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**Title:** Family stories: oral tradition, memories of the past, and contemporary conflicts over land in Mentawai - Indonesia  
**Issue Date:** 2012-12-11
Part Three
In part three, I examine contents of three stories presented in part two. I analyse them in three successive chapters by dividing three aspects of the stories in each chapter like characteristics of family stories, accounts of the early migration of Mentawaian ancestors and current land conflicts. Regarding the characteristics of family stories, I examine themes of those stories and describe circumstances of when and how a family story is told. Furthermore, I explain the position of a family story of a kin-group in the Mentawai community. Accounts of the early migratory action give an idea of which destination and places a few kin-groups’ ancestors had passed through. The accounts do not exactly point out the position of places but they give the probable position. By means of illustrations we may comprehend some places mentioned in the stories. They also give us an idea of the journey of the kin-groups’ ancestors. Regarding the current conflicts of land rights, I evaluate two cases. A case relates to a traditional situation where several kin-groups try to claim the same plot of land as the owners migrated or passed away. However, family stories give the rights of the land back to the relatives of the initial owners. The other case depicts similar situation to the first one; however, the last case is altered by external factors – the introduction of the government programmes to the traditional settlement.
8

Characteristics of family stories

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the characteristics of the family stories that have been discussed in the three preceding chapters. I begin by examining the mango story presented in Chapter 5. I then examine the pig story presented in Chapter 6 and the wild boar story of Chapter 7. By examining the themes of these stories, we may come to see the characteristics of family stories in Mentawai.

Besides, I describe features of the storytellers who told me the stories, explaining people’s competence in telling a family story. I also give an account of which family members may or may not listen to a certain family story. In the discussion of features of storytellers and listeners, I aim to reveal what Mentawaians think of their family stories. The outcome of this analysis is to determine what the social logic is of telling a family story and what the essential position of a family story is in Mentawaiian communities.

Before I look at the family stories, I first want to briefly evaluate the treatment of Mentawai oral narratives in the literature. They have not been examined thoroughly. I therefore take an opportunity to classify them into different categories. The aim of classifying the Mentawai oral narratives is to identify the position of Mentawai family stories in Mentawai oral narratives.

8.2 Mentawai oral narratives

Most types of Mentawai oral tradition are stories and in general they are called titiboat. However, the stories do not always fall neatly into one category. Stories telling about the origins and workings of plants, animals, human beings, and natural phenomena are called pumumuan. The word pumumuan is formed from the root word mumu, which literally means ‘ripe’ or ‘mature’ and figuratively means ‘old’. Stories in pumumuan explain how things began. These
stories are narratives of things that occurred in the old time. Stories about the origins of the first human beings in Mentawai like those I elaborated in Chapter 4 can be classified in this category; however, stories of the origins of different kin groups of the Mentawaians are not included in this category. So, *pumumuan* can be understood as a category of mythical stories. Other examples of *pumumuan* can be found in Morris (1900), Hansen (1915), Kruyt (1923), Loeb (1929), Sihombing (1979), Spina (1981) and Schefold (1988).

Another kind of stories is called *pungunguan*, formed from the root word *ngungu*, literally ‘mouth’ and figuratively it just means oral narrative. These stories resemble legends, fairytales, and fables. *Pungunguan* stories may be hilarious, heroic or educational. Examples of such stories can be found in Karl Simanjuntak’s unpublished manuscript\(^\text{15}\) (1914), titled *Pungunguanda Sakalagan\(^\text{16}\)* (Sakalagan's stories). Most of the stories in this manuscript tell about courage, and include stories about the legendary figure Pagetasabbau (see also Spina, 1981: 193-4). Stories about Pagetasabbau also describe the close relationship between an uncle (Pagetasabbau) and his two nephews who wanted to be handsome and accomplished. Such *pungunguan* stories convey morals about culture and traditions, about how people are supposed to learn to live in society.

Mentawaians also have stories telling about apes, crocodiles, turtles, birds, snakes, pigs, deer, and lizards, describing what they are and how they live. Such stories are also called *pungunguan*. Mentawaians make use of the characteristics of animals in order to teach people about these animals’ behaviour, and to use these as examples for humans. Young people do not always positively respond to instructions given by their parents; so by making use of stories about animal behaviour, parents give young people something to think about, and hope that their children eventually will decide how to behave properly. A father encourages his son to be diligent and work fast. He tells his son a story about a crab on the beach or a spider making its web. The crab quickly runs and digs a hole for its shelter. A spider does not stop working before completing its web. Taking these animals as examples, a father gently encourages his son to accomplish his work as soon as possible and not to stop before finishing the work.

The story of *sibatebate sabba sitoulutoulu* or ‘lizard and turtle’ (a short version is in Loeb, 1929, a long version in Spina, 1981: 112-115) tells about two contrasting human characteristics: cunning and guilelessness. The ‘cunning’ turtle ridiculously fools the ‘guileless’ lizard on a banana tree growing near the riverbank. The fruits of the banana are reflected on the river water. The cunning turtle asks the guileless lizard to dive into the river in order to get banana fruits. While the lizard is in the water, the turtle climbs the banana trunk and

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\(^{15}\) I thank Panulis Saguntung for the copy of manuscript.  
\(^{16}\) Sakalagan is a group of people, residing in Pagai islands.
The characteristics of family stories

gets the fruits. The moral of the story is that one should not be guileless if one does not want to be taken advantage of by cunning people.

In his book *Die Mentawai-Sprache*, Max Morris (1900: 132-141) presents a lot of riddles collected from Mentawaians residing in Sipora where a collection of riddles is called *patura*, which literally means ‘quiz’. In other places of Mentawai it is called *pasailukat* which literally means ‘puzzle’. Such riddles were and still are popular among Mentawaians, especially during social gatherings. When people work together, for instance building a house, many riddles are told, to cheer people up so that they do not find the work too heavy and time-consuming. After someone tells a riddle, others usually attempt to answer it, and if someone gives the right answer everyone shouts their happiness, excitement and encouragement.

When many people work together and one person begins to lose interest in the work, and starts to leave for home, stopping earlier while others are still working, the rest of the group will address the person with a riddle like this one: *itco lee koat; lakka ienung* (if ‘something’ begins to look at the sea, ‘something’ moves faster toward it). The answer to this riddle is ‘sea turtle’. If the person realizes that he has been ridiculed, he usually stays to carry on with the work until all decide to stop. Another example is: *gilik, bela ilu* (twist something off, tears drop), which is simply a riddle. The answer is sakoile or papaya fruit. If you pick a papaya fruit, a few drops of sap drip out of the broken stem. The message of this riddle is that every action has a consequence.

Another category of Mentawai oral tradition is called *sukat* or *bujai*, which is a set of sacred words or mantras occurring in ritual language. Some of these are used as prayers in ceremonies and others are sung. In Mentawai, Schefold (1988: 327) in his *Lia: das grosse Ritual auf den Mentawai-Inseln*, especially in chapter four of the book, discusses a great many examples of ritual language. On some occasions, ritual words are prayed and then sung. On other occasions, ritual words are only prayed and not sung. In order to avoid confusion, Mentawaians give names to the songs. The name of a song tells what kind of song it is. Songs are distinguished into two main categories: ritual songs and ordinary songs. Ritual songs, called *urai kerei* (shamanic songs), are usually sung by shamans (*tai kerei*). A shaman often uses singing in rituals as a way to communicate with spirits. *Urai kerei* can be further subdivided according to function. There is a group of songs for persuading spirits (*naknak simagre*) to join families in a ritual. There is a group of songs for re-harmonizing the relationship between body and spirit (*urai pameru*), and so on. Most shamanic songs are transmitted from a senior shaman to junior shamans and this transmission is called *panguli*.

Ordinary (non-ritual) songs are called *urai simata’* or *leleiyo* (ordinary people's songs). Mentawaians commonly express their experiences and feelings by singing them privately. For instance, a mother whose son recently died expresses her sorrow by singing while she is crying. According to the state of
feelings, meanings, and purposes, ordinary songs may be divided into several types, such as *urai soubaga* (sorrowful songs), *urai belet baga* (sad songs), *urai goat baga* (lonesome songs), *urai angkat baga* (happy songs), and *urai nuntut baga* (love songs). Some examples of Mentawai songs that have been recorded are on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings titled *Music of Indonesia 7: Music from the Forest of Riau and Mentawai* (Yampolsky, 1995) and *Songs from the uma: music from Siberut Island (Mentawai Archipelago), Indonesia* (Persoon and Schefold, 2009).

A type of stories in Mentawai that is important for this study is family stories, called *gobbui* (or *tiboi* in other dialects). These stories are about ancestral matters and historical accounts. *Gobbui* or *tiboi* may be translated literally as ‘talk’, with a figurative meaning of ‘story’. However, as the word *gobbui* or *tiboi* is not used alone. The word has to be accompanied by another word in order to be understandable. Examples are *gobbui porak* (story of land), *gobbui leleu* (story of hill or forest), *gobbui mone* (story of gardens and vegetation), and *gobbui teteu* (story of kin groups’ ancestors), in other places in Mentawai called *tiboi tubu* (story of oneself). Such stories cannot be separated from each other. Stories of the origins of a kin group, for instance, are closely related to stories of land, and to stories of gardens and stories of relatives. Each kin group has a collection of these stories. I call these family stories.

A family story is an oral historical narrative that can distinguish one kin group from another. The family stories function as one of a kin group’s identity markers. Family stories contain information about the group. Stories in the category of *gobbui* or *tiboi* are not seen as mythical narratives by the Mentawaians although they may provide mythical elements as they contain events that had occurred long ago. Nonetheless, information like the locations of places, the names of places, personal names, and the chronology of events, which are important elements of the family stories, is recognised as true by the Mentawaians. So, the content of the family story is about past occurrences of when the Mentawai ancestors were still alive. The family stories are not like *pumumuan* telling about things that happened in the mythical context. The family stories are oral historical narratives. The kin groups tell their family stories (*gobbui teteu* or *tiboi tubu*) in order to explain how they exist in different kin groups and who their ancestors were. The Mentawaians tell mythical narratives (*pumumuan*) in order to explain how the first human beings came to exist in Mentawai. However, there are no stories explaining how the current kin groups relate genealogically to these first humans in Mentawai. In fact, the first human being in *pumumuan* is not necessarily the ancestor of the current kin groups.
8.3 Themes of a family story

By listening to a family story, I become acquainted with diverse aspects of that kin group, most importantly the ancestors of the kin group, ancestral lands claimed by the kin group, and family connections between two or more related groups that currently reside in separate places in the Mentawai Islands. If these related kin groups are all descended from the same ancestral family, the groups usually tell the same family stories about their ancestors. What I think is that every family story recounts a past occurrence that affected a particular kin group.

In order to remember the content of a family story, there are rules and methods to guide storytellers to tell their family story properly. They choose particular occasions to tell the stories. Certain elders are chosen to play the important role as the prominent storyteller of their family stories. These elders maintain their family stories carefully by accurately transmitting the essential content of the stories through the generations, mostly to those who are perceived by the elders to have a certain quality and talent in speaking, listening and memorizing what they have heard. For a kin group it is crucial to maintain the stories accurately and as completely as possible, because family stories establish the identity of the kin group. Mentawaians do not tolerate the existence of a new version of their family story.

By means of a family story we may determine a link existing among families who have become separated from each other due to the early migration of their ancestors. Due to the early migration, related kin groups exist with different kin-names and currently live in separate places. When storytellers of two different kin groups tell about their ancestors, for instance as related in the wild boar story or the pig story, the storytellers may mention the same ancestors’ names in a particular passage of their story. This signifies that the groups of the two storytellers are related as members of an initial kin group. They are descended from the same ancestors.

However, a story may also be told by two or more different kin groups without there being any family relationship among the groups. In the case of the mango story, because several kin groups lived in the same valley, they had a great opportunity to narrate the same story. Other groups adopted the story and used it as an illustration in their own family story. Nonetheless, each group told the mango story slightly differently as the subject of an early family conflict. One group’s version of the story points out that the initial conflict was due to the mistake of the older brother, while another group’s version emphasizes that the mistake was due to the younger brother. In yet another version of the mango story, we read that the mother of the family made a mistake, considering the daughter-in-law innocent. These differences signify the lack of relatedness among those groups.
8.3.1 The mango story

In Mentawai, *sipeu* is a name for a certain kind of mango. Storytellers who narrate the mango story generally highlight a family conflict over the size of mango fruits. Some storytellers point out that two siblings (an older brother and a younger brother) commenced the conflict. One story attributes the mistake to the older brother; another story blames the younger brother for making a mistake. These stories suggest the consequence of the conflict is that either the younger brother or the older brother left to seek a new place to live. In a third version, we are informed that both brothers left.

In Mentawai, an older brother symbolizes seniority, wisdom, leadership, superiority and maturity. A family expects a lot from an older brother. In contrast, a younger brother is perceived as a symbol of inferiority and immaturity. An older brother needs to learn more and has to be led to understand something properly before he can do or decide something alone. Keeping these principles in mind will help us get a clearer picture in the mango stories of what an older brother should and should not do and what a younger brother is expected to do and not to do.

From the content of the mango stories, we get an impression of how an older brother and a younger brother acted in family matters. Story 8 tells that the older brother disputed with his younger brother. The older brother took bigger fruits from his younger brother. The older brother did not show his wisdom, superiority, leadership and maturity properly. Instead, he was selfish. The younger brother did not make a lot of difficulties in the situation. He joined his older brother in making a canoe although they failed. Later, they made a raft and decided to leave for the southern islands of Mentawai.

In the next passage of the story, the narrator tells how his current kin group came into existence. The story narrates another kind of mango fruit called *lakkau*. Three brothers argued with each other. The conflict commenced when the oldest brother tried to keep the mango by swallowing its seed. The two other brothers did not accept the incident and they accused their oldest brother of behaving selfishly. The accusation pushed the three brothers apart. The motif here is similar to the first mango story: an older member of the family is eager to possess something (fruit) that belongs to the whole family. The older brother is concerned with his own interests while ignoring those of his younger brothers.

In Story 9 the older brother cannot accept that his younger brother behaved dishonestly. The younger brother chose the big mango fruits that belonged to his older brother. The older brother did not like that and he showed his superiority, punishing his younger brother by sending him and his family away. The younger brother eventually left for a new place, while the older brother remained at the place of origin. Later, however, the older brother and his family also go away to seek another place. The departure of all the family
members after the mango conflict means that there were no family members staying in the place of origin anymore. Both brothers left for the southern islands of Mentawai, where descendants of the two brothers later met again.

One storyteller mentions two women (mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) instead of two brothers. In Story 7, a mother-in-law was deceitful towards her daughter-in-law. In doing so, the mother-in-law was perceived to have broken the common rule. She should lead her daughter-in-law to behave with proper manners. Instead, she took what the daughter-in-law should have. The daughter-in-law should be treated as a member of the family and should have equal rights within the family, but she did not get that. The mother-in-law’s action was not acceptable in Mentawai. The husband of the daughter-in-law, who was the son of the mother-in-law, decided to leave his parental family and seek a new place. The son chose his nuclear family instead of staying with his parental family. This was done in order to express the son’s rejection of his mother’s misconduct.

What I generally understand from the mango story is a significant strong social judgment. By relating the mango story, storytellers emphasize that Mentawaians could not accept deceitful behaviour in their families. The story suggests that family members should acknowledge equal rights among themselves. In the mango story, equality is indicated by the decision that each family had the same entitlement to a branch of the mango tree. One individual or family did not have more opportunities and rights than the others. However, the idea of equal rights was not always practised. If family members did not follow the rules, they were at odds with each other. It seems that a family separation was considered to be the only possible solution to such a problem. Family separation as the best option in resolving a conflict is still common in Mentawai.

8.3.2 The pig story

In the pig story, we are led to focus on an assault triggered by a pig. The pig story is told by several kin groups with ancestral connections to each other, even though they currently live in separate places. Chapter 6 present three versions of the pig story. The story tells of a harsh dispute that affected two neighbouring kin groups. The conflict began when a few individuals from the kin group called Sapokka shot a pig to death and ate the pork. The shot pig belonged to another kin group called Samongilailai. The pig had been given as a bride-price from the Sapokka to the Samongilailai when a Sapokka man got married to a Samongilailai woman. After the pig had been killed, the Samongilailai still attempted to find a friendly solution by asking the Sapokka for another pig to replace the shot one. However, the Sapokka refused. The Samongilailai eventually decided to carry out a harsh assault.
The pig story reveals a lot about social matters involving pigs. Pigs are important to Mentawaians. A ritual is usually performed before someone prepares a place to raise pigs. Family members have to observe a taboo period lasting several weeks. The owner of the pigs has to cut down a lot of sago palms to feed the pigs every day. The number of pigs says something about the social status of the owner of the pigs. Pigs represent wealth.

Mentawaians raised pigs for various purposes. They used pigs as payment of various fines and for bride-prices. The number of pigs for a bride-price varies according to the agreement between the two groups. The bride-price can be partly paid with other things like cooking pots or durian trees. As the bride leaves her family and moves to her husband's family, the pig and the rest of the bride-price are considered by the bride's family as a symbolic representation of the absent daughter. The pig may be kept alive for a few months or years, or it may be slaughtered and eaten by the family members of the bride when holding their own party, as the daughter's family may not join the daughter's wedding ceremony held in her husband's house.

According to the pig story, the Sapokka recognized the pig that they had given to the Samongilailai as a bride-price when it reappeared near their house. Nevertheless, the Sapokka shot the pig to death and ate the pork rather than informing the Samongilailai as the current owner so that the Samongilailai could come and get the pig back. By shooting the pig, the Sapokka ruined their relationship with the Samongilailai and damaged the representation of Samongilailai's daughter. The Sapokka action was not acceptable. However, the Sapokka did not accept the friendly solution offered by the Samongilailai. Because of that, the Samongilailai had to harshly confront the Sapokka. A Samongilailai man assassinated a few Sapokka men.

Furthermore, the pig story communicates a social situation in Mentawai where it was not – and still is not currently – acceptable for individuals to destroy or harm things that belong to other people. Mentawaians consider a harmful threat toward their belongings as an indirect assault on themselves, and they do not simply allow this to happen. People must be chastised by being forced to pay for what they have damaged. The pig story also recounts how the migrating ancestor of Samongilailai had conflicts with neighbours in new places. Sacrificing pigs or surrendering plots of land resolved some of those conflicts. It seems that conflicts with neighbours and the involvement of pigs are the main motifs of the pig story.

8.3.3 The wild boar story

In Mentawai, a family story contains historical information about the kin group. It tells about early conflicts that caused migration of the kin group, describing how family members separated from each other. It also names the places the group once occupied, indicating plots of land that belong to the
families and locations of their planted gardens. Generally, a family story tells about land and kinship. Moreover, a family story recounts factual happenings experienced by the kin group. For instance, headhunting raids carried out by the group against other groups are included in the family story, as illustrated by the wild boar story.

The wild boar story reveals another theme as well. This is the failure of prominent individuals of the group to behave properly. In the versions of the wild boar story presented in Chapter 7, the father of a kin group unsuccessfully tackles wild boars in the jungle. The wild boars were found lying unconscious on the ground after eating a toxic substance contained in fruit from a tree called *laggure*. The father apparently misjudged the situation and assumed that the wild boars were already dead. Therefore, he did not tie up their legs. Moreover, he did not foresee that the rain might awaken the boars. As the rain fell, the wild boars woke up and ran away.

By proudly announcing to his family what he had just come across, the father gave hope to his families that they would be able to eat the meat of the wild boars. However, the hope did not turn out to be a reality. Nevertheless, the father tried to pay for his mistake by slaughtering his own pigs. However, that did not help, and his failure turned out to greatly humiliate him.

The wild boar story suggests that the family members were disrespectful. The family members, mostly female ones, sang a song with words making fun of the father. This indirectly signifies disrespect towards the father. Initially, they might have sung the song without intentionally meaning to disgrace their father. But when they sang the same song again and again, it seems obvious that they were intentionally out to humiliate him. The father tried to compensate with different activities such as setting traps and headhunting raids. However, the father’s actions did not stop the female members from singing their favourite song.

Because of his humiliation, the father finally left most of his family members at the place of origin and sought a new place for his nuclear family. Actions of the father’s sons, who went after him to ask him to come back, show an effort to bring the family together. However, this did not have any positive result. The father and his family continued moving through many places. He never returned home.

The theme I see in the wild boar story is the repeating pattern of social actions of the past. By intentionally or unintentionally repeating an unconstructive thing, someone may damage social relationships within a kin group. In this case, we are informed about the division of an initial family into two, and the two groups dividing into more kin groups in later expansions. The father’s actions of moving through a number of places caused the expansion of his kin group geographically and genealogically. The father’s offspring grew to comprise several kin groups.
8.4  Telling a family story

During fieldwork, I observed how the storytellers tell their stories. Although they live in separate places in the Mentawai Islands, the storytellers had similar ways of telling a story. One group of storytellers had a matter-of-fact way of narrating their story. Seated in their house, they told me their story. They talked as if they were telling me about their daily experience. Their gestures were not exaggerated. Sometimes they raised or lowered their voice when appropriate. They used short sentences to build their narration. They did not use a lot of examples. They made important points directly. They told their story carefully. A few crucial things that may not be heard by their neighbours were told softly. These were things that they usually told secretly only to certain people who could be trusted. They seemed proud when telling secrets related to heroic actions of their ancestors. However, the majority of the actions of the stories are related to the killing of members of other kin groups in headhunting raids. What they foresee is appallingly bad consequences if relatives of the murdered persons find out that the ancestors of the storyteller assassinated their ancestors.

Another group of storytellers made more of a performance of their storytelling. While relating important events, they spread out their arms, opened their eyes wide, or demonstrated holding a machete, spear, or bow and arrow. They sometimes shook their head up and down to show that they shared the same opinion about their ancestors’ actions. Sometimes they attracted listeners by repeating the same words several times. They changed the tone of their voice in order to attract the audience’s attention. On other occasions, they took a significant pause while telling their stories in order to distinguish one event from others. However, listeners sometimes criticize these attractive and exaggerated ways of telling a story. These techniques make them doubt the truth of the story. These listeners start to feel that a family story is like a myth or legend in which a storyteller may freely vary his story to make it more entertaining.

I noticed another thing in both types of storytellers, signifying their similarity. They made use of small objects around them, like an empty cup or a package of cigarettes. They sometimes sketched curves or lines on the floor or wall of the wooden house by means of a knife, a machete, or charcoal in order to illustrate their stories clearly. Storytellers took listeners sitting around them as examples for the story. This made listeners pay special attention. I consider these methods to be elements of the Mentawaian oral tradition.

A Mentawaian storyteller transmits almost all the family stories to all members of his kin group. The stories contain information that concerns all family members. The important points of those stories must not be overlooked, because they convey historical accounts. A few particular stories, for instance stories pertaining to landownership, must be preserved carefully. They record the process of claiming new places and plots of land for the kin group. But the
family stories are not just about land. They also contain a lot of information about ancestors, relationships of related families residing in different places, and diverse conflicts that occurred in the past. The stories are all part of the identity markers of the kin group.

Some stories may be told exclusively on such special occasions as blessing a newly born baby, a wedding ceremony, the ritual for a newly constructed communal house (uma), or after burying the body of a family member. At such moments, all family members usually come together, and neighbours of other kin groups are usually absent. On other occasions, particular stories may be told while family members are working in the garden, or while hunting in the forest, or while canoeing up and down a river, where only a few family members are present. Telling a story at night allows two or more adults to share their family secrets or private stories. These ways are meant to avoid spreading information outside the family circle.

Mentawaians purposely limit the opportunity for particular groups of people to hear a story for a few crucial reasons. Particular stories actually contain family secrets, such as harmful actions done by ancestors of the group in the course of headhunting raids against other groups of people. Such hostile actions must be hidden from the kin groups of the victims, in order to avoid being harmed violently or burdened economically by the victims’ families.

Nonetheless, a few stories are told while neighbours belonging to other kin groups are present. Stories of landownership are sometimes deliberately told in the presence of other kin groups. The storyteller’s group may perceive their neighbours as allies. If a conflict over a plot of land occurs between the landowning group and other people who try to claim the land, neighbours who once heard the story may be asked to give testimony in order to clarify the status of the contested plot of land. If neighbours once heard the story about the contested plot of land, they may be expected to stand on the side of the landowner. For this reason, it is beneficial to have such a story be heard by neighbours.

8.5 Competence in storytelling

Storytellers are of various kinds in Mentawai. They may be categorized according to gender (women or men), social status (married or unmarried), and age group (adult or young). Several elders and other appointed individuals of the group have a great opportunity to tell the kin group’s family stories. They usually lead the rest of the family members when there are family conflicts with other groups. The storytellers are usually leading figures of the group; in a conflict situation, they decide what to tell and what to hide.

Male storytellers have more extensive opportunities to tell family stories than females do. This is because male members are allowed by custom to ar-
range almost everything in the social lives of Mentawaian society and they take the most responsibility for any consequences due to decisions made for their group. This is strongly related to the patrilineal system of Mentawaian society. Male Mentawaians have to maintain and uphold their kin-names. In fact, the identity of the kin group depends on its male members. Females do not have this obligation.

From Mentawaians’ point of view, a female member of a kin group usually leaves her group and follows her husband’s kin group, which is the group they live with after getting married. As she will join her husband’s family, it is risky if a female member of a kin group knows too much about her family history. She might accidentally mention unspeakable matters concerning her family to her husband’s family. Her husband’s family may take advantage of this. Because of this, men are chosen to take care of family stories.

Mentawaians perceive their family stories as reliable accounts of past events. A family story reveals a lot of matters important to a group, namely a list of ancestors, relationships with other kin groups, the group’s collective possession of things like ancestral lands, and important social events that have occurred in the kin group. Due to the content and function of the stories, female storytellers do not have a recognized status to tell family stories. From Mentawaians’ point of view, women are seen as ‘secondary’ members of the kin group. It is men who are traditionally responsible for carrying on a kin group’s identity. For that reason, female storytellers are not frequently important storytellers.

Nevertheless, female storytellers in Mentawaian society may, sometimes, serve as key storytellers when males cannot carry out their tasks due to lack of knowledge. In such a case, the cultural distinction between men and women in telling family stories does not apply, because women know particular information better than men. Women may have specific knowledge of cultural and historical accounts. Especially, if they once witnessed a particular event in the past, or if they are the only individuals who heard a story told by their ancestors. In such a case, they have a crucial position in their kin group.

Mentawaians not only distinguish between male storytellers and female ones regarding the telling of historical accounts, but they also make a distinction among male storytellers. Only a few men, who are selected by talent, interest, and position, will get the opportunity to tell their kin group’s historical account. Two to five male individuals of a kin group may undertake this important role. Most members of a group fully rely on and believe in the stories told by the storytellers. Owing to his crucial position, a male storyteller is required to have a good memory; therefore he can properly remember a series of past and recent happenings thoroughly. He should also be knowledgeable and skillful in relating the historical account to the rest of the family members, and be respected by them.
As frequently happens, particular stories may only be told in the presence of adult members. Sometimes, adults talk about something that may not be told in a public space. A family secret such as headhunting raids carried out by their ancestors must be hidden from the awareness of the victims of the raids and their descendants. Adults believe that children and young people are innocent and irresponsible. Therefore, younger people are not allowed to know particular family stories until older people consider them ready for the stories. Moreover, children are forbidden to show up at adults’ meetings. Adults especially do not want to have children or young people around them when they are in conflict with other groups while discussing a sensitive matter like establishing the kin group’s possession of a plot of ancestral land, because hostility may unexpectedly arise among them. In such a conflict, young people may easily become victims.

A few stories – for instance, stories about disputed plots of land – are normally narrated in the presence of male members only, particularly on ceremonial occasions. Another kind of occasion is a special meeting organized by a third party at which male members of two different kin groups dispute rights to a plot of land. The two parties explain why they believe they have possession of the land. In order to explain that, they tell their family story relating how their kin group came to have rights to the disputed land. Women are present at the meeting, but they are passive and do not give their opinions about the matter. They usually sit in the room listening to the male members talking about the case. Even if women are voluntarily present at such a meeting because they are concerned about their rights, their voice is frequently denied. The only way for female members to actively participate in the male sphere of telling family stories is if they are asked to give their opinion or if the matter under discussion concerns them directly. For example, such an opportunity is given to older women who are familiar with the case.

Within a kin group, a few people have a natural talent for telling stories, while other people need to listen to the same story several times before fully recollecting the whole content. They have to practise again and again until they are skilled in telling the story. This signifies that not all members of a kin group have the same abilities in telling family stories. Different storytellers may tell different versions of a story. The emergence of different versions does not really matter to Mentawaians as long as the family stories do not provoke controversy among the listeners. It is important to listeners to know the major themes of a story so that they can transmit the story to following generations properly. In order to do so, elders need youngsters who can remember things properly.

A lot of young people are not acquainted with how the story was created, maintained, and altered. Young generations of a kin group may be acquainted with the current place-names and the popular names of places; however, they
may fail to recollect the initial names and other names of places, as the names have probably not been told to them yet. The older generation might purposefully hide the names from the younger generation. It is not only certain place-names that may be hidden from the younger generation. Other events are also hidden, such as notorious assaults. To hide some crucial events may cause the meaning of the story to be incomplete if the storytellers who know the story pass away without transmitting the hidden information to younger storytellers. Sometimes, younger storytellers try to find out the hidden information from other sources, from people who might be familiar with the event, and then add the information to their family stories. This may lead to the existence of several versions of a family story. Other versions of a family story may easily come into existence if storytellers intentionally change a few parts of the story in order to support their aims when using the story as the main source of information in a dispute.

After becoming familiar with the place-names, everyone in the group eventually has the same perspective on which place they are talking about. Because the members of the kin group that owns the stories know several different names for that place, they will be able to better defend their ownership of the place when confronted by another group who tries to claim it. If the owners of family stories have to use their stories in disputes, for instance, in defining family relationships among them, the owners of the stories may always refer back to the initial name of the place, because they are the only group of people that knows the initial name. In fact, the place belongs to the group and the group knows the story of the place. Their recollection of the old names of the place becomes a winning point whenever the group has to defend their claim to the place.

Important parts of family stories need to be remembered and transmitted to following generations. A kin group has a particular method, which is repeatedly telling the story at family gatherings or while visiting particular places, where older members remind younger members not to forget the story of the places. The method has a bearing on the process of telling family stories. In the present day, when paper and pen have been accepted as part of Mentawaian culture, some Mentawaian families write down the important points of their stories. Important points include the place-names that belong to the family, names of their ancestors who led the family to the current place, and particular events that affected the dispersal of the family. Nevertheless, they do not write down the entire story; this is in order to protect the story in case the notebook is stolen by another kin group.

A few youngsters with talent, selected by elders, may nevertheless have an opportunity to learn not only the themes of the story but also the secret words. These are young people who are perceived to be reliable and who are able to remember the words better than other family members when the story is told to them. In fact, a small number of people have a good memory to recollect any-
thing in great detail. To tell a story to young members is to keep the story from being forgotten. Older people will not be able to keep maintaining the story forever. Before forgetting the meaning and the complete details of the story and before they die, they have to ensure that selected youngsters who will continue this tradition so the following generations can learn their historical accounts. Therefore, the older people who know particular family stories remind the younger generation to consider the family stories. The older people guide the younger generation to the ancestral places and introduce them to the land and plants planted by their ancestors by saying, ‘Remember this land and the trees growing on the land, they belonged to our ancestors and now belong to us. It is our task to take care of them.’ Older people in Mentawai frequently say such words to younger people. My father and uncles spoke to me similarly.

8.6 Ownership of family stories

During fieldwork I observed that storytellers regularly mention certain kin groups or individuals of kin groups in order to point out which of those kin groups are their relatives and they mention the names of the places where those kin groups currently reside in the Mentawai Islands. When I visited one of the kin groups mentioned, I heard a similar story to the one I had heard from the kin group that I initially interviewed. For instance, Samongilailai families residing on Sipora recognize that they have relatives residing in Taileleu and other places on Siberut, even though they have never met each other. Samongilailai families thus recognize the existence of other kin groups with which they share an ancestral connection, and this is because their family stories contain such information.

In other cases, I came across two or more kin groups that do not have any family relationship to each other whatsoever, even though they tell the same story. This is illustrated by the mango stories in Chapter 5. Each group tells a version of the mango story in which the family originally lived in the valley of Simatalu and departed from there. However, these kin groups did not suggest having connections with the other kin groups from whom I also heard the mango story. The storyteller of the Siribetug kin group, who told Story 7, did not mention the Satairarak kin group as their relatives, nor did the storyteller of Satairarak, who told Story 9, mention the Siribetug kin group as his relatives. The mango story is simple to remember, and it illustrates particular kin groups’ early family conflicts. By closely reading each version of the mango story in Chapter 5, we may get the impression that the storytellers tend to indicate that their kin groups are not descended from the same ancestor, the same place of origin, and the same initial kin group. What I can think of that might explain this situation is that formerly there was perhaps only one family affected by the mango incident. Other kin groups in the same valley later adopted
the mango story and repeated it within their families. Over the generations, the kin groups no longer remembered which kin group was the owner of the mango story. The current generation is only familiar with the story of their ancestors departing from their homeland because of a conflict over mangos. The probable reason for other groups to adopt the mango story is that they also want to be recognized as residents of the valley where the mango incident took place. What we conclude about the mango story with regard to the ownership of the story may also be the case with the wild boar story.

During fieldwork I met a kin group called Sanene who told me the wild boar story. However, I did not include their story in my analysis, as it does not tell about the early expansion of the kin group from Simatalu. Before coming to Saibi Samukop, the two groups (Sanene and Siriratei) arrived from different places of origin. Siriratei and their related kin groups like Saririgka, Sakairiggi, Sakatsila and Satoko were initially from Simatalu. On the other hand, Sanene and their relatives like Tasiripeigu, Saporug, Sakarigi, Sabatti, Sarimau and Saeggeoni were originally from Berisigep. The two kin groups called Siriratei and Sanene are unrelated, yet both tell the same wild boar story. The version told by Sanene is similar to the wild boar story told by Saleleusi (Story 13) and Sakatsila (Story 14 in Chapter 7). The two kin groups (Sanene and Sakatsila) currently live in the same valley of Saibi Samukop.
According to the wild boar story told by the Sanene storyteller, the Sanene kin group lived in Berisigep, situated in the northern part of Siberut, and the Siriratei kin group lived in Simatalu, situated in the western part of Siberut. Furthermore, Sanene and their relatives (Tasiripeigu, Saporug, Sakarigi, Sabatti, Sarimau and Saeggeoni) expanded from Bulaubog's family. The family existed as a kin group called Samaloisa. After a further expansion of the group, several kin groups with different names came into existence. Siriratei and their related kin groups (Saririgka, Sakairiggi, Sakatsila and Satoko) originated from Silango's family. It is obvious that Siriratei, Saririgka, Sakairiggi, Sakatsila, and Satoko do not share the same ancestors with Sanene, Tasiripeigu, Saporug, Sakarigi, Sabatti, Sarimau and Saeggeoni.

Yet ancestors of the two groups (Siriratei and Sanene) did not pursue the same migratory direction when they commenced to depart from their homeland. The Sanene departed from Berisigep and moved to Simalegi and further to Simatalu. Thereafter, the group entered the valley of Saibi Samukop. A few families settled there permanently while others kept moving southward in the Mentawai Islands. The Siriratei kin group, on the other hand, moved from Simatalu to Simalegi and further to Berisigep. The group moved again to Sikanatirik, Tubeke and stopped in Saibi Samukop. Thereafter, part of the family moved to the southern part of Siberut. The two groups' migratory movements match up with plots of land found (claimed) in the course of the early migratory movements of the groups' ancestors. The two groups do not share the same ancestral land and plots of land claimed during migration. Nevertheless, this analysis does not answer the question of why unrelated kin groups sometimes tell the same story of origins and migratory movements.

In order to understand why two or more different kin groups tell a similar story, I turn to a Mentawaian traditional system structuring relationships of two or more kin groups. Several kin groups inhabit a valley. Families usually visit each other in order to set up trust among them and to build friendship. When a family gets in contact with other families, they frequently tell some of their family stories to each other. A kin group's family story may unintentionally be told in the presence of these neighbours. It is quite common for two families to decide to build a friendship (siripo). If two unrelated families agree to turn their relationship into a close friendship, they may also come to regard each other as relatives. They help each other in every respect. They exchange things, including a few stories.

Another possibility for a family story to become known and adopted by other families is through marriage. A female member of a kin group follows her husband's kin group after the wedding ceremony. Over time, the bride will certainly hear some of the family stories of her husband's kin group. Later, she might tell some of these stories to female members of her original kin group. In addition, a married woman might tell a story of her original kin group to
Part Three

her children, who are in fact members of another kin group, namely their fa-
ther's (her husband's) kin group. In this way, a story may spread to another
family through marriage.

Another possibility for a family story to spread from one kin group to an-
other is through adoption (sinappit). Mentawaians often adopt a child from
another kin group, for instance if the parents die. An adopted child is treated
like other children in the family. The adopting kin group hopes that the adopt-
ed child will remain with his new family and carry on his new identity after
being adopted. However, this does not always go smoothly. In some cases, the
adopted person later wants to return to his original kin group. He may freely
do that, but he may not take along with him anything he got while living with
his adopting kin group. He will not use the adopting kin-name anymore either.
However, he cannot leave behind what he has heard, or been told or taught by
his adopting family. If he heard the family stories of the adopting group, he
will perhaps not forget them. By leaving the adopting family, the adopted per-
son thus carries with him the family stories of the adopting group. So, one way
or another, a family story of one kin group may end up being told by other kin
groups and may even be manipulated for the storyteller's own ends.

Some of the essential elements of a story may change when it is told by a kin
group to which the story does not belong. This is illustrated in the case of Story
6 in Chapter 5. The storyteller of Taikatubutoinan is familiar with the mango
story. However, he acknowledges that the story does not belong to him or his
kin group. The storyteller narrates the basic elements of the plot of the mango
story such that listeners can easily recognize that the mango story told by the
storyteller of Taikatubutoinan is a version of the mango story elsewhere. The
storyteller does not, however, narrate the essential elements characterizing the
identity of the kin group to which the mango story belongs. When told by a
storyteller to whom the story does not belong, the story no longer serves its
function as a historical account, because the storyteller does not know which
points are essential for the owner of the story.

I came across a similar case in the wild boar story. In 1967, Schefold carried
out fieldwork among the Sakuddei. This is a kin group residing in an upriver
village called Sagulubbe. The village is located in the southwestern part of Si-
berut. Schefold recorded a story from a storyteller of Sakuddei named Aman
Dumatkerei. The storyteller knew that the wild boar story belonged to a kin
group called Satoleuru. The kin group dwelled in the valley of Rereiket, where
the Sakuddei had once lived before moving away and settling the upriver place
of Sagulubbe. The wild boar stories in Chapter 7 are told like a historical ac-
count. The stories recount the names of ancestors, places claimed in the course
of migration, plots of land, kin groups arising from the initial one, and so on.
The stories are told with not much dialogue, and without hilarious or enter-
taining words.
The storyteller of Sakuddei does not care about the exact content of the wild boar story. He does not mention where the place of origin was located or the name of the ancestor who was affected by the wild boar incident. He nevertheless narrates a series of actions that the father of the story undertook in order to stop his family from ridiculing him. Although a list of places where the father had migrated to is mentioned, the story does not function as a historical account anymore, as additional phrases meant to bring about hilarity have changed the purpose of the story. In the hands of the Sakuddei storyteller, it is turned into an entertaining story that listeners can laugh about. A wild boar story that serves as a historical account can be transcribed in one to four pages. But the story as told by the Sakuddei storyteller with its additional jokes and conversation has expanded the story to seven pages or more. I shall point out several passages of the wild boar story as told by the storyteller of Sakuddei to exemplify the changes which have been made compared to the versions of the mango story presented in Chapter 7. I give an example by quoting a few sentences of the story collected by Schefold in 1967. This quotation shows how a person who does not have any relationship to a family story might change the story.

The storyteller of Sakuddei realizes that the story does not belong to his kin group, because he says in the beginning: ‘This story belongs to the group called Satoleuru, telling about their ancestors.’ The first words give the background of an occurrence where a person called Sileppabatu and his brothers went to hunt in the forest. Soon, hilarious matters immediately come into the story in the following phrase: ‘While following the footprints, Sileppabatu’s brothers put a kind of ants called obasoibo17 on his buttocks. They did that in order to annoy him and make fun of him. The annoyed brother said, “Why did you put on my buttocks these bloody obasoiba? They are going to bite and sting my buttocks.” But the brothers pretended that they had done nothing to him.’ This occurrence is told several times, as illustrated in the following sentences: ‘When they arrived at a place where they could take a rest again, they sat down there. While sitting, they again put obasoibo on Sileppabatu’s buttocks.’

Repetition not only describes people’s actions but also indicates how long an actor needs to accomplish a task. For instance, the storyteller says, ‘They searched, searched, searched, searched, searched, and searched.’ Or ‘He rowed, rowed, rowed and turned to follow the curve of the river.’ In a later passage, he says, ‘They ate, ate, ate, ate, and ate their meals until all meals were finished,’ or ‘He wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, wrapped, and wrapped those boars.’ Sometimes a story-

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17 Obasoiba is a kind of ant. Obasoibo have a black colour and are fond of coming out at night from places where they hide during the daytime. Therefore, Mentawaians call this kind of ant oba-soibo (oba = be fond of, soibo = night). Although this kind of ant comes out at night, they can be seen and found during daylight as well.
teller uses repetition to emphasize a crucial action. Such repetition is meant to keep the story alive and entertaining.

Moreover, the Sakuddei storyteller adds a lot of conversation to the mango story, for instance:

Soon after arriving at his house, his family members asked Sileppabatu, ‘What happened? Did you catch something out there, a deer (sibeutubu), perhaps?’ ‘Well, we caught a big one and a small one.’ ‘Is it true?’ ‘Yes! Certainly, we shot them.’ ‘You are not telling a lie to us, are you? Why have you returned earlier while the others have not returned yet?’ ‘Well, obviously we shot the animals but they were not instantly dead, they are still able to run away. When we all were searching for the animals, a few of us put siobasoibo on my buttocks.’ ‘Why is it such a big matter to you that people put siobasoibo on your buttocks?’ ‘Well, they did that more than once; they did that for fun, they made fun of me. And then they put siobasoibo not just on my buttocks, but also on my shoulders, my neck, my armpits, my body, and my testicles, and later my anus. Therefore, I felt insulted; they did not respect me and it seems like they did not count on me, so that I decided to return home earlier. Especially when the ants bit my testicles, it pissed me off badly.’ He thus explained why he had returned home earlier.

In this passage, the storyteller obviously makes the wild boar story more hilarious.

The Sakuddei storyteller creates another hilarious passage when he describes the headhunting raid which the irritated man decided to carry out. The hilarity is not about the act of headhunting but about the description of a person who was assassinated during the headhunting raid. The storyteller says, ‘The man decided to hunt people instead of animals. A ritual was carried out beforehand. The ritual is called headhunting (mulabbara). Thereafter, he went to carry out a headhunting raid (mulakeu). He killed an adult person in Muara Siberut. The person was really big and he had a long and hairy penis.’

The Sakuddei storyteller seems to recollect the course of migratory movements of the father who figures in the wild boar story. However, the storyteller is not allowed to reveal family links existing between the groups mentioned in the story and the group’s relatives living in other places. He states: ‘This story has a connection with groups of people who are currently living in Saibi Samukop. They probably had other names.’ He does not mention these names.

In short, a family story belongs to a specific kin group and functions as a source of information about the group. Accordingly, the story is supposed to be told by certain assigned members of the group in order to maintain it as a historical account giving reliable information about the group’s past. Other people that do not have any connection with a particular family story may not fully know the crucial points of the story. Other people who do not have
8.7 Concluding remarks

I have examined the characteristics of family stories, storytellers and listeners. In general, family stories can be regarded as historical accounts, relating events that happened in the past and events that caused the splitting up of the original kin group. Family stories also contain traditional knowledge about how ancestors of particular kin groups dealt with social conflicts. The stories reveal several possible resolutions to a family conflict. For instance, a family may decide to separate from their relatives and seek a new place to live. Or an individual may be assaulted by members of another kin group before deciding to permanently leave for a new place. Moreover, I found that family stories have become an essential source of information about plots of land claimed by kin groups. A family story tells the location and borders of plots of land claimed by that kin group. It tells whether a plot of land was claimed or was obtained from another group as payment of a fine or a bride-price. In this way, a family story brings the past of a kin group to the present. Family stories transmit historical information but they are not necessarily historically accurate and do not include precise details like exact dates.

Moreover, family stories shed light on daily life and the social logic of people’s behaviour. The stories demonstrate that Mentawai men respect each other equally. Every member of a kin group has the same rights to what the group possesses collectively. If a group has a tree, then the fruits of the tree are to be shared equally. This even applies to trees planted by individuals. Each member of their extended family may claim a share of the tree’s fruit. This also applies to an individual’s actions in hunting or gathering foodstuffs in the surroundings. If an individual hunts deer in the forest, the meat is to be shared equally among all members of the kin group. One member of a kin group may feel unjustly treated if his share is less than what other family members receive. It is also unacceptable if one person’s share is inferior in quality to what other members receive.

In addition, a family story usually mentions plots of land owned by that kin group. According to the traditional way of having entitlement to a plot of land, the owner of the story knows a lot of things about the land, such as its location, the ancestor who first found the land, events that happened concerning that land, the names of kin groups that own neighbouring plots of land. If a kin group can tell about these matters convincingly, other kin groups may have little chance to claim the land. The elders of a kin group therefore request the younger generation to remember precisely specific matters like the borders of the land and the ancestor’s specific words about the land in order to avoid making a mis-
take if they have to defend their claim to the land. Storytellers have to maintain their family stories because they contain a lot of essential information.

Another important element of the family story that makes it different from other kinds of oral tradition in Mentawai is the assignment of members of a kin group that may or may not tell the story. Gender and adulthood are two categories that distinctly separate family members that may tell the family stories. Everyone else takes up a position as listener. The storytellers are a few people, and they maintain the family story and transmit it to individuals chosen by seniority or adulthood or talent of the candidates. Adult men get more chance to be a storyteller than adult women. Talented young members are usually taught to remember significant points of the family stories and they take up their position as storytellers when they become adults. Adult storytellers are seen by the group as reliable and wise persons to decide on what may and may not be told, because the family stories are part of the group's identity. Most of the stories recorded during my fieldwork, as well as stories found during archival research, tell about the growth of the early Mentawaian kin groups and their departure from a place of origin. According to the stories, one kin group decided to leave the place of origin because conflicts occurred within the group. Several families arose from an initial kin group. They dwelled in separate places in Mentawai, after the families split up and left for different destinations. Later, some of those families formed new kin groups with a new name. Ancestral connections among these groups nonetheless remain valid. They respect each other as relatives. Accounts of past occurrences were – and still are – maintained in the form of family stories. These stories are a basic part of Mentawaian oral tradition (see Mustafa, 1993).