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Social and cultural features of Mentawaians

3.1 Introduction

Mentawaians do not have a specific orthography or written language, as they have only a spoken language; they do not have any writing tradition (see Pam-pus, 1989b). The main term currently used by Mentawaians when they speak of either general cultural practices or a particular tradition is *arat*. This was not a Mentawai term originally, however. It was adapted from the Indonesian word *adat*, which in the Indonesian language has a meaning similar to ‘custom’.

Mentawaians called their traditional belief system *sabulungan*. Government officials and missionaries wanted a way to refer to different religions, including the traditional belief system. They therefore added the word *arat* (the local pronunciation of *adat*) to *sabulungan*. The term *adat* or *arat* was introduced in the 1950s, when the government officials and the missionaries needed a word for ‘religion’. Since the 1950s, *arat sabulungan* is the term used for the traditional belief system of Mentawai, contrasting with such other terms as *arat Islam*, *arat Protestan*, and *arat Katolik*.

In this chapter on *arat*, I focus on Mentawaians’ concepts of customary land rights and their views on the traditional economy. I believe that customary land rights and the traditional economy of Mentawaians are closely related to the current land conflicts in Mentawai. To begin the discussion, I look at the traditional background of *arat*. Afterward, I briefly describe the arrival of world religions in Mentawai, because a person’s religious beliefs may influence that person’s behaviour in resolving conflicts. The last issue I discuss in this chapter is the traditional lifestyle. I point out how Mentawaians perceive and value their natural resources and ancestral land.
3.2 Historical background of *arat*

Before the term *arat* became popular in Mentawai, Mentawaians used the word *punen*, which means ‘activity’. The word has a similar meaning to ‘festivity’, ‘ceremony’, or ‘ritual’, and has to do with a set of activities that should be done. In the context of rituals, *punen* is specifically called *lia*. *Lia* is the term for a ritual social gathering in communal rituals or ceremonies. In the course of time, the word *punen* was replaced by *arat*. However, *arat* has broad and multiple meanings.

In the common understanding of Mentawaians, *arat* encompasses such matters as rules, norms, customs, and manners. It covers ownership of communal properties and people’s daily life. To some extent, *arat* may include beliefs and ideology. As the term *arat* became popular to refer to Mentawai cultural practices, *punen* was more frequently associated with religious ceremonies in churches, mosques, and public festivities. *Punen* is more specific in meaning and *arat* more general.

*Arat* encompasses rules that compel members of the community to behave in the proper way according to established customs. It governs the way social systems in a community are supposed to work. It may be said that *arat* is a kind of pattern for social conduct. *Arat* may be classified into several categories, namely *arat pangureijat* (marriage customs), *arat pulaggaijat* or *arat laggai* (norms regulating social cohesion in a village or settlement), *arat punen* (ritual order), and *arat pubakkanan ka porak sabba ka mone* (management of landownership and land tenure).

In addition, Mentawaians use the term *arat* to refer to individuals with a particular talent. If someone frequently demonstrates an ability that other people in the community are not so good at, that person is perceived as special. Her or his talent is referred to as *arat tubu* (*arat* = custom or habit, *tubu* = body). However, *arat tubu* (or, in another dialect, *galai tubu*) can be applied to both positive and negative behaviours. It has a positive connotation when *arat tubu* (or *galai tubu*) is used to refer to someone’s skill in producing something useful for oneself or for the community. Most Mentawaians, because of long practice, are talented at carving artistic figures or making fine tools like paddles, canoes, baskets, shrimp traps, and other household objects: they have *arat tubu*. However, *arat tubu* has a negative connotation when used to refer to someone whose habitual actions are destructive for the community.

In a very different sense, the term *arat* is used to designate the religions introduced by missionaries to Mentawai. Soon after declaring independence in 1945, the state of Indonesia recognized five world religions. In 1998, Confucianism was acknowledged as the sixth religion in Indonesia. However, only three religions – Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism – were introduced to Mentawai from outside. In Mentawai these three world religions were called *arat puaranan* (see Sihombing, 1979; Coronese, 1986: 38). Protestantism (*arat*
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Protestan) was introduced in 1901, Islam (arat Islam) was introduced in 1950 and Catholicism (arat Katolik) was introduced in 1955 (see Caissutti and Cambielli, 1985; Karangan and Yunus, 1985; Abidin, 1997). There is no Hinduism or Buddhism in Mentawai.

The majority of Mentawaians who adhere to one of these world religions do not practise their new religion exclusively. While adopting some of the principles and values of the world religions, groups of Mentawaians still practise their traditional belief system. While believing in Jesus, for instance, a lot of Mentawai Catholics also believe in the power of spirits of their ancestors and other spirits living in the spiritual world. These Mentawaians routinely engage in traditional rituals on particular occasions. On Sunday or Friday, Mentawaians regularly visit a church or mosque. Before looking at the world religions, I first explain the Mentawai traditional belief system and its growth.

3.2.1 Traditional belief system

The traditional belief system is known in Mentawai today as arat sabulungan. The Mentawai did not formerly have a particular term for their belief system. The church and the local government created this term to differentiate between arat puaranan (any or all of the world religions) and arat sabulungan (traditional beliefs). By doing so, the government and local churches could more easily forbid Mentawaians practising arat sabulungan. This word is formed from sa and bulungan. Sa is a plural unity of something. The root of bulungan is bulu, meaning ‘to offer’. Bulungan is understood as a group of unknown spirits. Sabulungan is thus a group of spirits, to which a special offering (buluat) is given. So, arat sabulungan is the belief focused on the existence of spirits. Through various different rituals, human beings can come into contact with spirits.

Indonesian scholars who have studied the Mentawai culture give different definitions for sabulungan. They interpret bulungan as if it were based on the root bulug, meaning ‘leaf’. They mistakenly assume therefore that sabulungan is a belief system based upon the power of leaves that mediate the sacred connection between Mentawaians and supernatural beings (see Sihombing, 1979; Rudito, 1993; 1999). In the view of these scholars, Mentawaians believe in a particular kind of leaves rather than in spirits. I will not discuss the spirits of Mentawai, as they have been sufficiently discussed by scholars such as Loeb (1929a) and Nooy-Palm (1968) for Sipora and Pagai islands, and Schefold (1973; 1988) for Siberut. I nonetheless highlight a few points of the traditional belief system that are relevant to land conflicts.

According to their traditional beliefs, Mentawaians acknowledge two worlds: the visible natural world and the invisible spiritual world. The natural world is the domain of people, animals, plants, rivers, mountains, sea, stones, and corals – concrete things that exist in this world. The natural world is what
people see on earth. The spiritual world is perceived as the domain of spirits. It is the invisible side of the human world. Mentawaians believe that the two worlds are not separate. In visible and touchable water, for instance, exists unseen and untouchable water. Mentawaians assume that ordinary human vision is not able to see the spiritual world. The only way to see it is through ritual and by using the transcendental vision of shamans (tai kerei).

Spirits may reside underground, in the sea, the sky, in rivers, forests, hills, and even in natural objects such as a large stone or tree. Mentawaians are familiar with taikabaga (chthonic spirits), taikabagatkoat (sea spirits), taikaleleu (forest spirits), taikapata or taikamanua (sky or celestial spirits), sikameinan (crocodile spirits living in rivers), and pito' (spirits staying in graveyards). The existence of spirits everywhere is also illustrated in mythical stories such as the stories of balubalu and of the origin of the durian fruit (Schefold, 1988: 70-80). Everything on this earth and in the universe has what is called simagere. This is an essence for living beings. It defines their natural quality. It may be translated in English as soul, although ‘soul’ does not have exactly the same meaning as simagere. It signals movements of living beings. Animals, plants and humans all have simagere. Because of having simagere, humans, plants and animals actively move, and they grow bigger until they reach a certain size.

In addition to simagere, there is another element called ketsat, which characterizes living beings like humans, animals, and plants. Ketsat may be translated as ‘spirit’. Both simagere and ketsat produce a sort of energetic radiation called bajou. It may have both harmful and useful consequences for human beings. Upon death, the human soul (simagere) and spirit (ketsat) return to the spiritual world. They are then called ukku or kalimeu (spirits of the dead). Human spirits are also known as sanitu (ghost of human death). Ordinary people may be in touch with the spiritual world when they come across a weird experience on a particular occasion, but they are not able to meet any spirits. A shaman, in contrast, may take a spiritual journey through ritual in order to communicate with spirits. This happens in trance. Mentawaians carry out a particular sacrifice in order to call their ancestors’ spirits to participate in a family ceremony.

In mythical narratives Mentawaians tell about a group of human beings separated into two groups by a particular ritual in order to explain the existence of the invisible spiritual world. One group remained in the natural world while the other disappeared to an invisible domain. Thereafter, the disappeared group never returned to the natural world. The only way that both groups can meet each other again is through rituals. Sabulungan is used to refer to all the spirits in the invisible world, some of whom are deceased human beings (ukku); the rest of these spirits are spirits of water, forest, and so on.

Thereafter, death is seen as a way to get into the invisible spiritual world. Mentawaians believe that a dead person’s spirit is a living spirit in the spiritual world. Mentawaians believe that human spirits never die. Both soul and spirit
continue to live in the spiritual world after the death of the body. To bring the domain of human spirits into simple human understanding, Mentawaians call the spiritual world beu laggai (big settlement). It can be thought of as a human settlement, associated with a sacred place, but is invisible. Mentawaians living in the coastal area of the valley of Saibi Samukop believe that the hill called Silagilagi is the place where their beu laggai is located. But it is not the hill itself that is the beu laggai; the hill simply marks the location of the invisible settlement.

Besides human spirits and other spirits in the invisible spiritual world, Mentawaians are familiar with the supernatural essence called ulaumanua. Ulaumanua’s domain is anywhere, even beyond the universe, therefore it was named ulaumanua: ulau (outside or light) and manua (sky). Ulaumanua is, to some extent, understood as a powerful light. This element does not have a particular personality. However, Mentawaians believe that it has power over everything in the spiritual world and the natural world. To Mentawaians, ulaumanua’s influence in human life is quite clear, even though it is difficult to describe. Living beings on earth are taken care of by this supernatural being. Mentawaians believe that when someone dies of natural causes, ulaumanua is the cause of death. Ulaumanua is assumed to be the only spirit that can sustain or terminate the life of humans, animals, and plants. So, ulaumanua is the spirit that takes good care of people and things living in the spiritual world and the natural world.

Mentawaians communicate indirectly with ulaumanua and other spirits through the spirits of those who have died, or ukkui. According to my findings, Mentawaians sacrifice domesticated animals and take some parts of sacrificed animals as an offering for the spirits. In order to please the spirits present at rituals, Mentawaians decorate their houses, themselves, and their offerings with colourful flowers and particular ritual leaves called katsaila. By presenting a buluat (offering) consisting of an egg, piece of pork, taro, banana, and other food decorated with flowers and katsaila leaves on a wooden plate, Mentawaians hope that their ancestors’ spirits in the spiritual world may be present at their ceremonies. Through rituals, wishes for health, prosperity and fortune are addressed to the ancestral spirits. In this manner, ancestors’ spirits may transmit family prayers through sabulungan to ulaumanua in the hope that the requests of the living people will be fulfilled.

Results of the offering may not be seen instantly. However, people might notice the results over time, by being aware of remaining healthy, or in their success in catching animals while hunting, or family members being far from troubles. Such good fortune may accordingly be viewed as an affirmation of successful prayers. Mentawaians practise their traditional beliefs through rituals and daily activities. Mentawaians show respect for what they meet in nature. If they want to extract natural products, they first address an apology to the spirits in order to show their respect, so that the spirits of the products and the spirits that take care of the products will not harm them. Mentawaians
sometimes perform a ritual in order to bring a land conflict to an end. In that situation, they swear upon their ancestors’ spirits. If they swear upon a lie, the spirits will punish them by bringing them misfortune. They may even die, if ulaumanua decides to punish them severely.

In family rituals, the rimata, an appointed leader of a kin group, together with a prominent shaman (si kerei), usually guides his relatives. The rimata is a social leader but may not necessarily be a senior shaman, as there are very few senior shamans in a kin group. Some shamans (tai kerei) of the family help a rimata to carry out the ritual. In addition, simata’ – ordinary members of the kin group – should all take on some part of the ritual. Some of the tasks of the simata’ are to beat the drums, to sacrifice pigs and chickens, and to prepare the meals. In daily life, a shaman and a rimata are similar to other members of the kin group with regard to accomplishing common tasks such as producing and gathering food, clearing gardens, and raising animals.

### 3.2.2 World religions in Mentawai

Protestant missionaries from Germany arrived on the Pagai islands in 1901, invited by the Dutch colonial officials who were already there. A few years later they expanded the Protestant religion to Sipora and Siberut. In order to expand the religion, Protestant missionaries gradually prohibited the traditional belief system, which was centred around shamanic activities. A few decades after the arrival of Protestantism, Islamic merchants from Sumatra introduced Islam to Mentawai in 1954, and Italian missionaries introduced Catholicism in the same year. This became the official record about the arrival of these religions (Coronese, 1986: 29). However, according to unpublished sources referred to by Karangan and Yunus (1985: 116) and Abidin (1997: 39), Islam had been in Mentawai as early as 1935. And Catholicism had been introduced to Mentawai in 1917 by European missionaries (Caisutti and Cambielli, 1985: 107).

When Soekarno was president of Indonesia (1945-1966), the Indonesian government made efforts to unite the diverse Indonesian ethnic groups into one Indonesian nation (Anderson, 2002). Indonesian youth had actually promoted this idea in 1928. They declared that they acknowledged one land, one nation, and one language of Indonesia by signing the Sumpah Pemuda (Youth Pledge). In order to arrive at a ‘modern’ Indonesian culture, everyone was asked to followed the Naskah Proklamasi (declaration of independence), Pancasila (five fundamental principles), Undang-undang Dasar 1945 (Indonesian constitution of 1945), the state motto, Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (unity in diversity), Undang-undang Negara (state laws), and Garis-garis Besar Haluan Negara (general policies of the Indonesian state) (Sihombing, 1979; Coronese, 1986; Schefold, 1988).

The process of Indonesian unification had a significant effect in Mentawai in 1954. It began with the Rapat Tiga Agama (‘three religions meeting’ – Prot-
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estantism, Islam and traditional belief system) in the Mentawai Islands, organized by representatives of government, military and police. The meeting came up with some crucial decisions. Mentawaians had to choose one of Indonesia’s five officially acknowledged religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism). Mentawaians therefore were not allowed to practise their traditional beliefs anymore. Each person was required to accept one of the five religions within three months after the meeting.

The provincial government of West Sumatra, with the help of local police officers, commenced to destroy Mentawai’s material culture, and prohibited Mentawaians practising their traditional culture. By so doing, ‘primitive’ images of Mentawaians could be abolished and the ‘new Indonesian culture’ would be accepted. Accordingly, the government together with the military and local police gradually forced Mentawaians to dwell in government-established villages (see chapter 5 of Persoon, 1994 for clear examples of the social changes entailed by this). In this way, Mentawaians’ social structures were destroyed and replaced with a new social structure made by the established religious organizations and local government bodies.

The process of eradicating Mentawai traditional culture occurred during the 1950s through the 1980s. It was instigated when President Soekarno (1945-1967) was in power, and continued during the rule of President Soeharto (1967-1998). Consequently, Mentawaians in Pagai and Sipora lost significant characteristics of their traditional culture. In Siberut, a similar thing happened. Kin groups who had been living communally in uma houses were separated into nuclear families and each family got a small house in a government-established village through the resettlement programmes of the Social Department of Indonesia. The majority of families were forced to live in such single-family houses. A lot of families, however, later returned to the places where they once lived.

Some groups of people in upriver places escaped from the government by moving deeper into the interior of the island when the government tried to relocate them. They did so in order to prevent their traditional culture from being destroyed by the government and the churches. The Sakuddei kin group confronted the government by totally rejecting being modernized. They departed from Rereiket and moved to the interior of Sagulubbe (see Schefold, 1988; Persoon, 1994: 270-276). There, they continued their traditional way of life and represent a particular image of Mentawaians that now seems exotic and archaic (Reeves, 1999; Bakker, 2007).

What happened to people in the past is still remembered today, even though it occurred several decades ago. Mentawaians clearly described the terrible occurrence when they were asked what happened at that time. The story of Aman Laulau Manai told in Lindsay’s book titled Mentawai Shaman: Keeper of the rainforest is one example of this. Other examples are the description of traditional culture given by Schefold (1992) and the story of the Sakud-
dei kin group in the documentary made by Franceschi (1999), as well as the story of Aman Maom in Benedict Allen (2000: 37) and in the documentary about the last of the medicine men produced by Salam (2000). Mentawaians vividly expressed their sorrow at losing their culture and how disappointed and angry they were at the Indonesian government.

The Protestant church in Mentawai endorsed the Indonesian government’s policies. The policies were used to promote the interests of the church. Some policies are still followed by the Protestant church in Mentawai. If someone has been baptized into a Protestant church, for instance, but still engages in traditional practices, for example asking a shaman for medical aid, she or he will be excluded from the Protestant community and from the Protestant church. If such a family wants to join the Protestant community again, the family has to undertake all over again the learning process of being a good Protestant. Afterwards, the family may be officially accepted again in the Protestant community.

Muslim efforts focused on converting as many Mentawaians as possible to Islam. The total number of adherents signifies the number of those in the Islamic community in Mentawai receiving aid from Islamic organizations in West Sumatra province and Jakarta (Abidin, 1997). However, the strength of Islamic beliefs among Mentawaians is relatively low. Samples taken from Matotonan, Saliguma and Sarausau, which are villages of Siberut where Islam has won more converts than in other villages, indicate that Mentawai Muslims still constantly practise the traditional belief system in their daily lives. While having officially converted to Islam, for example, these Mentawaians still eat pork, which is forbidden by Islam.

Moreover, they are irregular in their practice of sholat, praying five times a day. They do not adhere to the fasting period of Ramadhan nor can they read and understand Arabic, the language of the Koran. When their relatives celebrate a traditional ritual and they are invited, they fully participate with their relatives in the ritual, including eating pork. When Idul Fitri, a major Islamic festivity, is celebrated, Mentawai Muslims residing in interior villages of the islands go to the capital of the sub-district to receive such materials as new clothing. These materials are distributed free of charge by the provincial government of West Sumatra and the central government of Jakarta to poor Islamic people (fakir miskin). To sum up, Mentawai Muslims have limited knowledge of Islam, and they still strongly adhere to traditional practices.

Catholic missionaries have done something a bit different in Mentawai, even though the end result is similar. The Catholic church in Mentawai allows Mentawaians to carry on their traditional rituals as far as those rituals do not conflict with the major dogma recognized by Catholicism. The process of absorbing Mentawai culture in the Catholic church has been called inculcation (Caisutti and Cambielli, 1985: 110-112; Coronese, 1986: 34). An obvi-
ous example of this inculturation is seen when Italian missionaries and diocesan priests serve mass. They use a head-decoration while serving mass in the church. The head-decoration is similar to head-decorations used by Mentawai shamans in Mentawai traditional rituals. Moreover, other items of Mentawai material culture are allowed to embellish ceremonies in the Catholic church. By doing so, the missionaries have been trying to bring Catholicism close to Mentawaians in the hope that Mentawaians will accept and practice Catholicism in their daily lives.

Protestantism has expanded widely in the past three decades in Mentawai, especially in Sipora and Pagai. Protestant churches have been built in almost every village. Currently about fifty percent of Mentawaians are Protestants. Mentawai these days has the image of being Protestant. In the past three decades, Mentawaians have managed their churches independently by forming the Gereja Kristen Protestan Mentawai (GKPM, Mentawai Protestant Church Community), now separate from the Batak Church Communities in North Sumatra (HKBP, Huria Kristen Batak Protestan), from where German missionaries commenced the mission when they introduced Protestantism in Mentawai.

This significant achievement of the Protestant mission was reached by totally prohibiting Protestant Mentawaians from practising their traditional beliefs. The Protestant church in Mentawai excluded members if they kept practising traditional beliefs, for instance by seeking help for illness from a Mentawai shaman (si kerei). However, the church does allow them to ask for help from ordinary medicine men (simata’ siagiallagek), who have knowledge of medicinal plants without using particular rituals to cure the ill (Tulius, 2000).

A striking aspect of Mentawai culture today is the diversity of religious beliefs practised in Mentawai. People's beliefs may have a lot of influence in the process of taking a decision on crucial matters. However, it is not the only aspect. Other aspects also affect the social life and culture of Mentawaians. One of these is customary land rights, which is a major focus of this book. Customs related to land rights are called arat pubakkanan ka porak sabba ka mone, which can be described as traditional knowledge of how people can manage and maintain a plot of land. This set of customs directs people in managing their rights so that they may profit from their land without arguing with one another. And, how they may find resolution if they get involved in a conflict over landownership. To become familiar with traditional landownership in Mentawai, I describe a few aspects of it in the next section.
3.3 Landownership

According to family stories, the early migratory movements occurred in Mentawai when only a small number of people inhabited the Mentawai Islands. Extensive areas of land were unoccupied and unclaimed. There were multiple options and directions to migrate. The early Mentawaians claimed an extensive range of territory simply by passing through it and making paths through forests, crossing rivers, moving further over hills and even sailing over islands. In order to mark the claimed plots, people chopped down trees (land claimed in this way is called *saggri*, ‘chopping trees’). Sometimes they cleared the forest while passing through; land claimed in this way is called *siau*, ‘clearing forest’. People left marks on the area they passed through, which is called *batik* (marking a territory). Mentawaians refer to such topographical features as rivers, slopes, mountaintops, and entire hills to clearly delineate their claimed territory.

Generally speaking, Mentawaians assume some elements of wilderness will remain to be used communally, rather than being owned by one individual or another. Such wilderness can be divided into the following natural elements. *Sopak* (small river), *bat oinan* (big river), *onaja* (swampy area), *suksuk* (flat natural surface), *tinambu* (small hill), and *leleu* (big hill). One kin group’s territory may have all of those natural elements while others may have only some of those elements. So, not every kin group’s territory possesses the same natural elements. Mentawai kin groups dwell in different parts of the Mentawai Islands, and the natural surroundings are not the same from one place to another.

When it came time to name a particular territory, they often named the place by referring to its surrounding natural characteristics. For example, a place near Cempungan is called Simombuk (place with a lot of bamboos); people named it by referring to the most common plant growing in the area, which was *ombuk* (bamboo). Or, they used some feature of the landscape, such as a place called Simabiluk (wavy watercourse) in the valley of the Saibi Samukop river. Another option was to name a place by a common human activity done in that place, such as Pasakiat (trading place). Or a place might be named after a particular event, usually a special experience, so that they can remember not only the place but also what happened at the place, such as Silogau (bloody place). Silogau is a place where people from Simatalu and Saibi Samukop once killed each other. A lot of places called by particular names do not exist on official maps but in people’s memories and in family stories. We might say that those places are located in ‘people’s land’.

After claiming a plot of land while migrating, whether the migration was self-initiated or because of conflicts, some early Mentawai kin groups did not stay permanently on their newly claimed land. As related in many family stories, while part of the families remained on the newly claimed territory, other
families left for new places elsewhere in the Mentawai Islands. The early migrating families kept moving until they found an ideal place to live, where a deep river full of water was available in order that canoes might travel it easily and where their enemies might not easily reach them so that they might live in peace. Even though they settled in the last place of their migration, the places claimed earlier were not forgotten. Eventually, each plot of land in the Mentawai Islands acquired its own landlord. Ownership of these lands is captured in family stories. And only members of the kin group are familiar with the detailed content of the stories of their own kin group.

If a plot of land was claimed that did not belong to any other group, it is traditionally called *porak sinese* in Siberut (Schefold, 1988: 93) and *porak siappo* by most people in Sipora and Pagai. Claimed lands in general are called *porak sisaggri* (land marked by chopping branches of trees), *porak sibatik* (land marked by cutting trees off at irregular distances) and *porak sisiau* (land marked by clearing trees and passing through). By marking the land, Mentawaians let other people know that the plot of land had been claimed so that other people who arrived later at the place could not claim it anymore. The people who claimed the land declared themselves to be *sibakkat porak* (landowners). In order to strengthen their claims, Mentawaians cleared and then planted recently owned places with a variety of fruit-bearing trees. A large number of durian trees (*Durio zibethinus*) and other fruit trees like *peigu* (jackfruit: *Artocarpus heterophyllus*), *abbangan* (mango: *Mangifera indica*), *babaet* (rambutan: *Nephelium lappaceum*), were planted on the land. Planted land is called *mone* (land planted with durian).

A small group of people might have possession of a small valley; more often, a valley belongs to more than one kin group. In that case, they had to divide their claim to the valley clearly. They referred to the small rivers of the valley and different types of vegetation to mark the borders of their land. The exact size of a plot of land that a kin group claimed was not measured. However, it was important to agree clearly on the borders of each other’s plots of land in order to avoid conflict. Agreements about the borders and positions of each other’s lands are recorded in family stories.

When they once had agreed about the borders, it was important to correctly remember them. They then had to maintain the borders properly. Changing the borders due to failure of recollecting them properly might result in a hostile conflict between two or more groups that share the same borders. When members of a group recollect the place-name of their ancestral land, they may instantly also recollect the kin groups with which their ancestral land shares the same borders. According to custom, a kin group is not allowed to go beyond the borders of their own land in order to get what they need for their daily lives, unless the landowners of that land have allowed them to do so. Members of other kin groups therefore have to ask permission in advance before extracting natural resources situated on the land of a kin group.
Besides finding and claiming it, people may have acquired possession of a plot of land because of a particular tradition like headhunting, which was practised at that time. Before the Dutch colonial government ended the headhunting practice in Mentawai in the early 1900s, Mentawaians purposely sought people's heads living in other villages in order to complete a particular ritual. In the West, headhunting raids represent the most feared images of cruel practices of Mentawai communities (Schefold, 2007) as well as of certain other Southeast Asian peoples (see Hoskins, 1996).

People practised headhunting for different purposes (Schefold, 2007: 480-482). Mentawaians underwent serious preparation through a special ritual before conducting a headhunting raid. In brief, a small group of people, consisting of five to ten adults with particular skills, went to a selected destination. They were led by a vision, which they received through a ritual called labbra, which is the ritual during which the hunters decided where to go and what to expect during the raid. In case of a successful raid, the hunters brought the victim's head, hands and legs, and after returning home closed with a ritual called pasilepa or mulepa ('ending'). During this ritual, people in Mentawai had to observe several taboos (see Kruyt, 1923; 1924; Wirz, 1929/30; Schefold, 1988: 89-91: 231-6, for a Mentawai example; and Rosaldo, 1980; and George, 1996 for other Southeast Asian examples).

After successfully bringing home the victim's head, hands and legs, the hunters were aware that they would be hunted in return, especially when the victim's family found out who had assassinated their family member. If the hunter families knew in advance that the victim's family was about to take revenge, the hunters might send a few people of the other kin group as messengers in order to transmit a message to the victim's family asking them not to carry out the revenge. The hunters usually offered something for not taking revenge. In this case, a plot of land was an appropriate offer. Such a plot of land was called porak segseg logau, meaning, 'land for preventing bloodshed.' If both groups agreed upon the proposal, there would be no warfare. It is here that the headhunting tradition has a strong correlation with land ownership.

Quite often, the identity of the hunters remained unknown until one day the victim's family found out for sure which kin group had killed their relative. If the hunters did not want to surrender a piece of their land to the victim's family, they also had the option of compensating for their conduct by offering four pigs. In that case, four kinds of payment should be done. Descendants of the first person who had killed the victim should pay the ute ('head') by giving a large pig as compensation for the victim's head. Descendants of the second person who participated in killing the victim should pay a penalty called pelle, referring to the machetes used to kill the victim. Descendants of the third killer should pay the sereming, a price or penalty referring to spears. And descendants of the last person in the hunting party should pay the liat uma, the penalty for killing a member of a kin group. Each penalty required a pig.
Sometimes, Mentawaians went headhunting in a group of seven to ten people. Nevertheless, only four payments were mandated. And if one person alone was responsible for the killing in a headhunting raid, then his descendants would pay four pigs of different sizes to the victim’s kin group. This was done in order to reconcile the relationship between the two kin groups. Normally, the remaining kin-group members would be delighted to help their relatives pay the penalties. After years passed, both the victim’s kin group and the hunters’ kin group came together for a peace festival (abat), ‘which would create a fraternal bond between the groups involved’ (Schefold, 2007: 487). This tradition ended in the early 1900s.

Because of headhunting practices, many Mentawai families moved away from their initial homeland in order to avoid being assassinated. In some cases the members of the kin group remaining in the initial settlement were not numerous enough, and they welcomed families from other, unrelated kin groups to come live in that area. They built their houses close to each other and defended the settlement together. This established a relation of friendship among different kin groups, called parurukat uma (united groups), in short, pauma. When two or more kin groups live in the same settlement, each group keeps the membership and rights of their own kin group. Even though they are able to share food, assistance, and protection in case of trouble, the cooperation of several kin groups in one settlement does not merge their status or the rights of the different groups. If one kin group is recognized as the owner of a plot of land, that group remains the landowner. The other groups who came to live in the settlement were acknowledged as tai toi, which means 'outsiders', or as sarauma, which simply means ‘another kin group’. If a group decided to look for another place to live, it could do so freely.

In order to secure their status at a place, newcomers or outsiders usually bought a plot of land for their own homesteads (uma) rather than depending on the kindness of the landowner. In many cases, land could be bought in exchange for pigs, woks, cooking pots, axes and other valuable objects. Such a plot of land is not very large, but large enough to build a communal house and huts, to raise pigs and chickens, to grow edible plants, and to gather forest products that people need for everyday use. When buying a small plot of land today, Mentawaians can offer the landowners pigs and chickens, and currently a certain amount of money like 500,000 rupiahs (about 45 Euros) per hectare. Ancestors of the Sakuddei kin group living in the upriver place of Sagulubbe called Bat Kuddei purchased a plot of land in exchange for several pigs and chickens, to use for their homestead (personal conversation with Schefold, 2006). Another example is taken from a Chinese family that migrated to Saibi Muara. Ancestors of the family surrendered three pigs to the landowners in order to gain ownership of a 20-hectare plot of land in the early 1900s. Land acquired in this way is called porak sinaki.
I have explained above about the marriage system. Marriage is another means by which a kin group may acquire possession of a plot of land. Mentawaians often use a plot of land as a bride price (porak alat toga). After the married couple pass away at the end of their lives, their sons may visit their maternal relatives. They have to find a person who acted as sipangurei (in charge of organizing a wedding ceremony) at their late mother’s wedding. The sipangurei, if he is still alive, can offer a plot of land to the sons of the deceased mother. This kind of land is called mane. If the sipangurei has passed away, the deceased mother’s sons have to look for the sons of the sipangurei to see if they can get their mane from them. This land is called porak mane (land representing the deceased). Mane is not always in the form of a plot of land. It may take the form of valuable objects, domesticated animals, or planted trees that may be used as the representation of the dead mother. Such objects will be given by the mother’s relative who acted as sipangurei at her wedding. All sons of the dead mother have the same rights to cultivate or use this mane land. No single one of the deceased mother’s sons or grandsons may claim the land for himself alone. All sons of the deceased mother collectively own this kind of land. In addition, a family may get a plot of land as payment for an act of misconduct. People’s deeds are not always under control. In order to diminish destructive and disturbing behaviour, Mentawaians made social rules. The rules are called arat laggai, which encourage people to stay in touch, communicate and behave in accordance with the expectations of most members of a community. In Mentawai, there is accordingly a set of punishments called tulou. These can be applied to someone who behaves wrongly in the community. Sexual abuse and cruel assaults can be categorized as serious social misconduct. In the past, one would be required to surrender a plot of land as payment for a mistake of this kind. Two types of serious mistakes are tulou pakaila (sexual abuse) and tulou kisi (assault). Land given as payment for such misconduct was called porak tulou. Specifically, such plots of land are known as porak tulou pakaila (land for sexual humiliation) and porak tulou kisi (land for assault). Such are the different ways that Mentawaians may acquire rights to land. The size of such a plot of land is usually small, and it will normally be located in the ancestral lands of a different kin group (the one paying the penalty). Therefore, the borders need to be clearly defined among the groups.

Some kin groups live in the interior while others live in coastal areas near the mouth of a river. Wherever Mentawaians decide to dwell, access to a river is a significant criterion in deciding to stay at a particular place. This means that Mentawaians infrequently settle far from rivers. It is considered ideal to live on a riverbank because people can easily transport goods and reach places by means of canoe. Another preferred characteristic of a river is that it is located in between hilly areas. Mentawaians customarily hunt animals like monkeys, deer or wild boars, and areas situated between hills and riverbanks are ideal
for hunting deer and wild boars, while hilly places are ideal for hunting monkeys. Forested hills provide Mentawaians with necessary natural resources like building materials and foodstuffs. Therefore, people intensely defend their claims to a particular plot of land. By having a large plot of land, people ensure their access to natural resources, and eliminate the need to compete with other groups of people for those resources.

Because early migrants had already claimed most of the land area of Mentawai, later migrants could claim or buy only small plots of land. There are some groups of people who did not have any land at all. This means that some groups of Mentawaians possessed a large amount of land while others had no land. Kin groups who possess land are called *sibakkat porak*, and they freely extract resources from the surrounding natural (‘wilderness’) area. Meanwhile, kin groups without land of their own may obtain permission to make use of other people’s land; these people are called *sikokop*, literally translated as ‘eaters’.

If they left for other places, landowners of a particular place might hand over the maintenance of their land to some of their relatives. If they did not have any relative that wanted to take care of the land, they might ask a reliable neighbouring group. Such a group of neighbours is also seen as *sikokop*. They are free to extract anything they want from the land and use it in any way, but they absolutely may not possess or sell the land. Nothing changes regarding the ownership of the land. Those taking care of the land may not make use of the land as payments of fines or bride prices. If the appointed neighbours would like to do so, they must inform the owners first and wait to get their permission. Sometimes, the kin group that was asked to take care of another group’s land would receive rights to a small plot of land as compensation.

Rights to communal properties are passed down from male ancestors to male offspring. They may not ignore or deny any of the offspring in taking advantage of the land. If they would like to sell the land, profits of selling the land should be shared equally among all male members. Mentawaians consider the ownership of a plot of land to be based on a prominent person who first claimed that land. All descendants of the original owner have the same rights to the use of that land. In a simple way, I can explain this by taking the example of the Samongilailai kin group (Chart 2.1 in Chapter 2). All male descendants of Samongilailai have the same rights to their ancestral land located in the homeland in Simatalu. It is called *porak pumuteteu* (ancestral land), or *porak muntogat* (inherited land). In fact, this land belongs to descendants of several related kin groups, because all of them were descended from the same ancestor, the one who originally claimed the land. As the term for kin group in Mentawai has slowly been changing from *uma* and *muntogat to suku* in the last five decades, Mentawaians also designate their ancestral land as *porak suku*. 
A few new kin groups like Salamao, Salimu, and Sapalakkokoai in Taileleu came into existence from the splitting up of the Samongilailai kin group in the course of migratory movements. Ancestors of each of those groups claimed a plot of land for their own. Or, they may have bought a plot of land or received it as payment of a fine from another kin group. Samongilailai members that stayed in Sipora or elsewhere in the Mentawai Islands may not simply claim Salamao’s land in Taileleu, even though the two kin groups are related. However, if the Salamao kin group vanished for some reason, Samongilailai kin-group members in Sipora would take over rights to Salamao’s land, and other kin groups in Taileleu would not be eligible to claim the land.

Every married man has an equal voice in deciding the status or uses of the kin group’s communal properties. However, the voices of young males and females among the relatives are not often listened to. In fact, young males and females are always assigned a smaller share of the profits of communal properties. Children of married women may benefit from both their kin group on the paternal side and from their kin group on the maternal side. In Sipora and Pagai the situation is quite common that nephews and nieces benefit from their maternal uncle’s land (monen kamaman). They do not otherwise have an obvious right to their maternal kin group’s land. In Mentawai, female members of a kin group do not customarily have clear rights to their kin group’s communal properties. In unusual cases, a woman may receive a plot of land as a gift, but the original owner retains his rights to the land until he dies. The rights to the land may then be passed down to the woman’s son.

Some small plots of land do not belong to a kin group but may be owned by a nuclear family. Such plots of land are called porak mane (land representing the deceased) or porak tulou (payment of fines), and are considered porak sangauma (land belonging to one family). This kind of land also has its own story, apart from the general story of ancestral land, dividing people into those who are and are not included in possessing the plot of land. Taking the family story into account, other groups of families that share the same genealogical ties may not claim the plot of land. Sometimes, the plot of land is very small in size, only enough for one house. Therefore, the male children of the original owner usually keep the land for the purpose it had when first bought. If it was a house for a family, it should continue to be used for that purpose, instead of dividing rights to it among several male descendants.

This shows us that a particular family of a kin group sometimes owns rights to more plots of land than the rest of the kin group, if the family has specifically received a plot of land from another Mentawai kin group as payment of a penalty, a bride price or compensation. In fact, the family may even possess exclusive rights to a particular plot of land because the land was given to them as compensation for a particular misdeed done to the family by another group. The following generations of that family may keep their ownership to that plot.
of land. They may freely decide if they would like to sell the land to other people. Or currently, they can surrender standing woods on the land to timber companies, as is happening at this moment in several places in the Mentawai Islands. In this way Mentawaians may gain profit from their land in a short period of time.

Due to different social arrangements involving land, landownership is a very complex issue in Mentawai. A kin group may live far from its land; however its rights to land remain unchanged. Planted trees like durian and other fruit trees serve as evidence of the landownership of the kin group. And the family stories are sources of information explaining the attachment of the kin group to particular plots of land.

I have briefly discussed how Mentawaians possess land and resources. This says something about their economy. Mentawaians traditionally rely on the natural resources of their land. They often cultivate the land too, planting a variety of crops. These days in Mentawai, people do not always depend on land and natural resources. Some people seek other ways of making a living. I explain that in the next section.

3.4 The economy of Mentawai

Traditionally, Mentawaians extracted most of their daily needs from the natural surroundings. They relied on domesticated pigs and chickens for livestock. Mentawaians in the interior of the islands went hunting and those who lived in the coastal areas went fishing in order to supplement their daily diet. They planted diverse crops, namely bananas, taro, coconut, cassava, and sweet potatoes, besides consuming sago. Sago was the staple food for people residing on Siberut, while bananas and taro were the staple food for people living on Sipora and Pagai. In addition, they gathered certain vegetables and other edible foods in the forest. Mentawaians cook their food by boiling, steaming and baking. Some particular foods are eaten raw as well.

The government has made a variety of efforts to change the lifestyle of Mentawaians from traditional to modern. One government programme is to change Mentawaians’ diet by promoting rice as the staple food for ‘modern people’. In order to be modern, Mentawaians should eat rice instead of sago or taro. Due to the absence of rice cultivation in Mentawai, the local government suggested that Mentawaians plant rice on unused plots of land near settlements. In the 1970s, Mentawaians residing in government-established villages began to cultivate rice (Persoon, 1992). In the course of time, sago as the staple food on Siberut has been replaced by rice. Now, twenty years later, Mentawaians in the coastal areas and in government villages really depend on rice, while sago has remained the staple food for people still living a traditional lifestyle in upriver settlements.
Ironically, as Mentawaians began to get accustomed to rice, they also stopped planting it. Persoon (1992) assumes that Mentawaians were not able to cope with the intense attention required to take care of rice-fields and to control pests attacking rice crops, and that they were not experienced enough to deal with Mentawai’s unpredictable dry and wet seasons. Consequently, a lot of rice fields have been left uncultivated. As most Mentawaians have become accustomed to eating rice, they now depend on the import of about 50,000 kilograms of rice from Padang every week. A Minangkabau merchant in Muara Siberut imports about 10,000 kilograms of rice from Padang every week in order to supply the needs of local buyers, who are mostly Mentawaians. This man is not the only rice merchant in Muara Siberut. There are several others who sell rice in the sub-district of Muara Siberut. A few families who own a plot of land have sold their land for rice.

Besides rice, Mentawaians also depend on other imported goods such as sugar, tobacco, salt, cigarettes, and other consumer products that are all imported from Padang. Cellular phones of different types and brands, motorbikes, and satellite dishes for television are all products that are changing the lifestyle of a new generation of Mentawaians. In order to afford those things, Mentawaians produce and sell copra (the dried flesh of coconut), rattan, and such other products as nutmeg and cloves, or they distil the oil of the patchouli plant (*Pogostemon cablin*). The history of cash crops in Mentawai began only in the 1970s. New cash crops like cacao have been introduced to Mentawai. However, Mentawaians are never in a position to set the prices of these products. Mentawaians lack knowledge about how to maintain a consistently high quality of their products, which would give them a better bargaining position in dealing with local buyers and traders (Persoon, 1985: 71-80). Local buyers and traders from Padang can therefore easily manipulate the price of a product.

In the past two decades, more and more educated Mentawaians have found jobs in private companies, non-governmental organizations, and the government of Mentawai Archipelago District, thus earning a monthly salary. Many plots of land in Mentawai have been affected by this current situation where a lot of people seek other jobs instead of farming. One consequence is that many plots of land are left uncultivated and neglected. Even many of the young people in each village without any steady occupation are unwilling to work on the land. Oddly, such young people are mostly keen to gain fast cash. Instead of working in the fields, they prefer to sell the land to logging companies or to private buyers. The younger people first persuade the older generation in their kin group to sell their land for instant cash. Luckily, not all those of the older generation are easily manipulated by the younger generation. The older generation also learned something from mistakes of other groups that had sold their land to logging or private buyers. Kin groups who sold their land have been in a difficult situation recently because they cannot cultivate their land anymore.
nor do they cultivate other people's land. Meanwhile, their money is spent soon after they receive it, leaving them without any means to earn a living.

Currently, many plots of land located in the capitals of sub-districts such as Sikabaluan, Muara Siberut, Tuappejat, Sioban and Sikakap are now in the hands of Sumatran and Javanese migrants, and a number of hectares are used for government buildings. There are also a lot of Mentawaians who have migrated to other places in the Mentawai Islands and bought a plot of land from local landowners.

Many plots of land located outside of government villages (desa) are being exploited by logging companies, as the companies have obtained a concession from the government to log off the area. However, the companies may not immediately carry out the deforestation. First they have to negotiate with the landowners. The landowners receive a certain amount of money as compensation. This money is divided among the family members that have rights to the land.

However, surrendering a plot of land to logging companies or local buyers does not occur easily. When one kin group considers surrendering a plot of land, other kin groups try to stop them. These other groups claim to have the same rights to the land as the group that wants to sell it. It seems to happen often that a plot of land is claimed by two or more kin groups. This may occur due to the indistinct status of the ownership of the plot of land. Debates among the groups about the land may take days, weeks, even months. Moreover, it is not enough to discuss the problem among themselves. People of other kin groups who are familiar with that plot of land are asked to present their testimony too. Local authorities are asked to witness the meetings.

Mentawaians make use of different ways to win a land conflict, for instance by telling family stories about their ownership of the disputed land. The other way is to present a riddle or tricky question related to the status of the land and then wait for an answer from their opponents. If the opponents cannot solve the riddle or question, they may be seen as not having rights to the land. The riddle or question is used like a ‘code’. For instance, a conflict occurred in Saibi Muara where two different kin groups disputed the ownership of a plot of land. After meeting for several days, one group posed a question to the other, asking the name and sex of a person known to have been killed on that plot of land. The other group did not know the name and sex of the person killed. Therefore, the group that asked the question won the case.

### 3.5 Concluding remarks

*Arat* is an essential term for the ethnography of Mentawai. *Arat* embraces cultural values, social customs, ritual practices and other religious aspects. The repetition of daily activities in order to materialize ideas in behaviours and
cultural objects is regarded as *arat* as well. The current changes taking place in Mentawai have an impact on *arat*. Mentawaians have voluntarily adjusted some of their cultural values so that they are compatible with changes introduced or imposed by outsiders and governments. Even if Mentawaians do not want to change, the government or other outsiders often force them to change. Some groups of Mentawaians accept and practise new values. Others cannot accept the changes and continue to practise their traditional culture. Rejection of changes is usually shown by people literally moving away to a place where they can continue their traditional lifestyle. In some Mentawai communities, the arrival of change is accepted. While practising many aspects of their traditional culture, new values are adopted as well. In the course of time, the changes are accepted and integrated in the traditional culture. Mentawaians currently combine customs from their own culture and customs introduced from outside.

These changes affect the attitude of Mentawaians toward their culture and toward specific traditions like oral tradition. Therefore, changes in *arat* are expressed not only in material culture, behaviours and ritual performances, but also in narratives like family stories, as we will see in the following chapters.