violent individuals as far as possible. Some even fled as far as the southern Mentawai Islands. Since the clash, the population from

---

11 The governor of West Sumatra, once district head of district Padang-Pariaman himself (therefore pretty well informed about the potential natural resources available within Mentawai), is known as an advocate of logging concessions on the Mentawai Islands.
the southern Mentawai Islands refer to the inhabitants of Siberut as Sabirut. The population on Siberut in turn refer to the people on the southern islands as Sakalagat. The people on the Pagai Islands again differentiate between themselves and those on Sipora, calling them Sakalelegat (those we left on the island of Sipora but are still of our kind) or Sakobou. All are categories that come along with negative stereotypes. Sakalagat are the cowards (they migrated from Siberut in earlier ages), the ones who were driven away, the losers, the ones from whom we have to fear black magic, the ones who eat gette’ (taro – regarded as inferior), the ones who are maju (developed or modern) but who forgot about their culture and identity, the ones who became more or less similar to the Minangkabau. Sabirut in turn, of course, are described by others as the ones who stayed, the passive ones, the ancient (kuno), outdated, old-fashioned and conservative part of the Mentawaians. They are rude, harsh, traditional and savage. The Sabirut like to kill. They are known for cutting your head off for no particular reason. While people might refer to themselves according to the above mentioned categories, all prefer to call themselves Simattaoi (Mentawaians).

The political translation of these intra-ethnic animosities is done with the help of the term putra asli setempat (people originating from a certain as yet unspecified place). While putra asli daerah only differentiates between Mentawaians and sasareu (literally: those from afar; outsiders), putra asli setempat differentiates quite precisely among Mentawaians themselves. For people in search of political constituencies, the heterogeneous constitution of the population within the Mentawai Archipelago is thus a problematic issue. Which person is likely to get the broader support of society is a delicate question. Putting a Satoko clan member, originating from Saibi Samukop (South Siberut), forward in political negotiations might guarantee the support of fellow clan members in Saibi Samukop, but not automatically the support of broader society in South Siberut, let alone in North Siberut or, even more unlikely, of those on the southern Mentawai Islands. Candidates in the first DPRD elections therefore often had to campaign against the odds. The elections, which were fought along party lines, led to an overwhelming victory for Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDI-P, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), followed by Partai Damai Kasih Bangsa (PDKB, the Love the Nation Democratic Party) and Golkar. As soon as the DPRD was finally installed in late June 2001, negotiations over the position of district head began. PDI-P and PDKB clustered together and put forward two candidates for district head: Edison Saleleubaja, a Protestant clergyman originating from Sikakap (North Pagai), and Alexander Lukman, an ethnic Chinese with a Catholic background. Alexander was eager to take up the position of district head. He had far-reaching ideas about opening his own logging company on the islands. He had an elaborated political plan written even before he was
officially listed as a candidate for the position of district head. By contrast, Edison was not at all eager for the position. Many of his friends, however, whom he had known from his years in the local NGO Yayasan Kondisi, were now involved in the logging sector in Mentawai and they thought it very convenient to have a close friend occupying the influential position of district head. Financially supported by his friends, Edison became a political puppet in the hands of the logging sector.

Besides Edison and Alexander there was a third serious candidate for the position of district head: former interim district head Antonius. Together with his equally Muslim running mate, Ridwan Siritubui, originating from Simalegi (North Siberut), they formed the Islamic pole in the elections. They could count on the votes from Golkar and the smaller Islamic parties in the DPRD. Not unlike the two other candidates, Antonius and Ridwan also leaned heavily on financial support from the logging sector.

In a close finish between Antonius and Edison Saleleubaja after two rounds of elections, the latter was finally elected as the first district head of Kepulauan Mentawai district. The story goes that Edison’s camp had spent Rp 1.3 billion (€ 130,000) to buy the crucial vote within the DPRD.

Edison was officially installed in August 2001, soon after which he appointed the various heads of the local government departments. All departments were now invariably headed by Mentawaians, most of whom were friends or close relatives of Edison. Edison’s old position of head of DPRD was taken up by his brother-in-law. Ridwan Siritubui, the former running mate of Antonius was asked to take up the important position of district secretary. Although Ridwan’s qualifications were officially not adequate to take up the position of district secretary – a point over which the deputy district head Aztarmizi was to fall at a later stage – Edison preferred to install fellow Mentawaians over the undoubtedly more experienced and better qualified outsiders. Edison was clearly reluctant to give the newly gained power back into the hands of the far more experienced Minangkabau administrators, who were also eager to take up some of the vacant positions. Interestingly, only the strategic position of head of the Department of Forestry was given to a Minangkabau. According to Edison himself he did so because he considered this position to be far too

---

12 Under the leadership of Edison Saleleubaja, Yayasan Kondisi started as an evangelistic organization aiming to empower the Protestant population on the Mentawai Islands. After only a short time, however, they found themselves involved in the logging sector.

13 Bakrial, involved in the logging company PT Mundam Sati, active on Sipora and the Pagai Islands, even pushed Edison as far as taking up Aztarmizi, the former assistant district head and close relative of Bakrial, as his running mate. Edison, lacking any experience in governing a district, thought it a good idea to link up with the experienced Aztarmizi.

14 At the moment Ridwan became district secretary he had achieved the rank (pangkat, according to level of education and working experience) of 3D, while 4A is officially required to take up the position (Puailiggoubat 16(15-31 January 2003):3).
New colonizers?

contested to be occupied by a Mentawaian. Due to this decision, Edison found himself immediately under fire by local NGOs on the one hand, who demanded the conservation of what was left of Mentawai’s tropical lowland rainforest, and by the financial supporters of his political campaign on the other hand.15

Dealing with development

Whereas the Mentawaian lifestyle has long been stigmatized as terbelakang (backwards), two key words in the discussions about the past, present and the future of the Mentawaians and their environment are pembangunan (development) and kemajuan (progress). The word pembangunan has its origin in the word bangun, which means ‘to construct’, but also ‘to wake up from a state of unawareness’. In the latter meaning we can find a connection with the New Order government’s point of view that the masyarakat terasing should be brought back into the mainstream of national progress.16 Kemajuan implies a forward motion towards modernity. The local understanding of modernity comes in a multitude of variations. Depending on the circumstances modernity might imply having asbestos-roofed houses, schools, roads, prestigious infrastructure, churches, plastic kitchen utensils and western clothes, but also cars, bicycles, motorcycles, outboard motors, computers and mobile telephones. The term maju is used in an interrelated sense for a way of life which foremost involves using manufactured goods and having the knowledge that pertains to them. Travelling by motorcycle for instance is considered lebih maju (more modern) than paddling along the river in a dug-out canoe. In order to progress and develop one should thus leave behind the old ways of life and start adhering to a more progressive, consumptive lifestyle.

Completely in tune with these ideas about progress and development, the newly installed local government launched several prestigious development projects. They were financed by the Dana Alokasi Umum (DAU, General Allocation Fund), an annual allowance from the central government in order to set up administration, transportation and infrastructural facilities. Transportation facilities between Mentawai and the mainland have improved considerably since 1999 and there is even a plan on the drawing board to rehabilitate the airstrip on the Island of Sipora and construct a small airport. In accordance with the 2001 development plan for Tuapeijat a complex of completely new government offices was to be built in Tuapeijat on the Island of Sipora.17 Another important activity in the development of the archipelago is

15 Especially the local NGO Yayasan Citra Mandiri has been very vocal in this respect.
16 See Ariel Heryanto (1988) for a more elaborate discussion of this topic.
17 The choice for Tuapeijat as the new political centre of the district was not a deliberate one. While Muara Siberut – the main harbour village on Siberut – would have been a much more likely choice, under the guidance of interim district head Antonius it had already become clear
the construction of various roads. These are often old dirt roads and already existing trails within and between villages that are to be repaired and refurnished with a cement top layer. Elsewhere, often hand in hand with small scale logging concessions, completely new connections over considerable length are being realized. Contractor companies – almost invariably in the hands of local DPRD members – are eager to get their hands on these projects because the additional revenues from the lumber that must be removed from the trajectory is considerable. In order to collect as much timber as possible, roads from one village to the next often do not run in a straight line, but tend to meander tremendously. These practices not seldom lead to conflicts with intervening local communities who often see part of their gardens destroyed by the advent of the road. In the meantime the local government does not seem to be very eager to act against these practices because they might then get into conflict with befriended persons or family members within the DPRD.18 Besides, the government generally perceives the forest as a realm that accommodates practices which contradict the local understanding of progress and modernity. The forest and all the cultural and natural diversity it contains is not perceived as something valuable in itself, as promoted through Western notions of nature conservation and cultural survival. The forest and the lifestyle of its inhabitants are more often than not perceived as disturbing obstructions to the swift and sound development of the region.

Since early 2003 the DPRD has tried to push through the idea of upgrading the number of sub-districts from four now to eight and more recently ten in the near future (Puailiggoubat 4(March 2002):11). This pemekaran wilayah is considered important for the development of the district. Ten sub-districts will lead to a considerable increase in the budget for development received from the central government, subsequently leading to an increase in local development projects, which is very much in the interest of several members of the DPRD and the local government. Local communities also seem to be enthusiastic about the plans. Most people can already imagine how the quality of their lives will improve after the creation of the new sub-districts that will undoubtedly translate into more facilities such as schools, medical centres, harbours, police offices, and telecommunications. While several local communities have already made part of their lands available for the construction of these facilities, the government wants local communities in each of the planned sub-districts to make at least 100 hectares available. These negotia-

---

18 Members of local government are generally believed to be bribed by contractor companies often in the hands of DPRD members.
tions over land is probably one of the reasons why the implementation of the ten sub-districts has been delayed. Since sub-district facilities can be built on 5-10 hectares of land, the government’s request for at least 100 hectares is considered absurd. From a governmental point of view, however, this demand does make sense. Plots of at least 100 hectares that need to be cleared for different purposes can first be handed out as an IPK logging concession, which could in turn generate income for the district in the form of taxes.\(^\text{19}\) Whereas the land in Mentawai is now commonly considered to be in the hands of local communities, the local government has to negotiate with local communities over land on which they wish to realize the development projects. Since most land in Mentawai is owned by a great variety of clans, these negotiations are invariably extremely complicated and lead to great confusion among all parties and sometimes even to serious conflicts among clan members and the government, and among clan members themselves.

So far the development of the archipelago has been handled mainly in terms of physical development. While the construction of new offices and infrastructure might be called overwhelming, ideas for a more structural approach with regard to development are suspiciously absent. Problems in the critical sectors of education, healthcare and economics are barely addressed. Although medical centres and schools have been erected at various locations in the archipelago, there seems to be no planning for their actual operation. Teachers and medical personnel are still absent. Besides, facilities like these are still extremely poor in the more remote areas of the archipelago. Local politicians seem to lack a development perspective that goes beyond physical development only. The former New Order rhetoric and practices with regard to development are still very much in use. The dependency on the development budget from the central government remains extremely high. Local income generating activities are – apart from several small private enterprises paying taxes – generally absent. So far the local government has not been able to break the foreign monopoly over the vibrant surfing industry in the Mentawai Archipelago, has not been able to stop the illegal exploitation of the Mentawaian waters by foreign fishing fleets, and – even more surprisingly – has not been able to generate a substantial income from the logging sector active in the archipelago. Hopes for the future are set on foreign investments in the tourist industry, but with tourism in Mentawai focussing on surfing (monopolized by mainly Australian businessmen) as well as on the forested environment and its adherent local cultural practices, the current attack on the natural environment and the swift vanishing of the forest on the islands does not seem to be very constructive.

\(^\text{19}\) So-called IPK logging concessions (Izin Pemanfaatan Kayu, Wood Utilization Permit) are issued to clear forested lands for other purposes such as infrastructure or plantations.
Tricks of the Trade

With the district itself not gaining from the logging activities, the question arises why then the logging sector seems to be more vibrant than ever before. Though in 2004 at least 20 new permits for small scale logging concessions were issued for a total area of more than 30,000 hectares, the local administration was not able to collect any retribution fees from the timber companies involved (The Jakarta Post 24-3-2005). It is generally believed that both members of local government and the DPRD are subject to bribery from the logging sector. Besides, Edison himself was widely believed to have received payment for the smooth and unquestioned issuing of the smaller IPK licenses.20 When Kortanius Sableake’ in late 2004 – he had just been elected head of the DPRD – publicly confronted Edison with these accusations during a meeting between local government and DPRD on the issue of revenues generated within the district (pendapatan asli daerah), Edison suspiciously fell acutely ill and had to leave the meeting prematurely.21 While we might never find out what was precisely going on and how much money was involved here, it is a fact that the Mentawaian administration and Mentawai’s natural resources stand to lose while some individuals quite clearly enrich themselves over these practices.

It is especially in the awarding of the currently plentiful development projects to the executive parties that a lot of corrupt practices ensue. Many local politicians have lately founded their own contractor company – whether capable of the factual implementation of the projects or not – through which they are able to lay their hands on the money allocated for the projects. As a result the projects are transferred through various befriended contractor companies before they are finally implemented. By that time only half of the initial budget for the project may be left, which then results in projects that are only half finished or completed with inferior materials because after the various transfers there is not enough money left to finish the project properly (Puailiggoubat 6(May 2002):8). These practices are often referred to as diproyekkan: making something into a project in order to get access to (part of the) project funding.

Collusive practices also emerged in the selection procedures for civil servants. After Edison Saleleubaja was installed district head, a large number of members of the Saleleubaja clan were accepted as civil servants. Although an official examination must be passed before one is able to become a civil servant, a personal recommendation from the district head makes the examination a mere formality. Those people not in the privileged position to obtain a personal recommendation from the district head himself often simply buy the

20 Until 2002 IPK concessions up to 100 hectares could be issued by the district head personally. See also McCarthy in this volume.
21 Edison was hospitalized several days after this incident. In Indonesia, sudden illness is often a device to avoid embarrassing situations for politicians and high officials.
position for either themselves or their protégés. It goes without saying that for those without the financial means or a personal relationship with some higher government official, the much sought-after civil servant positions are difficult to obtain.

KKN, the Indonesian triad of corruption (*korupsi*), collusion (*kolusi*), and nepotism (*nepotisme*) has been and still is a major issue in Indonesian politics. While Mentawaians are now part and parcel of these practices it is difficult to point an accusing finger at anyone in particular. It is rewarding to behave as unobtrusively as possible in order not to attract negative publicity. What did, however, lead to a public outcry was the presumed corruption of the district secretary, Ridwan Siritungu. His name became a substitute for blatant corruption when Rp 7.6 billion (€ 760,000) of government money allocated for reforestation was transferred to the ‘wrong’ account number. Even before the money could be returned, local NGOs and the media had blown up the story to huge proportions. Ridwan was openly attacked by the deputy district head, Aztarmizi, who also accused him of illegally transferring Rp 8.2 billion (€ 820,000) of development money to the various departments. On the basis of oral agreements with Edison and the various heads of departments, Ridwan did indeed lend them a total sum of Rp 8.2 billion – money that was to be returned at a later stage. Aztarmizi, who on the basis of Ridwan’s insufficient qualifications felt politically bypassed by Ridwan, not only accused him of corruption, but also questioned his professionalism and experience. Annoyed by Aztarmizi’s accusations, Ridwan struck back at Aztarmizi by stating that Aztarmizi and his fellow Minangkabau friends had been in power long enough in the Mentawai Archipelago and that it was time for them to let go of their superior attitude. Since Ridwan had been brought up within the Minangkabau community, he seriously offended many with this statement. Aztarmizi, with the financial support of his close relative Bakrial, mobilized some of the Mentawaian civil support organizations to demand a close investigation of Ridwan’s activities. This triggered counter demonstrations by other parts of Mentawaian society who believed in Ridwan’s sincerity. The situation began to get out of hand when Ridwan refused to cooperate with the investigating team. Ridwan was convinced of his innocence and stated that the financial transactions had been done with the oral approval of Edison. Both Ridwan and Edison disappeared. Some weeks later police arrested Ridwan in the city of Bukittinggi on the Sumatran mainland (*Puailiggoubat* 28(15-31 July 2003):3).

Ridwan was brought to trial, but it experienced serious delay as the most important witness, the district head, remained untraceable. When at length Edison had been heard – he saved his own skin by stating that he had never given his consent – Ridwan was sentenced to five years jail.22 Ridwan, however,

---

22 *Puailiggoubat* 49(1-14 June 2004):3. Here we should remember that Edison was indebted to Bakrial, who had earlier paid for Edison’s political campaign in the race for the position of district head.
took the case to the high court, which exonerated him. At the time of writing Ridwan was waiting to be reinstated as district secretary. However, with the relationship between him and Edison under severe pressure, Ridwan’s future position within the Mentawaiian administration is a highly uncertain one.

Whether corruption and money politics have increased or not is difficult to assess. Money politics and corruption were also perceived as a considerable problem when the Minangkabau were practising them and Mentawaians were excluded. Now that fate has given the advantage to the Mentawaians, corruption and money politics seem to have decentralized as well. Ordinary citizens are now, much more than under the Minangkabau administration, able to profit from ethnically instigated patron-client relationships with their government.

Where have critical voices gone?

With the Mentawaiian politicians entangled in all kind of conspiracies, and local communities left out of the political negotiations, the question arises why there is not more protest against these forms of exclusion. Where have local NGOs gone and why are they not able to fill the gap between local communities and their government?

Politics (politik) and politicians (politikus; sometimes replaced by the more friendly term politisi) have always been something of a dirty category. The word berpolitik (politicking) is for instance also used to describe peoples’ sneaky strategies to push through their own interests. And indeed, the Mentawai political elite is – like their Minangkabau predecessors – often accused of acting in their own interests only. Not unjustifiably, local communities feel that most of the political debates and decision-making processes occur beyond their realm. They have only the weapons of the weak (Scott 1985), of which gossiping, nasty insinuations, and the threat of using black magic are the most common. Most local communities are, however, less informed, less involved, sometimes even ignorant and this makes them more passive, quick to develop cynical attitudes, and sometimes believing that politics is something not applicable to them.

In the more remote areas of Mentawai (the west coast of Siberut Island and the Rereiket area) where the majority of the population is still illiterate, news only trickles down on an irregular basis. Many people in these areas are still in the dark about the significant shift in political power that has taken place. Though some people in these areas are aware of the fact that Mentawai has obtained district status with its own district head, some people do not perceive Edison as their political leader because he originates from Sikakap, which means that he is a member of the much distrusted Sakalagat and should therefore not be considered capable of supporting their interests.
Nevertheless, regardless of the omnipresent corruption and money politics, the majority of Mentawaians believe the current political constitution to be much more promising than that of the previous Minangkabau administrators. With fellow Mentawaians in power it has – at least for some part of the population – become easier for local communities to communicate with their political leaders and to get privileged treatment for their businesses, while opportunities to enter politics have increased significantly. Corrupt and collusive practices are certainly not a new phenomenon. But they were perceived as more disturbing during the Minangkabau administration, because the Mentawaians were excluded from them. Though annoying for those not able to partake, bribery and corruption of this kind is a commonly accepted form of politicking.

The sometimes prestigious infrastructural developments that the local government has implemented have also mitigated any negative public opinion. Regardless of the disturbing side effects of these development projects – of which not everyone is equally aware – people tend to perceive of them as positive and above all adding to their modernity. With local communities themselves involved, they gain directly from these projects by receiving payment on a daily basis. This stands in complete contrast to the way in which such projects were implemented in earlier days, when projects were almost invariably implemented by outsiders. The fact is, local communities often lack a more long term perspective with regard to certain developments. As a result local communities often only start complaining when the negative impacts of certain practices have become completely visible and irreversible.

While the empowerment of civil society is at stake and hopes are high that local NGOs will raise political awareness and push through measures of political accountability, they do not seem to be able to put their theoretical potential to full use (see also Collins 2003; Bob Sugeng Hadiwinata 2003; McVey 2003). The reason for their poor performance lies in the fact that the majority of local NGOs have recently become political strongholds themselves. While most of the Mentawaian elite were until recently involved in local NGOs and support organizations, various individuals within these local organizations now see no other option than to use their organization as a platform from which they can easily jump over to institutionalized politics. This leaves civil society basically without actors who do not have a double agenda. The shift to politics by Kortanius Sabeleake’, the former director of YCM, is just one example of this. However, Kortanius’ case is interesting. Having been the founder and the acting director of YCM since 1995 and the driving force behind the local newspaper Puailiggoubat, he created a lot of support for himself personally.\footnote{So far Puailiggoubat is the only local newspaper made by Mentawaians meant for the Mentawaian public.} While YCM claims (for reasons of transparency) to have cut off all official
affiliation with Kortanius since he was appointed head of the DPRD late in 2004, it cannot be denied that he still enjoys considerable support from YCM and he is also, not unimportantly, able to influence the local media.

As far as local NGOs and village councils are involved in the monitoring of local politics they do not do so on a structural basis. Often the constitution of these organizations coincides with the emergence of a particular political issue they might favour or dislike. Not seldom, public demonstrations by these groups are instigated (and paid for) by people in the higher political echelons in search for an outcome sympathetic to their interests. While these public demonstrations thus do not necessarily ventilate the popular will, they do add to the general confusion and certainly influences the way in which the issue appears in the media.

New colonizers?

The decentralization process in Indonesia has led to an important shift in local power relations in the Mentawai Archipelago. The Mentawaians have been able to liberate themselves from what they saw as cultural repression and political colonization by the mainland Minangkabau. The question remains, however, whether this shift has indeed also led to a more democratic political system at the local level. It turns out that the local government has been captured by a local elite, which does not equally represent all levels of society. On the basis of selective ethnic sentiments, differing ethnic groups living in the Mentawai Archipelago are consequently excluded from political participation. Putra asli daerah, not necessarily more competent, are being privileged over sasareu (non-Mentawaians). Besides, there is also still that part of Mentawaiian society living in the more remote areas of the archipelago that is still unaccounted for. These people, most of them illiterate, do not take part in the politicking that takes place mainly outside their realm. So far there have been few initiatives to incorporate these people into the local political system. Moreover, in the opinion of the local government, these people can only be incorporated within the development process if they let go of their old fashioned forest-based lifestyles. In this respect local politicians seem to have slipped back into the former New Order rhetoric with regard to masyarakat terasing, which can be regarded as a definite step back in the empowerment of local communities. Apart from this disquieting development, it is striking to see how easily the new political elite is able to let go of their former ideals and rhetoric with regard to their rights to self-determination and to access natural resources; a rhetoric through which they in earlier days linked themselves to powerful, mainly overseas donor organizations campaigning on behalf of

24 See also Vel in this volume for a description of similar events.
indigenous peoples and nature conservation. It appears that opportunistic behaviour on the part of the local elite, losing all interest in the wellbeing of the communities on whose image of indigeneity they have been preying for decades, is the rule rather than the exception. A situation has been created in which eventually all stand to lose.