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A Journey in Indonesian Regional Autonomy
The Complications of "Traditional" Village Revival in Mentawai, West Sumatra

This article aims to show the development of local identities and of local government political interests, as captured by clans and élite groups in Mentawai, West Sumatra, Indonesia. An ethnographic analysis was made of those islands in the Indian Ocean, which contain a high diversity of clan dialects/ languages and new élite groups that have emerged as a result of young academic Mentawaians returning from the mainland. Influenced by a notion of indigenous political strength, a change in regional administration has set in motion political lobbying by young academics infused with new political ideas and economic interests. Regional autonomy raised the importance of local specific community demands of minority and indigenous governance, and the formation of local élite groups aligned with local interest groups, especially in remote regions of the Indonesian archipelago. The complications of a political landscape with numerous independent clans and recently created élite groups focused on their own narrow concern have compromised the negotiation capacity to advance the general interests of the communities in the Mentawai archipelago.

INTRODUCTION

This article will discuss the political capture by local clans to impose their local area governance system, and in particular their own language use, in defiance of not only provincial administration legislation, but also of district level. The drawn out debate by the elders of the different clans and the young academics who have returned from the mainland, infused with new awareness of their place of home in Mentawai, are beyond the original spirit of regional autonomy. It was not perceived that regional autonomy would create internal challenges among clans on rather minor matters, as the larger matters of good governance and sound resource exploitation would need all their skills to be applied. Nevertheless, debate on future directions of using indigenous names for institutions in local governance and appropriate economic development, is an inescapable part of the political deliberation process to create a new social environment. Even more, it is an opportunity to advance concepts of shared local economic interest on one side and individual clan interest on the other side, to enable space for compromise and advancement of local positions in island politics.

The Mentawai archipelago is located off the west coast of Sumatra. Because the sparsely populated archipelago, made of four large islands and 252 small islands, averages only thirteen people per square kilometer and has limited developed infrastructure, the Mentawaians were administrated as part of a mainland Minangkabau district till 1999. Due to the Mentawaian cultural and social independence, low economic base, and limited administrative skills, most of the key administrative and commercial sensitive positions were historically held by the mainlanders who profess Islam. As a result of Indonesian laws prescribing faiths only to include world religions and not indigenous minority faiths, Christianity rapidly spread on the islands after the 1950s. This religion would firstly allow the continuation of their traditional diets, and secondly, although severely curtailed, some parts of their traditional culture to flourish. The Minangkabau mainlanders, who held on to most powerful key positions on the islands, had effected a historically uneven development in the sharing of opportunities with the Mentawaians. This triggered a need for research on local Mentawaian development in 2000, after the national introduction of regional autonomy. Since 2002, several minor investigations have been carried out to map the capacity of indigenous governance and economic development. Some of the most significant

cultural and political shifts in the community where described in a doctoral thesis.

INDONESIAN POLITICAL SETTING

The introduced regional autonomy allowed widespread local reform, in which two large and important changes were put forward, which would enhance the political and economic position of the Mentawaians. Firstly, district legislation put in place an adoption of a local Mentawai character on regulations. Secondly, autonomy would enable a better distribution of opportunities in local government positions and in the economic sector, which were previously almost denied to Mentawaians. It was hoped for by the legislators that besides locally based access to resource use and economic development, autonomy would enable local tradition and identity to blossom and would not diminish local unity in the community. Thus, when local autonomy was advanced, after a long struggle against authoritarianism from the Minangkabau provincial level, as well the national implied Javanization from Jakarta, local Mentawai identity reasserted itself from 2000 and onwards. The unforeseen difficulties of internal strife, in which individual clans would be interlocked with different views on natural resource use—such as which appropriate criteria of logging ought to be applied for the rainforest, or the finalization of the form of local government systems—appeared to be unavoidable. This was increased when several regional clans began claiming to hold the key of true Mentawai origins of tradition that ought to be considered in shaping the future of Mentawai. The multiple squabbles on which group of clans truly held the pure examples of Mentawaian culture, or on which considerations ought to be taken in account for a contemporary Mentawaian culture, seemed to be unavoidable.

These negotiations to maintain a traditional view are seen to be of the utmost importance for clan elders. Similarly, it is important to forward and establish democratic principles for everyone to have an equal say in local governance, as advocated by the young élite. In the regional autonomy concept, the sharing of regional resource wealth, especially with the traditional landowners of Mentawai, and the raising of all important levels of welfare and trust in the community, are important issues of concern. Although those might seem to be a highly ambitious aims, a fairer resource distribution of natural resources

and better use of human resources as a result of better cooperation in society are commendable principles.

The early political reform undertaken in the 1998–2000 period, when Suharto was forced to resign from his position as president of Indonesia, required refinement of the political arrangements in regional areas, to accommodate the various ethnic groups in the country (see fig. 1). In West Sumatra, this meant that minority groups, such as those located in the offshore islands of Mentawai, were bound to change economic and social opportunities for locals as supported by legislation. While Mentawai already had become a separate district in 1999, the second adjustment that came in force with the legislation for a nationwide effort in 2000, provided an even greater responsibility for economic and social affairs in regional areas. In the corresponding governmental rationalization in Mentawai, the local culture and local faith that form the base of the worldviews of *Arat Sabulungan* and the validity of the shaman or *Sikerei*, as well as the sense of governance by elders, resurfaced again. Those traditional philosophies that influenced resource uptake and local relations had been neatly tucked away during the autocratic years of Sukarno and Suharto, but had never been forgotten. Regional autonomy had somehow revived the former political power of the *uma* (traditional longhouse where a particular extended clan family regularly gathers and part of the family permanently lives) with newly developed ideas of young academic élite, and governance became equated with locality. In a desire to localize variations, differences were signaled in the village governance structure by clan elders and local élite interests, who were vying for positions in government.

The following developments went through the subsequent lobbying by all interest groups to stand up to a scrutiny of exclusive Mentawai heritage. A local name change for the village office was part of this process in Mentawai. The introduced village community administration system or *desa* had a strong undesirable resemblance to Javanization, a governance philosophy rooted in the culture of the most populated island of the previous Suharto government era. Similar to many other places in Indonesia, Mentawai followed the path of increased local influence and input created by autonomy in local regional administrations.

The recent struggle in the formation of this local particular common local layer of identity and the recognition of local divergence in a political realignment in Indonesian communities has been well

documented (van Klinken 2007; Weintré 2011). The dynamics of it is a continuous process, in which interest group factors create not always smooth changes; on the contrary, it can be subject to quick and also long drawn out processes of negotiations. The plurality of *Indonesiaku* (my Indonesia) and the options within that geopolitical frame are a continued force in the shifting sands in society and change agents that are distinctively active in the background. Attracting local identities to the political landscape has brought about local indigenous awareness and a new élite in almost every part of the nation, where there are, together, more than 300 ethnic groups and even more languages to chose from. The solution to implement sufficient captive local ownership to regional areas with local political actors, as a means to distribute local wealth of natural and human resources, is a continuous work in progress (Weintré 2011).
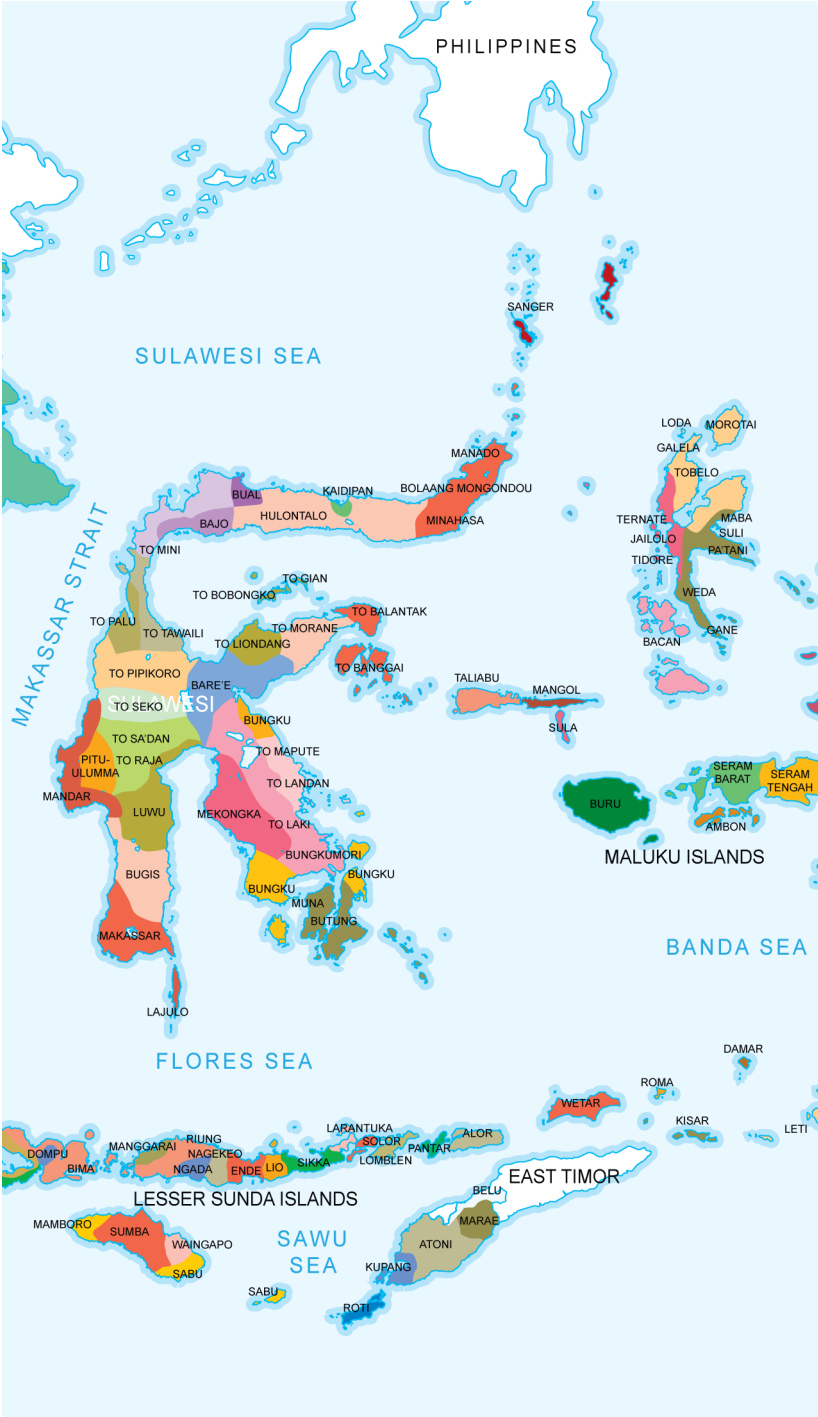
MENTAWAI

The historical national village legislation issued in 1974 and strengthened in 1979,[1] demanded a state initiated unification of small traditional communities in a system of village (*desa*) government unit bureaucracies. This process created strong resentment to the central government in Java, where the *desa* model originated. In particular, in some of the remote areas, where collegial trust of elders and clan hierarchal systems are the norm in governance, local practices in which leaders were not chosen but stepped forward to become a leader and were trusted by the community, were challenged by the legislation. Most of the remote areas had developed over time their own functional governance system, that in the authoritarian Suharto days of government only had been given scant attention (Braüchler 2010, 7). The unawareness of the often high functionality of local governance systems was, in hindsight, an unfortunate error of judgment by the national government.

Regional autonomy in the West Sumatran mainland had raised a strong desire by its inhabitants to use their local nuances in the political Minangkabau cultural capacity to restore their pre-1979 so-called Minangkabau, "village republic," or customary governance. Mainland village councils, known as *nagari*, were the norm, before the Java-based uniformity in state government institutionalization spread after independence. According to Tri Ratnawati (2001, 8), the aspiration of *kembali ke nagari* or "return to the *nagari*" in 2000, was not only

Figure 1. "Ethnic Groups in Indonesia," redrawn by Gunkarta Gunawan Kartapranata, based on a map in the National Museum of Indonesia.[2]

PHILIPPINES

SULAWESI SEA

SANGER

MAKASSAR STRAIT

LODA
MOROTAI
GALELA
TOBELO
MANADO
BOLAANG MONGONDOU
BUAL
KAIDIPAN
BAJO
HULONTALO
MINAHASA
TERNATE
MABA
SULI
JAILOLO
PATANI
TO MINI
TIDORE
TO GIAN
WEDA
TO BOBONGKO
TO PALU
TO BALANTAK
GANE
TO TAWAILI
TO MORANE
BACAN
TO LIONDANG
TO PIPIKORO
BARE'E
SULAWESI
TO BANGGAI
TALIABU
MANGOL
TO SEKO
SULA
BUNGKU
TO SA'DAN
PITU-
TO RAJA
TO MAPUTE
SERAM
ULUMMA
BARAT
SERAM
TENGAH
MANDAR
TO LANDAN
LUWU
BURU
MEKONGKA
TO LAKI
AMBON
BUNGKUMORI
MALUKU ISLANDS
BUNGKU
BUNGKU
BUGIS
MUNA
BUTUNG
BANDA SEA
MAKASSAR

LAJULO

FLORES SEA

DAMAR
ROMA
WETAR
KISAR
LETI
LARANTUKA
ALOR
RIUNG
SOLOR
PANTAR
DOMPU
MANGGARAI
NAGEKEO
LOMBLEN
BIMA
NGADA
ENDE
LIO
SIKKA
EAST TIMOR
BELU
LESSER SUNDA ISLANDS
MAMBORO
MARAE
SUMBA
ATONI
WAINGAPO
SAWU
SABU
KUPANG
SEA
SABU
ROTI

MALUKU ISLANDS

well received by Minangkabau communities in West Sumatra, it was also well received by the Minangkabau diaspora (*rantau*) living outside West Sumatra. From the enthusiasm, it was clear that a homegrown governance system, which doesn't indicate that it is faultless, appears to be far more preferred than an externally imposed system of governance (Davidson and Henley 2007, 211). In the Mentawaian setting, a similar opinion was raised by both community elders (*sikebbukat-uma*) as well as the new academic élite. The widespread opinion was that neither *nagari* (Minangkabau) nor *desa* (Java) were sufficiently grounded in the local language or tradition of Mentawai governance.

Many inhabitants of Mentawai became alarmed by a proposed return to the West Sumatran mainland Minangkabau expression of *nagari* as a preferred provincial wide customary local village government system. The *nagari* system had no local governance association or linking to their small archipelago, located eight hours away by modern ferry in the Indian Ocean, although being bonded to the same provincial government. It was clear for the Mentawaians that those West Sumatran provincial boundaries require multiple approaches on governance to be functional when different cultures or languages provide a different outlook on managing resources and governance system. Non Government Organizations (NGOs) combined with local Mentawai academics also known as *simasoppit*[3] proposed a Mentawai-inspired government system. It would incorporate the traditional community consultation process in which the elders (*sikebbukat-uma*) are influenced by the wise words of the *Sikerei*, as well as by the influence of the new Mentawai academic élite. As an alternative to *nagari* or *desa*, a possible local term for village settlement or *laggai*[4] was raised by the élite to emphasize a profile of longstanding island tradition in governance.

The young élite was not only aided in this process by the newly introduced autonomy regulation, but also the legislation on human rights that gave an implied right for Mentawaians to prosper economically and socially within their indigenous culture. At the time when the *nagari*[5] as a West Sumatran province local regulation (*Perda Sumbar*)[6] was being debated for legislation, the existence of multiple customary traditions in West Sumatra was raised by Mentawaians and questioned the exclusive Minangkabau cultural setting in the legislation. The new regional autonomy regulation urged explicitly the need of plurality of ethnic governance by provincial levels for its districts. The provincial tolerance of government that gave attention to local tradition in the

debate approach and terminology would positively influence the spirit of the process. In turn, it would mirror the allowance of local influence that had been made by the central government to all its provinces, including West Sumatra.

The Minangkabau *nagari* regional custom idea raised a vehement and repeated protest by Mentawaians in West Sumatra. This time it was not only the protest in questioning the *nagari* issue itself, but it was combined with their dissatisfaction of the rate of exploitation by Minangkabau mainlanders of their islands' natural resources. It was claimed that the spoils of logging operations had been very unevenly shared over the many years prior to regional autonomy was introduced (Eindhoven 2002). External Mentawai trade cartels that had operated in Mentawai had artificially lowered the prices of a range of Mentawai resources such as timber, rattan, patchouli essential oil, copra, bananas, and several types of spices that were offered by the islanders for sale.[7] This bitter experience made the local Mentawaian élite, supported by NGOs, remain defiant on the issue of the *Perda* or local law that would reinstate a uniform system of customary mainland Minangkabau-based *nagari* village government on the islands of Mentawai. In subsequent negotiations, their cause was recognized by mainland legislators, and in a redraft, an additional paragraph was added by government law experts, which would provide scope to minority groups for modification and allow their indigenous (i.e., Mentawai) community group to embrace their particular tradition (Delfi 2005, 9). Whilst the local *Perda* law meant only minor editing[8] by adding this particular paragraph, it allowed the conducting local government as stipulated by local customary proceedings and the use of specific local names as appropriate. To achieve this redraft of legislation, it required a skilled Mentawaian move and vocal protest, spearheaded by the new academic élite of the community. Their achievement, combined with the highlighted differentiation of Minangkabau versus Mentawaian tradition, firmly established the cultural plurality in the province and established the academic élite as a political force that was able to achieve Mentawaian recognition from the mainland.

For the Mentawaians, it provided a window of opportunity to consider a new local government concept to be fitted within the customary norms in debate and proceedings in Mentawai. Whereas Minangkabau has their regional *nagari* custom to be used as their local government form, Mentawai could request to have their local *laggai* or perhaps the alternative *pulaggajat* agreed upon.

READINESS FOR AN ISLAND INDIGENOUS GOVERNMENT FORM?

Issues of regional autonomy have become an important concern, especially for the younger generation of Mentawaians, who have been to the mainland and received formal education to reinforce general academic but also government administrative skills.[9] Their freshly acquired skills are eagerly accepted in new government employment positions in the regional autonomy that prefers local staff. This is not only to strengthen locality, but it is also how local identity is constructed in government, and perhaps it might be used to oppose external groups by those young élite groups. As an example, local NGOs, staffed by local academics, strongly supported the indigenous southern Mentawai governance loose *laggai* village structure to be introduced to Mentawai (Eindhoven 2003, 47). Although the base *laggai* features are very basic in relying mainly on an elders' consultation process, they could be tailored to incorporate indigenous contemporary features to enhance the dynamics that also exists in traditional societies. The young élite also stimulated a new visual image for Mentawai, in which modernity in governance was shown to be combined with tradition by relying on the well known image of the Mentawai *Sikerei* shaman[10]. This was especially effective in their visual banners during the campaigning for specific Mentawai rights in the Minangkabau mainland.

The *Sikerei* shaman image (see fig. 2) in the new academic elitist published profile was not only used as a means to bridge the gap of recognition to resolve matters of identity, but also actively used the trusted image of old tradition to drive new power sharing deals with the established élite. The *Sikerei* role would be mainly a ceremonial nod of approval, which is sufficiently powerful as it provides the recognition of worthy local issues, instead of being perhaps a copy of mainland tradition. This diversity is not out of the ordinary since regional autonomy has been introduced. Many newly sprung up elitist groups formed by fresh graduates in regional areas in Indonesia use the image of tradition and custom in their campaign banner. They combine those images with current projects of governance and resource exploration[11] to gain political points for their political local party.[12] However, in public discourse the focus on custom appear to be touching mainly on the life of the real traditionalists, which is captured in communities that continue to see the *Sikerei* as the mediator between

Figure 2. *Sikerei,* traditional shaman from the Rereiket River watershed on Siberut Island. Photo by Maskota Delfi.

the transcendental world and society and its economic imperatives. Most of the traditionalists live in the upcountry *uma,* while the young élites, who are comfortable with an office environment, in reality often only have a token attachment to custom, although cherish their traditional background. It is fair to state that modern realistic ideas of political and economic aspirations are required to reach beyond that of ordinary village level and have to be connected to the wider

economic implications of the community. Stressing local custom such as traditional local food and using local dialects appear to constitute a powerful act that is valuable and contains political merit for the young élite; recently, custom has required new symbolic and rhetorical importance to fuel their political activities (Eindhoven 2007, 69).

In accordance with Mason Cummings (2010, 1), the inherent contrast between "us" and "them" is a fundamental component in shaping cultural identification. From this, the rejection of implementing the *nagari* system could be perceived as a collective rejection of outside forces. The application of the term *laggai* becomes an attempt, which Gerry van Klinken (2007, 12) recognizes as a tactical reason, to drive out other collectivism that is mainly focused on family or clan enrichment, which can be treacherous to the wider community.

An in-depth investigation of how the discourse of identity advances and how local intellectuals expand on this notion in those relationships become part of a signifying process that is still continuing. The process is not only a meeting point of local power in the identity discourse, but also a cross relationship event of non-indigenous individuals or *sasareu*, who migrated to the Mentawaian island group from the mainland or Java.[13] Those *sasareu* who show an equal respect of Mentawaian culture as they would of their own culture and don't hesitate to enjoy a shared meal with Mentawaians have been well received. The increased level in higher tertiary education by Mentawaians on par with many *sasareu* migrants has created a revived and stronger intellectual circle in government offices and in open businesses, especially in the southern part of Mentawai. In those analytical enquiries, a consideration was made by the authors on what attracted the *sasareu* to settle in Mentawai culture. It appears that most *sasareu* are driven by opportunities—which is not necessarily predatory behavior, as many have intermarried and some share some of their knowledge freely. This is different from a section of the *sasareu* who stay mainly in town, for they hardly mix with the Mentawaians and mainly trade their mainland goods to the islanders and frequently return to the mainland. A marked difference can be detected in their social networking and their avoidance of sharing a common life with Mentawaians.

Awareness of identity combined with a consciousness of searching youngsters who have extensive contact with both migrants and the indigenous traditionalists who live in an *uma*, young Mentawaians

cannot be free from their relationship with external ethnicity. In other words, some are very much subjected to external ideas, while some are less influenced—but persuasion is unavoidable. With these dynamics at work, the young intellectual movement in Mentawai—combined with local events and media issues beamed from television, books, internet, and social media in a phase of global networking—provides an insight of a global indigenous resistance. Although many definitions are given to global indigenous resistance, in principle it is the resistance by indigenous groups against the depletion of natural resources in their homeland and against the related causes of environment destruction by the neo-colonialism of industrial nations. Global indigenous resistance also takes the form of a feared loss of treasured home culture and cosmology, and is seen in the emergence of minority indigenous groups in the global patchwork of individualities with a strong desire to maintain the diversity of their culture in relation to mainstream cultural varieties. Such resistance and the use of modern means of communication have encouraged Mentawaians to resist domination by minority Minangkabau groups in Mentawai, as well as the containment of their ethnic identity, however difficult it might be.

While quite a few Mentawaians do confirm that *laggai*[14] has a direct association with Mentawai—as it was heard of before independence to indicate a cluster of different clan dwellings in a specific clan domain in the southern part of the Mentawai archipelago—in current times, the new élite has revived the word but in a different context of government settlement or village (Delfi 2013a, 2013b). The rejection by some of the *laggai* concept was raised in the discourse of resistance by the indigenous Sakalagan people in Mentawai. It was observed that the efforts of the young simasoppit[15] élite continued a resistance of identity in relation with *the other*—in particular, the strength of the ethnic Minangkabau in the overall geographical region in central Sumatra.

The template of the *laggai* identity in local government appears to be a new model that has been purposely re-assembled and constructed by the young Mentawaian intellectuals as a possible means to show Mentawai resistance and a protest to the strong presence of Minangkabau culture in the Mentawai region. The matter of "office naming" is unlike the Minangkabau situation. In the Minangkabau version, the applied *nagari* local government system was already operational long before the legislation on village government in 1974

and subsequent update in 1979, in which a general developed local government administration system was being applied to the rest of Indonesia. To be fair, it has to be stated that the return to the *nagari* system in the mainland this century has not been without problems in some areas in West Sumatra Province (Ghani 2003). History showed that the *nagari* system had been in operation for a long period in Minangkabau, in which the principle of autonomy was known as *adat salingka nagari* or every *nagari* has its own custom. This might explain that the Minangkabau reaction of the introduction of Law number 22/1999 became almost synonymous with the motivation of *kembali ke nagari* or the return to former local office of government.

This is starkly different with the situation in Mentawai, which has no previous historical base of *laggai* in a village context. A *laggai* system of governance had not its roots in a political sense, but it is relevant to note that the *laggai* model appeared as a symbolic means of resistance by the *Simasoppit* on a linguistic level, which became a campaigned objection to the Minangkabau use of *nagari* on Mentawai.

The differentiation noted above is an important element in the original claim of Mentawai that has become an identity marker with the outside world. To explore the Mentawai notion, local collectiveness has to be put forward, which is not merely based on the collectiveness of the non-indigenous inhabitants of Mentawai.

The Government local transmigration relocation programme, which incidentally already commenced in colonial times, has caused a steady stream of Mentawaians to leave their own original *pulaggajat*, or local structure of governance, in their valley. Besides promoted migration, natural clan break-ups also take place, in which an individual decides to leave the *uma* for personal reasons to move to a new *pulaggajat*.[16] This could be for various reasons, such as better land, prospects, marriage, or as a result of disagreement. Research on Siberut Island, according to Schefold (1991, 121), has shown that at least ten different *pulaggajat* or riverside community settlements or territories could be distinguished or classified as distinct dialects or *nganga* (Pampus 1992, 69). Besides dialects, other markers can also be indicated to distinguish a different *pulaggajat*, by noting the different patterns of body art common in each home river valley (Schefold 1991). Initially, *pulaggajat* has referred to *uma* land, according to some researchers (Reeves 2001).

Additional complications of use have presented themselves in untangling the issues in Mentawai based on dialect. The use of *laggai*,

which originates from the *nganga* dialect of the Sakalagan (people who live in the southern part of the archipelago), could perhaps not be considered as a marker of neutral Mentawai uniformity, as its word use could be likely construed as a measurement of control by the Sakalagan people on Sipora, as indicated by the inhabitants of Siberut Island. In daily discourses, the people generally on Siberut rejected to use of *laggai*, which could be a rejection in a twofold sense: on the basis of language, and on the basis of a perceived desired control by certain sections of Mentawai élite. The option of *nagari* was rejected by the young Mentawaian educated élite as this could point to borrowing the mainland cultural language of the Minangkabau, while a Mentawai expression could be negotiated. Thus, the draft of regulation of *laggai* (*Ranperda laggai*) could not be considered worthy as a Mentawai word for a local government office by the inhabitants of Mentawai Siberut.

In another complicating matter, in the language nuances in Mentawaian dialects or language, a meaning can be hidden. M. Gibbons (2002, xxiv) indicates that through language, a meaning or significance of power can be maintained by someone. Owing to the word choice offered to interchange a Javanese term or Minangkabau term (*desa* or *nagari*) with, the best outcome of each group of people in the archipelago appears to reject each other's proposal of choice in Mentawai. The relation between Sakalagan people in Sipora and Pagai, and the Sakalelegat élite and people in Siberut call for a rejection of the *laggai* option. Therefore, it appeared that the search for a common Mentawai identity is difficult to satisfy when focusing on an archipelago-wide commonality. The word option of *pulaggajat* that was earlier mentioned was also being rejected by the Sakalagan people,[17] as in some of their opinions it has connotations of backwardness, not suitable in a new and modern district.

The problem with using a local name for creating a governmental system at a village level in Mentawai exists because subdistrict political interests are in play, even though some of the Mentawai intellectual élite want to "create" a new local name, which can be claimed as specific Mentawai. This condition also shows that the Mentawai island group is not a singular ethnic identity group. Mentawai islands, like Indonesia, are many, which is clear in the diversity of dialects, in social and political organizations, and also in food habits. That could be the reason why compromise on the name of the *laggai* is difficult. In the meantime, according to a Sakalagan spokesperson, they do not

agree to the term of *pulaggajat* to change *nagari* or *desa*, because the word *pulaggajat* is considered even more old-fashioned than the word *laggai*. This is also acknowledged by some people in Siberut Island.

A deeper social search was instigated to discover how this destructive absence of compromise could have an avenue of being reversed, by using social engineering as determined not only by economic motives, but also by emotional factors. In this, the following was noted.

Firstly, Mentawai has many dialects. Secondly, people in every part of this archipelago mostly distinguish themselves from others when from a different clan. Thirdly, it is not a habit of Mentawaians to force others to follow, especially on Siberut Island, where the traditional faith of *Arat Sabulungan* is still very strong.[18] Fourthly, due to their natural abundance of food, including important the staple food sago palms, traditionally almost everyone has the freedom to split from their particular clan and make a new clan for their own group, as food security doesn't necessarily force people to live together. Those societal conditions indicate that there are relatively few societal indications that request a compromised solution in local settings, which hamper the compromise needed in a larger district decision that is needed for an acceptable move for the whole of Mentawai.

Community movements and ownership of land or what grows on land have complicated the process even more in the past. Since before, people from Mentawai have moved from their original land river valley on Siberut Island to the area of the Sakalagan people on Sipora and Pagai Island. Some of those have migrated to those islands three, four, or even five generation ago, and hardly ever went back to their *pulaggajat* located in Siberut. Those internal migrants have year after year lost their traditional view and traditional communal awareness, and taken on the prevailing ways of the Sakalagan. In another development in the northern part of Siberut Island, some groups have forgone their communal strength, as they have abandoned the traditional *uma* and clan system.

RENEWED LIVING OPTIONS:
WHAT ABOUT *BARASI*?

The debate on discovering the appropriateness in *desa*, *laggai*, or possibly *pulaggajat*, or finding a common ground has not been finalized yet.

The difficulty is truly caused by the various community structures and social perceptions on the island—from the modern tin roof housing complex style house, which are often found in Sipora, to the traditional thatched roof community longhouses that are often encountered in the southern parts of Siberut. The social and economic change spelled out in Mentawai autonomy has also caused some searching among the Mentawaians on future prospects. Is it possible to be Mentawaian while using our own language and cultural background to find modernity, or is foreign adoption the only way to move forward? The quest to form a local government and sustain cultural pride instead of siding with an imported Minangkabau name remains a challenge.

Thus far, only two Mentawai versions have been debated; *laggai* and *pulaggajat*. It appears that no conclusive outcome can be reached, as each group in the debate, being from the north or the south, claim to bring the most suitable solution to the debate. As segmentation in Mentawai is very strong, it has become doubtful if a common ground could be found, when the only option which remains is to reject the other parties offering. To overcome language connotations or stir up rivalry, the Mentawai community could consider a Mentawai word which has been introduced on every island, has connotations of modernity, and in not known in Minangkabau culture. The authors often heard the word *barasi* from the locals while in Mentawai to indicate a settlement. *Barasi* is an original Minangkabau loanword to indicate a housing area that follows a clean formation of 90-degree angle of intersecting footpaths combined with parallel paths to form a clear grid of housing.

With regard to the historical journey of *barasi*, it has been used since the fist housing estates were set up in Siberut. The settlement programme, of which the first attempt was made in colonial times to exercise better control of the community, has continued since independence, although on a much larger scale by the Department of Social Affairs. It has the specific purpose to bring Mentawaians in closer contact with government services and has improved administrative tasks. After implementing relocating programmes, most Mentawaians who live in *barasi* have accepted and enjoyed to stay, while some others left the *barasi* after a while to live in their own clan-controlled land in a field cabin, or have opted to return to the original *uma*. To differentiate between the settlements that often have been built by outside contractors and their own settlement, the settlements are known as *barasi*.

Nevertheless *barasi* is not a word that exists in the Minangkabau language (Delfi 2005, 109). The word *barasi* is actually derived from Minangkabau vocabulary *barasiah*, which means "clean." Since the introduction of settlements in Siberut, the word *barasi* is in use and is the equivalent of *desa*. For instance, we encountered the following: *barasi* Muntei, *barasi* Puro, or *barasi* Madobag. Even though some Mentawaians might be living in a *barasi*, many of them keep a dwelling near their field. They enjoy a *barasi* house within the vicinity of a small shop, school, community office, or place to meet the healthcare worker who serves the area on a regular basis.

To return to the debate of the reintroduced word *nagari* in the mainland: In general, Mentawaians reject the Minangkabau *nagari* word. This is as a result of the negative historical experiences with Minangkabau people who regarded the Mentawaian religiousness as being uncivilized and inferior in the past. Therefore, with a new pride of regional autonomy, they want to distinguish their identity from the mainland identity. Unfortunately, the term of *laggai* or *pulaggajat* itself could not be agreed by all of the Mentawaians. Therefore, it appears that for some moderate Mentawaians, the term of *barasi* probably could be a reasonable solution in Mentawai for a local name for their own village structure. They can also claim it to be their own, as it is not used in West Sumatra. In addition, *barasi* is a new word and cannot be considered by anyone to have old-fashion connotations. Its Mentawai originality won't make people feel hesitant to use or pronounce it. It would be appropriate if Mentawai could designate a name for their village administrative unit that establishes a name which belongs to them. *Barasi* is a neutral approach for Mentawai to form a commonality in the archipelago.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics to adjust to new conditions of economic and social change in regional autonomy is continuing. Reaching a negotiation stage to be able to meet and compromise is a political process that takes time. To discover common grounds and common interest that provides most groups a shared satisfaction level is within reach when élite capture can be controlled within certain limits. Although the élite have set their own agenda and their economic interests, it appears that regional autonomy has firmly given room to the indigenous population

to influence the decision making process. Indonesia has shown to be sufficiently robust in handling the change to regional autonomy. In years to come, a reflection can be made on the worthy establishment of indigenous governance and of the credibility of good governance in communities that have grown in size, far greater than the original structure of the *uma*.

NOTES

1   Law number 5 of 1974 on Regional Government (UU no. 5/1974) is the basis of Village Law number 5 of 1979 (UU no. 5/1979). Combined, they enhanced a standardization of the government structure with regard to linking central government to local administration and internal governance in village communities. See Braüchler 2010.

2   Source: Wikimedia Commons, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indonesia_Ethnic_Groups_Map_English.svg.

3   The term of *simasoppit* equals the West Sumatra Minangkabau term *cadiak pandai*, which means "academics."

4   In the southern part of Mentawai, villages are called *laggai*, but it is a not an archipelago-wide concept or used in a political or administrative concept.

5   The word *nagari* is originally derived from the Sanskrit language and refers to the concept of country. In colonial times *nagari* was referred to the local system of community governance and colloquially known as the "village republic," operational in central in Sumatra.

6   Peraturan Daerah (Perda) or Local Government Regulations are forms of legislation that are issued by village, city council, district, or province. In this case it is the reference to West Sumatra Provincial Regulations (Peraturan Daerah Propinsi Sumatera Barat, Perda SumBar).

7   Geological surveys have encountered deposits of commercial viable mineral resources such as gold and oil, while investors have indicated to be interested to establish oil palm plantations.

8   Perda Propinsi 9/2000 paragraph 24 on the reintroduction of *nagari* allows Mentawaians to create their own regulations on restructuring local government based on their own custom and culture. See Delfi 2005.

9   Especially in the last two decades, more and more Mentawaians have enrolled in tertiary education in mainland universities, where they primarily favored studies in economics, public administration, and teachers' education.

10   The image of the *Sikerei* is the traditional healer and leading rituals for the clan. Bumi *Sikerei* loosely translates as the land of the shaman.

11   Regional autonomy has created new bureaucracy levels in the regions, requiring local staff recruitment projects as well as new office expansion. Regional exploration is no longer a prime responsibility on central government level (Jakarta) but needs authorization on district level, for matters concerned on environmental issues and administrational approval.

12   Regional autonomy has infused locally freshly educated (see the ethnic division map of Indonesia) in taking a fair share of local government positions that were formally substantially occupied by skilled migrant staff. The sudden lift of local graduates and formal skills in a wide range of fields has provided new perspectives, not only on local governance, but also in a better focus on sustainable exploration and development in their own region.

13   The majority of migrants are Minangkabau, especially from the coastal areas, as well as Batak. Others have arrived from Nias, the islands north of the Mentawai archipelago and Java.

14   From a linguistic perspective, *laggai* was possibly derived from the word *eilagat*, a type of tree in the south.

15   This group are mainly academics (*simasoppit*) from the Sakalagan area.

16 In daily conversations in Siberut, the word *pulaggajat* is usually used to ask where someone comes from, in particular when met for the first time.

17 Interview of inhabitants on Sipora Island who preferred to remain anonymous, March 2008.

18 According to the principles of *Arat Sabulungan*, individuals have a free personal spirit known as *simagere*. If the personal spirit is being forced, intimidated, or repressed, the spirit will depart from the body which can cause illness, madness, or even death. That's why Mentawaians will seldom try to influence someone against his or her will. Prolonged interference by the intimidator might also have repercussions on their personal health.

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