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4 Stories about the origins of the inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands

4.1 Introduction

Historical accounts of Mentawai people have been produced by Europeans since John Crisp wrote an account of the inhabitants of a Mentawai island called Poggy (Pagai) in 1799. European anthropologists, linguists and historians have made efforts to answer the question of where the ancestors of the present-day inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands came from. They examined cultural characteristics of Mentawaians and features of the language. They examined people’s physical appearance as well (van Beekering, 1947). Most of these scholars concluded that the ancestors of today’s Mentawaians came from Sumatra, either directly or indirectly, via Nias (Schefold 1989a). Mentawaians are assumed by scholars to be descended from Austronesian communities that migrated from Formosa (Taiwan) to Sumatra, arriving in Mentawai about 2000 years ago (Bellwood 1995).

Limited attention has been paid to stories told by the Mentawaians about their origins, even though European scholars have gathered the stories and discuss some of them. These stories of origins probably do not solve the question of the origins of the early inhabitants of Mentawai Islands. They do not contain a history, strictly speaking, of the Mentawaians. However, the stories may provide historical elements that can be used to understand aspects of the origins of the Mentawaians. I look at them in order to find out significant elements of the origins of Mentawaians.

I do not mean to survey the prehistory or history of the Mentawaians in this chapter, but rather to figure out some historical matters of the origins of the Mentawaians that are described by the Mentawaians in their stories about the origins of the early population of Mentawai Islands. I want to find out what the Mentawaians themselves think of their origins. To this end I deal with several stories of origin.
A study on Austronesian societies edited by James J. Fox and Clifford Sather (1996) provides extensive comparative perspectives for understanding origin structures and systems of precedence. An article by Fox (1995) focusing on the concept of origin and the way it is designated in a large number of Austronesian languages provides a perspective that may help to understand the origins of the Mentawaians. I will use this perspective in order to understand what current inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands say about their origins. On the other hand, ideas of origins found in Mentawai can contribute to the comparative study of Austronesian societies.

I consider the stories transcribed by several earlier scholars, who collected a number of stories of origin told by Mentawaians. Some of these stories describe the arrival of the first inhabitants of Mentawai. Some stories tell of the arrival of Malay people from Sumatra who later merged with local Mentawai communities. Other stories narrate the arrival of people from Nias who merged with the first inhabitants of the islands. Through the generations, it gets difficult to distinguish people who came first, from those who came later; the majority of the current inhabitants are all recognized as Mentawaians.

James J. Fox points out crucial elements in identifying the origins of persons or groups. ‘Conceptions of ancestry are invariably important but rarely is ancestry alone a sufficient and exclusive criterion for defining origin. Recourse to notions of place is also critical in identifying persons and groups, and thus tracing origins’ (1996: 5). Fox furthermore argues that alliance, defined in the broad sense of relations of persons and groups to one another, is also an important element in defining origins. Together, all of these notions imply an attitude towards the past: the past is knowable, knowledge of the past is of value, what happened in the past has set a pattern for the present, and it is essential to have access to the past in order to make sense of the present (Fox 1996: 5).

In the Mentawai case, stories of origin collected from different kin groups are useful for determining where the ancestors of the majority of inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands came from. However, stories of origin of the first inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands, as recounted by particular individuals, may not necessarily explain the origins of those individuals themselves. Their stories about Mentawai origins do not always speak of their own origins. The stories just give an idea of the first place inhabited by the first arrival in Mentawai.

Nonetheless, after analysing the stories of origin, a place of origin of ancestors of the majority of the current inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands can be suggested. This place then becomes the starting point for tracing the course of migration of the ancestors of the current inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands. It so happens that in Mentawai, migratory movements are marked by plots of ancestral land claimed by the ancestors of the current inhabitants, and therefore to the validity of present-day claims to these plots of land. However, the descendants of these ancestors dispute ownership to some of these plots of
land. That is why it is important to Mentawaians themselves to determine the place of origin of current inhabitants’ ancestors.

I begin by examining stories collected previously by several scholars. After that, I analyse stories collected during my own fieldwork. I divide the stories into several periods. Some stories were collected between 1842 and 1930. Other stories were collected between 1960 and 1991, and I recorded a number of additional stories myself, after 2000. I examine the stories in order to identify a place of origin, on the one hand, but I also compare the stories to each other to see what features they share.

4.2 Stories of origin gathered between 1842 and 1930

In this section I examine stories collected in the period 1842–1930. These stories were collected by Morris (1900), Neumann (1909), Hansen (1915), Kruyt (1923, 1924), Loeb (1929b) and Wirz (1929-30). Some of the stories have been re-edited and republished by Bruno Spina (1981). I start this section by looking at Neumann’s report published in 1909. Neumann did not collect the story himself. He discovered a report dated 1842, which records a legend about Muko-muko people arriving at the Pagai islands by means of a raft.

4.2.1 Neumann’s report

The assistant resident of Bengkulu wrote a report7 on 17 November 1842. The report contains information on the origins of the Mentawaians residing on the Pagai islands. The report intrigued Neumann because it records a myth or legend shedding light on the origins of the contemporary Mentawaians residing on the Pagai islands. Neumann quotes the legend in his report titled De Mentawei-eilanden (1909) as follows:

In overoude tijden gebeurde het eens, dat twee personen, een man en eene vrouw van Kataun, door den sultan van Moko Moko wegens het plegen van ongeoorloofde gemeenschap zwaar beboet warden. De boete niet kunnende betalen werden zij door den sultan en zijne rijksgroten veroordeeld, om beiden op een bamboezen vlot gezet en aan de golven prijst gegeven te worden. Dit gebeurde. Na zeven dagen zonder eten en drinken op zee rondgezworven te hebben, kwamen zij op de Poggie eilanden en werden de stamouders der volgende geslachten. (Neumann 1909: 196)

7 Neumann gives the archival number 795/535 without mentioning the name of the archive it was found in.
This story may be translated into English as follows:

A long time ago, it happened that two persons, a man and a woman of Kataun, were punished by the sultan of Moko Moko [spelled today Muko-muko] because they had had an unlawful sexual relationship. The sultan required them to pay a certain amount of money as a fine for their misbehaviour. They did not have enough money to pay the sultan, so the sultan and his followers condemned them to be put on a bamboo raft in the ocean. This was done, and they began to drift on the waves. After seven days on sea without food or drink, they arrived on the Pogge [Pagai] islands and became the ancestors of the following generations.

Neumann does not mention whether the assistant resident of Bengkulu recorded the story from Mentawaians dwelling on the Pagai islands or from Malay people living in Bengkulu. Nonetheless, the legend as quoted by Neumann tells of the existence of an ancestral connection between two different groups of people: those residing in Pagai in Mentawai and those residing in Muko-muko in Bengkulu, Sumatra.

Regarding the connection between these two different groups, Mentawaians on the Pagai islands in recent times also told a legend about Minuang, which is a local name for a huge tree, and Manyang, a local name for a giant eagle (see Spina, 1980: 17-18). The legend in Spina's book says that the giant eagle stayed on top of a tree that was standing in Pagai and fed himself by eating people in Sumatra. The legend does not mention the exact place in Sumatra from where the people had come in order to kill the giant eagle.

During my fieldwork, the same legend was told to me by the people who proclaim to be descendants of the ancestors from Muko-muko in Bengkulu. In their stories, the huge tree shaded Bengkulu in the afternoons, as the sun began to sink towards the horizon. Pagai is located to the west of Sumatra off the coast. People in Bengkulu got curious about the shadow and wanted to find out where the tree was located. Besides, they wanted to find out where the eagle lived. When people from Muko-muko arrived at the Pagai islands, other groups of people from Siberut had already occupied the Pagai islands, with the same curiosity. As recounted in the legend of Minuang and Manyang, people from Siberut and Muko-muko worked together to cut down the tree where the eagle was sitting. After the huge tree fell, the giant eagle flew away towards Sumatra, where it died. One group of Muko-muko people returned to Bengkulu, while another group stayed in Pagai.

In fact, I came across a lot of Mentawaians in Pagai, Sipora, and the southern part of Siberut who claimed to be descended from a group of people who were originally from Muko-muko. The majority of them use this story to explain their arrival on Pagai. Their ancestors began a life in Pagai, and afterwards some families moved to Sipora and Siberut.
and his family are an example of a family who moved from Pagai to Siberut. Martinus Obet Salamanang, when interviewed by Schefold in 1967, stated that his ancestors came from Muko-muko. When I met Martinus in the 1980s, he was like other Mentawaians. He spoke Mentawai and had the kin-name Salamanang. Unfortunately, he had no tattoos; perhaps the government had prohibited him from being tattooed. Moreover, his ancestors did not come from Simatalu on Siberut. His ancestors had arrived on the Pagai islands several generations ago. His family actually is one of many Muko-muko families that have come to live in Mentawai, who are currently perceived as belonging to the Mentawai community.

### 4.2.2 Morris’s collection

Max Morris had the opportunity to visit the island called si Kobo (currently known as Sipora) in 1897 in order to study the Mentawai language under the supervision of Alfred Maass. He also wanted to study the dialects spoken in Siberut and Pagai. He gathered a lot of stories in Sioban on the island of Sipora. Transcriptions of his findings are included in his book titled *Die Mentawai-Sprache* (1900). Examining his transcriptions, I observe that the dialect resembles the dialect spoken today in the southern part of Siberut, not the dialect spoken today on Sipora. When I was in Sipora in 2004, I recognised another dialect spoken in there. It was not the same dialect in the storytexts gathered by Morris. I therefore conclude that Morris recorded the stories of a Mentawai community that had a linguistic connection with the Mentawaians living in the southern part of Siberut, in Katurei Bay and Taileleu.

His findings include a number of stories. Two of Morris’s transcriptions are stories of origin of people living in Siberut and Sipora. The first story, here translated into English, is as follows:

A group of people lived in the sky. They created this earth, trees, houses, fish, grass, and everything [on earth]. Afterwards, they created human beings: a man and a woman. Then the people [in the sky] came down to earth and brought two dogs: a male and a female. The sky people saw the two persons. ‘If you remain just as you are now, both of you will not expand.’ The dogs mated. ‘You have to see how dogs mate; you have to do like that in order to expand your numbers.’ That was what the people of the sky said to the two persons. After that, the two people on earth began to bring life to a son, afterwards to a daughter. The children grew up and they married each other. Then the new couple had children as well. Thereafter, many people were on this earth. Crocodiles taught people how to make a canoe. The canoe was given a sail. Many people got into the canoe and sailed. When the canoe arrived at various places, some remained there. They arrived first at Taileleu [in Siberut], after-
wards they arrived at Sabirut [Muara Siberut]. Then our families expanded on this island. (Morris 1900: 54-55)

The second story is about the migration of people in Siberut to Sipora. This group of people is regarded as the first group in Sipora, as they arrived there without meeting other people. The story goes like this:

From Sabirut we moved here [to Sioban on the island of Sipora]. We opened a settlement and had gardens so that we could grow bananas, coconuts, and fruits. Thereafter many people died because they had been shot by demons: female and male demons. Shamans killed the demons. Then people went to get drinking water. Demons attacked them. Many people died; two people stayed alive: a woman and a man. When the Barau people sailed to Sabirut, the two people joined the Barau. Afterwards, people returned to this place [Sioban in Sipora] and populated it. Our ancestors lived in this place. One of our ancestors was called si Obat [sic] [Ubat = white-haired man, meaning an old man]. The name of our ancestor was si Obat, the name which our ancestors [later] used to identify the place. The place-name means ‘the old white-haired man’s place.’ (Morris 1900: 55-56)

These stories are similar to what Hansen gathered in Pagai (see next section). To his knowledge, it was Malay people from Sumatra who told the story. It seems that, after occupying Siberut and Sipora, they moved to the Pagai islands. Current descendants of these people told the same story to Hansen, and it has similar features to the story collected by Morris. In Morris’s stories, it is not really clear where the first human beings had lived before sailing to Mentawai. Nonetheless, the stories say that the first sailors arrived at a place called Taileleu (in the southern part of Siberut island) and settled in the valley of Sabirut. These people, after expanding their numbers in Siberut, moved to Sioban on Sipora island.

4.2.3 Hansen’s account

The story collected by Max Morris (the first of the two stories in the previous section) resembles a story collected by J.F.K. Hansen. Hansen was a Dutch marine commander in Pagai for ten months in 1911 and 1912. During his stay, he gained knowledge of Mentawaians and their culture and recorded his observations in a book titled De groep Noord en Zuid Pageh van de Mentawei-Eilanden (1915). Hansen’s book presents several stories, and one of these stories is simi-
lar to Morris’s story. I will not quote the entire story here, but note some points that make Hansen’s story dissimilar to Morris’s.

In Hansen’s collection, there were sky spirits that had created an island called Sumatra. So, Sumatra was the first place created, and the place where the first people lived. Crocodiles taught the people to make canoes. The people then used the canoes with sails to reach Siberot (Siberut). A number of these people remained in Siberut while others returned to Sumatra. Then, the story tells about the journey of people in Siberut to Pageh (Pagai islands), where they went to find a large bird called Manyang, which had eaten many people in Siberut. In order to get rid of the bird, people made smoke under the tree where the bird stayed. This did not work to get rid of the bird, however.

Hansen’s story subsequently tells that a group of people stayed in Pageh while another group returned to Siberut. Afterwards, people in Pageh went to Sumatra, asking for help. People from Sumatra came to Pageh to help kill the bird. They found the bird in a nest on the top of the tree, and put themselves to work cutting the tree down. When people cut the tree during the daytime, it grew again at night. Therefore, they cut it day and night. Eventually the tree fell; the bird flew away towards Sumatra, where it died.

Hansen (1915: 193) notes several points about this narrative: 1) the first people lived in Sumatra, and they did not know how to make canoes. They also did not know of the existence of the Mentawai Islands; 2) after they learned how to make canoes, they began their journey to Mentawai; 3) at that time no other people inhabited the island of Siberut, nor were the islands of Pagai inhabited. Thus it was only people from Sumatra who populated the islands; 4) after people first arrived on the islands, they travelled frequently between Sumatra and Mentawai; 5) people at that time knew and were familiar with metals and clothes, but as the supply of these materials decreased, people’s skills in using them also declined. People then made use of loincloths and bows and arrows; 6) afterwards, people became accustomed to travelling frequently between Sumatra, Siberut and Pagai.

4.2.4 Kruyt’s report

Another scholar who paid attention to stories of origin is Albert C. Kruyt. He was a teacher and a missionary. Kruyt visited the Pagai islands for two months only (February and March 1921), but he gathered a lot of information at the places where the majority of people had been converted to Christianity, and he included information provided by O. Werkmann, who was also a missionary. Mentawaians who had converted to Christianity were willing to tell him a lot of stories. In his report titled Een bezoek aan de Mentawei-eilanden (1924), Kruyt presents a story. The detailed story is as follows:
According to a story already well known long ago among people on the islands of Sakalagan [Pagai islands], there were two big canoes (kinapat), fully occupied by men; they sailed (mulajo) leaving Padang for elsewhere in a westward direction. Prior to departure, they prepared two things to be used as tools that would be recognizable whenever they would meet elsewhere someday. For this purpose, they took with them giant clam\textsuperscript{9} shells (pelebu) and a whetstone (asaan). Each canoe had to bring one half of the tridacna shells and one half of the equally divided whetstone. Afterwards, they left according to the initial plan, going in a westward direction from Sumatra.

After being apart for quite some time, it was a long time before they met again; hence, they did not recognize each other anymore. They met again near the islands of Mentawai; all of the men in each canoe prepared for shooting by using guns. They fired their guns from one canoe to another, but none of the people were injured or killed. They began wondering why no one had been injured. They then took their tools, and their part of the giant clam shell. Both parties shouted to each other, 'Do you have the other part of this shell?' They answered, 'Yes!' And again, 'Do you have a part of this whetstone?' People on both canoes all together said, 'Yes!' 'Come closer and let us match up the shells and the whetstone in order to ensure that we are the same.'

Thus, they came closer and put together the shells and the whetstone. The two parts fitted perfectly. They then realized why they could not shoot each other: because they were members of one family. Thereafter, one canoe returned to Padang and another canoe attempted to move towards the island of Siberut.

Before the separation between them occurred, people who wanted to go to Siberut island requested rice seeds and clothes from their relatives who wanted to return to Padang. But the group who wanted to go to Padang said, 'If we give you the rice seeds and clothes, we are afraid that you all will never return to us.' The people from Padang who went to Siberut indeed never returned to Padang. This is the reason why on the Mentawai Islands no rice and clothes were available. On the island of Sakalagan (Pagai islands), people still remember that rice and clothes had had to be imported from Padang for the past three generations. That [importing of rice and clothes] would thus have started about 1850. (Kruyt 1924: 33)

This story shares many features with the stories gathered by Morris and Hansen. The story tells that the first inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands departed from their initial home in Padang (the capital city of West Sumatra). They arrived at Siberut by means of sailing canoes. However, the story does not describe the course of migration from Siberut to Sipora and further to Pagai, although Kruyt had gathered the story among Mentawaians residing in Pagai. This story was gathered in 1921 and the storyteller had made a little variation

\textsuperscript{9} Sometimes it is called tridacna.
in the story, by mentioning guns instead of bows and arrows. It is possible that the Dutch who came with guns to Mentawai in the early 1900s had influenced this story. What is important about the story is the information about where the first Mentawaians came from and where they arrived. It is clearly mentioned that the inhabitants departed from Sumatra and arrived in Siberut. Current inhabitants in Pagai from whom the story was recorded might have an ancestral link to those Sumatran sailors.

4.2.5 Loeb’s and Wirz’s descriptions

Edwin M. Loeb published *Mentawei Myths* (1929b), a book containing a number of stories. Loeb collected the stories together with a German missionary known as Minister Börger. A few Batak people from North Sumatra who were sent to teach Mentawaians on the Pagai islands helped Loeb and Börger to collect the stories. Eight of the stories in Loeb’s *Mentawei Myths* are similar to Karl Simanjuntak’s handwritten stories collected in 1914. He was one of several Batak teachers who worked for a Protestant missionary at that time. Unfortunately, there is no story in Loeb’s publication that tells about the origins of the first Mentawaians. But there are several stories narrating the transformation of animals into humans or the reverse, signifying the origins of something (see Loeb 1929b). This tells us that the Mentawaians also have a sort of mythical stories of origin, which, unlike what I call family stories, do not indicate links with people living today. Schefold (1989b) has extensively discussed this issue in his article on myths and the gender perspective.

The last group of early collected stories of Mentawai origins I examined is by Paul Wirz. Wirz studied the work of Maass (1899) and Kruyt (1924). He visited Siberut in 1926 and stayed there for a short time. Wirz wrote a report of his visit, *Het eiland Sabiroet en zijn bewoners* (1929-30). In the report, he writes about the origins of the first settlers in the place called Simatalu in the northwestern part of Siberut. Based on stories collected from Mentawaians, Wirz concludes that the first settlers arrived at a coastal area of Siberut by means of canoe, but the stories do not indicate where those settlers came from. The arrival of the first settlers was followed by several waves of migration. The migratory movements at that time were of people who lived on the Batu islands, situated among the southern islands of Nias (see Wirz 1929-30: 135). However, Wirz does not present stories of the origins of Mentawaians. He just describes how people arrived at Siberut and how they expanded in number. The first settlers became the forebears of the majority of the current Mentawai population residing in the northern part of Siberut, and some of these people moved further south in the Mentawai archipelago.
4.3 **Stories of origin gathered between 1960 and 1991**

Herman Sihombing is one of the scholars who gathered stories of origin in the Mentawai Islands between 1960 and 1991. One story he collected is about a person called Aman Tawe. However, Sihombing is not the only scholar interested in this story. Versions of the same story have also been studied by Hetty Nooy-Palm (1968), Reimar Schefold (an unpublished story he collected in 1969), and Stefano Coronese (1986). This story was apparently quite popular among Mentawaians; however, only a few kin groups claim to be descendants of the man in this story. The other kin groups claim to have originated from other ancestors, as described in the stories above (see section 2) and in the story below of a pregnant woman drifting on a raft. I examine the story of Aman Tawe to find out where the first settlers of the Mentawai Islands arrived and even to find out where the first settlers embarked.

### 4.3.1 Sihombing’s narrative collection

Herman Sihombing, a scholar of law at Andalas University in Padang, carried out fieldwork in Sipora and Pagai in 1960. He was interested in the social life and cultural values of Mentawaians. He also gathered stories from Mentawaians, one of which tells about the origins of a man called Aman Tawe (meaning the father of Tawe, in the Mentawaian language). Several groups of Mentawaians in Sipora and Pagai regard Aman Tawe as their forefather. Sihombing’s research findings were published in 1979 under the title *Mentawai*, from which I quote in my own translation the following story of Mentawai origins.

> Long ago, a Nias person called Ama [Sihombing uses this spelling] Tawe went to the southern part of Nias island to fish. Unfortunately, Ama Tawe’s canoe was hit by rough waves; therefore he arrived at Matalu [in the west-central part of Siberut], at the river mouth of Simatalu. He found many sago palms and taros flourishing. Sago palms and taros grew there naturally. Near to those sago palms and taros, he made a hut. His living conditions in Simatalu were much better than in Nias because of the convenient availability of natural resources like sago palms and taros. He made quite a big canoe in order to fetch his wife and their only child in Nias. The child was called Tawe. When Ama Tawe returned to Simatalu together with his wife and child, several other people came along with the family in the same canoe. This small group of people created a Mentawai community. In order to identify the community, they named themselves and the islands where they lived by making use of Ama Tawe’s name. Because of this, part of the current Mentawaians believe that they came from Simatalu and are descendants of those people from Nias.
The generations of Nias migrants in Simatalu expanded. Then, two siblings (a brother and a sister) had sexual relations so that the sister got pregnant. Consequently, the father of the two siblings and other villagers decided to exile them. After years floating on a raft, the two siblings arrived at Sipora island. Several families went after the siblings because they missed them. The families thus searched for the siblings. The families wanted to live together with the siblings. The families [that wanted to look for the siblings] split up into two groups. One group by means of a raft followed the eastern coastline, while another group followed the western coastline of the islands in a southerly direction. In order to be able to recognize one another later, these two groups were requested to bring half of a whetstone with them to Simatalu as a sign to identify each other. They thus began to depart [from Simatalu] going southwards. After years passed, they did not find the two siblings in Sipora. Therefore, they went beyond Sipora and finally arrived at the Pagai islands. The two groups came across each other at a place called Talu Pulai. They [the two groups] did not recognize each other anymore. They began to shoot at each other. But nobody was injured or killed. They then remembered that they had brought half of a whetstone. They joined each other's whetstones and saw that the two pieces fit together. Afterwards, they built a settlement in Talu Pulai. There they planted coconut trees as a *kelapa peringatan*, or symbol of making peace with each other. (Sihombing 1979: 17-19; translation by JT, 2005)

Hetty Nooy-Palm, a Dutch anthropologist, was interested in the story of Aman Tawe and discussed it as well. She did fieldwork in Sipora and the Pagai islands in the early 1960s and collected a version of the story that is very similar to Sihombing's transcription. When Nooy-Palm asked her Mentawaian informants where they came from, they told her the story of Aman Tawe in order to explain their origins. The same story was referred to when explaining the origin of the islands and the origin of the name Mentawai. The name belonged
to a man called Aman Tawe who came from Nias (Nooy-Palm 1968:165-6). This person was thus seen as their forefather.

Schefold encountered the same case when visiting Sipora in 1969, where he met Jonas Samongilailai and recorded a story of Aman Tawe told by him. Schefold and I listened to the tape of the story. In general, the story is similar in content to the story (the first part) collected by Herman Sihombing. Stefano Coronese (1986: 12-13) collected a story similar to the stories studied by Sihombing, Nooy-Palm, and Schefold, when he did fieldwork in Mentawai in the 1980s. This part I also heard when I gathered stories of origin of Mentawaians in Siberut in 2002, stories telling that Aman Tawe was from Nias and lived in Simatalu. I think the story and the people who told me the story are unrelated. The Mentawaians who told me the story of Aman Tawe did not claim to be descendants of Aman Tawe. But they did claim that their ancestors came from Simatalu; however, they were not descendants of Aman Tawe. They mentioned other names whenever referring to their ancestors, who had come from Nias prior to inhabiting Simatalu or adjacent places on Siberut. So, particular Mentawai kin groups definitely believe that their ancestors embarked from Nias before dwelling on Siberut and other Mentawai islands.

The story of Aman Tawe is not the only story telling about the origins of Mentawaians to be collected between 1960 and 1991. Another story is about a pregnant woman drifting on a raft and later marrying her own son. Reimar Schefold is the first scholar to have gathered and published this story. The woman’s name is unknown. Perhaps the Mentawai storyteller did not mention her name when Schefold first collected the story. The woman was just identified by her pregnant status. Nonetheless, several Mentawai kin groups believe that she is their first ancestor.

I examine Schefold’s story of the pregnant woman in order to figure out the location where the woman began her life on Siberut. I also note some similarities of the story to others that I gathered during fieldwork, as some of the stories indicate other places where the woman arrived.

4.3.2 Schefold’s narrative collection

Reimar Schefold was the first anthropologist to take the story of a pregnant woman drifting on a raft into account, when he began his research in Mentawai in 1967. He considers other stories of origin of Mentawaians, like the story of Aman Tawe. Schefold examines the story of the pregnant woman drifting on a raft in order to identify where the first Mentawaians came from. The story is discussed in his books, namely in Speelgoed voor de zielen: Kunst en cultuur van de Mentawai-eilanden (1979: 19), Lia: Das Grosse Ritual auf den Mentawai-Inseln (1988: 79), an article titled ‘The origins of the woman on the raft: on the prehistory of the Mentawaians’, (1989a: 2), and Mainan Bagi Roh:
Kebudayaan Mentawai (1991: 22). In his books, Schefold does not present the full story. Instead, he gives a synopsis of it, as follows:

The first humans on Siberut lived in Simatalu in the west part of the island. There was an unknown time [when] a girl and a dog together on a raft landed, nobody knew from where [they had came]. The girl had been expelled by her brother out of shame, because she had had sexual relations with the dog, and out of it she got pregnant. In Simatalu, she gave birth to a son. When he grew up, he wanted to search for a woman; the mother gave him a ring from her finger and ordered him to find a girl that this ring would fit. The son roved about the whole island and met nobody, until after a long time wandering he met his mother again. They did not recognize each other anymore, and the ring fitted. From this couple, the first Mentawaian was born. (Translation from German (Schefold 1988: 79) by JT, 2005; see Schefold 1979: 17; 1989a: 2; 1991: 22 for a similar version of the story)

In order to become familiar with the full version, Schefold and I listened together to the whole story recorded in 1969 as told by Nikodemus Siritoitet, a Mentawai police officer, in Muara Siberut on Siberut island. Schefold allowed me to transcribe the story and use it for finding out about the origins of Mentawaians. Nikodemus's story is as follows:

**Story 1**

This is a story about the first woman. The narrative goes like this. At the time she arrived on this island of Siberut, there were no other people yet; no people were living on the island of Siberut. According to this story, a woman arrived here because other people sent her away drifting on a raft. We do not know where she came from. According to this narrative told by older people (sikebukat) in Mentawai, she had been drifting away on a raft. People did that to her because she made a mistake. Her mistake was that she broke a custom of her community. A lot of people [of her community] like her brothers, parents, relatives and everybody got angry with her and decided to expel her from the community. They put her on a raft, thus they sent her away. She began to drift, drift, drift, drift, drift.

Her actual mistake was that she had sexual relations with someone. No one knew who the man was. Because of the sexual relations, she got pregnant. Therefore, the other family members felt ashamed. They thus decided to send her away. They actually wanted to send her to death at that moment. However, the mercy of her brothers saved her life. They [her brothers] set her adrift by means of a raft. Thus she drifted, drifted, drifted away until she arrived at the area called Simatalu. The precise place where she lived is unknown, and the only place that was heard by most people was Simatalu.
She stayed in Simatalu through the course of time until she gave birth to a son. Then she took care of him, raised him, and the son grew, grew, grew until he turned into an adult. Thereafter, the time came for the mother to ask her son to search for a wife. ‘Ta’ina [poor child], go and search for my taliku [daughter-in-law].’ The son replied, ‘Who is she, the daughter-in-law I should find?’ The mother said, ‘Here is my ring and you must look for her around this place, around this island; when you find one you have to fit this ring to her finger, but if the ring does not fit, you must not stop seeking for her yet.’

Thus, the son took the ring from his mother and his adventures began. He wandered around the island; he wandered, wandered, wandered around many places. This continued for days and nights, months, and maybe years until he had wandered over the whole island. We could say here that it was many years, because after that when he stumbled upon his mother again he did not recognize her anymore. When they met again, the mother greeted him. ‘Where do you want to go?’ The son replied, ‘I am looking for a woman to be my wife.’ And the mother asked another question, ‘What does she look like, the woman you are searching for to be your wife?’ The son answered her, ‘Here is the ring once given by my mother to me. If this ring fits her finger she will become my wife. So, if you are willing, you can try to fit this ring. If it fits your finger, you can become my wife.’ Thus, she fitted the ring on her finger and it indeed fitted. He was surprised. ‘Tikai! [a word expressing amazement] It fits on your finger. Now you must become my wife.’ So they became husband and wife.

But the woman knew who the man was. He was her own son, but she did not speak up about it. She kept the secret in order to fulfil the message. After that, they lived together for an unknown time and they had children, but we [current Mentawaians] do not know how many people they produced and who they are now.

We do not know the origins of this woman. Maybe she came from Nias, or Batak [the predominant ethnic group of North Sumatra]. Her origins remain unclear to me up to this very moment. So this story ends here. [Nikodemus Siritoitet narrated this story to Schefold in Muara Siberut in 1969.]

The story told by Nikodemus has several features that we can indeed find in Schefold’s synopsis. What is important to me is the identification of the place where the woman first arrived on the Mentawai Islands, which was at Simatalu on Siberut. However, her origins before arriving in Mentawai are unknown to this storyteller. However, Simatalu, where the woman arrived, is uncertain as well, because during fieldwork I gathered the same story from several Mentawai storytellers mentioning other places. We look at these other versions of the story in the next section.
4.4 Stories of origin collected between 2002 and 2006

In 2002, I visited Simatalu, hoping to meet someone who could tell me the story of the pregnant woman and the story of Aman Tawe. It appeared that nobody was familiar with these stories. I then decided to visit a neighbouring village called Sirisura, where I met Tengatiti Siribetug, a 60-year-old man who once provided Schefold with great hospitality and socio-cultural information and was Schefold’s best friend during his fieldwork in Mentawai (Schefold 1988: 50). Tengatiti narrated the story of the pregnant woman to me:

Story 2
‘So… long ago, on the island of Siberut, there were no inhabitants. Other people have told me that one person arrived first. That person first lived in Nias, more precisely on the island of Tello. The person was a woman. She got pregnant without anyone knowing who her husband was. Because of being ashamed, the family members of the pregnant woman became angry and they nearly assassinated her.

She felt humiliated by the fact that she had become pregnant from an unknown husband. Hence, she made a raft in order to go away from her family. The raft was made out of bamboo and wood. She rode the raft. From the island of Tello, she was able to see the island of Siberut. She thought she would leave Tello and go to the island of Siberut. She rode, rode, rode... rode on the top of the waves... rode, rode, and finally arrived at the beach in Simalegi [northwestern Siberut].

She walked onto the land; beforehand, she had pushed her raft out to sea. She stayed in Simalegi. She stayed, stayed, stayed until she gave birth to a son. She took care of her son. The son grew up; then the mother thought about how to expand their numbers. ‘You are my son, we should search around these places, and we should search for other people and for land.’ The mother went on to say, ‘Take this ring, my ring. When you meet a woman, fit this ring to her finger and if it fits, you should take the woman as my daughter-in-law (taliku-ku).’

Following what his mother said, the son then left to search for a wife. He brought the ring along. He walked around this island. He walked around, walked around, around beaches, around rivers and hills, and after an unknown number of years of wandering, he again met his mother. The son did not recognize his mother anymore because of the long time that had passed.

He took the ring and asked her to try it on. ‘Fit the ring on your finger,’ he said to her. When she did as he asked, the ring fitted properly. ‘Because the ring fits your finger, you are my wife,’ he said to the woman. The woman was his mother. The mother did not remember what she had once said to him. Or perhaps she did not want to remind her son; therefore they got married. Afterwards, people in Siberut began to expand.’ (narrated by Tengatiti Siribetug, 60 years old, in Sirisura, in 2002)
This story is indeed slightly different from previous versions. According to Tengatiti, the woman drifted from Tello island near Nias and arrived at Simalegi instead of Simatalu. In this story, the place of origin of the woman is mentioned. However, this place-name is seldom heard from other storytellers. During fieldwork in Mentawai, I came across other storytellers telling me versions similar to the story told by Nikodemus. They referred to Simatalu as the place where the woman arrived. I do not repeat these stories here due to their similarity. I am, however, going to present another two stories in order to show some specific places the woman may have come from.

The next story was recorded in 2002 from Teu Roime Tatubeket, a 70-year-old man living in Pokai, a village located in the northern part of Siberut. The interview took place in the house of one of Teu Roime’s relatives, where he usually spends his leisure time. His seven relatives gathered in the house listened to our conversation. Teu Roime’s story is as follows:

**Story 3**

I had heard this story from other people who told me that we [Mentawaians] probably came from Nias long ago. But I have recently heard from other people who told me that we perhaps were part of Minangkabau. To me, it is not important whether we came originally from Nias or Minangkabau. The story of our initial ancestors goes the way I heard it, and I am going to narrate it to you. It was a woman in a community. She got pregnant; they [her relatives and neighbours] did not know her husband. They looked for the man who had made her pregnant, but they did not find anyone. She did not want to speak about the man. According to a customary rule (arat, Indonesian adat) in the community, the pregnant woman was sentenced to death. But they did not kill her; they decided instead to set her adrift in a box on a raft. A man in the community felt pity for her; he helped her by putting her belongings and the box onto the raft. He also supplied her with food and some kinds of crops. The raft was washed away to sea.

Meanwhile, shortly afterwards, she arrived on the shore of the place called Simatalu on the island of Siberut. She did not recognize the place; she began her life in this area. After some time, she gave birth to a son. In the course of time, the son grew up to be a young man. ‘If we stay here by ourselves, we will never expand,’ the mother thought. Therefore, the mother requested her son to go away. ‘Look for a wife in order to expand our numbers,’ she said to her son. ‘This is my ring; take it with you. When you search for a woman, then search for her, search for her, search for her until you meet someone like me; you must fit this ring on her finger.’ She added, ‘If the ring fits her finger, then you must take her as your wife.’ She handed the ring to her son. After that the son wandered around the island. He wandered, wandered, wandered, wandered. We do not know how many days, how many months and years. He did not meet anyone else, until finally he came across his own mother.
He remembered what his mother had once told him. He repeated the words and put the ring to her finger. Auspiciously, the ring fitted her finger. The mother knew and recognized the momentous event. Unfortunately, the son did not recognize the woman, who was actually his own mother. He married her, his own mother. They became a family. Since then the numbers of our population have been expanding. (narrated by Teu Roime Tatubeken, 70 years old, in 2002 in Pokai)

To this storyteller, the pregnant woman’s origins – whether she came from Nias or Minangkabau – was unimportant. Nonetheless, he mentioned that a man helped her before she left her homeland. She stayed in the box on a raft while drifting. The pregnant woman arrived at a place called Simatalu. This place became the place of origin of today’s Mentawaians.

However, another storyteller said that the woman arrived elsewhere, near Simatalu. That storyteller was Eugenius Nangi Satoko, a 59-year-old man, who lives in Saibi Muara on Siberut. He had heard the story from people residing in Simalegi. When he was young in the 1970s, this man had frequently visited three areas on the west coast and northern parts of Siberut – Paipajet, Simatalu and Simalegi. He spent a few months in Paipajet, travelled around Simatalu, and eventually settled in Simalegi. The Simalegi people told him the story of a pregnant woman, as follows:

**Story 4**

Somewhere in Nias a woman got pregnant, but most people did not know the man who made her pregnant. According to the customary law [Indonesian *adat*] of the community [in which the woman lived], a woman who got pregnant from an unknown husband had to be sentenced to death. Because of her father’s mercy, the woman was set adrift on a raft, a raft made out of two sago palms.

She arrived at a place called Lebbekeu, a place people in Simalegi called Lebbeseu, located on the west coast of Simatalu. While staying there she gave birth to a son. When her son grew to be a young man, the mother gave him a ring. The mother asked him to walk around the area. If the son met a man, he should consider the man as his own brother; however, if he met a woman, he should take the woman as his wife.

So the son walked around the area. From the coast in Lebbekeu he took a shortcut over the hills to arrive at the river Simatalu. Then he followed the river downstream to the mouth of the river. In the meantime, his mother walked along the beach to the mouth of the river Simatalu as well, and then followed the same river upstream on which her son was travelling downriver. After some time, we do not know how many years, the son turned into a man. Later, he met his mother again in Bat Matalu [the main river basin of Simatalu]. When
they met, the son remembered what his mother had told him to do if he met a woman.

The mother knew who the man was because of the ring on his finger. Shortly thereafter, they got married and lived in Simatalu. Since then, the number of people on the island has been expanding. Currently, [here Eujenius gives his own interpretation of the story] every kin group anywhere in the Mentawai islands always refers to Simatalu as their place of origin. When asked about the beginnings of their inhabitation in Mentawai, Mentawaians always mention Simatalu, because the first ancestral family inhabited a place in Simatalu. Simatalu [as the place of origin] is seen in a lot of stories telling about initial dispersals, such as the stories of sipeu (mango fruit) or sibela siberi (wild boars). People who have these stories always mention Simatalu as the place from where they first came. (narrated by Eujenius Nangi Satoko, 59 years old, in Saibi Muara, in 2002)

Like other narrators of the story of the pregnant woman, Eujenius Nangi Satoko also states that the woman departed from Nias. Her community sentenced her to death for her mistake of getting pregnant without knowing who the man was. However, her life was saved due to her father’s mercy. He decided to set her adrift on a raft instead of killing her. This storyteller states that the woman arrived on the west coast of Siberut, at a place called Lebbekeu, near Simatalu. She gave birth to a son and he grew up. She sent her son to find someone in the area. He did not find a man to be his brother, nor did he find another woman to be his ideal wife. He met his own mother in the upriver place of Simatalu. This place became the settlement of the first family on Siberut.

4.5 Concluding remarks

By looking at details of the stories discussed in this chapter, I conclude that the stories collected between 1960 and 1991 do not have connections with the stories collected between 1842 and 1930. When I carried out fieldwork in 2002, 2004, and 2006, I did not meet storytellers who could tell me stories of origin similar to the stories collected in 1842–1930. Instead, the stories of origin I gathered were similar to the stories collected between 1960 and 1991. What I want to focus on here is: where the first settlers on Mentawai came from, how they came, and what was the first place in Mentawai they are said to have lived. Most stories collected between 1842 and 1930 talk about the arrival of Sumatran people on Siberut and Pagai. However, Sipora is not mentioned in the stories as the destination of the first inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands. According to Kruyt’s report (1924), the stories of origin of inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands collected by scholars between 1842 and 1930 tell how groups of Malay people came to live in Mentawai. These Malay people came directly...
Stories about the origins of the inhabitants of the Mentawai Islands

from Sumatra, more precisely from Padang. Another group also embarked from Sumatra but from another place: Muko-muko in Bengkulu. In the literature between 1930 and 1960, I did not find stories of origin of the Mentawaians. It seems that scholars did not gather any stories of Mentawai origins during this period.

Stories of origin collected between 1960 and 1991 contain information about the arrival of individuals from Nias island. They were a man and a pregnant woman. In the story of Aman Tawe, the first settler is called Aman Tawe. In some versions, a man was washed away from Nias and stranded in Siberut alone. In other versions he arrived with his son or his family and neighbours, but the neighbours returned to Nias. One story tells that the man fetched his family in his homeland before he began a new life on Siberut. Sometimes I come across Mentawaians telling me that Aman Tawe and his family first settled on the island and their neighbours later came to look for them. The neighbours unfortunately did not arrive at the place where Aman Tawe had arrived. It appears that Aman Tawe’s new life on Siberut was the beginning of the current Mentawai population.

A different narrative of the origins of the Mentawai people is the story of the pregnant woman. Her miserable life of getting pregnant without a husband had forced her to leave her homeland in Nias. She was safely stranded in one of several places mentioned, Simatalu or Lebbekeu or Simalegi, where her new life began. She gave birth to a son to whom she later got married. They became the ancestors of several kin groups of current Mentawai inhabitants.

Like the stories collected between 1842 and 1930, Sipora is not mentioned in stories gathered between 1960 and 1990 as the first place the first migrants lived. Sipora appears to have been populated by groups of people living in Siberut, who originated from people who had come from Sumatra or Nias. Moreover, Sipora was also inhabited by groups of people whose ancestors had once come from Muko-muko. These groups merged with other groups who also lived in Mentawai. Collectively they created the current ethnic group of Mentawaians.

These stories of origin tell us that current Mentawaians may originate from different ancestors who departed from various places, like Sumatra and Nias. These ancestors did not arrive at the same place on Siberut. As described by Wirz (1929-30), after the arrival of the first settlers, there were several more waves of migration by other groups of people, with the new migrants arriving at different places on Siberut. After examining the stories I agree with Wirz. The stories mention dissimilar places of origin, that is, dissimilar places of first settlement, such as Simatalu, Lebbekeu, Simalegi and Berisigep in the northern part of Siberut, and Muara Siberut and Taileleu in southern Siberut, as well as the Pagai islands.

What I conclude after looking through all the stories of origin is that I agree with Schefold (1988; 1989a) when he says that the first inhabitants of the
Mentawai Islands came ‘directly or indirectly (via Nias)’ from Sumatra. Nevertheless, I am aware of the probability of a situation where several groups of early settlers did not arrive at and occupy one and the same place on Siberut, because they moved to Mentawai in different waves of migration and arrived at several separate places on Siberut (and possibly the Pagai islands). If one group arrived at an unpopulated place, they might see themselves as the first inhabitants of the islands, not realizing that there were already settlements elsewhere in the islands. In fact, we do not know precisely when, where, and who came first to Mentawai.

The stories of origin of the early inhabitants of Mentawai Islands do not indicate any time of arrival of the early inhabitants. The stories are not reliable as historical sources. However, a lot of information in them can be used to understand the past of the early inhabitants of Mentawai Islands. By analysing family stories of origin, we may conclude that the current Mentawaians were formed from diverse groups who came to live in the Mentawai Islands from various places of origin. This resembles the situation of the Cook Island population as described by Siikala: ‘The origin narratives which at the same time tell about the migration of the original ancestors from the mythical homeland to the present day islands and give their genealogies, create the qualitatively separate island populations’ (Siikala, 1996: 45).

My main concern in this chapter is with current Mentawaians’ ideas about their ancestors and ancestral places in order to understand their genealogical link to ancestral plots of land and the ties existing among related families residing in separate places in the Mentawai Islands. This may help explain the fact that not all kin groups claim the same ancestral domain and ancestral land: it may be because the way they perceive their stories of origin leads them to believe they are not descended from the same ancestors as other groups. I explain this matter further in the following chapters, as I examine family stories about long-ago conflicts that caused migration from places of origin to the Mentawai Islands, and about how the Mentawaians discovered and claimed certain plots of land. Out of the several places of origin mentioned in the family stories, I focus on Simatalu, as it relates to the land conflict I discuss later in this book.