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**Author:** Tulius, Juniator  
**Title:** Family stories: oral tradition, memories of the past, and contemporary conflicts over land in Mentawai - Indonesia  
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Part One
Part One describes the Mentawai archipelago, its inhabitants and their social organization and culture. Several places occupied by Mentawai ancestors in the early migrations are noted, as well as the names of those places. Population growth and genealogical and social groups are discussed. I also explain the traditional customs of Mentawaians, including their economy. Kinship is the centre of social organization, and traditional land rights are scrutinized. Both social organization and land rights are based on kin groups. Some kin groups believe they have the same origin. In order to understand the notion of origin I evaluate several stories of origin.
2

Characteristics of the islands and of Mentawaians

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I describe characteristics of the four largest islands of the Mentawai archipelago – Siberut, Sipora, and North and South Pagai (see Map 1.1 in Chapter 1) – where my research was carried out. Research findings by Scheffold (1979, 1988, 1989a) and Nooy-Palm (1968) on traditional situations in Mentawai are useful for their extensive descriptions of traditional dwellings and the kinship system of Mentawaians. Descriptions of historical developments and governmental aspects of the islands are provided by Loeb (1928) and Persoon (1994).

Next I discuss factors that may have caused the population of Mentawai to fluctuate, or more precisely that may explain why Mentawai’s population has increased so slowly. I will not re-evaluate historical accounts of the Mentawai Islands and their population prior to 1985, as Persoon and Scheffold (1985), Scheffold (1988), Mess (1870; 1881), Wirz (1929/30), and Reeves (1999) have discussed these in detail. Only a few accounts of social, economic and political developments in Mentawai are considered for comparison purposes. Place-names are discussed to show how important a place-name in Mentawai is.

Subsequently, I look at traditional settlements and social organization of Mentawaians, which contribute to the identities of Mentawai communities. Kinship is a major aspect, with the classification of social groups. I deal with the notion of kinship in Mentawai by looking at marriage and its role in social alliances between two or more kin groups. Kin groups also play a significant role in arrangements having to do with possession of communal heritage, such as land. This leads to a discussion of who may or may not claim rights of ownership to communal properties.
2.2  Mentawai Islands

The Mentawai Islands constitute a small archipelago situated about 100 kilometres off the western coast of Sumatra (see Map 1.1). Mentawai, currently the official name of the archipelago and its inhabitants, consists of four large islands – Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai – along with about 40 smaller islands. It has had various other names since Dutch explorers led by Vornelis Pietersz discovered this archipelago in the seventeenth century (Coronese 1986). The archipelago has a total landmass of 6,011 square kilometres. It is covered with tropical rainforest with high biodiversity. On the islands, large numbers of endemic species of flora and fauna are found, signifying evolutionary development separate from that of Sumatra and other islands of Indonesia. These circumstances fascinate biologists, geologists, anthropologists, and other scientists who come to study them. The results of this work are listed in the bibliography by Suzuki (1958); see also Roth (1985) and Persoon, Schefold, de Roos and Marschall (2002).

According to a research report by the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF), during the Pleistocene Epoch (roughly the period from one million years ago to 10,000 years ago), the sea level in Southeast Asia was some 200 metres lower than it is today, and Sumatra was connected with Java, Borneo, and mainland Southeast Asia. This allowed for a relatively free interchange of animal species and accounts for the general similarity in the fauna of the three major Sunda Shelf islands (Sumatra, Java, and Borneo) (WWF, 1980: 3). During the early Pleistocene, the Mentawai archipelago was part of the mainland of Sumatra. However, the Mentawai Islands appear to have been separated from Sumatra at least since the mid-Pleistocene and to have been essentially an oceanic archipelago for about 500,000 years, such that their flora and fauna have evolved in isolation from the dynamic evolutionary events on Sumatra and the rest of the Sunda Shelf (WWF, 1980: 3).

Verstappen (1973, as quoted in WWF, 1980: 3) suggests that the Mentawai Islands may have been uplifted at a different time from such islands as Nias and Enggano. The hills and ridges of the Mentawai Islands are all about the same height. In some areas of the Mentawai Islands are sedimentary beds that have been turned or uplifted, some of them tilted as much as 90 degrees. The hills rise steeply, almost without transition. This has resulted in a very complex drainage pattern on the islands. The major rivers separate each island into a number of river basins (Verstappen, 1973).

2.2.1  Siberut

Siberut has a total landmass of 3,838 square kilometres. Geographically, Siberut is a sedimentary island, dominated by shale, silts, and marls of relatively young age, and covered by tropical rainforests. When it rains, there is
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’an extremely high rate of normal erosion, resulting in the development of a strongly dissected, rugged landscape, with many rivers and streams and few flat-topped hills’ (WWF, 1980: 5). I assume the other islands of Mentawai suffer from a similarly high rate of erosion.

The major rivers ramble down to the lowlands separated by complicated systems of watercourses. When they reach the lowlands, they grow and level out, soon becoming larger streams and later joining to become a river. The larger rivers are 30 to 40 metres wide. The high rainfall on the non-resistant soils means that all rivers carry very heavy silt loads during rains. On Map 2.1,

Map 2.1 Siberut

1 The map is courtesy of Karl-Heinz (1989a: 93). He uses it for showing Mentawai dialects geographically.
Part One

the rivers are roughly sketched and it can be seen how the rivers separate the landmass of the island into several river basins and valleys (see also WWF, 1980: 5). There are at least eleven major rivers on Siberut, and each of them has dozens of smaller watercourses. Every major river has a name and the name is usually used as the name of the river valley as well as the name for a group or community living in that valley. Several small rivers are not identified by name. Rivers not only separate the land into valleys, but also divide Mentawai communities who speak different dialects. The Simatalu people, for instance, speak the Simatalu dialect, which is different to the dialect spoken by the Simalegi people and other communities in other valleys on the same island. The dialects are all related, together forming the Mentawai language.

Persoon and Osseweijer (2002: 234) clearly note these distinctive features in a comparative study of the island societies off the west coast of Sumatra. I also observed that Mentawaians differentiate themselves by decorating their bodies with different tattoo motifs, depending on the valley they come from (see Mernit, 2003).

In the seventeenth century, Dutch sailors under Vornelis Pietersz ‘discovered’ the Mentawai Islands. In 1600, the islands were called Nassau after the Dutch royal family. However, there is no information whether the Dutch sailors stayed on the four islands. It seems that they visited Pagai irregularly by means of sailboats until 1620. They did not stay at Pagai either, so they did not have an official residence on the islands. After 1620, Dutch sailors rarely visited Mentawai. In 1663 Wouter Schouten noted in his diary the names of the Mentawai Islands. The names were taken from a map published in 1606 by the Portuguese, among whom Siberut was known as Mintaon Island (Coronese, 1986: 20; Schefold, 1988: 97). It seems that Portuguese sailors had sailed along the coastline of the Mentawai Islands but did not come on shore there.

Afterwards, John Crisp from the British East India Company situated in Bengkulu visited the Mentawai Islands several times in 1792. In 1799, John Crisp published the first important account about Mentawai, but he only mentioned Pagai. He described the geographical situation and cultural characteristics of people living in Pagai. He had not much to say about Siberut. In 1825, the Dutch officially colonized the Mentawai Islands and Siberut was called Groot Fortuine. In 1849 the Dutch opened an administrative office in Pagai in order to impede British attempts to colonize the islands again. In 1905, the Dutch opened a police station on Siberut. After the Dutch occupation was over in 1945, the name Groot Fortuine was no longer used. Instead, the largest island of Mentawai was officially named Siberut.

Scholars like Wirz (1929/30: 133-5) and Coronese (1986:11) attempted to find out why the island was called Siberut. They examined the etymology of Sabirut, which is formed from the words sa (group of people) and birut (rat). People’s behaviour living in the southern part of Siberut perhaps had a rat-like character. Or perhaps the name meant ‘a group of people living on an island
with a lot of rats. Which one of these meanings gave Siberut its name remains unclear.

Administratively, Siberut was formerly divided into two sub-districts (kecamatan), North Siberut and South Siberut, with ten governmental villages under the supervision of each sub-district. However, in 2006 the island was divided into five sub-districts. This has indirectly affected the status of traditional settlements. Soon after the official approval of the five new sub-districts in Siberut, the traditional settlements or hamlets were recognized as governmental villages. Individual houses scattered at irregular distances along a riverbank (rather than being grouped together in a settlement) are the last traditional dwelling-places in Siberut.

2.2.2 Sipora

Sipora is situated between Siberut and Pagai. It is smaller but has higher peaks than the other islands (the highest peak is about 450 metres). Its landmass is 651 square kilometres. This island has more than twenty villages. Increasing population has had the effect of opening new villages on the island. And, villages change quite rapidly because of developments. This also occurs on other Mentawai Islands. It seems to me that community members recently have wanted to change their villages from a traditional situation to modern circumstances. In Map 2.23, I indicate the main villages I visited during fieldwork on Sipora. Besides those villages, there are several small settlements not included on the map.

Historically, a Dutch VOC boat called 'Vlissingen' came across this island on its way to the East Indies. On the boat 160 people had died from an epidemic, while others were very ill. The survivors had good hope as the boat approached the island. Therefore, the island was later called Goe-Fortuyn, meaning Good Luck (see Van Beukering, 1947: 31; Schefold, 1988: 97). The island was at one time called Kobou (Volz, 1909 as quoted in Coronese, 1986: 10; Schefold, 1988: 73), a name also used on topographical maps made in Batavia in 1934.

According to the Sipora people, the island had a crater filled with saltwater located on higher ground, from which a putrid odour rose. The putrid odour and saltwater crater were called Kobou. Therefore, the island was called Kobou. In particular villages of Sipora, inhabitants were accordingly called Sakobou, a word meaning a group of people living near a crater. Coronese surmises that Volz misunderstood the meaning of kobou, understanding it to indicate there were ancestral connections between the Kubu people in Sumatra and the Mentawai people in Sipora (Coronese, 1986: 11; see also Persoon, 1994: 135 for an account of the Kubu people).

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3 The original drawing of this map is taken from Reproductiebedrijf Topografische dienst. Weltevreden (1930) and I re-drew it in order to show some villages that I visited during fieldwork in 2002 and 2004.
Some informants told me about the origin of the name Sipora, saying it was invented by Sumatran merchants who came to the island to get various kinds of rattan. The Sumatran merchants did not speak any Mentawai. Because they could not speak the Mentawai language properly, the Sumatran merchants mispronounced words spoken by Mentawaians. One settlement on the island was called Siubat, where rattans were gathered in front of a family’s house (sapou). Many Siubat villagers referred to the place where rattans were piling up by saying the word sapou-ra, literally meaning ‘their house’. By repeatedly mentioning the place-name where the rattans were gathered, this word sapou-ra modified by Sumatran merchants to Sipora is currently used as the name of the Sipora island. So, the Sumatran merchants mistakenly used this word for the name of the island.

Another explanation of the name of the island I got from Schefold. Mentawaians in Sipora once told to Schefold about the origin of the name of Sipora
where he visited the island during his fieldwork in the late 1960s. In an attempt to explain the etymology of the name Sipora, Schefold (personal communication) suggested that it might have originated from the word *porak* (land). It is possible that the first people to migrate to this island considered it a newly found land. Perhaps for that reason, the first settlers called this island Sipora. Indeed, while I was collecting family stories, the term *porak siappo* for ‘found land’ was frequently used to refer to this island and land claimed by the Mentawaians in Sipora was also called *porak siappo*. And the people who found the land were called *siappo porak* (land finders). Later this was shortened to Sipora, because only people who found the land settled on the island. In daily conversation, Mentawaians living on Sipora call themselves Sakalelegat (meaning ‘a group of people remains at the place’).

During fieldwork, I noticed that Mentawaians frequently made use of the etymology of place-names, while talking about a settlement and its name. It seems to me that the cultural function of etymologizing place-names is very important to Mentawaians. By remembering and repeating the etymology, they may recollect the reasons a settlement was originally given a particular name. Moreover, place-names help people remember particular events of how the first inhabitants arrived at the place and commenced their life there. Place-names may indicate how groups of people commenced to populate a particular area. By recollecting a place-name, Mentawaians remember what their ancestors experienced and what important events took place there. One example turned up during fieldwork in Sipora. Local people told about the first settlement in Sipora, during early ancestral migrations, which was called Goiso’oinan, ‘place with small water’ (see Map 2.2). When I investigated the area, there was indeed a small shallow river such that canoes could not go further inland than about a hundred metres.

Due to this circumstance, Mentawaians sought another place to settle that is currently named Saureinu. The river at this settlement was relatively wide and deep. Therefore, it was called Bat Simakeru, ‘deep-river place’. After a lot of groups of people settled at this place, others decided to move away to seek other places to the south. As a variety of groups of people dwelled there, people residing nearby starting coming there to find themselves potential partners for marriage (*urei*). Because this village provided potential partners, it was called Saureinu, ‘group of potential marriage partners’.

After Saureinu, other groups of people settled in a place called Simatorai Monga, meaning a place where mangrove roots emerge to the surface above the seawater at a river mouth. Later this name changed to Sioban, because there was just one old man who could stand to stay there. The other people had all moved away because they were afraid of evil spirits that had disturbed them while staying there. These people moved to Sibagau and other smaller settlements in the southern part of the island on the east coast.
On the west coast of Sipora, there are several settlements. People began to build a traditional dwelling in Mabelepaddegat, 'place where bows and arrows were lost' (bows and the sharpened tips of arrows are made out of the hard bark of a palm tree called paddegat). This name was used for this place because people experienced terrible trouble when they tried to get to shore. Their canoes turned upside down because of big waves, and their bow and arrows for hunting were lost. Later, people shortened Mabelepaddegat to Mapaddegat in order to confuse newcomers or enemies during headhunting raids. This change brought about a new interpretation of the place-name, because Mapaddegat means 'place with many palm trees (paddegat)'. In fact, palm trees were not numerous at all in this settlement.

After occupying Mapaddegat, Mentawaians moved further south and eventually arrived at a place called Simabetumonga, meaning 'river mouth with rough sea'. This place-name describes the real situation. In particular months (between April and October), the sea is rough and the river mouth is difficult to enter by canoe. However, in other months (between November and March) the sea is relatively calm, and the river mouth can be entered easily. A bit further to the south was a place called Berisirimanua (in short, Berimana), meaning 'place without people'. The last place on Sipora that was settled during the early migrations was called Beriulou, 'place without snakes'.

Because I myself come from Siberut, I initially misunderstood the meaning of place-names like Berisirimanua and Beriulou. In Siberut, a place-name usually has a straightforward meaning. In Siberut the word beri means 'many'. A place located in the north of Siberut was called Berisigep because a lot of ants (sigep) were found in the area. Therefore, I first thought that Beriulou on Sipora meant a place with a lot of snakes (ulou). The place-name successfully misled me. Beri on Sipora turns out to mean 'unlikely' or 'none'. The residents of those places informed me that the place-names were purposely given in order to confuse and keep away other people who might want to come there.

In the early migrations, the migrants sought unpopulated and safe places. By giving the places undesirable names like Simabetumonga, Berisirimanua, and Beriulou, the residents hoped that other people would pass by the place. The place-names were intended to give a negative impression to other people. The residents hoped that other people would seek another place if they knew that the place had a river mouth with rough sea (Simabetumonga), or that many people (Berisirimanua) inhabited the place, or that a lot of snakes (Beriulou) were found in the place.

Administratively, Sioban is the capital of the sub-district (pusat kecamatan) of Sipora. Besides Sioban, there are a number of important villages on Sipora such as Saureinu, Berimanua, and Sibagau with a significant population. There is also a small village called Tuappeijat, which initially was not really important. According to ancestral stories this settlement was the place where people from Siberut stopped for awhile when they came to visit Sipora,
Characteristics of the islands and of Mentawaians

as well as when returning to Siberut. Therefore, this place got named Tuappeijat, ‘place to take a rest’. But this situation changed in 1999, when the political climate changed in Mentawai, and Mentawai was made a new district of West Sumatra province, separate from its former administrative district of Padang Pariaman. It follows that Tuappeijat eventually became the district capital of the Mentawai Islands and it currently becomes a much larger village.

2.2.3 North and South Pagai

The total landmass of North Pagai and South Pagai is 1,521 square kilometres. A strait about 500 metres wide divides the two islands. The name of these islands, Pagai, is apparently derived from the Mentawai word paagai, ‘recognize’. This word may refer to a situation where two or more people recognized each other (Nooy-Palm, 1968). In 1600, Dutch explorers arrived at these islands and named them Nassau. While the name Nassau was still in use by the Dutch, Pagai was the name used among Mentawaians and migrants from Sumatra. Some reports by early scholars mention the islands by the name Pageh or Pagai. In Pagai, most Mentawaians call themselves Sakalagan, meaning ‘inhabitants of the village’ (Nooy-Palm, 1968: 159).

In Pagai, Mentawaians prefer living in villages at some distance from the sub-district capital, called Sikakap (see Map 2.34). Migrants from Sumatra, Nias and Java mostly reside in Sikakap. This situation is also seen in other sub-districts of the Mentawai Islands, even though the capital of a sub-district is the centre for economy, information, transportation, and governmental services. Mentawaians prefer to live among themselves in villages where they have more access to natural resources and extensive land. Furthermore, they feel insecure in the capital, especially if they have to compete with migrants economically and in social and political matters. They visit the sub-district capital only for a particular reason, like visiting their children who are pursuing higher education, or purchasing goods to supply basic needs. Otherwise, they pass through the capital only when they want to travel to Sumatra.

Developments on the Pagai islands, influenced by the Protestant church since 1901, the Indonesian government since 1945, and logging companies since the 1970s, have changed social circumstances significantly. Therefore, outsiders, mostly government employees and migrants from Sumatra, frequently assume that the Pagai islands are more developed (maju) economically and socio-culturally than Sipora and Siberut. People on the Pagai islands frequently say that their traditional lifestyle has vanished, as has happened on Sipora. They say that Mentawai traditional culture today can only be found in some particular areas of Siberut.

4 This map is based on Nooy-Palm (1968: 156). I adapted it to indicate the villages I visited for my research and other place-names mentioned in this book.
Part One

Map 2.3 North and South Pagai
2.3 Population growth in Mentawai

The Mentawai archipelago is inhabited predominantly by an ethnic group called Mentawai. The origins of this group are unknown. Nevertheless, a few scholars like Van Beukering (1947), Nooy-Palm (1968) and Schefold, (1988, 1989) have tried to figure out where traditional Mentawaians originally came from. These scholars speculate that Mentawaians might be descended from an initial family connected with a group of people in Sumatra, or else from inhabitants of the neighbouring island of Nias. Schefold (1989) writes his special article about the prehistory of Mentawai archipelago and its inhabitants.

I do not re-examine the origins of Mentawaians by looking at their material culture, physical appearance, or language, as these approaches have been discussed thoroughly by scholars like Van Beukering (1947), Nooy-Palm (1968) and Schefold, (1988, 1989a). Instead, I examine several previously collected stories of origin of Mentawaians. When asked to explain their origins, Mentawaians tell stories. A handful of scholars have collected such stories; however, these stories of origin of Mentawaians have not been examined thoroughly. I therefore take the opportunity to examine them extensively by comparing them one to another. I collected stories of origin as well, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

According to the central bureau of statistics of Mentawai district (Badan Pusat Statistik or BPS), 65,765 people inhabited the Mentawai archipelago in 2000 (BPS, 2002: 14). Mentawaians constitute about eighty percent of the total population. The rest are recent migrants from Sumatra, Java and a small number from other islands of Indonesia. A few foreign missionaries dwell in Mentawai, too. Most of the migrants from Sumatra and Java live in the four sub-district capitals (ibu kota kecamatan) of the Mentawai Islands. Most Mentawaians prefer to live in traditional settlements and villages far from the capital. From 1945, the islands and people of Mentawai are politically part of Indonesia, falling under West Sumatra province. Administratively, the Mentawai Islands until 1999 were part of Padang Pariaman district, which is on the mainland of Sumatra.

Population of Mentawai is much less than that of Nias, with more than 400,000 inhabitants, and Bali, with more than three million. All three islands have about the same landmass. Nooy-Palm, a Dutch anthropologist, suggests that the slow growth of Mentawai’s population (see Table 2.1) might be caused by the incidence of malaria (Nooy-Palm, 1968: 160-165). Besides malaria, records of governmental and private clinics show that cholera, tuberculosis, and other diseases have had an impact on population growth. Catholic missionaries informed me that of about 300 inhabitants in Paipajet, a village situated on the west coast of Siberut, dozens of them died from cholera in 1974. Another illness that significantly decreased the Mentawai population is smallpox. Mentawaians call this disease gutgut (see also Schefold, 1988: 69). We have records of death caused by diseases, but records of death caused by natural disasters are absent.
Table 2.1 Population figures of the Mentawai Islands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and source of data</th>
<th>Siberut</th>
<th>Sipora</th>
<th>N&amp;S Pagai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late 18th century (Marsden, quoted in Nooy-Palm, 1968: 160)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1,400 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1855 (Von Rosenberg, 1855, quoted in Nooy-Palm, 1968: 160)</td>
<td>7,090 people</td>
<td>1,450 people</td>
<td>2,550 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930 (Volkstelling, 1930, quoted in Nooy-Palm, 1968: 160)</td>
<td>9,268 people</td>
<td>3,892 people</td>
<td>4,940 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966 (Nooy-Palm, 1968: 162-3)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4,616 people</td>
<td>7,523 people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have identified some place-names and cultivated plots located in coastal areas that are far from current villages and are currently unpopulated. This may indicate that some Mentawai families inhabited coastal areas before settling the interior of the islands. Some mythical stories of Mentawaians mention the rise of seawater due to natural quakes. Such natural disasters as tsunamis might have forced traditional Mentawaians to settle in the interior of the islands. In the last four decades, the government has opened villages in coastal areas and some people have returned to live near the older settlements. The majority of governmental villages were not opened at the locations of old settlements.

Natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, and landslides are potential causes of the loss of human life (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999). Such disasters might once have taken place in Mentawai as well. Dutch scientists recorded a series of giant earthquakes in the Mentawai Islands causing massive tsunamis that affected the west coast of Sumatra in 1797 and 1833. There is no information on how many people died in Mentawai due to the 1797 and 1833 earthquakes, but certainly a number of people died in Padang and Bengkulu. Findings in the past decade by seismographic researchers from the California Institute of Sciences and the Indonesian Institute of Sciences reveal that a series of massive earthquakes occurred in Mentawai, especially in Siberut, about four hundred years ago (see Natawidjaja et al., 2006). Unfortunately, numbers of deaths are unknown. More recently, a series of earthquakes occurred in Aceh in 2004, in Mentawai in 2007, and in Padang in 2009. Only a small number of people died, but for a small community like Mentawai, the number is quite significant.
Certain traditions and customs of Mentawaians may explain why the population grew slowly, and sometimes even decreased. An obvious example of customs and practices hindering the growth of the population is headhunting raids, a notorious and feared practice among many Southeast Asian communities (see Rosaldo, 1980; Hoskins, 1996). A headhunting raid involves rituals of sacred obligations, exalts masculine virtues, celebrates and protects village property, and glorifies village tradition (George, 1991; 1996).

In Mentawai, headhunting raids were carried out primarily on Siberut (Schefold, 2007). The Dutch colonial government brought headhunting practices in Mentawai to an end after occupying Siberut island and setting up a military station in Saibi Muara in 1905. A few years later, the military station was moved to Muara Siberut, due to lack of water in Saibi Muara. The Mentawaians immediately stopped practising headhunting. However, the headhunting ritual itself is still practised. Instead of hunting human heads, monkeys and other wild animals in the forest are chosen to replace human heads.

Another custom keeping down population growth might be the tradition of Mentawaians to refrain from having sexual relations during a taboo period, in order to bring luck and avoid the death of family members (see Loeb, 1929a). In addition, marriage at a young age – thirteen years for boys, after menstruation for girls – was frequent in Mentawai. This is still the case in areas like Simatalu and Rereiket on Siberut island. Consequently, a lot of babies and young mothers die during childbirth. A survey I carried out in the Rereiket area in 1999 revealed that three of ten children died at birth and another three to four died before the age of five.

In the past, Mentawaians fully relied on services offered by shamans and medicine men; however, they did not heal every kind of illness. Currently, modern medical services are available in the main governmental villages. However, for Mentawaians living in the interior, it is hard to get medical services. Ill people that cannot be cured by shamans or herbalists often die, as happened while I researched among the community living in Sagulubbe village, an upriver place, in 1998 (see Masjum, 1999).

Protestant missionaries came to Mentawai in 1901, Muslim organizations introduced Islam in 1950, and the Catholic church arrived in 1954. These missionaries not only came to convert traditional Mentawaians to their religions, but they also introduced formal education and (Western) medical care (Nooy-Palm, 1968:162; Sihombing, 1979; Caissutti and Cambielli, 1985: 107-115; Coronese, 1985; Schefold, 1988: 68; Persoon, 1994: 234, 300; Abidin, 1997). The Indonesian government began to regard Mentawai as part of the country in the 1950s by assigning official representatives to the islands.

In the 1970s, the Indonesian government began to view Mentawai as a place where forests could be logged in order to earn national and provincial revenues. Using those revenues, the government tried to open up and improve the geographically isolated and 'primitive' living conditions of Mentawaians.
The government attempted to improve infrastructure and social services in Mentawai by setting up formal schooling, medical care, and other governmental services (Persoon, 1994: 227; 2003: 254-5). All these efforts have had direct and indirect impacts on the quality of people’s lives and on population figures.

2.4 Traditional dwelling-places

Mentawaians are egalitarians. No one is higher in rank than others. Traditional Mentawaians live in *uma*. The term *uma* is used for a communal house as well as for a group of people descended from the same ancestor living in a particular place. In a later section, I discuss *uma* as a social group.

As a building, an *uma* has several functions. It is the place where members of a kin group live together, where they store their communal treasures such as shamanic objects and other material objects that bring members of the group together, and where they have social gatherings at which communal rituals are performed. The size of an *uma* is 10 to 15 metres in width and 20 to 25 metres in length (see Schefold, 1988: 106-108 for details on the construction of an *uma*). Rivers are the major pathways for transporting goods and moving easily from one place to another by dugout canoe. Therefore, Mentawaians traditionally built their *uma* houses on a riverbank, at irregular distances from each other (Schefold, 2001: 361). Some communal houses are bigger than others. The size of the building depends on the number of family members. Persoon estimates that a group living in one *uma* might consist of up to eighty family members and be composed of ten to fifteen nuclear families (Persoon, 1994: 281).

Kin groups residing in different valleys and islands of Mentawai had different sizes and forms of *uma* houses. Some *uma* were erected with the floor high off the ground in order to prevent attacks by enemies and wild animals. Some *uma* were made with a saddleback roof (see Schefold, 2003). Other *uma* were built with the ridge of the roof completely horizontal.

Variation in this housing model is also seen in the space between the house roof and the floor (see Schefold, 1988: 106 for further discussion of house construction and other meanings of *uma*; see Persoon, 1994: 277-285 on the changing significance of *uma* due to the government’s resettlement programme). The size of the house and the place the house is built represent the identity of a kin group. This is one way Mentawaians form their communal identity. For instance, one kin group with a big (*beu*) house (*uma*) who all live together in the house was named Taibeu-uma, meaning a group of people with a big house. One house was erected near a graveyard (*ratei*) and the kin group living in it was called Tasiriratei.

Some *uma* had a *kerebau*, a tie beam, supporting the upper construction, while many other *uma* were without *kerebau*. Because of having a house with a
tie beam, making it different from other houses, one kin group was called Sakerebau (see Story 8 in Chapter 5), meaning a group of people whose house has a kerebau. A unique construction feature of an uma thus represents the identity of its owners. Through their name, the owners of an uma declare themselves the owners of the unique house construction.

In the vicinity of an uma, people built a hut where they could process sago to make sago flour. They built a house for storing canoes. They erected some small houses (sapou or lalep) for nuclear families, widows, and young individuals. This complex of buildings is surrounded by several gardens planted with coconut and sago palms, fruit trees, taros and other edible plants. Such a complex of gardens is called puumaijat. In the vicinity of the puumaijat is a forested area where people might go hunting for wild animals like monkeys, wild boars, and deer. People also use this forest to gather building materials, wild foods, and medicinal plants. Small pathways connect the houses with places where people usually go for their daily tasks. These paths supplement the use of canoes, which serve as the main means of transportation in Mentawai.

The whole complex – of buildings and gardens and adjoining forest – is the territory of a kin group and represents the identity of the group and its authority. In many cases, sibakkat porak (landowners) take the initiative to open a settlement on their land. In this case, the landowners possess both the land and the settlement, and are thus known as sibakkat pulaggaijat (owners of the settlement). In some settlements, newcomers (sitoi, a term for recent Mentawaiian migrants, and sasareu, a term for non-Mentawaiian migrants from far away) may be allowed to live together with the landowners for any of several reasons.

First of all, newcomers may be allowed to live together with landowners in the same dwelling-place because they are seen as potential marriage partners (Mentawaians practise kin group exogamy). Second, newcomers might be perceived as potential members of an alliance. By means of newcomers’ support, landowners could more easily defend their place and their families from an attack by headhunters from other villages. However, this does not mean newcomers can take the initiative to open their own settlement; they should first ask permission from the landowners. In case of permission being granted, the newcomers only have the right to use the land but not to possess it. If at some time in the future the landowners want to use it themselves, then the newcomers have to return the land to its owners.

As a kin group grows larger, a few nuclear families commonly decide to move out of the uma to small family houses, called sapou or lalep. It is an additional space, separate from the uma, so that a family may live apart from other members of the kin group. Such small family houses are called pulaleman (from the root lalep). One nuclear family is called sangalalep. Living separately from the communal group does not break up family relationships. One of the functions
of *uma* is to bring together family members of a kin group living in the vicinity of *puumaijat* in rituals and ceremonials. When the kin group performs rituals and other communal activities, the nuclear families living in the small houses are usually invited to join the other kin group members in the *uma*. A major ritual should be performed in the *uma* in the presence of all kin group members. A small ritual may be performed in a *sapou* by a nuclear family (see Wawman, 1997; 1999).

In the vicinity of the *uma* may also be found a *rusuk*, a hut where young unmarried people may spend their leisure time. This *rusuk* might also be used temporarily as a dwelling in case of too many people living in the *uma*. In some cases, older widows used to stay in this kind of hut. There, they could manage their own needs while contributing something to the needs of the *uma*. Ideally speaking, an *uma* in Siberut should have a separate *rusuk* for young unmarried females, and a separate *rusuk* for young males.

In Sipora and Pagai, a *rusuk* is more often meant for a young family to live in. In Sipora and Pagai the custom is to keep the *uma* pure. When there is a newly married couple, therefore, the preference is to have this couple stay outside the *uma* in a separate dwelling (*rusuk*). When the young couple are ready to move into the *rusuk*, tradition requires the male to observe a three-week taboo period. Because it may be inconvenient for the young man himself to observe this taboo period, the father of the young man usually takes on this responsibility of his married son until the married son can do that by himself after first being taught by his father what he should and should not do. During the taboo period, the father avoids eating particular fruits and roasted or uncooked food. He eats just one full meal a day at a particular time (Loeb, 1929a; Nooy-Palm, 1968; Schefold, 1973).

I came across a similar situation in Simatalu (Siberut) in 1999 when I accompanied a British team producing a documentary titled *The House of Spirits* for Discovery Channel (Wawman, 1999). A father had to replace his just-married son in carrying out a taboo period for his son’s newly built *sapou*. The father realized that his son was not ready to undertake the three-week taboo period. He was not allowed to eat uncooked food. He was not allowed to have sexual intercourse with his wife. He was forbidden to slaughter animals. Above all, he ate only once a day until the taboo period of three weeks was completed.

Mentawaians traditionally expanded a *pulaggaijat* (hamlet) by adding a few more houses in the kin group’s territory. If an area was populated by just one kin group, it would be recognized as that group’s hamlet. By using the kin group’s name, it was easy to recognize, for instance *pulaggaijatda Samongilailai* (Samongilailai hamlet). A *pulaggaijat* is a complex of dwelling-places where families with the same genealogical ties lived together. The term *pu-
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laggaijat does not include the extensive area of forest that a kin group typically claims as ancestral land for its own use.

A lot of Mentawai family stories tell of a variety of conflicts that had been the main factors forcing early families to move from one place to another. Parties involved in conflicts tended to avoid each other in every respect. The departing party went to look for a new place to live, so that they could stay totally out of sight of their fellow kin group members or members of another kin group with which they were at odds. Early families gradually moved out in multiple directions. Then, as other families came after them, early migrants moved further away, in order to avoid their relatives who came after them. This became a common pattern of migratory movements.

In the course of migration, Mentawaians passed through a large area. This consequently led to Mentawaians occupying land to build dwelling-places (pulaggaijat) as well as having access to extensive ancestral land, because they claimed all the land they passed through. On recently claimed land, migrating people constructed new dwellings. Eventually, there might be several hamlets (pulaggaijat) in one valley or one territory. A pulaggaijat usually has no political function whatsoever, nor does it have prominent leaders, although the presence of experienced family elders to guide family members in carrying out traditional customs is indispensable. Broadly speaking, the pulaggaijat strongly correlates with a kin group's ancestral claim to a particular plot of land surrounding their pulaggaijat. When several kin groups live in hamlets next to each other in the same valley, some of the communally used land in the valley may come to be claimed by different kin groups.

Hills and rivers divide the islands into valleys. In each valley there are several pulaggaijat or hamlets. Each valley has a main river. The name of the river is used as the name of the valley as well as the name for the group of people dwelling in that valley. Mentawaians are thus distinguished geographically according to the valley where they live. Additionally, I observed that traditional tattoo motifs serve to differentiate among different groups of Mentawaians, with each valley having its own characteristic tattoo design (see also Greenaway and Oliver, 2001; Gregg, 2010). Some motifs, besides differentiating Mentawaians who live in different valleys, also indicate a person's gender and status.

Moreover, the dialects spoken by Mentawaians in different valleys are distinctive (Pampus, 1989a). Simatalu, for instance, is currently used as the name of a Mentawai dialect. A large number of people living in the Simatalu valley speak a dialect called ngangan Samatalu. These people are called Samatalu (people of the valley of the Simatalu river). But Samatalu actually consists of several different kin groups, dwelling in hamlets situated along the main river of Simatalu. Simatalu valley is an ancestral domain for several kin groups that initially dwelled there. It includes forests, pasture, residential, agricultural, and other types of communally owned land including hunting grounds, burial grounds, worship areas, bodies of water, minerals and other natural resources,
to which all members of a kin group traditionally have access. Such land is held under a claim of ownership by a particular kin group from the time of their ancestors continuously down to the present.

2.5 Mentawai kinship

In addition to its meaning as a building, *uma* is also used to mean a genealogical group of people, or kin group living in particular place. According to Schefold (2001: 361), the word *uma* in Mentawai refers to a group of about ten nuclear families. A nuclear family is called *lalep* and may consist of several individuals (father, mother, sons, daughters, and sometimes one or more widows). An *uma* as a genealogical group, or more precisely ‘a local patrilineal group’ (Schefold, 2002), has expanded from an initial nuclear family of ancestors. This initial nuclear family of ancestors may refer to the first inhabitants of that particular place, or refer to the ancestors that had formed the initial kin group when the group lived in the place of origin. Sometimes an *uma* in a particular place has a genealogical bond with a few other umas dwelling in other places. The genealogical bond of kin groups living in separate places is called muntogat and exists because the kin groups share the same initial ancestors and ancestral land whence those initial ancestors commenced to spread out.

During my fieldwork I noticed that *uma* is the basic term for kin group as commonly used on Siberut (see also Schefold, 1988). However, on Sipora and Pagai the word *uma* is rarely mentioned. On these islands, *muntogat* is the most popular term for kin group (see also Nooy-Palm, 1968). On Siberut, on the contrary, the term *muntogat* is not really used to signify a kin group, although the term is used when people discuss relationships with other kin groups sharing the same ancestral family. In order to examine kinship and the concepts of *uma* and *muntogat*, I take an example from a kin group called Samongilailai (see Chart 2.1).

According to its family stories, the Samongilailai kin group formerly had an *uma* house located on the riverbank called Mongilailai, situated in the valley of the Simatalu river on Siberut island, from which their *kin-name was initially created*. The house was called *uma(nda)* Samongilailai (Samongilailai house). The house was erected on the land of the Samongilailai. All members of the Samongilailai kin group lived together in one house at that time. This illustrates that the word *uma* refers to a building as well as to a genealogically related group of people (see also Kruyt, 1923: 10).
In the case of the Samongilailai kin group, Emeiboblo together with his brother Pabelemanai are the ancestors of the kin group. Most Samongilailai were not able to recollect any names of ancestors other than Emeiboblo and Pabelemanai, so they always consider these two individuals as the earliest forebears of their group. In the course of expansion, Emeiboblo’s descendants expanded in number and moved away to different places. Several uma thus emerged in separate places. Most of those uma were given new names, being named after the place where they lived at that time. For instance, there are Sakoddobat (group of people on the riverbank of the Koddobat river), Salamao (group of people on the riverbank of the Lamao river), and Sapalakkokoi (group of people on the riverbank of the Palakkokoai river). Afterwards, Salimu (group of people on the riverbank of the Limu river) separated from the Salamao kin group after the latter group had moved to a place called Taileleu.

All those sub-groups of the original Samongilailai kin group occupied separate places in the Mentawai Islands, and those places were claimed as the property of one or another new sub-group of Samongilailai. The new kin groups have thus new plots of land in new places. The ancestral land located at the place of origin in Simatalu, however, was still claimed by all of the groups (at least by all of the groups whose family stories still contained this information). The emergence of new groups of Samongilailai did not necessarily erase...
the existence of Samongilailai as a kin group itself. In fact, some family members still use the name Samongilailai and like other relatives, the Samongilailai also migrated to different places. Most of the Samongilailai sub-groups reside in the southern part of the Mentawai Islands, especially in Sipora and Pagai. So, we can find Samongilailai\(^5\) living in different places of the Mentawai Islands. Pabelemanai’s current descendants, which were originally part of Samongilailai, remained in Simatalu, although they changed their kin-name to Sababbam (a group of people who often killed other people). All current descendants of the kin groups that descended from the initial Samongilailai family regard Emeiboblo and Pabelemanai as their founding fathers (\textit{punute-teu}).

The genealogical relationship among the related \textit{uma} of Samongilailai creates a family network called \textit{muntogat}. \textit{Muntogat} is derived from \textit{mu(n)} meaning ‘to have or to possess’ and \textit{toga(t)} meaning ‘child’. So, \textit{muntogat} means ‘the descendants of (an ancestor)’ (Nooy-Palm, 1968). All Samongilailai members, even though they have different \textit{uma} names and different places of residence, are seen as one big group of related descendants or one \textit{muntogat}, which is the Samongilailai \textit{muntogat}, owing to the fact that they descended from one initial ancestral family led by Emeiboblo and Pabelemanai.

In Sipora and Pagai, people are quite familiar with the term \textit{uma} as a communal house and as the group of people living in it. However, people living in an \textit{uma} may not necessarily all be related to one another genealogically. Families from different kin groups sometimes share the same \textit{uma} building; in such a case, the term \textit{parurukat uma} (gathering of different kin groups) is used in Sipora and Pagai to refer to all the people living together in one building. The kinship term that people in Sipora and Pagai are most familiar with is \textit{muntogat}, which refers to the relationship among several groups that share the same ancestor.

As Nooy-Palm (1968) explains, \textit{muntogat} is the term popularly used by Mentawaians residing in Sipora and Pagai which is similar in meaning to what Mentawaians in Siberut call \textit{uma}. \textit{Muntogat} refers to an ancestor, more precisely to origins (an ancestor and a place of origin). The term \textit{muntogat} is less commonly used in Siberut to mean kin group, because the term \textit{uma} is used instead. In Siberut the term \textit{muntogat} does not necessarily encompass the idea of a dwelling-place, as the term \textit{uma} is used for that. \textit{Muntogat} is used to indicate the family relationship existing among descendants of related kin groups

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5 Samongilailai has migrated to different places of the Mentawai Islands. Like other kin groups, we can find two or three Samongilailai families living in a place and other four or five Samongilailai families living in another place. Samongilailai living in those different places contains about 30 up to 40 families or about 200 individuals.

6 One \textit{muntogat} may contain six up to ten different kin names and they are living in separate places of the Mentawai Islands. One \textit{muntogat} may contain more than 100 families or more than 700 individuals.
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Currently living in separate dwelling-places. So, muntogat is the term for two or more related descent groups that share the same origins.

Besides uma and muntogat, most contemporary mentawaians have started to identify their kin groups using the term suku like suku Samongilailai. Suku is an Indonesian word, an abbreviated form of the phrase suku bangsa. We may translate suku bangsa into English as ‘ethnic group’ (see Vermeulen and Govers, 1994). This term is also used by the Indonesian government to refer to any one of more than three hundred Indonesian ethnic groups. Each of Indonesia’s ethnic groups is designated by such terms as suku bangsa Jawa (Java-nese people), suku bangsa Dayak, (Dayak people), and suku bangsa Mentawai (Mentawai people).

In Mentawai suku is defined slightly differently. Mentawaians use the term suku for a kin group instead of an ethnic group. Apparently, this tendency was instigated by the arrival of migrants, especially Minangkabau from the Sumatra mainland. Minangkabau traditionally use the term suku as well to refer to kin groups, for example suku Caniago, suku Tanjung, and suku Sikumbang. Minangkabau is matrilineal and suku is used to term the matrilineal descent group (see von Benda-Beckmann, 2001; 2004; Biezeveld, 2002).

This term has a similar meaning to the term marga used by the Batak people of North Sumatra (Situmorang, 1993). The Batak people are patrilineal and use marga to term their patrilineal descent groups. The Batak people like the Mentawaians are patrilineal; however, the Mentawaians currently use suku as a synonym of uma and muntogat since 1950s government officials from Minangkabau origins have influenced administrative matters like grouping the Mentawaians by using the term suku in Mentawai. In fact, the Mentawai Islands are part of West Sumatra province.

Mentawaians’ tendency to use suku to identify their kin groups is obviously instigated by the current developments in Mentawai. In the last five decades, uma as a symbol of the unity of a kin group and a centre of rituals has been replaced by small houses built in the government villages and churches and mosques have replaced the ritual functions of uma. The government forces the Mentawaians to leave their traditional settlements and move to government villages. Uma as the central unit of Mentawai kin groups slowly but surely diminishes in number and decreases in function in Mentawai society. Different kin groups identify themselves in different suku rather than in uma or muntogat.

What, then, does the term suku mean to Mentawai people? It refers to kin group with several families living in the nuclear family houses of a government village. This suku also refers a genealogical network of several kin groups living in different places using the same kin group’s name. The same term is also used to refer to differently named but related kin groups dwelling in separate places.
And today, communal possessions like ancestral lands are also called *porak suku* (communal land) instead of *porak uma* or *porak muntogat*. The ownership of *porak suku* is the same as *porak uma* (local kin group's land) and *porak muntogat* (genealogically related kin groups’ ancestral land). In order to distinguish between *porak suku* as *porak uma* and *porak suku* as *porak muntogat*, someone has to notice the location of land, the size of land, the historical matters of the land, and a number of families or kin groups claiming to have rights to the land.

### 2.6 Social alliances

Social alliances – especially what I refer to in this book as kin groups – are important in Mentawai, and marriages are a common means to create them. Mentawaians have a marriage custom of kin exogamy. That means a person cannot wed a member of his own family or kin group. Therefore, it is compulsory to look for a potential partner outside of one's kin group. It is considered a great achievement if one finds a partner from a neighbouring valley. Mentawaians have a patrilineal descent system. This means the existence of a kin group depends on the presence of male members, because it is the male members who are responsible for upholding and continuing a kin group's identity. Rights to ancestral properties like land are always handed down to male members.

A social alliance can be established through marriage. A marriage between members of two different kin groups can strengthen the family relationship between kin groups residing in the same valley or in two separate valleys. A young couple that get married cannot formally carry out their wedding ceremony without agreement between the two kin groups to which they belong. Parents of the young couple have to negotiate about the bride-price to be paid and the day when the wedding ceremony will be performed. After these matters have been agreed, bride-receiving families celebrate the wedding without the attendance of the bride-giving family, according to Mentawai wedding customs.

Before undergoing a traditional wedding ceremony, two unrelated kin groups should first negotiate the bride-price, or *alat toga*. The amount of the bride-price in Mentawai varies over time and place. In the past, land was the most valuable object as a bride-price, besides planted trees like durian trees and coconut palms, gardens, and other valuable things (e.g. pigs, chickens, sago palms, and metal objects such as cooking pots, machetes, axes and woks). Such land was called *porak alat toga* (land for bride-price). The bride's family, if receiving land as part of the bride-price, acquires ownership of the land and the land can be used by all members of the bride's kin group. The size of land given as bride-price varies. It might be as large as a hectare. Sometimes, a plot of land has already been planted. Other times it is just land with natural forest.
But a family would not surrender all of their land as bride-price, only a small part of it. Just as the bride-giving kin group receives a plot of land and other objects agreed in the negotiation, the bride-receiving kin group receives the so-called *ibat pangureijat*, ‘wedding meals.’

In the past, traditional Mentawaians deliberated seriously on the proper time to hold a wedding ceremony. They considered what would be a good position of the moon. They considered wet and dry seasons, fruit and fish seasons. By selecting an auspicious time for the ceremony, they wished to ensure that the young couple would become a good family and have children that would bring happiness and good luck. It was felt that the young couple would enjoy health and prosperity if they chose the right time to get married. At present, contemporary Mentawaians follow the European calendar and a Christian tradition for weddings. For Christian Mentawaians, the best time to hold a wedding is considered to be Sunday, Christmas, or another Christian celebration. Similarly, Muslim Mentawaians consult Islamic tradition for an appropriate time for a wedding. Not only is the Islamic tradition followed of being wedded by an imam (an Islamic religious leader) in a mosque, but the preference is to wed a Muslim Mentawaian as an ideal marriage partner. Although Mentawaians have been converted to world religions like Islam and Christianity, there are still families that like to hold two different wedding ceremonies, one according to the traditional Mentawai wedding ritual and the other according to the tradition of a world religion. This custom of having two different ceremonies is most frequently practised by Mentawai Catholics.

During a traditional wedding ceremony, one or two persons should take the position as father of the bride, who has the responsibility to prepare the wedding meals that will be delivered to the bride-receiving kin group. It is possible that a prominent member of the kin group will take on the role of preparing the wedding meals if the father of the bride has passed away. Such a person is called *sipangurei*, meaning ‘someone in charge of organizing a wedding ceremony.’ The wedding meals are delivered at the same time the bride departs to join her future husband’s kin group. After a very short moment of meeting, the bride’s family immediately return to their home, leaving the bride to her husband. But a week after the wedding, the young married couple may visit the bride’s kin group. This visit is made without the presence of other members of the bridegroom’s kin group.

After the wedding, the bride lives together with her husband’s kin group. She gives birth to sons and daughters who will carry their father’s kin group name and rights, and identify with their father’s kin group. In case of divorce, the woman is expected to return to her family, but the relationship between the two kin groups will be disturbed by the divorce. The woman returns without bringing her children, only her personal belongings. In case her husband dies, she will return to her kin group, and the relationship between the two kin groups will remain harmonious, the children remaining with the father’s kin group.
group. If she dies of natural causes, her personal belongings will be returned to her original family, and the relationship between her family and her husband’s family will remain in harmony.

Another possible occurrence in a marriage is that a wife might be mistreated by her husband. In this case, she may freely return to her kin group or voluntarily remain with her husband and take care of her children. However, her kin group will not remain silent. Her family will request a compensation payment for the husband’s violent behaviour. A pig might be an appropriate payment, the so-called ute (head). If a wife dies due to her husband’s brutality towards her, her kin group will request her husband’s kin group to give them a plot of land as compensation.

Besides marriage, another way to strengthen a social alliance between families is an adoption. Sinappit is the term for an individual who has been adopted by another kin group. Sinappit are recognized and acknowledged as members of the adopting group (Schefold, 1988: 52, 220). Therefore, a sinappit will not use his or her original kin group name anymore. She or he will use the name of the adopting kin group.

Sinappit have the same rights to land and natural resources belonging to the kin group with which they live (that is, the adopting family). However, if sinappit decide to return to their initial kin group, they have to give up the possessions they have acquired while living with the adopting group. In case of hostility or making an unacceptable mistake in the group, a sinappit has to leave the adopting group without being allowed to take along any possessions. Sometimes the initial kin group from which the sinappit came would like to have them back; in this case the initial kin group has to pay back the lulut pangurau (costs of raising them) to the adopting kin group. The amount of those costs is negotiated and agreed by the two parties. Sinappit may voluntarily return to their kin group at any time.

Siripo is another kind of relationship between two individuals. It is a close relationship. After a siripo relationship between two individuals from different kin groups is established, their families may be involved in the new relationship too. They respect each other deeply. It is like a ‘nephew and maternal uncle’ relationship. In the traditional relationship between a nephew and his maternal uncle, whatever the nephew needs from his maternal uncle, he may get it easily and for free, and the nephew will do likewise if his maternal uncle needs something from him. This also characterizes the relationship of two individuals in a siripo relationship. What an uncle and a nephew may not do that two siripo may do is to create a new kin group. Traditionally, if a nephew does not have a kin group anymore, he may join his maternal uncle’s kin group. In the case of a siripo relationship, if the two friends decide to build an alliance, then both individuals stop using their initial kin-group names. Instead, the two of them create a new kin group with a new name.
An example of *siripo* happened to a Siriratei family and a family of Chinese migrants. Both merged to create a new kin group called Satoko. Before that happened, the Chinese family had bought a plot of land in Saibi Muara, where its members could plant coconut palms and build a big house, and the house looked like a Malay shop (*toko*). The Chinese family invited a Siriratei family to join with them to create a new kin group called Satoko (from the word *toko*). Members of the new Satoko kin group that originated from Siriratei did not lose their rights to their ancestral Siriratei lands even though they were now part of the new Satoko kin group. This particular case is discussed further in Chapter 10.

By describing these social matters of Mentawaians, I aim to give some background for recent social changes and their impact on landownership and land use in Mentawai. In this chapter, I have briefly described the geographical characteristics of the Mentawai Islands. Mentawaians carefully considered the geographical characteristics of valleys, rivers, and other topographical features prior to settling a place. The features of that place also play an important role in their family stories.

Furthermore, I have described the population of the Mentawai Islands with special focus on kin groups and social alliances. *Uma* is the most common term used for kin group. Another important term is *muntogat*, which refers to the genealogical tie among related kin groups residing in separate places. Within a *muntogat*, related Mentawaians regard each other as having the same ancestor and homeland. So, such groups are united by having the same origins. However, social alliances are not always based on genealogical ties but can also originate in an intimate friendship or adoption, two ways in which individuals can join another kin group or start a new group. Together they create a kin group and regard each other as family. Due to contemporary developments in Mentawai, suku has been replacing the traditional terms of kinship. This also gives other meanings to the social structures of Mentawai communities.

To understand kin groups in Mentawai, not only genealogical ties need to be considered but also landownership and what is told about land in family stories. Through landownership, one group of related people is divided from others. Kin groups have particular ideas, emotions, and other communal properties, and land is one of several elements that bring people together.