



The *uma* (communal longhouse) and its inhabitants are the smallest unit within the imminent political system of the *laggai*. Buttui, Siberut Island.

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# The Return to the *Laggai*

Report >  
Indonesia

As part of the current reformative politics in Indonesia, *otonomi daerah* (regional autonomy) has been introduced. In response to the growing demands for greater political and financial autonomy, a start was made when decentralization was introduced in 1999. The desire to have autonomy at a provincial level, which could potentially have undermined the state, was cleverly circumvented when the government decided to denote lower administrative units – the *kabupaten* (district) and *desa* (village) – as key levels in the new autonomous system (von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann 2001).

By Myrna Eindhoven

The era of *Reformasi* has offered greater political and financial freedom, and has also created the opportunity for critical parties to be more vocal. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have taken this opportunity to voice their desire to have greater legal recognition of *adat* (tradition or custom) and *adat*-based rights to natural resources. Regional autonomy and the adherent decentralization are all about the empowerment of Indonesia's civil society and the democratization of its political structure. Under internal as well as external pressure to move towards a less authoritarian political system, Indonesia is being forced to replace former repressive top-down policies with locally instigated bottom-up strategies. The role of domestic NGOs in promoting local *adat* as an important bottom-up strategy is extremely significant. Local NGOs, supported by post-Cold War discourses that prioritize democratization, human rights, environmental protection, transparency, and good governance, do not seem to have a hard time linking themselves with powerful international (donor) organizations, thereby creating potentially powerful positions for themselves.

On the mainland of West Sumatra regional autonomy has triggered off a restructuring of the local government, in which the *desa* (village) structure is to be replaced by a local government based on the *nagari*.<sup>1</sup> When West Sumatra reintroduced the *nagari* as a local government unit in late 2000, the Mentawai Archipelago – also part of the province of West Sumatra – feared that they would also become subject to this 'return to the *nagari*'. This would have been an unacceptable development for most of the Mentawaians, for they feel substantially different – in a cultural as well as religious sense – from their Minangkabau neighbours from the Sumatran mainland. While Mentawai waited for additional legislation from the provincial level, several local NGOs had in the meantime introduced the idea that Mentawai should have its own movement: *kembali ke laggai* (return to the *laggai*).<sup>2</sup> A simple return to the *laggai* is, however, not as simple as it may seem. Not all parties involved are equally in favour of such a return, in which the current village government would be replaced by one based on the *laggai*. Some consider it the ultimate opportunity to differentiate the Mentawaians from the mainland Minangkabau, while others fear – not unreasonably – that the structure of the *laggai*, which is, strictly taken, a land tenure structure, is not capable of carrying the political structure that it would need to support in the near future.

Local NGOs and the provincial government are much in favour of the 'return to the *laggai*'. Most local NGOs use it as a supportive tool in processes of identity formation. The provincial government, is eager in making Jakarta believe that the 'return to the *laggai*' is a direct expression of the popular will of the Mentawaians and, thus, prove that it can handle issues of ethnic diversity within the province by itself. The local government in the Mentawai Archipelago itself

seems to have little or no interest in the developments around the *laggai*. The review of draft versions of legislation has met with serious delay not least because of the slack behaviour of local government officials. Only recently have they openly stated that they do not consider the 'return to the *laggai*' to be in their interest. The 'return to the *laggai*' is seen as just one more burden on the newly constituted but already problematic governance of *kabupaten* (district) Kepulauan Mentawai, created in 1999. The local communities, on their part, feel generally left out when it comes to negotiations regarding the 'return to the *laggai*'. Due to various practical obstructions, these communities are informed either slightly or not at all. As a result they feel that the return to the *laggai* is a process in which their role is at best that of the spectator.

Section 24 of the provincial regulation 9/2000 on the reintroduction of the *nagari* grants the Mentawaians the opportunity to draft their own regulations with regard to the restructuring of the local government on the count of their significantly different *adat* and culture. Although this statement may seem only logical, this was in fact one of the first times that the different status of the Mentawaians had been officially recognized in neutral terms. That is to say, in earlier days the different Mentawaiian *adat*, culture, and religion had always been talked about in negative terms, as a backward and pagan lifestyle that had to be either changed or erased (Persoon 1994). Thus the statement published in section 24 of the above-mentioned provincial regulation was interpreted as a public acknowledgement of the different, yet equal, status of the Mentawaians within the province of West Sumatra.

In accordance with this legislation, an advisory team of 23 people consisting of civil servants, intellectuals, and academics, several of whom were Mentawaians, was created. This team had to investigate the wishes of the local communities and was also responsible for draft versions of the legislations which would eventually lead to a return to the *laggai*. It was a local NGO, Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM), known as a strong protagonist of the *laggai* structure, which facilitated five meetings with local communities in the first three months of 2001. The team experienced several problems while compiling the successful draft version. According to the advisory team local communities had forgotten about the *laggai*. Moreover, this loss of cultural knowledge could be blamed upon the Indonesian government, which had been actively suppressing the local culture of the Mentawaians since the 1950s. In the team's recommendations, the government was, therefore, cited as being responsible for re-educating the local communities about the *laggai* system. It also turned out to be rather problematic to overcome all differences in the various local understandings of *laggai* and opinions on what the system should look like in the future. On the southern Mentawai islands of Sipora and the Pagai Islands the word *laggai* refers to a settlement, but on the

Island of Siberut the word knows a variety of different meanings, none of which refer to a settlement in the sense understood on the southern Mentawai Islands. The process of 'returning to the *laggai*' is technically speaking an impossible process, for – at least on Siberut – there has never been a *laggai*.

Apart from the confusion with regard to the terminology, the structure of the settlements on the different islands tends to differ significantly due to different initial settlement patterns. Things have also been complicated through both spontaneous and forced (re)settlement projects, instigated by the Indonesian government. Thanks to these different and shifting settlement patterns it is now extremely difficult to delimit the borders of the *laggai*. Whether it should be composed on the basis of the initial stretches of ancestral land, or whether it should be based on the territory of the village, is a highly debated issue all the more so because the very access to political power is at stake here.

Negotiations about the return to the *laggai* are characterized by bottom-up rhetoric in which the revitalization of *adat* is made into an important feature of local autonomy. The choice for *adat* as a central notion within these developments is not a random one: in national as well as international public discourse it is considered to be something that originates from below, which means that the revitalizing of *adat* is a symbolically powerful factor in the quest for bottom-up strategies. That the return to the *laggai* will automatically lead to *adat* enjoying a more important role is, however, not all that certain. Neither is the revitalization of *adat* an automatic guarantee that democratization, in the Western understanding, will follow. ◀

## References

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## Note >

- 1 The *nagari* is a typical Minangkabau form of local government, which was operative in West Sumatra until 1985. It was at that time the Indonesian government – in an attempt to create uniformity in the abundant variety of local forms of government – introduced the *desa* (village) government system (Persoon 1994: 227).
- 2 The use of the word *laggai* in the context under discussion is based on the use and meaning of the word as it is understood on the southern Mentawai Islands of Sipora and the Pagai Islands, where it refers to a 'settlement'.