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10 Current conflicts over land

10.1 Introduction

During fieldwork I collected information about land disputes from different villages in the Mentawai Islands. In a few villages, I came across kin groups that debated their rights to a plot of land. In some places, kin groups argue about the borders of their land. In other places, I met landowners that defended their lands from voluntary newcomers in the villages. Some of the land conflicts occurred while I was carrying out my field research in villages. I directly witnessed how these conflicts were discussed. Some other cases I only heard about from local people. These were cases that had occurred a few years earlier.

I have selected two cases to discuss in this chapter. The conflicts chosen have relevance to the theme of the study, namely the role of family stories in resolving land conflicts, as well as factors that instigate conflicts. The aim of the chapter is therefore to describe the course of the two selected land conflicts as well as to find out how Mentawaians make use of family stories in resolving conflicting claims to a plot of land. In order to fully understand the whole story of each conflict, it is necessary to find links of the case to preliminary explanations given in a few family stories presented and discussed in part two of the book.

The selected land conflicts took place in two different villages, Saibi Muara and Maileppet. The land conflict in Saibi Muara is characteristic of a traditional situation where two or more kin groups try to occupy and claim a plot of land although the first settler had already claimed the land. The second case is the Maileppet case, a situation where the Indonesian government transformed a traditional village into a government village.

People told me various stories to describe the course of the land conflicts. By listening to people's stories, it is clear that conflicts over land rights are of many kinds. After talking to elders, kin-group leaders, and the village head in sev-
eral villages, I identified multiple factors that have caused land conflicts. Some cases shared the same characteristics where two or more kin groups disputed the same problems. Nevertheless, all cases have relations with past and traditional occurrences (I call it ‘internal factor’) and current circumstances (I call it ‘external factor’) in Mentawai. Both factors interplay in conflicts over land.

Regarding to the internal factor, most land conflicts are related to ancestors’ early migratory movements. I am going to explain the conflicts later in this chapter by looking at two selected cases. Before that, I want to describe another factor that has a strong influence on the occurrences of conflicts over land among Mentawaians. The factor is external, which is the influence of government and non-government organizations that want to develop and carry out different projects on Mentawai Islands.

The Indonesian government declared the Mentawai Islands to be part of Indonesian territory under the supervision of the provincial government of West Sumatra in 1945. The government declared that the land in Mentawai belongs to no one. It is considered empty land where the government fully claims the land as state property. The government does that by referring to Article 33 of the Indonesian constitution (Undang-undang Dasar) of 1945, stating that the Indonesian government fully controls land and the natural resources in it and these shall be used for the prosperity of the Indonesian people. So the Indonesian government considers the land and natural resources of Indonesia, including Mentawai, as a potential source of income for the state.

In 1973, the government ratified logging concessions for a few big companies to log places on all four of the Mentawai Islands (Persoon, 1989: 203). After 1973, Mentawaians stood by powerless while standing forests were cut down. North and South Pagai were almost entirely deforested and Sipora too. The intensive exploitation affected Siberut less significantly. International organizations like Survival International (SI) and World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) tried to stop the expansion of logging companies on Siberut (Schefold, 1980; WWF, 1980; Persoon and Schefold, 1985; Persoon, 1989 and ADB, 2001).

In 1976 the Indonesian government, through Indonesia’s Ministry of Forestry, agreed with the international organizations to conserve a small part of Siberut Island (6,500 hectares) as a wildlife reserve. In 1981 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) signed an agreement with the Indonesian government to protect the biodiversity of natural resources and characteristics of Mentawai culture in an area of 56,000 hectares on Siberut. This area was expanded from the initial area of 6,500 hectares. UNESCO gave the project the name Man and the Biosphere. However, after signing the agreement, UNESCO did not implement the programme in the field. Instead, other organizations like SI and WWF had been actively running their projects to stop the extensive natural exploitation in Mentawai.
However, their projects were not run continuously. SI, for instance, stopped working on Siberut as the Indonesian government terminated its permit due to SI's strong protests against Indonesian policies on Mentawai (WWF, 1980; Persoon and Schefold, 1985).

The departure of international organizations from Siberut in the late 1980s opened a great opportunity for logging companies to exploit Siberut. It was not only the logging companies already active on the other Mentawai Islands who seized this opportunity. Entrepreneurs created several new logging companies and they also obtained concessions from the central government in Jakarta and from West Sumatra’s provincial government in Padang. Besides, a few companies from Jakarta were interested in acquiring land for oil palm plantations. The island was clearly in danger. Mentawaians started worrying about their land, and conflicts took place among different stakeholders on the islands (Persoon, 2003).

Before the logging companies carried out their plan, Indonesia’s Ministry of Forestry launched a multimillion-dollar project funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 1992. It was called the Biodiversity Conservation Project and it was located in Flores and Siberut. A few Mentawai students joined the conservation project. Other Mentawai students established their own organization, and built a network in order to gain financial support for achieving their goals, including the desire to separate Mentawai from the district (kabupaten) of Padang Pariaman and to manage the natural resources themselves (Eindhoven, 2002; 2007; 2009). Besides, they wanted the ancestral lands of Mentawaians to be acknowledged as theirs.

When the government agreed to run the project, some logging concessions on Siberut were terminated. The conservation project was officially ended in 1999 (ADB’s project compilation report, 2001). But it was already nearly inactive when I gathered preliminary data for UNESCO in 1997. UNESCO then decided to carry out its programme in order to replace the conservation project. This was the first time that UNESCO had actively implemented its programme in the field since the ratification of the conservation agreement with the Indonesian government in 1981.

Meanwhile, the Mentawai students keep struggling to gain their political and land rights. After years of political lobbying, the voice of Mentawaians was heard in 1998. After the fall of Soeharto in May 1998, the Mentawai students made use of the moment to urge the transitional government of President Habibie to recognize Mentawai as a new district (kabupaten) of Indonesia. According to Undang-undang Nomor 49 tahun 1999 (Indonesian Law Number 49/1999) Mentawai Archipelago was formed as a new district of West Sumatra Province, being separated from Padang Pariaman. That happened on 4 October 1999. The government promised a change for better governance by delegating part of its authority to provincial and district levels. Under the new policy after the reformasi, the Indonesian government launched otonomi dae-
raha (regional autonomy), giving provincial governments in Indonesia extensive authority to run their provincial territory within the context of the unity of Indonesian state. Furthermore, as part of the political agenda of reformasi, the Ministry of Agriculture now acknowledges Indonesian ethnic groups’ traditional land. Ancestral lands are now recognized by the state as tanah ulayat (kin-group land). This is stated in Law of the Indonesian Ministry of Agriculture / National Head of Land Tenure Number 5 /1999 (Peraturan Menteri Negara Agraria/Kepala Pertanahan Nasional Nomor 5 Tahun 1999) (see Kansil and Kansil, 2002).

The current situation does not seem to have brought about significant changes in Mentawai. Conflicts over trees promoted by logging companies and waves instigated by surfing industries repeatedly take place in Mentawai (Persoon, 2003). Conflicts over land between Mentawai kin groups that attempt to get involved in these businesses occur frequently and the Mentawai government is not able to resolve them. The Mentawai government even takes advantage of the situation by promoting oil palm plantations as a great option for the local economy, leaving the Mentawai kin groups in a situation where a kin group has to defend their ancestral land from being claimed by other kin groups and from their own government. To become acquainted with this situation, I now examine the two selected cases of land conflict occurred in two different villages.

Two cases of conflicts over land are selected to illustrate the internal factor of the land conflicts. I begin with the case occurred in Saibi Muara. Then, I describe the case gathered in Maileppet. The land conflict in Saibi Muara illustrates an interesting traditional case of conflict over landownership. The conflict affected kin groups that have been living in the valley for generations.

### 10.2 Conflict over land in Saibi Muara

To understand the conflict, I first explain the traditional situation in Saibi Muara in the period before the Dutch colonized Siberut island. Thereafter, I depict the social situation with regard to land tenure when the Dutch colonized Siberut by building a police station in Saibi Muara. After that, the recent growth of the Saibi Muara completes the background of the land conflict. Then, I discuss the land conflict as well as the resolution of the conflict.

#### 10.2.1 Traditional situation in Saibi Muara

According to family stories of kin groups living in Saibi Muara, the traditional settlement of Saibi Muara started small, with a few houses. The owner of the place and of the land in the valley was called Saleuru. The Saleuru kin group departed from Simatalu and explored in the downriver part of the valley of
Saibi Samukop and arrived at the river-mouth place called Saibi Muara. They lived there and therefore they were known as Saleuru (sa means ‘group’ and leuru means ‘toward river mouth’, the name saleuru means ‘a kin group living near a river mouth’). The Saleuru families were the first to claim most of the land in the valley of Saibi Samukop. They declared themselves the landowner (sibakkat porak) and the owner of the settlement (sibakkat pulaggaijat).

Another kin group called Sataggau came to live in Saibi Muara. The Sataggau originally lived in the northern part of Siberut near the coastline at a place called Sirilogui. They lived from fishing, and frequently came to Saibi Muara to fish because the place has a bay where there was good fishing even though the sea was rough. After fishing near the Saibi Muara coast, the group usually returned to Sirilogui. However, due to the distance between Saibi Muara and Sirilogui, which by canoe was quite far, the kin group stayed for a short period of time on the Saleuru’s land. As they frequently stayed on the Saleuru’s land, the Sataggau eventually decided to ask permission from the Saleuru to build alaman (shelter while hunting or fishing). The Saleuru granted permission. As they felt fine to live there, the Sataggau decided to buy the small plot of Saleuru land with ibat laut (seafish, usually sea-turtle). Eventually, the Sataggau kin group became one of the Saleuru’s neighbours.

While dwelling in the downriver settlement of Saibi Muara, such other groups as the Siriratei, Sanene, and Siritoitet followed the Saleuru’s trail. However, these other kin groups were perceived as sitoi, or newcomers (a term used for Mentawaian newcomers). The newcomers were not allowed to own the land but were only able to exploit the natural resources because the land around Saibi Muara had been claimed as the Saleuru’s property. The newcomers were also seen as sikokop, which literally means ‘eater’ but may be understood as ‘exploiter’. The presence of exploiters in the valley had inspired the owners of the place to call the area Saibi Samukop. The name means that the people who were from a place called Saibi in Simatalu (the name Saibi first existed in the valley of Simatalu) exploited the land. Consequently, the name Saibi exists in two valleys: Saibi Simatalu and Saibi Samukop.

The landowners were actually afraid of losing their rights to their land because the newcomers did not only occupy the land but they also cultivated it by planting crops and valuable trees. The landowners did not find it easy to use their land anymore, because they have to deal with the newcomers and their planted trees growing on the land.

The Saleuru decided to get rid of the Siriratei, a group living in the upriver part of the valley of Saibi Samukop. The Saleuru disliked the Siriratei families because the Siriratei women collected fish, shrimp, and shellfish in the rivers owned by the Saleuru. As told in the Sakatsila family story (Story 14 in Chapter 7), the Saleuru asked a kin group in Tatubeket (for personal reasons my informant did not want to mention the name of the group) to eliminate the Siriratei. A few people of Siriratei were killed. After finding out which kin
group had assassinated their family members, the Siriratei took revenge. They also figured out that the Saleuru had actually masterminded the killing. The Siriratei therefore discussed the situation with the Saleuru and received a plot of Saleuru land as payment (compensation) for the killing. The land was called ‘porak segseg logau’. After the payment was agreed, Saleuru and Siriratei lived in peace.

About the time of the assassinations, a family of another kin group called Taririsurat departed from a place called Tatubeket. They also lived in Saibi Muara. However, before being in Saibi Muara, they had first lived in Sarabua near the village of Saliguma. The land in Sarabua belonged to the Saleuru. The land had been received from another kin group as a bride-price. Without the landowner’s permission, the Tasirisurat family cultivated a plot of land in Sarabua. Tasirisurat did not live there peacefully. The father of the Tasirisurat family believed that the land was haunted. The death of family members was perceived to be evidence that the land was haunted. The family therefore left the place and sought a new safe place in Saibi Muara.

In Saibi Muara, the Saleuru welcomed the Tasirisurat family. In Saibi Muara, the wife of Tasirisurat’s father passed away when she reached old age. The father later married a daughter of the Saleuru kin group, and a son was born. According to the patrilineal system of Mentawai, the son was a family member of the Tasirisurat. To the Saleuru, the son was considered as a nephew (buak) of the kin group because his mother was from the Saleuru kin group.

The next significant event told by the storyteller living in Saibi Muara was a tragedy that affected the Saleuru. Lightning struck their house and the kin group lost everything. The Saleuru families thereafter split into two: one group moved to the valley of Rereiket and the other group moved to Cempungan. Before they left, they needed goods and food. The Sataggau provided the Saleuru with what they would need while looking for a new place to live. The Saleuru offered part of their land to the Sataggau as payment for these goods. The Saleuru nephew in the Tasirisurat kin group was asked to take over the maintenance of another plot of Saleuru land, as the group could not care for their ancestral land after moving away to other places.

During the time the Saleuru nephew took care of the Saleuru land, a lot of plots of land were used for bride-prices (alat toga) or for payment of fines (tu-lou). Some plots of the land were given as payments to different groups like the Siriratei and the Siritoitet. The nephew informed the Saleuru living in Rereiket and Cempungan each time. In doing so, both groups knew which plots of their land had been given away and to whom. The Saleuru forgave the nephew for surrendering a few plots of land to other people. The Saleuru considered it as compensation for his time spent taking care of their land.

After the nephew passed away, there was no one to take care of the land. The Sataggau therefore took over the maintenance of the Saleuru land, as they owned a few plots of land in the same area (Saibi). They had bought some plots
of land by paying the Saleuru with sea-turtles. and they had received some plots of land from the Saleuru because of providing them with goods and food when they left the area. Due to the absence of Saleuru on their land, the Sataggau thus owned several plots of Saleuru land.

However, this situation changed when all the Sataggau family members in Saibi Muara passed away due to an unknown epidemic. The people of Saibi Muara said that the Sataggau died like *laggug siboikboik ka bagat kali*, literally, ‘cooked crabs in a wok’. They died all at once; none of the Sataggau survived the epidemic. As there was no one left of the Sataggau kin group in Saibi Muara, the Siriratei and the Siritoitet dwelling in Saibi Muara took over the land and both groups freely cultivated the land.

### 10.2.2 The Dutch in Saibi Muara

Official documents mention that the Dutch officially colonized the Mentawai archipelago in 1864. At that time, the Dutch irregularly visited the Pagai islands, but they did not dwell there. About other islands of Mentawai, there was not much information. Siberut for instance was hardly mentioned in Dutch reports of visits to the Mentawai Islands. Four decades later, Protestant missionaries from Germany settled the Pagai islands in 1901. The Dutch began to visit the coastal areas of Siberut island intensively. However they did not settle the island yet (Coronese, 1986: 22-26; Schefold, 1988: 97-100). After visiting several times, the Dutch decided to build a police station on Siberut. According to Van Beukering’s research, that happened in 1905 (Van Beukering, 1947:33; Schefold, 1988: 98). However, the location was not mentioned.

A lot of stories are told by the Saibi Muara villagers about the arrival and settling of the Dutch on Siberut. An elder resident of Saibi Muara told me that Saibi Muara was the initial location where the police station was built in order to maintain peace on the island. Peace was a desirable goal as headhunting raids were actively practised in particular regions of Siberut at that time. The Dutch were asked by the residents of Siberut to stop the tradition, as they could not bring it to an end by themselves. Mentawaians were afraid of visiting other places because they alleged that they would be killed on the way. They believed that only a third party like the Dutch could stop the headhunting raids. The Dutch had a group of soldiers to use to bring the peace that had been long awaited by local residents.

In order to build a police station, the Dutch needed a plot of land. However, the actual landowners, which were the Saleuru, were not living in the area anymore. As told by local people, the Dutch invited a few groups of people who local residents had said were landowners in Saibi Muara to attend a meeting. However, the first owner of the land, which was the kin group called Saleuru, did not show up at the meeting, nor did the Sataggau come. At the meeting, the Siriratei and the Siritoitet were present. A few local people were
also invited to witness the event. The meeting was intended to establish who were the real landowners in Saibi Muara.

In the meeting, the Dutch decided a few points. They concluded that the absence of the initial landowner was proof of their extinction. The Dutch therefore acknowledged other groups living in the area, which were Siriratei and Siritoitet, as the new landowners. The use of the land where the police station was to be built was thus negotiated with the Siriratei and Siritoitet. The Dutch stayed in Saibi Muara until 1915. Thereafter, they had to leave the place due to lack of safe drinking water. They moved to Muara Siberut, leaving behind a few houses unoccupied in Saibi Muara. The residents of Saibi Muara demolished the houses and made use of salvaged building materials for their own houses.

One of the Dutch soldiers who was stationed on Siberut was of Chinese origin. He was married to a Malay woman from Sumatra. He worked for the Dutch as a KNIL (Koninklijk Nederlandsch-Indisch Leger) soldier. After retiring, he decided to return to Saibi Muara where he had been stationed. He decided to live there because he had a good friendship with a Mentawaian man there from the Siriratei kin group. He bought a plot of land of about twenty hectares from the Siriratei and Siritoitet to use for his house and garden. The land was located in Sigulugbaga, one of the parts of the village of Saibi Muara. He paid three pigs for the plot of land according to the price that the Siriratei and the Siritoitet kin groups had requested of him. A written document was not made of the transaction. The family of the Siriratei friend and the Chinese family decided to create a new kin group called Satoko. The kin-name was derived from the model of the house owned by the Chinese family. The house looked like a shop (toko) of Malay tradespeople because of its zinc roof. The Chinese family used zinc to cover the top of the roof instead of using of sago palm leaves. The new kin group living in the house was called Satoko (people living in a house like a toko). The two families did not see each other as unrelated anymore; they regarded each other as relatives. The new group was formed from a close relationship called siripo. The two families together – that is, the new Satoko kin group – opened a new settlement in Saibi Muara.

The Satoko opened their new settlement in Saibi Muara on the plot of land that had been bought by the Chinese family. In the course of time the traditional settlement of Saibi Muara expanded and transformed into a structured village. The Siritoitet dwelling in a place called Sigaitaligei joined the Satoko in Saibi Muara. In the course of time, more and more new kin groups joined the Satoko, for instance part of the Siriratei kin group residing in an upriver settlement of the valley of Saibi Samukop, and other relatives of theirs like the Sakatsila and the Saririkka (see Story 14 in Chapter 7 for the family relationship among these groups).
10.2.3 Land conflict in Saibi Muara

It has been several generations since the village of Saibi Muara was built. This village was built by different groups of Mentawaians in addition to a few families of traders that had come from the mainland of Sumatra. In the 1950s more and more kin groups joined the current residents of Saibi Muara. They came from upriver places of Saibi Samukop valley as well as from other places on Siberut. More families from Sumatra came to live there while some of the other Sumatrans returned to Sumatra. The families that came from upriver places of Saibi Samukop valley were of Siriratei origin. They were welcome to become part of the Satoko kin group. The Satoko, formerly consisting of two families, became a big kin group. Families of other kin groups such as the Sagaragara, Siribetug, Sanene, and Salabi, who were also from upriver settlements of the valley of Saibi Samukop, came to live in Saibi Muara. These newcomers brought significant numbers of people to the settlement. They needed extensive plots of land for gardens and homesteads. The Saleuru did not return to Saibi Muara, nor did the relatives of Sataggau show up. So the new groups freely used the Satoko land in Saibi Muara for the location of their houses and they exploited natural resources on the Saleuru land. The initial Satoko members were aware of current developments in Saibi Muara.

In the 1980s, the new generations of Satoko, which consisted of several different kin groups, began to claim plots of land in Saibi Muara. They even sold a few plots of the land for the homesteads and gardens of new other arrivals. They asked 500,000 rupiahs (about 50 euros) for each hectare of land. They kept the money for themselves. This situation occurred increasingly often in the last few years. The other inhabitants who had been living in Saibi Muara longer than the group that recently joined the Satoko disliked this development and began to confront them. Social tensions increased sharply between the Satoko and other kin groups living in Saibi Muara. However, these other kin groups were angry only at particular Satoko families, as not all Satoko families had been selling land. The group that sold the land was of Siriratei origin, which had recently come to live in the government village of Saibi Muara. The current Satoko realized that more and more families wanted to live in Saibi Muara; however, the majority of plots of land available were already being used for gardens by those who had come to the village earlier. In order to take advantage of the land, the current Satoko began to sell plots of land to the newcomers. Their actions were protested by other kin groups in Saibi Muara. In the further discussion of this case, I call the new Satoko families the ‘Satoko’ in order to distinguish them from the descendants of the initial members of Satoko.
10.2.4 Resolution of the land conflict in Saibi Muara

In 2002 the Siritoitet organized a big meeting in Saibi Muara, where several kin groups were present. The Siritoitet also sought and invited current members of the Sataggau kin group, which residents of Saibi Muara considered to be the probable earlier landowners of Saibi Muara. These Sataggau families were dwelling in a village called Cempungan. The ‘Satoko’, the Sataggau, and the Siritoitet sat down together to find a resolution to the land conflict in Saibi Muara. Descendants of the initial Satoko kin group were not invited. The ‘Satoko’ defended their initial claim to certain plots of land in Saibi Muara. However, the Sataggau also claimed the same plots of land.

In the meeting, the ‘Satoko’ told family stories about the land in Saibi Muara. The major themes of Story 14 and Story 15 presented in Chapter 7 were told in the meeting in order to illustrate how the ‘Satoko’ kin group arrived in Saibi Muara and how the kin group has rights to particular plots of land in the valley of Saibi Samukop. According to the ‘Satoko’ family story, several plots of land in Saibi Muara were received from the initial owner, which was the Saleuru kin group, as payments for a headhunting raid and a bride-price. A group from Tatubeket carried out the headhunting raid at the request of the Saleuru. A ‘Satoko’ was killed. The ‘Satoko’ looked for the killers. They eventually found out that they were from a group living in Tatubeket. The ‘Satoko’ took revenge and also were informed who had masterminded the killing: it was a group living in Saibi Muara, the Saleuru. So, the Saleuru were in trouble. In order not to be killed by the ‘Satoko’, the Saleuru decided to surrender a plot of land to the ancestors of ‘Satoko’ (when the group was still known as the Siriratei).

The Sataggau also told a family story to describe their connection to the contested land. According to the story, the Saleuru’s uma (communal house) was struck by lightning and burned down. The Saleuru therefore needed goods and food while going to seek a new place to live. The Sataggau offered the Saleuru the goods and food they would need during their. In return, the Sataggau received a few plots of Saleuru land.

Some of those at the meeting and representatives of other groups from Sai-bi Muara seemed to recognize and acknowledge the Sataggau story, but some of the ‘Satoko’ still attempted to reject the current Sataggau’s claim to the land. According to the ‘Satoko’, the current Sataggau are not relatives of the initial Sataggau that once lived in Saibi Muara because the initial Sataggau families in Saibi Muara had died due to an unknown epidemic. This information was according to a story told by ancestors of ‘Satoko’. Therefore, the ‘Satoko’ concluded that the current Sataggau were not related to the initial Sataggau. After an elder of the ‘Satoko’ ended his argument, an elder of the Sataggau stood up angrily. He pointed his index finger at the ‘Satoko’ family members and he spoke sneeringly about the ‘Satoko’s’ knowledge of the land in Saibi Muara. He said that the amount of the ‘Satoko’s’ knowledge was no more than a small
amount of dirt under his nails. He furthermore said that the 'Satoko' had actually been able to survive so far because of using land that belonged to Saleuru and Sataggau.

His statements made the 'Satoko' angry. The 'Satoko' young men challenged the Sataggau to a fight. They hit the wooden floor by using their bare hands in order to make an intimidating noise. A few young men left the meeting room and waited outside, ready for physical violence. As told by witnesses from other kin groups who were also present at the meeting, the Sataggau families stayed calm and were not afraid at all. Meanwhile, the Siritoitet elders added some information to both kin groups’ stories when it was necessary to clarify certain points. Unfortunately, the Saleuru were not present at the meeting to witness whether matters told by both kin groups were truly relevant to the contested land.

Instead of fighting with the 'Satoko', the Sataggau challenged the 'Satoko' to undertake tippu sasa, which is a ritual to prove a truth by cutting a piece of rattan decorated with leaves and flowers. Before cutting the rattan, the two disputing groups have to swear by the names of their ancestors that their claims are true. The Sataggau believed that the only way to prove the truth of what the Sataggau said about the 'Satoko' and to establish the actual status of the land in Saibi Muara was through such a ritual. However, the 'Satoko' did not respond to the Sataggau's challenge, as the Sataggau had not accepted the 'Satoko's' earlier challenge to a fight. The presence of a lot of local people witnessing the meeting had calmed the tension between the two groups. Both parties eventually decided to seek a friendly resolution. After considering all testimonies and stories uttered at the meeting, the 'Satoko' lost the case and the Sataggau won the contested land.

In order to acknowledge the land rights to be in the hands of the Sataggau, the 'Satoko' and the Sataggau went to the office of the village head to sign a letter of agreement, consisting of significant points. The points are that the 'Satoko' and the Siritoitet do not have any rights to the disputed plot of land in Saibi Muara, therefore they cannot sell the land anymore. Rights to the disputed plot of land in Saibi Muara are given to the Sataggau. However, Saibi Muara residents are not forbidden to cultivate the land, as they have already planted most of the land. But they do not have the right to sell the land. If they want to sell their own garden to someone else, that is possible, but the land itself is still owned by the Sataggau.

In order to legitimate the agreement, the village head of Saibi Muara on behalf of the local government was asked to mediate the dispute. After the meeting, the residents of Saibi Muara were still talking about the case. An opinion came from the descendants of the original Satoko kin group, who were not surprised that the 'Satoko' had lost rights to the land because they (the 'Satoko') clearly did not know many of the important details concerning the contested plot of land. The Satoko suggested that the 'Satoko' should ad-
dress a question to the Sataggau. If the current Sataggau were relatives of the Sataggau who owned the contested land in Saibi, the question is: why did their ancestors not show up in the meeting organized by the Dutch?

The actual Satoko were referring to an event in 1905 when their ancestors were involved in a meeting organized by the Dutch. According to the Satoko, the Sataggau families were absent at the meeting in 1905 when the status of the land in Saibi Muara was discussed. The absence of Sataggau at that meeting was evidence of the death of the Sataggau. The actual Satoko concluded that the current Sataggau are not related to the Sataggau that had owned the land in Saibi Muara. So the Siriratei and Siritoitet were recognized as the landowners according to the meeting organized by the Dutch in 1905. The Sataggau were quite happy to see that no descendants of the original Satoko were present at the meeting in 2002.

10.2.5 Analysis of the land conflict in Saibi Muara

The description above illustrates a common situation where several kin groups tried to appropriate for themselves a plot of land, although that plot of land had once been claimed by the first settlers to arrive there. This could happen because the first settlers did not remain on their land permanently. After the first settlers moved away, other kin groups came to live on their land. The first settlers sold a few plots of land to buyers from these kin groups, and surrendered some plots of land as payments for headhunting raids or bride-prices. By surrendering and selling land, the first settlers encouraged a situation where more and more people came to live in that area. The growing population meant increased competition in exploiting natural resources. New arrivals in the area needed plots of land for homesteads and gardens. The new arrivals eventually took over the maintenance of the land and even claimed it as theirs. They divided the plots of land among them. However, the claiming of land done by new arrivals increased the land conflicts in the area.

One group disregarded other groups’ claims and commenced to sell the land to other buyers who had recently arrived in the area. As the conflict continued, the current residents sought a solution by inviting kin groups that had some connection to the disputed land. However, the groups did not invite representatives of the first settlers to the meeting. Nor did they invite members of other kin groups that might be familiar with the case. The story of the land in Saibi Muara was therefore incomplete. Two opposing groups involved in the land conflict in Saibi Muara tried to defeat each other. The ‘Satoko’ group accused the Sataggau group of not being the real landowners and the Sataggau did likewise. However, members of ‘Satoko’ could not prove that they were the real landowners. During the meeting they did not show a great deal of knowledge of the land. They failed to prove that the current Sataggau are unrelated to the initial Sataggau kin group that once owned the land in Saibi Muara. On the
opposing side, the Sataggau convincingly accused the ‘Satoko’ of taking over the maintenance of the land in Saibi Muara and exploiting it without asking permission from the Sataggau.

As the ‘Satoko’s’ knowledge about the land was lacking, they could not disprove the claims of the Sataggau. In order to win the case, the ‘Satoko’ sought another way. They provoked a physical confrontation. However, the Sataggau handled the situation wisely by staying calm. They later won the case by challenging the ‘Satoko’ to carry out a particular ritual to establish the truth of what they were fighting about. The ‘Satoko’ realized that their knowledge of the story of the land was not strong enough to protect them in the face their ancestors. Therefore they did not dare to undergo the *tippu sasa* ritual. After they rejected the Sataggau’s challenge, the ‘Satoko’ acknowledged the Sataggau as owners of the land.

### 10.3 Conflict over land in Maileppet

My familiarity with the conflict over land rights in Maileppet began when I carried out a preliminary survey for a UNESCO project on the village in 1997. Maileppet is a coastal village in southeastern Siberut. According to Samongilailai family stories (Story 11 and Story 12 in Chapter 6), the Samongilailai kin group were the first inhabitants of the area. The majority of kin groups currently in Maileppet agreed with this. They acknowledged the ownership of the Samongilailai to particular plots of land in Maileppet. A kin group called Sarubei did not agree with this. The Sarubei claimed to have rights to particular plots of land in Maileppet as well, including a few of the plots claimed by the Samongilailai. This had brought the two kin groups into disputes in recent years.

Below, I tell how the conflict commenced and how both groups tried to bring the conflict to an end. I first describe the traditional situation, drawing on information gathered from family stories of several kin group. Thereafter, I describe the workings of governmental programmes aimed at modernizing the area. Then, I describe the land conflict thoroughly, and then the resolution arrived at by the disputing kin groups.

#### 10.3.1 Traditional situation in Maileppet

According to Samongilailai family stories about the pig incident (Chapter 6), a Samongilailai ancestor had some plots of land in the area of Maileppet after departing from Simatalu. Before settling the village of Maileppet, the ancestor had lived in several other places, like in Silaoinan valley. The ancestor is related to other family members of Samongilailai that had migrated to other places of Mentawai. Thus, over time, the Samongilailai families had expanded
into several kin groups living in separate places on Siberut and other islands of Mentawai. Some kin groups acquired a new kin-name while one group kept using the initial kin-name, which was Samongilailai. Even though the groups have different kin-names, they continue to recognize each other as relatives genealogically. They are all descended from the same ancestors.

Of these groups, one group still uses the name Samongilailai. The Samongilailai were the first people to arrive and settle in Maileppet. The Samongilailai kin group was therefore known as the owner of the land (sibakkat polak) and the owner of the settlement (sibakkat pulaggaijat) by those who came to live in Maileppet later. The Samongilailai ancestor lived in Maileppet and opened a garden. However, at some point, he and a few families decided to move away. They sought a new place in the upriver area called Rogdok in the valley of Rereiket. A few Samongilailai families remained in Maileppet. The same ancestor later decided to move to Sipora island without leaving any families in Rereiket. The kin group still calling itself Samongilailai currently live on Sipora. After the dispersal to different places, social contact among Samongilailai families residing in separate places in Mentawai was very limited.

A few Samongilailai families remaining in Maileppet took care of their ancestral land and gardens. These Samongilailai consisted of only a few families. With such a small number of people, the Samongilailai could not take care of the extensive land. In the course of time, more and more families from other kin groups such as Satairarak, Sagulu, Samongan Abbangan, Saseppungan, Sarubei, Saleleubaja, Sapataaddekat, and Samalaggasat came to live in Maileppet. The Samongilailai apparently did not have any objection to the arrival of these kin groups. The various newly arriving groups occupied plots of land in Pasakiat, the initial settlement in Maileppet and later a traditional hamlet within the village of Maileppet.

In order to lessen competition with the other kin groups living in Maileppet, the Samongilailai decided to invite a few of the larger kin groups to merge with them, namely the Samongan Abbangan, Sagulu, Sakaaelagat, Satairarak, and Sataiuma. There were several reasons for the merging of the groups. For instance, they needed to defend the area from attacks by other kin groups from other villages. The different groups all together formed a new kin group called Samaileppet. The name was taken from the name of the river as well as the name of village: Maileppet. The Sarubei did not merge with the Samongilailai. The Sarubei group did not perceive themselves as Samaileppet even though they lived in Pasakiat in Maileppet. The group remained Sarubei. It seems that the Sarubei could defend their land in Maileppet by themselves.

A few elders of Samaileppet older than seventy believe that the merging of groups happened before the Dutch colonists arrived on Siberut in the early 1900s. However, a few literate Mentawaians in Maileppet believe that the merging occurred in the 1950s. The Samongilailai in Sipora and other places of Mentawai did not know that their relatives in Maileppet had merged with
other kin groups in order to create a new kin group. As the Samaileppet had replaced the Samongilailai as kin-name, the name Samongilailai consequently disappeared from the area and the maintenance of Samongilailai land in Maileppet was put in the hands of the Samaileppet.

10.3.2 A government village for Maileppet

In the 1970s, the governor of West Sumatra Province decided to improve the quality of Mentawaians’ lives from traditional and primitive circumstances to civilized and modern conditions. The governmental organization called Otorita Pengembangan Kepulauan Mentawai (OPKM), literally ‘development authority of the Mentawai archipelago’, was assigned to accomplish this task. Some of this organization’s tasks were to build 800 houses in archipelago, to structure the village according to the government system by introducing elections of the village head, who was then to appoint staff members to manage the social life of the village. In this way, the government expected to civilize and modernize Mentawaians to become like their fellow citizens elsewhere in Indonesia (Persoon, 1994: 240-241).

In 1980, the government commenced to build 100 houses in Maileppet. This program was not the first such initiative in the area. In the 1970s, the Social Department of Indonesia had built a few houses in the small village Pasakiat. In 1980, the government wanted to resettle Mentawaians living in the interior in villages near the coast. Therefore, they decided to expand Pasakiat into a larger village by building 100 houses there, and establishing Maileppet as a government village. For these 100 new houses an extensive area was needed, so the OPKM asked permission for a particular plot of land from the Samaileppet. Several Samaileppet elders represented the rest of the family members in a meeting with the OPKM. Some members of the Sarubei kin group were present and witnessed the meeting. In the meeting, the Samaileppet elders permitted the government to build 100 houses on Samongilailai land and signed a document that stated that the group agreed to surrender a particular piece of land in Maileppet for building 100 houses. The land, however, actually belonged to the Samongilailai – meaning to all those descended from the original Samongilailai ancestors. The Samongilailai on Sipora island did not know that the Samaileppet had surrendered their land to the government.

After the 100 houses were completely built, the families in Maileppet were divided into nuclear families in order to occupy the houses, but they could not fully occupy all the houses. Therefore, the government had to mobilize some kin groups from the interior of Siberut to fill Maileppet. The arrival of these other groups had some consequences. The groups not only occupied houses, but they also needed plots of land, mostly for gardens. These resettled people opened new gardens and extracted natural resources on Samongilailai land. After a few years living on the land, a few of the new families who were actually
using the land began to claim the land as theirs. Some of them even sold plots of land to newcomers in the village if they decided to migrate to other places. It was about a decade after the 100 houses were built when the Samongilailai on Sipora eventually found out that their land in Maileppet had been surrendered by the Samaileppet to the OPKM for the 100 new houses, and that new settlers had been selling plots of land in Maileppet. They assumed that the Samaileppet should be blamed for surrendering Samongilailai land to the government for the resettlement project in Maileppet. In 1995, the Samongilailai on Sipora sent letters to the Samaileppet in Maileppet. The Samongilailai wanted to get the sold land back. They moreover requested the Samaileppet to take financial responsibility if the buyers insisted on compensation for giving up the land.

Instead of responding to the letters, some of the kin groups that had formed the Samaileppet decided to split up from each other in 1996. The Sagulu, Samongan Abbangan, Sataiuma and Satairarak started to go back to using their initial kin-group names. This forced the initial Samongilailai families in Maileppet to do likewise. A few families did not want to return to the name of their former kin group and continued to use the name Samaileppet. This group declared itself to be the new Samaileppet. However, these families did not take any responsibility for what the initial Samaileppet had done, nor did the other members of the initial Samaileppet.

After the Samaileppet kin group split up in 1996, the Samongilailai residing in the village of Sioban on Sipora found out that a few families among those who had merged to create the initial Samaileppet were their relatives. They considered these relatives living in Maileppet to have the responsibility to take care of their ancestral Samongilailai land and gardens in Maileppet. The rebirth of the Samongilailai kin-name in Maileppet offered a great opportunity for the Samongilailai in Sioban on Sipora to travel to Maileppet and reunite with their relatives on Siberut. In Maileppet they could be hosted by their relatives, and stay for an extended period of time. This added support for the Samongilailai kin group in Maileppet generated new power and encouragement for the kin group to defend their rights to plots of land surrendered (in 1980) by the then-existing Samaileppet for the resettlement program and also to plots of land claimed by the Sarubei kin group.

### 10.3.3 Land conflict in Maileppet

My informants stated that the Samongilailai in 1996 could not find any kin group willing to take responsibility for having surrendered the land in 1980 to the government for the resettlement program in Maileppet, so there was no kin group from which they could reclaim their land. So they had to turn to the government. But the current local government did not want to take responsibility for what OPKM had done, because the project had been completed. So
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the Samongilailai could not get help from the local government to regain their rights to the plots of the land. The local government suggested the group to go to Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province. Perhaps the group could talk to the provincial authorities about regaining their land rights. Unfortunately, the group did not have enough money to make a trip to Sumatra.

They then found another idea to regain possession of the land in Maileppet. The group decided to ignore the local government and rejected the agreements made in the 1980s between the Maileppet community and the provincial and district governments. They began to request the Maileppet villagers to pay for their homestead, an amount of money for each hectare of land they used. The first year, 2000, some families who had enough money paid the Samongilailai. After paying for the plot of land they were using for their homestead and garden, the buyers got a piece of paper stating that the land currently belongs to them as it had been bought from the Samongilailai. Some other families rejected the Samongilailai’s request. They mostly argued that the government had invited them to Maileppet when the resettlement program was run in the 1980s. The Samongilailai, according to those families, should ask the government to pay for the land. Other villagers, for instance the Sarubei, instead of paying for their homestead, questioned the status of the land in Maileppet. The Sarubei families believed that particular plots of land claimed by the Samongilailai belonged to them (to the Sarubei). Therefore, they concluded they did not owe any money to the Samongilailai.

The Samongilailai were surprised to find out that the Sarubei believed they owned some plots of land. This situation did not correspond to the family story of their ancestors about land in Maileppet. According to the Samongilailai family story, a few plots of land had been surrendered to other kin groups for bride-price or the payment of fines; they did not know whether the Sarubei had received a plot of land from the Samongilailai in that way. However, the Sarubei believed that their ancestors had found the land first. Both groups did not want to lose their precious heritage. To the Samongilailai, the success of defending their land rights would mean to preserve a symbol of their ancestral identity. To the Sarubei, to win the land conflict would mean to ensure a financial source, as they planned to sell logging rights to the land.

10.3.4 Resolution of the land conflict in Maileppet

In order to find a resolution to the problem, both parties – the Samongilailai and the Sarubei – met each other in a series of meetings organized by the local authority. The local authority is regarded as the third party in the conflict. The third party is called sipatalaga, mediating between two disputing kin groups. The tasks of the sipatalaga can also be performed by a group consisting of several individuals from different kin groups that have no connection with the two disputing kin groups. As mediator or negotiator in a conflict, the
sipatalaga tries to help the two opposing groups to find a friendly resolution of their conflict. The sipatalaga does not make a final decision on the case. However, the sipatalaga can suggest some ideas and give his opinion as to which kin group has presented a stronger case. In the end, the two opposing groups themselves make a decision based on the facts and arguments discussed in the meeting.

The meetings began in the hamlet (dusun), and took place in the house of the hamlet head, as he has no office. His house is usually his office. In the meeting, the Samongilailai wanted to know how the Sarubei kin group had acquired a plot of land in Mailepet. The Sarubei elder told a story about the land. According to the story, the Sarubei departed from Simatalu. The kin group arrived in Mailepet and claimed a small plot of land. They made social contacts with other kin groups. The Sarubei received a few other plots of land because a few female family members married family members of other kin groups. For instance, one of the Sarubei’s female ancestors married one of the Sakeletuk’s male ancestors living in Muara Siberut. For this marriage, the Sarubei received a particular plot of land as the bride-price.

My informants who witnessed the meeting reported that the Sarubei did not tell their story convincingly. They said they knew the borders of their land; however, those borders were not familiar to kin groups sharing borders with the land claimed by the Sarubei. The other kin groups present at the meeting did not support the Sarubei’s claim. The Sarubei were in a weak position.

However, the Samongilailai recognized some of the plots of land in the Sarubei kin group’s story. In their opinion, those plots belonged to the Samongilailai. The Samongilailai kin group told in the meeting how their ancestors arrived in Mailepet and they became the first settlers in the area. The Samongilailai immediately responded to the arguments of the Sarubei by saying that the Samongilailai ancestors had initially claimed the land because they were the first to arrive at the place. At that time, there were no other groups living in the area. The Samongilailai ancestors planted sago palms and durian trees. The inhabiting process of Mailepet was depicted as told in Story 11 and Story 12 in Chapter 5. However, the Samongilailai did not reveal all the significant information at once. A few important points were hidden, waiting for subsequent arguments from the Sarubei.

After hearing the Sarubei’s story, the Samongilailai elder addressed a few questions to the Sarubei. The questions were quite crucial; for example, whose sago had the group eaten, and whose land had the Sarubei families been planting in Mailepet. The Sarubei did not give clear answers. One of the Samongilailai elders made use of the situation to strongly state that the Sarubei were not the owners of the contested land, and were not the owners of the settlement either. The Sarubei, however, did not want to be denied rights to some land in Mailepet; they kept insisting that they had rights to land.
Current conflicts over land of the meeting explained that after a few hours, the two opposing parties did not come up with a clear decision.

As the meetings did not bring a satisfying result for both parties, they agreed to take the case to the village level. The village head (kepala desa) and his assistants (perangkat desa) in Maileppet facilitated the next meetings and drew up the agenda. A day was given to the Sarubei to tell their stories of how the group may have a link to the contested land. Another day was given to the Samongilailai to do likewise. The stories mostly depicted how the kin groups may have claimed the land. And these stories were quite different.

Afterwards, the case was discussed in the village, and some people from other kin groups living in Maileppet came forward and said that they were familiar with the contested land. Some of them had some convincing opinions about the contested land. However, they were not allowed to interfere in the conflict, unless they were asked by one of the disputing parties to give statements. The disputing kin groups eventually decided to ask several individuals from other kin groups in Maileppet to give their testimony regarding the contested land. Most of them were leaders of kin groups (sikebbukat uma). Each of the disputing kin groups expected that these elders would support them to win the case. However, it turned out that the statements of these leaders of other kin groups did not change the case much.

All witnesses who knew about the land had been invited to give their testimony as well as to witness the course of the meeting. There was no new statement or evidence presented at the meeting. The result of the meeting lasting several days was that the Samongilailai were the actual owners of the contested land. The Sarubei families, however, still did not want to give up their claim. So they did not acknowledge the Samongilailai’s ownership of the contested land. After two weeks passed, the meetings did not come to an acceptable result for both parties. This situation frustrated members of both parties and some members began to show violent behaviour by striking the wooden floor of the building during the meeting. Their words also began to irritate each other. The tone of their voice was higher and louder than during the earlier meeting days, indicating the rankling tensions and intimidation. Above all, the head of Maileppet village and his assistants had failed to successfully arbitrate the dispute. Subsequently, all parties continued the conflict and decided to meet at the sub-district office of South Siberut situated in Muara Siberut.

Policemen, government representatives, and church elders were asked to be present at the meeting in order to mediate the conflict, as both kin groups tended to act aggressively. It was accordingly discussed in Muara Siberut, the sub-district capital of South Siberut. However, this involvement of government officials from the sub-district offices in Muara Siberut did not bring the conflict to an end either, although most of the important information, stories and testimonies had been repeated in the meeting. As the two parties were unable to agree on a final solution, the government representatives decided to
divide the land between the two kin groups. Each would have a plot of land and the borders were clarified by using rivers and hills as the major borders. In order to end the conflict, the Samongilailai accepted the agreement. However, the Sarubei kept rejecting the decision, as they believed they were the only group with rights to the contested land. So, tensions between the two groups were rising, and even today the case is not closed yet.

The Samongilailai did not want to spend more time on the case. They had spent a lot of money and time being in Siberut, leaving their families in Sipora. In order to bring the conflict to an end, the Samongilailai decided to challenge the Sarubei to conduct the Mentawai ritual called *tippu sasa*. Mentawaians believe that the *tippu sasa* ritual is the only way to attest a factual truth. In *tippu sasa*, members of the groups involved in the conflict had to swear upon their ancestors’ names while cutting (*tippu*) rattan (*sasa*) in order to testify whether their claim was absolutely true.

In such a ritual, after swearing and calling their ancestor names, both parties cut a piece of rattan bound with fetish flowers and leaves. The flowers and leaves are wrapped with snakeskin. Fetish flowers and leaves are believed to represent life and death, and the snakeskin is used to represent the commitment that the kin group losing the case will not claim the land anymore. It is like a snake that sheds its skin and will never reuse its skin. The rattan-cutting process is done at the request of both parties involved in the conflict, and both parties attend the ritual to witness it. The ritual is performed at the location of the disputed land. If two groups dispute a plot of land, they may also chop the ground of the contested land instead of the decorated rattan.

The Sarubei, however, did not want to accept the Samongilailai’s challenge to carry out this ritual because they believed the Samongilailai coming from Sipora were Sakalagat – southern Mentawaians who were known or assumed to be familiar with practising black magic. The Sarubei suspected that the Samongilailai might manipulate the *tippu sasa* ritual (with black magic) such that it would not affect them. Instead of *tippu sasa*, the Sarubei challenged the Samongilailai to swear on the Bible, seeing the fact that both groups were Christians. However, the Samongilailai kept insisting on performing the ritual of *tippu sasa*, as they believed it to be the only way to resolve the problem.

The Samongilailai did not show up to swear on the Bible at the office of the sub-district head in Muara Siberut in order to comply with the request of the Sarubei, nor did the Sarubei comply with the request of the Samongilailai to carry out *tippu sasa*. Instead, each kin group performed its own act separately. The Sarubei swore on the Bible at the sub-district head’s office, and the Samongilailai chopped the ground of the contested land in the *tippu sasa* ritual. In both cases, the act was witnessed by policemen, church elders, and other local people.

After a few weeks passed, three members of the Sarubei from Maileppet mysteriously passed away. One person drowned in the river mouth of Muara
Siberut. Another person was bit by a deadly poisonous snake. The third person died after he got fever. Some Mentawaians presumed that the peculiar deaths were a sign that the Sarubei kin group were not the actual owners of the contested land. Other people in Maileppet believed that the Sarubei had suffered the consequences of swearing an untruth on the Bible. Most Maileppet people concluded that the land absolutely belonged to the Samongilailai and wanted the conflict to end.

However, the Sarubei believed that the Samongilailai from Sipora had used magical formulas (tae) to harm some members of their group. They believed that the death of their relatives was not because of the consequences of swearing on the Bible, but because of the magical formulas used by the Samongilailai. However, the group could not prove their accusation towards the Samongilailai, nor could they prove their entitlement to the contested plot of land. According to public opinion in Maileppet, the Samongilailai were the winner of the case. However, the Sarubei kept rejecting the final resolution of the conflict.

10.3.5 Analysis of the land conflict in Maileppet

The conflict over land rights in Maileppet between the two kin groups is an intriguing case. The conflict was started by the fact that the first settler to occupy the place and land in Maileppet had allowed kin groups that came later to live on and use the land. Additionally, the first settler decided to merge with those other groups to create a new one. Consequently, the identity of the first group disappeared. This affected the maintenance (use) of the land, which was delegated from the initial kin group to the newly created merged group. However, ideally, the ownership of the land did not change, was not delegated to the new merged group. Decisions to sell the land could therefore not properly be made by the merged kin group. In reality, however, plots of land were sold by some of the individual kin groups that had merged.

The conflict over land rights in Maileppet became complicated when the government transformed the traditional settlement into a structured village. The new structured village required extensive land for the houses and gardens of its inhabitants. The government negotiated with members of a kin group that did not have ancestral rights to the land. The majority of members of the group were from other kin groups that did not have ancestral connections to the land. The initial landowners living on another island of Mentawai later realized that they were about to lose their ancestral land and so they asked the group to give the land back to them. Instead of responsibly responding to the request of the initial landowners, the merged group decided to split up, leaving the problem to the relatives of the initial landowners.

By means of family stories, related members of a kin group that had been separated eventually reunited. Their ancestors were the first Maileppet inhab-
itants. After being reunited, they decided to try to regain their rights to the land in Maileppet that had been sold to the government and to other local buyers. Another group in the village had claimed plots of land that were actually part of the ancestral land of the kin group descended from the first settler. Family stories of both groups and testimonies of other kin groups were stated, and different levels of meetings and various stakeholders became involved in order to resolve the case. However, the other group kept insisting on their rights to the land. In the end, most local people believed that the descendants of the first settler should have the ownership of the contested land. However, the other group kept denying the first settler’s rights. What I may conclude is that the family stories of both groups indicate a connection to the disputed land. As each group does not acknowledge the validity of the other group’s story, the dispute between them over land rights remains unresolved.

10.4 Concluding remarks

The current conflict over land in Saibi Muara illustrates an interesting traditional situation. The first settlers had claimed an extensive area of land after departing from Simatalu. They built a house near the river mouth and became the landowners of the valley of Saibi Samukop and the owners of the settlement in Saibi Muara. In principle, this eliminated the opportunity for other kin groups to have a direct entitlement to any land in this valley. But the initial kin group was small, and did not use all of the land.

The landowning kin group could not hinder the arrival of newcomers in the area because the land was extensive. New kin groups arriving in the valley freely exploited the land, but according to tradition they could not claim the land as owners. Nevertheless, some of those kin groups acquired plots of land by buying them from the owners or by receiving them as payment for a fine or bride-price. In this way, the newcomers had the opportunity to occupy and live in the area without worrying about being rejected by the landowners. However, in the course of early migrations, more and more kin groups arrived in the area. This provoked tensions among the residents of Saibi Muara because there was increasing competition for the opportunity to own a plot of land. The first owners of the land felt threatened. They attempted to eliminate one kin group by asking a kin group living in another village to undertake the assassination. However, this did not solve the problem. The landowners had to surrender a plot of land to the kin group of the victim. This opened a great opportunity for the victim’s kin group to come live in the valley because they now owned a plot of land there.

The situation changed when the landowning kin group totally left the valley and handed over the maintenance of their land to another kin group that they regarded like relatives because of a marriage between the two kin groups.
However, this related kin group could not maintain the land after the death of the prominent member of the kin group. Another kin group took over the land. Later, they claimed they owned the land because they claimed their ancestors had bought it from the initial owners before the latter left the area.

However, this group died out due to an unknown illness. This left the land without a landlord. Other kin groups in the area attempted to gain rights to this land, and those living there eventually believed they owned rights to the land. A few generations passed until the moment arrived that relatives of the initial landowning kin group decided to try to regain rights to the land. However, they could not simply take over the land rights. They first had to prove a genealogical link existing between them and the initial kin group that had once owned the land. The way to prove this was by listening to family stories. However, the other kin group did not want to give up rights to the land. They impeded the attempts of the relatives of the initial landowners by denying the relatives’ claims to be related to the kin group that first owned the land.

In the Maileppet case, several kin groups merged with the kin group of the first settlers to create a new kin group. Other kin groups that arrived in the valley later tried to claim some of the land. In examining this conflict, I see a situation where the landowners made efforts to reject their opponents’ claims to their land.

At the meeting held to resolve the conflict, both kin groups encountered difficult arguments from their opponents. Nonetheless, the case was not resolved properly because the kin group who did not want to accept the truth of the other group’s family story had stopped any efforts to resolve the case.

The land conflicts described in this chapter, which occurred in two different places on Siberut, reflect the functioning of family stories in defining the landownership of the various kin groups. By means of family stories, genealogical relationships between current kin groups can also be established.

In conflicts over land, one kin group made use of a family story to justify their connection to the disputed land. However, the family story is a weak indicator to sort out which group the land belongs to. A family story is an unwritten document, told by a group of people who believe they own the land. It conveys only that group’s perspective, and the family story of one kin group does not always match the family stories of other kin groups. It turns out that a family story is not easy to use in resolving a conflict. So, the land conflicts described in this chapter not only concern the land but also family stories about land.

Moreover, I observed that a family story about land is perceived by kin groups as a historical account, as a source of information about past happenings. However, the family stories do not give enough detailed information about the land to be able to resolve conflicts. The stories lack demographic
data regarding the number of family members in the related kin groups that share the same ancestor. In the conflict, two disputing groups sat next to each other in the same building. They represented unknown numbers of relatives. If people fail to reach their aims by making use of family stories, it is not necessarily the failure of family stories in serving as sources of information. Sometimes people purposely reject the information told in family stories. As happened in the conflicts described in this chapter, one kin group sometimes denies the truth of information told in family stories of other kin groups and refuses to accept the situation of failing to gain its aims. By doing so, the group runs the risk of facing another challenge by the other group. In Mentawai, to deny the truth of a family story may result in the deaths of family members, unless the kin group sincerely believe that their family stories are undeniably true.

Land disputes do not always pertain directly to the land itself. Members of a kin group argue about their shares of the money earned from the selling of their ancestral land. Sometimes, the confrontation serves individual interests and sometimes it expresses the voice of the whole kin group. The worst result of a conflict is that the related families eventually decide to separate from each other.