Mentawaians in the city of Padang (West-Sumatra, Indonesia) and their role in processes of identity formation in an era of globalisation[1]

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Introduction

In March 1999 the first ever Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago was held in the prestigious Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta. This congress marked a milestone in the development of the indigenous peoples' organisations in Indonesia, as this was the first time that so many representatives of indigenous peoples[2] from all parts of the archipelago came together. In the previous era such a meeting would be looked upon as subversive and anti-governmental. Major elements of the declaration, which was issued at the end of the meeting argue for less repressive governmental policies, the recognition of the right to cultural identity, to ethnic language and religion, and most of all the right to the land and its natural resources and protection of intellectual property rights. These rights are argued to be of universal validity, comparable to the rights of individuals as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (AMAN 1999). As a result of this congress the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN) was called to life.

A representative of the Mentawai archipelago[3] had also been present at the week long during congress of indigenous peoples of the archipelago. When I spoke to him while I was in Indonesia in January 2000 he told me:

> 'I was glad I was able to attend this congress. It was good to become aware of the fact that so many other indigenous peoples in the archipelago face similar problems as we Mentawaians do. With the

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[1] The fieldwork on which this chapter is mainly based was conducted during six weeks in January and February 2000 in Padang, mainland West Sumatra and on Siberut Island, Mentawai archipelago, West Sumatra, Indonesia. I would like to thank Juniator Tulius for the inspiring suggestions and additional information he provided me with through e-mail.

[2] In anthropology the term 'indigenous people' is used to describe a non-dominant group in a delineated territory, with a more or less acknowledged claim to aboriginality. Indigenous peoples are defined as 'non-state people', and are always linked with a non-industrial mode of production. This does not mean that individual members of indigenous peoples never take part in governments or work in factories, but rather that they represent a way of life which renders them particularly vulnerable in relation to modernisation and the state (Eriksen 1993: 125). Indigenous peoples usually have a strong degree of self-sufficiency regarding not only means of subsistence but also with regard to language, religion, political leadership and legal authorities. Characteristic of these indigenous peoples is a strong sense of cultural identity vis-à-vis the more dominant ethnic groups in the national society (Persoon 1998a: 288).

[3] The sparsely populated Mentawai archipelago consisting of four islands (Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai and South Pagai) is situated in the Indian Ocean about 100 km off the west-coast of Sumatra. Its inhabitants, the autochthonous Mentawaians, completed with a small number of migrants, predominantly of Minangkabau origin, number a little more than 60,000 people.

founding of AMAN, indigenous peoples now have an opportunity to work on a countrywide level to push for change in government policies and laws. But on the other hand I also do realise that indigenous peoples have to deal with their own particular grievances and problems which are closely related to their particular areas. These contextually bounded problems should be solved at the local and regional political levels. Therefore, in my opinion it is important for every indigenous people to search for their acknowledgement by and participation within the local and regional governmental structures.'

According to Appadurai (2000) a world wide order of institutions has recently emerged, giving evidence of what we may call 'grassroots globalization,' or 'globalization from below.'

'The most easily recognizable of these institutions are NGOs (non-governmental organisations) concerned with mobilizing highly specific local, national, and regional groups on matters of equity, access, justice, and redistribution. These organisations have complex relations with the state, with the official public sphere, with international civil society initiatives, and with local communities. Sometimes they are uncomfortably complicit with the policies of the nation state and sometimes they are violently opposed to these policies. Sometimes they have grown wealthy and powerful enough to constitute major political forces in their own right and sometimes they are weak in everything except [or even in] their transparency and local legitimacy.' (Appadurai 2000: 11-12)

The Congress of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago, with AMAN resulting from it, can be seen as a form of globalisation from below as suggested by Appadurai. Nowadays many indigenous peoples in Indonesia are very critical regarding the governmental cultural policies and demand more freedom and rights of access towards their natural resources. For at least a large part of Indonesia's indigenous peoples this really marks a new phase in their recent history, because they have never been involved in this kind of activities as a group before. Several current developments, all somehow interconnected can be held responsible for the renewed opportunities for the articulation of ethnic identities. First there is the wave of democratisation current in today's Indonesia. Second there is the recently renewed attention at the international level for indigenous peoples (UN[4], World Bank, WWF, etc.). Third, we are able to recognise an all over higher level of education among indigenous groups themselves. And last, but certainly not least, is the significantly increased access to modern means of communication. These developments which are all closely connected to notions of globalisation seem to mutually reinforce each other.

These new, highly political, forms of organisation raise questions of how these identities are shaped at the local and regional level, of how these local processes are linked with developments at the national as well as the international level and of how these processes are part and parcel of a global context. By providing a complex picture of the relationship between globalisation from above (as defined by corporations, major multilateral agencies, policy experts, and national governments) and below, research on globalisation could, according to Appadurai (2000: 14), contribute to a further strengthening of grassroots activists in international forums. A similar idea, however somewhat different, also suggested by Eriksen (1993: 128).

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[4] According to Persoon (1998a: 281) the most prominent international indication that the interest in the position of indigenous peoples has reached global proportions was the proclamation of the United Nations Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993. When at the end of that year it had become apparent that all goals could not be achieved within that one year, the Decade of Indigenous Peoples was proclaimed.

I would like to present the Mentawaians, the autochthonous population of the Mentawai archipelago as a case study. Although only recently one is able to recognise a process going on in which the Mentawaians express their identity more self-consciously than before. Their process of identity formation seems to develop in two different, though interconnected contexts. The first context is the Mentawai islands themselves were processes of identity formation are mainly the result of various kinds of external interventions. The second process mainly takes place in Padang, the provincial capital of West-Sumatra and is almost fully dominated by young, relatively highly educated Mentawaians. An important part of this second process of identity formation is the political mobilisation of the Mentawaians in anticipation of the ongoing implementation of decentralisation and regional autonomy.

In order to set an overall framework for these discussions I will start this contribution with a short discussion on how processes of globalisation and identity formation are interconnected. The focus will then turn towards the Mentawaian context. Some attention will be paid to external perceptions on Mentawaian identity. In the course of this chapter it will become clear how these external influences contribute to the way in which Mentawaians see themselves today. I will discuss how the process of Mentawaian identity formation is taking place in both settings mentioned earlier. An attempt will be made to show how both settings, which are not to be understood as mutually exclusive domains, intermingle and influence each other, how they make use of and borrow from each other. I will focus on the 'tools' and expressions of these identities, on 'how' these Mentawaian identities are working at several different levels. Some special attention will be paid to the role of so called third parties within the process of identity formation. It is especially these third parties that, in my opinion, link indigenous organisations to the global context. This will be followed by a brief discussion on how the Indonesian state sees itself confronted with an increasing pressure originating at the one hand from international demands to conform to international standards and sub-national or regional demands for greater cultural, political and economic autonomy on the other. Finally there will be some concluding remarks.

Globalisation and identity
According to Appadurai (1996) globalisation has much to do with increasing intensity with which global cultural streams spread around the world, affecting everybody. Appadurai recognises five dimensions of global cultural flows, which he calls 'scapes'. In addition to 'ideoscapes' (the world wide spread of images) he distinguishes the movement of people to and from every corner of the world ('ethnoscapes'), the world of production and consumption of modern technology ('technoscapes'), financial flows ('financescapes'), and the global media infrastructure ('mediascapes'), that is the world of mass media (Appadurai 1996: 33). It can be said that the Mentawaians are somehow incorporated into these global cultural flows.

In the literature it is very often assumed that these processes of global flow trigger processes of 'local closure' (Jacobsen 2000: 5; Meyer & Geschiere 1999: 2). These processes of 'localisation' (Appadurai 1996) during which people are reinforcing and emphasising cultural identity are not simply to be understood as a phenomenon during which people, in fear of losing their identity due to the encroaching global world, return to and indifferentiatingly

hang on to their 'traditional' identity. This impression, however, seems to be advocated by Vermeulen & Govers:

> '…where interaction is increasing and where people are losing or fear they will loose their cultural distinctiveness. In the process they 'become aware' of their culture, may start to 'repair' their culture and demand cultural rights.' (Vermeulen & Govers 1994: 4)

Although the characteristics of globalisation seem to be drawing the world into a certain commercial sameness, every society for cultural significance and the creation of group identities appears to bring to these forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1988: 5). Globalisation in all its manifestations should not be presented nor understood as 'an option to reject or to adopt, but as a context of life' (Meyer 2001: 10), its intensity probably highest and most influential in the city for reasons to be explained later. [***To be elaborated with some insights on the information age by Castells (1997)***]

External perceptions on Mentawaian identity
Though originally the culture of all Mentawaians must have been rather similar, external interventions (mission, development activities of the government, logging and tourism) have created substantial differences in religion, living conditions, settlement patterns, etc.

Protestant missionary activities started in Mentawai in the beginning of the 20th century on the southern islands. As a result of these activities the local religion (*arat sabulungan*) has largely disappeared from those islands. Later protestant as well as catholic missionary activities also spread to Siberut, but they did not seem to have a similar impact there.

From a governmental point of view the Mentawaians are considered to belong to the *masyarakat terasing* (isolated community), in the international setting known as 'indigenous peoples'. The Indonesian government considers this *masyarakat terasing* as being lost from the main processes of social, religious, political and economic change. The ultimate goal of the Indonesian government is to bring these people back to the social and cultural mainstream (Persoon 1998a: 289). A key word in the discussion about the past, present and probably also the future of indigenous peoples in Indonesia and the Mentawai archipelago in particular is *pembangunan* (development)[5]. The word *pembangunan* has its origin in the word *bangun*, which means 'to construct', but also 'to wake up from a state of unawareness'. In the latter meaning we can find the connection with the governmental point of view that the *masyarakat terasing* should be brought back into the mainstream of national progress (Porath 1997: 6). And it was indeed the Indonesian government that ever since Indonesian independence[6] can be primary held responsible for the way in which the Mentawai archipelago developed. More concretely, this 'mainstream policy' is expressed in terms of housing and settlement-patterns, modes of production, cultural expression, formal education, health care, religion and interaction with other parts of society (Persoon 1998: 289). Especially Persoon (1994) explains how everything was undertaken to adapt these people as soon as possible to a proper

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[5] See for instance Persoon and Schefold (1985) and Winzler (1997).
[6] Indonesian independence from Dutch colonial rule was declared in 1945.

national Indonesian identity. The people were no longer allowed to live in their longhouses[7] traditionally situated along the riverbanks in the interior of the islands. New, more decent and controllable villages comprising of several longhouses were created along the coast and the main rivers. This process still continues until this very day through government-sponsored resettlement and development programmes. *Arat sabulungan* was officially prohibited in 1954 and all inhabitants were given three months to decide whether they wanted to convert to either Christianity or to Islam (Persoon 1994: 230). At the same time, external features such as glass-beaded jewellery, long hair for men, loincloths, tattoos and the custom of chiselling the incisors onto a point were forbidden as marks of 'unindonesian primitiveness' (Schefold 1998: 271). Besides being considered as a social as well as a religious problem, *masyarakat terasing* in general was also believed to contribute to what is called an agricultural problem (Persoon 1998a: 291). Most of Indonesia's indigenous peoples practise some variant of what is called swidden or slash-and-burn agriculture. In the government's rather undifferentiated opinion[8], these agricultural practices are the main cause for the loss of precious timber. Indonesia's forests, from which most indigenous peoples extract food, construction material and on which large parts of their cosmology is based, are considered state property and therefore clearing the land for agricultural purposes is considered illegal (Persoon 1994; 1996; 1998a; 1998b). As a result a great deal of the development programmes particularly aimed at the abolition of these agricultural practices. People were instructed to grow cash crops and rice, considered a more civilised staple than the starch obtained from the sago palm, which was and still is the staple until this very day. Especially the growing of rice met several problems, of which the free roaming pigs, eating almost everything they encounter on their path, were one.

In the 70s and 80s of the last century logging has seriously affected the tropical lowland rainforest on the islands. Most of the forests on Sipora and both Pagai islands has been cut and therefore most of the forest-related activities such as hunting, collecting rattan and other forest products in order to obtain a cash income have lost their relevance for the local people. Besides being a source of a wide variety of products, to the Mentawaians the forest is also 'a world beyond', the habitat of ancestral spirits, with which a spiritual harmony should be maintained (Schefold 1997). To the surprise of many in 1992 all logging concessions were by presidential decree withdrawn from Siberut Island. Almost half of the island was then declared a national park. Large parts of the forests on Siberut and its adherent lifestyle are therefore left relatively unmolested[9].

Another important process of change is caused by tourism. Since the early 1980s western tourists have started to come to Siberut. Tourists come to Siberut Island in particular because of Siberut still being the most 'traditional' island within the archipelago. A significant part of the population on Siberut still lives in their longhouses and there are still many *kerei*[10]

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[7] These longhouses called *uma* give room to extended patrilineal family groups also known by the term *uma*. These *uma* consist of 50 to 80 individuals, which to a large extent were and in some respect still are politically and economically self-sufficient.
[8] See for a further elaboration on this issue Persoon (1994).
[9] Siberut is still well known for its rich endemic wildlife, which makes Siberut an important island in the natural heritage not only on Indonesia but in international context as well (WWF 1980).
[10] Until recently the only specialist known to the otherwise egalitarian Mentawaian communities was the medicine man, *kerei*, responsible for communication with the souls and ancestral spirits. *Kerei* also have a

(medicine men) active on Siberut. Moreover people still look 'traditional' in their loincloth and decorations of glass beads and flowers; often only worn on the occasion of tourists visiting their settlement. Some critics suggest that this particular form of tourism only creates a sphere of meaningless performance. Other voices are more positive, defending the point of view that this so called ethno-tourism contributes to Mentawaians becoming more conscious of their 'traditional' culture and more proud of their, finally as positive regarded, being different from many other people. It is also for the first time in history that outsiders come to the island out of appreciation for the 'traditional' culture instead of trying to change or even to abolish it (Bakker 1999). As a result of the dollars generated trough this specific form of tourism on Siberut Island, the government recently more or less allows, though not officially, cultural expressions, like producing 'traditional' handicrafts, wearing loincloths and the performance of certain rituals by *kerei*, by which the tourists are attracted.

We can also place the numerous foreign film makers in this more positive sphere of interest. Film plays an important part in the image of the Mentawai islands in the outside world. Although I know of only one film made on the island of Sipora in the late 1930s, numerous films were made on Siberut Island starting from the early 1970s onwards. Recently a great number of foreign film makers, originating from Singapore, France, United Kingdom, etc seems to be mushrooming the place in order to record 'fading drumbeats', vanishing forests and 'last of the medicine men'. National Geographic is currently preparing a documentary expedition to Siberut Island. Although these, somewhat romantic, documentaries always pick Siberut Island and portray it as the location where the last of the 'real' things are fading, vanishing or at least being threatened, they at least put Siberut on the world map. Moreover, history teaches us that the international public outcry following from the images of abuse made known all over the world through these films may contribute to a change in policy.

As a result of these external interventions[11] the Mentawaians have developed rather different attitudes towards their 'traditional' culture. Though all of them would certainly identify themselves as Mentawaians, they differ widely in the way they would define their being Mentawaian, using different markers of identity and holding different ideas about the direction in which Mentawai should develop in the future. This includes for instance the use of language, religion, life style, attitudes towards formal education, etc.

Mentawaians in the city of Padang
It is mainly for educational purposes that, mainly young Mentawaians have been coming to Padang on the Sumatran mainland for the last fifteen to twenty years. As a result, a group of

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substantial knowledge about medicinal plants growing on the islands. For further reading on medicinal plants on Siberut see Avé & Sunito (1990).

[11] By calling these developments 'external interventions' I would like to express the idea that Mentawaians were never an active party in the decision-making processes from which these developments resulted. These developments were simply imposed on them, which, of course, doesn't mean that Mentawaians were never active within the logging companies. Nor it means that all Mentawaians moved to the coastal areas to live a 'decent' life in a resettlement village, or love tourists because of the empowering force they may have on their cultural consciousness. Without wanting to treat the negative effects resulting from these, (unethical) interventions as of little importance, I do want to dismiss the image of a constantly suffering third party. Once the external interventions were present on the island Mentawaians became part and parcel of these developments. Mentawaians were never saints and they opportunistically made use of the new possibilities offered to them.

Mentawaian intelligentsia has come into being, able to process and analyse in certain ways the phenomena discussed so far, and who, moreover, are capable of articulating questions of identity (Derks 1997: 702). Most of the Mentawaians coming to Padang in search of education are males. Although I personally know of several young female Mentawaians getting education in Padang they still seem to form a minority within the group of Mentawaian migrants. Most of the Mentawaian females marry at a young age and are, mainly for financial reasons not encouraged to go to Padang. During their secondary education in Padang most scholars live in one of the catholic dormitories (*asrama*), which were especially build for this purpose. A substantial number of scholars return to Mentawai after they have finished their secondary education. Others stay in Padang to find a job or to go to university. This is also the moment when they have to leave the relatively protected environment of the *asrama*. They go and live with family or find themselves a boarding house (*rumah kos*).

According to the literature a certain demographic basis, a critical mass, or what Eriksen (1993: 13) calls an 'indigenous elite of interethnic brokers', which in all probability can only be found in a city (Derks 1997: 702), is required for the start-up of a cultural process called ethnic mobilisation. Both Schefold (1988a: 640) as well as Persoon (1994: 307) mention the presence of such an elite group for the case of the Mentawaians. They both argue, however, that the political influence of this group is still insignificant. They were said to lack experienced people with leading capacities. By that time there were little or no goal-directed organisations active in order to maintain the Mentawaian identity.

The Mentawaian migrants who are part and parcel of the mainstream culture dominated by the mainland Minangkabau engage in ethnic competition, a process during which they experience discrimination on ethnic grounds which indeed makes ethnicity salient to them. But there must be more to it, because history teaches us that salience of identity must have existed ever since interethnic contact occurred. In many respects Padang can be considered a modern Indonesian city encompassing all problems and delightments belonging to today's modern city. What thrills the world at large also fascinates Padang. Moreover, its urban inhabitants are able to get in contact with the rest of the world by all kinds of modern communication devices.

What is, aside from all other facilities, especially interesting in this regard are the far reaching opportunities offered by the Internet. In 1997 not one single Internet cafe was to be found in Padang. Nowadays, the Indonesian equivalent of the Internet cafe, *warnet* , short for *warung internet,* are mushrooming and the number of Internet users with it. A typical *warnet* contains around eight to fifteen PCs accompanied by a desk at the entrance where the visitor has check in and out. An hour in front of a monitor costs around Rp. 5000[12]. Printing a page Rp. 500. Opening an e-mail account is offered for free by several providers. These rates bring the *warnet* within reach of many people. In a country where only few individuals have a personal computer because of financial constraints, the *warnet* plays an important role. The Internet enthusiasts include both educated men and women, students and schoolchildren. It might be very well possible that the *warnet* develops into a meeting place where critical citizens gather. As far as the Mentawaians are considered, it seems likely that in the near future only the Mentawaians in Padang will be able to communicate through the Internet, because electricity is still lacking on most parts of the Mentawai archipelago. It is, however, obvious that those capable of using the

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[12] Approximately 0.70 EUR.

Internet indeed do so. Some of the local Mentawaian NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) intensified their contact with other NGOs and international support organisations through the Internet. International organisations and NGOs are supporting the Internet as a way to empower local NGOs. Considering the Mentawaian case, it will be interesting to investigate whether, how, by whom and to whom information provided by the Internet is distributed further by circulation of prints and photocopies, by talks or via radio.

Annoyances, threats, and opportunities
The under-representation of Mentawaians in the local bureaucracy, including that of the provincial government which has its seat in Padang, has become a source of constant annoyance. The Minangkabau hold most of the key positions in various kinds of official and semi-official bodies. It is especially this fact, together with their insignificant economic position, that gives the Mentawaians an 'acute sense of being colonised' (Jacobsen 2000).

The Mentawai archipelago is part of the province of West Sumatra and was until October 1999 part of *Kabupaten Padang-Pariaman*. Ever since October 1999, however, the archipelago has formed its own *kabupaten* called *Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai*. The Mentawai islands were one of the new *kabupaten* created under *pemekaran* (Pan-Indonesian development plan). Now that the Mentawaians see themselves, at least partly, freed from the political Minangkabau dominance, they are very much aware of the fact that they now have to prove that they are indeed capable of political self-government. That is at least what I recognised while I was attending a three day during seminar in the beginning of January 2000. This seminar, which was held in Padang was besides representatives from different local Mentawaian NGOs based in Padang attended by delegations from the four different islands consisting of village chiefs (*kepala desa*) and family heads (*kepala suku*), students and other people interested in the political position of Mentawai[13]. Besides *Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai* and the newly to be elected *bupati* (head of *kabupaten*), the foundation of a political party, *Partai Demokrasi Kasih Bangsa* (PDKB) for the Mentawaian region was also discussed. Ever since the foundation of *Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai*, a Minangkabau, selected by the Padang administration, is installed as interim *bupati*. Although it was said that this *bupati* was only installed to set up the system and that local elections would be held after one year, this same person is still *bupati* for *Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai* until the present day. At the moment it is unclear when local elections will be held. Unclear is also who will become the next *bupati*. The Mentawaians, of course, want it to be a Mentawaian person, but many powerful, less transparent interests are involved in this obviously crucial issue. The background, present situation and goals concerning the political situation were clearly set out by several members of the PDKB. The Mentawaians seem to be very well aware of the fact that the present political situation in Indonesia offers them opportunities for political self-government which they cannot afford themselves to deny. But at the same time they are struggling with questions of how prepared local government is in terms of its own policies, structures, programmes, human resources, etc. Although their insignificant political position is a cause for concern, the Mentawaians do, however, consider political self-government a

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[13] Although there were so many people present the representation of the stakeholders was not balanced. Indigenous peoples representatives and local NGOs dominated the proceedings. Neither company representatives nor regional or local politicians were present. There was no exposure in the media.

starting point from which most other problems and threats can be handled. They are very much able to formulate what it is that they do not want, but at this moment they seem to lack insight and experience to reach consensus and formulate clearly outspoken plans of action. The seminar in Padang has, however, been an important step in increasing awareness about regional autonomy legislation. More practical, intensive discussions are certainly needed.

In the course of time the Mentawaians have established a very critical attitude towards the mainland Minangkabau by whom they have been dominated politically as well as economically and socially. It is therefore especially against the Minangkabau that Mentawaian negative feelings and stigmatisations are directed. The Minangkabau, who used to accuse the Mentawaians of stubbornness and obstinacy against the developments proposed by the central government and implemented by the local Minangkabau, are now accused themselves of amateurism, corruption and not being able to live a civilised life by the Mentawaians. Mentawaians consider Minangkabau to be an unreliable and murderous people[14]. Several times I overheard gossip and rumours about Minangkabau being out for a member of the Mentawaian community to murder *secara halus*, by means of magic. I recognised that some Mentawaians protect themselves against such dangerous forms of magic by embrocating themselves with fragrant oil called *nenei*[15]. Because the Minangkabau perceive the Mentawaians as pagan and primitive people, still in close contact to nature and the spiritual forces it may encompass, the Minangkabau in turn believe in the potentially dangerous spiritual powers of the Mentawaians. Of course, I am not interested in the validity of such stories, but rather in the fact that they belong to a process of identity formation that has clear overtones of 'interethnic struggle' (Derks 1997: 706). Such rumours are a form of Mentawaian resistance against Minangkabau domination and therefore also part of the process of Mentawaian identity formation.

Islamisation and transmigration are considered the most important threats to Mentawaian rights to their territory, language, religion and *adat* (tradition).

Recently provincial officials are once again preparing proposals to convert large parts of Siberut into oil palm plantations (Down to Earth 1999). A workforce for these plantations will be created through transmigration. The proposed transmigration from Java and West Sumatra to the Mentawai archipelago is leading to uncertainties with regard to land ownership. Most of the Mentawaians do not have official evidence of the fact that they are the legitimate owners of the land. Officially their land is considered *tanah kosong* (empty land) owned by the state (Persoon 1998b: 5). Currently some local NGOs are trying to assist local communities to apply for legal titles. In earlier days the transmigration of young Javanese bachelors to Siberut who were supposed to marry Mentawaian girls was suggested to be an effective way to rapidly integrate the Mentawaians into Indonesian society. This unethical plan, however, was dismissed after a letter campaign organised by local, national and international NGOs (Persoon 1996: 12). Present forms of voluntary transmigration from the Sumatran mainland to

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[14] See also Porath (1997) for similar accusations between the Sakai and the Malay within the province of Riau.

[15] This oil has to be obtained from the Mentawai archipelago, where it still plays a major role in several ceremonies. The oil is subtracted from a fetish consisting of several plants known for their negotiating functions. On the Mentawai islands such fetishes, thought to attract the positive and to neutralise the negative, are made on different occurrences. The fetishes and therefore the oil subtracted from it is 'cooling the one who uses it off' which includes that this person is, at least temporary protected from sorcery.

the archipelago do lead to certain forms of intermarriage mainly consisting of male migrants marrying young Mentawaian females who for the sake of marriage convert to Islam which in most cases is the religion of the partner of choice. These forms of intermarriage are not appreciated by some Mentawaians who consider this mixture of blood a threat to the Mentawaian unity. One of the speakers at the seminar even tried to convince the audience that these intermarriages are a bad development by stating '*kita bukan kambing*' (we are not goats). Marriages between Mentawaians and members of the (Christian) Chinese community in Padang are, however, considered less problematic. This leads us to a closely connected issue, that of Islamisation.

Ever since Dutch colonialisation the Mentawaians have been christianised. Due to severe governmental pressure after Indonesian independence, the majority of them have now entered either Catholicism or Protestantism. But until this very day many ideas and practices belonging to their former local religion are still alive. Only a small number of Mentawaians converted themselves to Islam. Most of them live in Padang or in the harbour places on the east coast of the Mentawai islands where they have intensive contacts with the Muslim Minangkabau also residing there. The Christian members of the Mentawaian community I spoke to in Padang consider Islam and the ongoing pressure of Islamisation a threat to the Mentawaian *adat*. The Christian religion seemingly is not regarded as a threat to Mentawaian *adat*. I even got the impression that the Christian religion these days is regarded by many as a crucial element within the Mentawaian cultural heritage.

The accurate knowledge about the cultural heritage is said to be eroding. Therefore, it is said, it should be given a place within the formal education system. Already several times I heard about incentives to produce books and other learning material on Mentawaian culture for primary and early secondary education. By getting this material approved by the local education department the Mentawaians will be able to include a 'local content' component within the school curriculum. Besides this attempt to encompass local culture within the local educational system, there are also ideas to set up some funding agency in order to provide scholars who want to get educated in Padang with a scholarship. Although, as far as I know, neither of these plans is realised yet, the importance of formal education, however, seems to have entered the discussion on the future of the Mentawaian islands.

Strategic use of identity markers in daily life
Although it is possible to mobilise around any marker of identification – the logic of symbolism allows that anything can be signified in this way – the criteria of identification have to possess at least some social relevance, not only to 'us', but also to 'them' (Jenkins 1997: 168). In an article titled *Pigs across ethnic boundaries,* Persoon & De Iongh (1999) argue that the government's efforts to make the Mentawaians turn to the raising of other domesticated animals instead of the free roaming, semi-wild pigs, can be held responsible for the fact that pigs certainly have become a marker of ethnic identity. The raising of pigs has certainly discouraged the Moslem Minangkabau migrants to move further into the interior of the islands. They restrict themselves to trading activities and to fisheries along the coastal zones of the Mentawai archipelago.

Ever since my first visit to Padang in 1997, I recognise that most of the young Mentawaian people in Padang are, besides speaking their own language, able to speak the standard Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*), but also the local Minangkabau language

which is the daily language in West Sumatra. To me it seems that they use their multilingual ability in a strategic manner. While in informal contexts the Mentawaians seem to be willing to communicate with the Minangkabau in the Minangkabau language, they insist on communicating in the more neutrally perceived *Bahasa Indonesia* in encounters with Minangkabau in more formal contexts. More than once I realised that certain transactions were made with Minangkabau people in which the Mentawaian was speaking *Bahasa Indonesia* while the Minangkabau used his own language. A student once told me that he was so annoyed by the teacher using the Minangkabau language during the lecture that he stood up and asked the teacher to refrain himself from speaking the Minangkabau language while teaching. Again, whether or not it is true this student really had the nerves to protest against his teacher is not important. The fact that he was aware of the sensitivity of the use of a certain language is what counts. In a familial context one is always addressed in the Mentawaian language. More than once I was present at informal gatherings in the house, in which I lived together with several members of a Mentawaian family, where the evening hours were sometimes filled with singing numerous songs about Mentawai, sometimes leading to funny mistakes and debates about the correct song texts. The people present at these informal meetings originated from different areas in the Mentawai archipelago where different dialects of the Mentawaian language are spoken. The Mentawaian language knows more than thirteen different dialects, which sometimes differ from each other substantially. One of my favourite singers who seemed to master all the different melodies and song texts sang the songs with great enthusiasm and apparently sincere emotion. His outstanding performances would have made everyone present believe that there was only one thing on his mind: Mentawai. Several days later during a conversation about his place of birth, a small village on Siberut's east coast, he entrusted me that he had never been back to Mentawai ever since he had accompanied me going there, by then two and a half years ago. At present he even further distanced himself, at least physically, from Mentawai by accepting a job in Pekanbaru, the capital village of the Riau province.

Critical elite and their grassroots
When reading the literature it may be suggested that critical elite like the Mentawaians in the city of Padang can be held responsible for the start-up of ethnic mobilisation. In the literature we can find many examples of the role that can be played by migrants maintaining or restructuring the cultural identity of the ethnic group to with they themselves belong. This, in my opinion, may be true indeed, but some critical reflection can be made on this premise.

Often, the implication is made that we deal with rather homogeneous ethnic groups with an, again, homogeneous elite of interethnic brokers, all having the same interests and goals, from which the most important is the retention of their ethnic identity. The impression is given that due to the migrant's, mainly unpleasant, encounter with the 'other' ethnicity becomes salient to them. As a result of their partial assimilation they consciously return to old norms and values. Such a thought is for instance suggested in Eriksen:

> "…ethnic survival seems to imply that in order to save 'a culture' one must first lose it! This assumption is strengthened by the fact that the leaders of a dominated group must master the cultural codes of the dominant group in order to present their case efficiently. (…) we may put it like this: while one's grandparents may have lived as traditional Inuits (…) without giving it any thought, and one's parents

took great pains to escape from their stigmatised and shameful minority position and to become assimilated and modern, today's generation does everything in its power to revive the customs and traditions that their grandparents followed without knowing it, and which their parents tried so hard to forget." (Eriksen 1993: 129)

This thought in itself already carries an internal contradiction and reality, at least when we consider the Mentawaian case, shows us differently. An essential point in the Mentawaian case consists of the fact that all four different islands within the archipelago underwent different historical developments. As a result goals, interests and ideas about the future of inhabitants on the different islands differ from each other substantially. Then again, when we take a closer look at the inhabitants of Siberut Island – the island which I personally know best – one has to recognise that the population seemingly more oriented to a way of life considered modern, living in the northern part of the island has almost nothing in common with the more traditionally perceived Sarereiket area in the southern part of the island. What at first sight might be confusing within this latter, locally supported dualism, is the fact that those considered less modern actually have more access to modern devices like outboard motors, chainsaws, radios and often own more life stock than those people considered modern. Due to their 'traditional' way of life they attract tourists, foreign producers of documentary films and researchers of several different academic backgrounds who all owe a respectable amount of money to these local people who helped them having a good time, shooting their exotic images and gathering their data.

Besides the heterogeneity to be found between and even within the Mentawaian islands we should also take a look at the elite in Padang and their relationship with their supposed grassroots. This group of people, in my opinion can also not be regarded as a homogenous group. Individual interests differ widely due to level of education, gender, intensity of contact with the outside world, occupation, command of foreign languages, personal ambitions, contact with family, friends and relatives back on their island of origin, etc. Most of them just live their daily lives without ever openly manifesting themselves as being Mentawaian. Only a small number of them are politically active on a potentially influential level. Their actions certainly need further investigation. What, however, I do want to suggest at this moment is that it would be a serious mistake to suppose that all actions undertaken by this group of elite migrants have or were even meant to have an undifferentiated favourable effect on the people still living on the Mentawai islands. More than once I heard about Mentawaian people who saw their newly founded NGO, which they started with good intentions, fail, turn to activities in the detested logging sector themselves.

Although most of the migrants in Padang have a primary focus on the area of origin and some of them even present themselves, under the influence of the international discourse, as thé indigenous population from the Mentawai archipelago, some of them have lost almost all contact and feeling with it. When they are suggested to spend some time in their *uma* they kindly refuse for they consider such a life far too primitive.

During a meeting in Padang organised by the UNESCO, currently active on the islands with a 'natural resources management and conservation' project, it became very clear that different groups of Mentawaians hold very different opinions about what is considered appropriate for the islands and who should speak on behalf of whom (UNESCO 1999).

'Indigenous' Mentawaians and third parties in a global context
In addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the more specific Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, both issued by the United Nations, powerful multilateral banks[16] as well as many international non-governmental organisations[17] have over the last few years formalised their positions on indigenous peoples in their proposals and policy statements (Persoon 1998a: 282-6). This interest in the position of indigenous peoples at a politically more powerful level is definitely a new development.

Where in the past Indonesia's indigenous peoples relied to a great extent on international support organisations[18] they now see themselves, due to the significantly increased access to modern means of communication able to make their own voice heard. Although the premises on which intermediaries operated in the past were definitely based on good intentions they left little space for indigenous opinions.

Due to increased pressure by indigenous peoples themselves and the activities of these support groups, exposure in the mass media and in some cases the work of individual researchers, international politics started to take the indigenous issue seriously. This international movement focusing on the position of indigenous peoples is an example of what Khondker (1994: 23, cited in Persoon 1998a: 286) calls 'globalisation of the local'.

A large Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded conservation and development project, to be implemented on Siberut under auspices of the Ministry of Forestry shows how the international discourse on indigenous peoples has its impact on the Mentawaians. The project should have started its real implementation in the second half of 1996 (Ministry of Forestry 1995), but apart from the construction of several staff buildings, nothing was ever realised in the context of this project[19]. According to the first plans, the ADB contracted a local NGO called YASUMI (Yayasan Suku Mentawai), which in the official documents is translated as the Association of Indigenous Mentawai, to implement the project (Ministry of Forestry 1995). According to Persoon (1998a) the use of the term 'indigenous' is drawing special attention because this term is never used in official Indonesian documents for all citizens in Indonesia are considered indigenous. YASUMI was called to life by the ADB in order to operate as the official representative of the Mentawaians. Since ADB has, following the World Bank, officially approved policy guidelines with respect to indigenous peoples they are in search for local participation within their projects (ADB 1995). Because the MOF/ADB project stopped before it ever really started no-one can tell whether the involving of YASUMI would have been successful, but what can be said is that the people involved within YASUMI were said to have little or no in-depth knowledge about the situation on Siberut. A village head (*kepala desa*) from the Rereiket area told me once that thought of these youngsters as being *sombong* (conceited) and that he would have inspired his community to act against their

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[16] Like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).
[17] Like World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the World Conservation Agency and the World Council of Churches.
[18] Like formally educated members of the indigenous group, foreign anthropologists, missionaries, NGOs such as Amnesty, Survival International, Cultural Survival and the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IGWIA).
[19] This, in the opinion of Down to Earth, might in the near future lead to an impetus for further logging when the government decides Siberut must 'pay its way' by generating revenues from forests to pay off the considerable ADB loans for this project.

activities and instructions. This, of course, is only an example, but I know that this man was not the only one who had such an opinion. I know of several people who felt rather passed over because YASUMI was presented to them just like that without being consulted first. These voices can be interpreted as an indication of the youngsters within YASUMI having actually no knowledge about or contact with their supposed grassroots. After the failure of this MOF/ADB project YASUMI was left without real goals and without a program of action and actually became redundant. The people active within YASUMI tried to set up some regulations with regard to tourism, but their plans to make every tourist register itself with YASUMI and to pay some tax, was never taken serious either by tourists or their guides. YASUMI, as a name, still exists until this very day, in Padang as well as on the Mentawai islands, but its intentions and activities are unclear and therefore not very popular either.

That the (new) transnational networks of indigenous peoples as well as the cultural brokers or entrepreneurs (those individuals and agencies which mediated between the indigenous group, the state and the international society) are still extremely important is shown by another example from the field. The local NGO Yayasan Citra Mandiri[20] (YCM) has close connections with the London-based support organisation Down to Earth[21] (DTE). YCM is providing DTE with instant news about what is happening on the Mentawai islands. DTE, more able to spread the news trough newspapers and the Internet, is bringing the local news under the attention of the rest of the world. Through DTE, YCM is able to put more pressure on the Indonesian government to take more notice of Siberut because of its commitments to protect the island as a Biosphere Reserve, to seek for funding and to broaden their scope and impact. Were most of the local NGOs concerning Mentawai keep office in Padang, YCM, recently opened a secretariat in Muara Siberut, the main harbour on the east coast of Siberut Island. Staff is now going between there and Padang regularly each month, being able to pursue developments on both sides. Due to their more fortunate financial position YCM was also able to contract a community organiser in Rogdok, on of the smaller villages in the southern part of Siberut Island. I also recognised that DTE sometimes operates as an intermediate through which problems between the different local NGOs can be solved.

Between 'indigenous' demands and international pressure
The Indonesian government has always been very well aware of the fact that the ethnic diversity present within the country might form a potential threat to national unity (Lenhart 1994; Maybury-Lewis 1997). According to Geertz (1973) it is senseless to wish ethnic attachments out of existence. Therefore the appropriate reaction for a nation consists of 'domesticating' them (Schefold 1998: 274). Not only have ethnic identities been domesticated and de-politicised by the state, their 'peaks' are also being enlisted to contribute to the process of nation building (Picard 1997). The endless ethnic diversity within the country is presented as one of the central features of national culture. The Indonesian nation state has for a long

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[20] Yayasan Citra Mandiri is mainly focussed on community organising projects within the Mentawai islands.
[21] Down to Earth is a London based NGO preoccupied with issues concerning ecological justice in Indonesia. Down to Earth monitors and campaigns on the social and human implications of environmental issues in Indonesia. They aim to support civil society groups and provide an international voice at the levels of national governments, foreign companies, aid agencies and international funding institutions. Their main focus is the right of the rural poor and indigenous peoples of the 'outer islands' , which are all other islands but Java, to determine their own futures.

time legitimised itself through the 'imagination' that its inhabitants represent a solid cultural community (Anderson 1993).

The reinforcing bond between indigenous communities and international normative patterns is increasingly putting the position of the state under pressure (Jacobsen 2000: 5). The Indonesian state can no longer suppress ethnic groups' utterances of identity without attracting immediate negative attention of the international community. Moreover, as human rights recently constitute a part of IMF's humanitarian regulations, the Indonesian government is forced to initiate policies that guarantee the right of ethnic groups to participate in the current restructuring of the Indonesian state and nation. Indigenous peoples have, at least theoretically, secured the international support for their demands concerning their cultural and political acknowledgement.

Therefore the recent question of regional autonomy in Indonesia, if it goes ahead in any real sense, is of huge importance especially to indigenous peoples. Many Indonesian Peoples' organisations and NGOs believe that the real test will be in the strength of local-level democracy – how quickly and how far local communities can ensure that they take a full part in decision-making (Down to Earth 2000).

Concluding remarks

The main goal of this chapter has been to show how Mentawaian identity is shaped at the local level. By focussing on a distinct category of relatively highly educated Mentawaians in the city of Padang I attempted to show this process is linked with developments at the national as well as the international level and of how these processes are part and parcel of a global context. As we have seen the process of Mentawaian identity formation is surely not a neutral activity, but rather a form of resistance to certain forms of domination. I do, however, want to promote the thought that current processes of identity formation are more than a form of resistance only. In my opinion we would seriously narrow our understanding of identity processes if all Mentawaian activities are placed in a discourse of resistance.

As suggested earlier: people do have more on their minds than only resistance against what they consider violations of their territorial rights and their rights to define their own way of life. Due to, and as a part of state policies, for a long time Mentawainess has been expressed almost exclusively, sometimes even by the Mentawaians themselves, in negative stereotypes like *terbelakang* (left behind), *malas* (lazy), *belum maju* (not yet developed), *masih bodoh* (still stupid). Such humiliating stereotypes indicate that the current process of Mentawaian identity formation is a kind of resistance that for a considerable part aims at 'recapturing dignity' (Derks 1997: 702).

In the course if this chapter we have also seen that the process of identity formation is highly politicised. Therefore it is very tempting to focus on activities instigated by local NGOs. Of course there is nothing wrong with that and we should definitely investigate these activities. We should, however, as Barth (1969; 1994) emphasises, be aware of the entrepreneurial role in ethnic politics.

> 'The mobilisation of ethnic groups in collective action is often affected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise, and is not the direct expression of the group's cultural ideology, or the popular will.' (Barth 1994: 11)

That this is also the case in the Mentawaian context can be concluded from the UNESCO meeting, mentioned above. From this meeting it became clear that not all 'ordinary' people affiliated themselves with the public expression of their identity at the organisational level.

In order to grasp and understand what a particular ethnic identity is about, it is not enough to make a homogenising inventory of its manifestations. One has to pay attention to the experiences through which it is formed. In this view ethnicity has to mean something – in the sense of making a difference – not only to *the people* one is studying, but also to the individual *persons*[22] (Jenkins 1996: 13). In other words, the collective can not be 'real' without the individual and its every day experiences. People's daily lives are rich with discourse and signs relating to identity and ethnicity. This chapter and the short pilot study from which it originates are an attempt to grasp the status quo of daily life among Mentawaians in the city of Padang. It was an attempt to find out what Mentawaian identity consists of and how it is working. Its explanatory power, however, is not yet explored.

Again I want to stress that processes of identity formation can not be fully understood without taking the broader context into account. The blessings of globalisation and its (political) implications at the national as well as on the regional and local level are shown to be ambivalent. A higher level of regional autonomy for instance might be a powerful incentive for local authorities to further exploit natural resources present within the region. Thanks to increased access to modern means of communication one is now able to communicate directly with sponsors, intermediaries and other indigenous peoples all over the world. One has, however, to keep in mind that this access is not equally distributed among all Mentawaians. Therefore the threat of exploitation of one group over the other is not imaginary.

Another question raised, but certainly not answered within the context of this chapter is the role of invigorated ethnic groups in post-Soeharto Indonesia. According to Jacobsen (2000) many ethnic groups, now provided with a higher degree of political and economical autonomy, suddenly recognise real possibilities for reinforcing a powerful position against the Indonesian authorities. They do so with the help of international support organisations and by referring to international standards concerning human rights. Natural resources of vital importance to the Indonesian economy may also become a bargaining item in negotiations with the contemporary weakened Indonesian state. The question remains whether indigenous people, like the Mentawaians will become well organised enough to claim an acknowledged position within a new Indonesia. The fact that they might use their natural resources as a bargaining item might result in a disaster for the local forests on the Mentawai islands, Siberut in particular. Nature will probably become a victim while only the few in power will profit.

This chapter probably raised more questions than that it gave answers. This chapter should therefore be seen as an impulse for further research. Ethnicity and the current debates it inspires are constantly changing shape and direction may make it seem like impossible to grasp or even understand. One could, however, consider it a challenge to try to conceptualise ethnicity as a flux. In order to fully understand ethnicity in all its complexity we should not refrain ourselves from analysing all its levels from individual experiences to global contexts, and that we must be simultaneously perceptive of action as well as symbolisation.

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[22] See also Barth (1994) and Geertz (1973).

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