

# Indigenous Identity on the World Stage: The Mentawai of Indonesia

N. Mason Cummings

**Abstract:** *Under the recent formation of a world market, local indigenous populations such as the Mentawai are increasingly pressured to adjust their collective sense of identity according to the complex framework of a global community. Market-penetration has been highly variable in this region, in part due to the geographic dispersion of the Mentawai archipelago. Local articulations of indigenous identity are hardly present in the international discourse that tends to homogenize the area's great deal of cultural variation. This paper analyzes the various cultural forces of transforming and defining indigenous identity on the world stage, along with the emergence of ethnogenesis through the increasing interaction with outside groups.*

## Introduction

The process of cultural change has been drastically accelerated and even redirected under the recent formation of a world market. But in the case of the Mentawai archipelago of Indonesia, market penetration has been anything but homogenous. Local identities and conceptions of social cohesion are constantly reshaped and transformed through the seemingly ubiquitous process of social change. When this process is imposed by outside forces, however, the contextual platform on which identity is conceived takes upon a whole new realm as the relationship between 'us and them' becomes even more complex. Yet while this inherent contrast between 'us and them' is a fundamental component in shaping cultural identification, it is also imperative to understand that land use patterns are another inextricable component in the formation of social identity. Thus while land use patterns are transformed and redirected under the various pressures of political-economic (or even environmental) forces, so are local conceptions of identity. Indigenous identity has undergone drastic transformations through the process of globalization, and many groups in the Mentawai archipelago (among a myriad of other locations) are virtually stuck in the constantly changing interaction between tradition and modernization.

As Reeves (1999:34) argues, "anthropological scholarship needs to take greater heed of the ways in which the local inhabitants construct their own identities." There is currently a great deal of discursive variation surrounding the collective notion of Mentawai identity, yet local articulation is commonly an absent feature of this discourse. Here it seems as though outsiders' interpretations regarding local inhabitants frequently prevail over the interpretations which inhabitants hold of themselves (Reeves 1999). The notion of social identity in itself is entirely contextual, and identity cannot be adequately understood as a singular or discrete unit without reference to a broader social system. Here identity involves the explanations of who particular groups consider themselves to be through contrasting notions of 'selves' with 'others' (Reeves 1999). This concept of self-identification is oftentimes not the case in the context of globalization, however, as "localized identities, histories, and commitments have been

consistently unmarked and derecognized in favor of homogenizing discourse of development” (Li 2000:174). On the world stage, indigenous peoples are demographically contrasted with, and often exploited by, a larger market core.

### **Ethnographic/Geographic Contexts**

Traditionally, there is extremely little migration between various the islands and island groups of the Mentawaiian archipelago, and the cultures show remarkable differences throughout the island chain (Pearson & Osseweijer 2002). This extensive geographic and cultural variation is greatly overlooked, however, when indigenous identification takes the stage of a broader colonial context. In this case, “the ‘archipelago’, ‘group’, or ‘islands’ on the one hand and ‘its’ inhabitants on the other are collapsed into each other creating a unitary ‘thing’” (Reeves 1999:41). Yet local religious, cultural, and linguistic categorizations remain highly variable despite the apparent homogenization of indigenous identity on the world stage (Pearson & Osseweijer 2002). It is crucial to note here that there is not one single group that traditionally identifies themselves as ‘Mentawai’. Rather, the term refers a gamut of geographically-dispersed indigenous groups that have been collectively labeled as a discrete social unit in contrast to Indonesia’s central ‘modernized’ population.

Differential market penetration in many areas has pressured various indigenous groups to degrade their natural resources by redirecting subsistence patterns (Godoy et al. 2005). These trends of land tenure transformation, in turn, reshape social identity at the local level. While Holt (2005:206) argues that for many indigenous groups “the natural environment is inextricable from the social environment,” redirecting subsistence towards the demands of a market economy could have significant effects on broader social realities. In addition to this basic transformation of local identities through changes in social-environmental relationships, indigenous communities are commonly identified as conservationists on the world stage (Li 2000; *see also*: Friere 2003; Holt 2005; Grunewald 2002; Anonymous 2006). The crucial effort to build international alliances encourages many indigenous groups to convey a sort of ‘noble conservationist’ image, which may even conflict with some of their traditional cultural and subsistence practices. While this will be further discussed in subsequent paragraphs, here it is important to keep in mind that all of these basic transformational forces which act upon indigenous identity are highly variable within the geographically-dispersed context of Mentawaiian groups.

The formation of an Indonesian state has had substantial ramifications on the collective concept of indigenous identity in the area. All of the various ‘unmodernized’ cultural groups assumed a combined identity as a subordinate transformation of the dominant Indonesian core (Reeves 1999). Again, despite this sense of collective identity as imposed by colonizing forces, social organization has remained highly variable. Moreover, the geographical variation that characterizes this region has also resulted in differential market penetration, and cultural identification has become subject to varying degrees of contact with Indonesians and the awareness of Indonesia as an institutional entity in a geopolitical context (Reeves 1999). Pearson & Osseweijer (2002:229) also explain that “small islands and their surrounding costal zones are usually far from centers of political power and the rules of regulation and enforcement are weak.” Despite the great deal of the region’s geographic and cultural variation, Indonesian independence has

implied a process of cultural standardization which encourages everyone to take on an identity as an Indonesian citizen, and this has been especially concentrated on politically defenseless groups (Eindhoven 2002). All Indonesians are also required to profess one of the state supported religions: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, or Buddhism (Anonymous 2006). Once again, however, many groups have been excluded from this process of standardization as a result of both geographical and political variables.

### **Political Economy**

In the effort to properly articulate indigenous identity, it is important to understand some of the fundamental political-economic processes of change that are currently at work on local, regional, and global levels. A common feature of these islands is that they are abundant in natural resources (Pearson & Osseweijer 2002), and the process of extracting these resources for a market economy may transform local patterns of social organization. Push factors such as landlessness, land tenure issues, and population increases often accelerate the intensity of rural-urban migration (Evers 1975). There are also a myriad of pull factors, however, such as expanded opportunities to earn monetary income, better nutrition and health care, and easier access to other basic resources and services (Godoy et al. 2005). It is clear, nonetheless, that many of these pulls to change are the result of preceding pushes. Evers (1975:778), for example, points out that push factors seem to be more central element of rural-urban migration and that “relatively few people are drawn into urban areas through job offers.” Even indigenous groups with the advantage of geographic isolation are threatened by continuous economic encroachment, and eventual resource depletion may force them to surrender to progress (Bodely 1999). All of these forces have substantial effects on social organization, and the resulting changes in land tenure are foundational to the broader changes in social structure and cultural identification.

Many of the area’s semi-nomadic indigenous groups are sedentarized by the effects of market penetration as subsistence production is redirected towards facilitating the needs of the growing Indonesian core. These processes can be empirically documented through the use of modern tools such as remote sensing, geographic information systems, and even indigenous mapping (*see*: Chambers 2006). The images produced by such technologies are visual representations of things such as land tenure changes that, when properly assessed, can provide information about even broader processes of social and economic changes within a geospatial context. These technologies can also be useful in illustrating cultural variation in relation to subsistence practices as a product of geographical variation in the Mentawaiian region. Whether used in an academic or applied approach, these technological innovations can indeed be part of the solution to some of the demographic problems caused by the process of globalization, yet those very same processes are the ones to support such technological innovations.

With the rise of these new communication technologies, the formation of international alliances has been a central element in shaping and articulating indigenous identity as local groups have become consciously concerned with the preservation of their culture (Eindhoven 2002). These international networks have the ability to “mobilize information strategically which enables [groups] to persuade, pressure, and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments” (Eindhoven 2002:361).

Significant increases in access to modern means of communication and the resulting international attention to 'indigenous peoples' had been the backbone of Mentawaiian activism (Eindhoven 2002). Here again we see that the products of globalization are both the reason for and potential solution to many social problems. While there is an inevitable catch-22 at work here, this does seem to be a basic example of how social capital can permeate new institutions (Godoy et al. 2005). Local articulations of identity are transformed through new processes of translation, but the local conceptions of traditional identity may be only slightly adjusted to changing sociopolitical contexts. This, however, is a rather idealistic notion. Culture is dynamic, and identity retranslated is essentially identity reformed, especially considering the myriad of potential change agents in the global context.

Many cultural practices and traditions must be compromised and reformulated in order to establish effective international networks. As previously stated, a large part of the indigenous effort to defend their cultural rights has been characterized by the adoption of conservationist arguments in order to establish allies on the world stage (Freire 2003). The effort to maintain a conservationist image becomes more difficult, however, as economic pressures accelerate resource allocation on different islands. Indigenous leaders have thus begun to emphasize this inherent threat to their environments in the process of establishing international connections.

Activists draw upon the arguments, idioms, and images supplied by the international indigenous rights movement, especially the claim that indigenous peoples derive ecologically sound livelihoods from their ancestral lands and possess forms of knowledge which are unique and valuable (Li 2000:155).

Many indigenous groups do indeed embody many of these basic ideals, but articulating them on the world-stage within the context of market penetration can clearly have impacts on conceptions of local identity. Eindhoven (2002:358) points out that many Mentawaiian leaders "seem to have become masters of the art of translating their interests against state and corporate powers into the conceptual framework of Western ecology." An essentially unavoidable conflict of local interests results from this situation.

### **Local Identity and Enthogenesis**

In considering social identity in terms of the relationship between 'us and them', the widened public sphere has also played a central role in shaping local conceptions of identity. Once again, the process of making connections involves the ability to readily articulate local identity to fit a broader preconfigured international image (Li 2000). While we have seen that much international discourse of the Mentawai is characterized by the homogenization of cultural variation, local groups also seem to voluntarily assume this collective identity for themselves in pursuit of common interests (Li 2000). Thus they do, to some extent, consider themselves a cohesive culture in contrast to other politically dominant groups. These processes are framed by questions of authenticity and change, and it is often in the best interest of neighboring indigenous groups to cohesively adjust to changing sociopolitical contexts. By articulating a common environmental threat as a collective and unitary society, however, indigenous groups are inadvertently highlighting their primordial otherness from western society while simultaneously

homogenizing their own distinct senses of cultural identity (Li 2000). This inherent juxtaposition between cultural revival and cultural reinvention has significant effects on the emergent ethnicity of indigenous groups.

The establishment of local NGOs has been one of the fundamental strategies in establishing international alliances, and they are a key to generating monetary support for activists. By presenting themselves as noble conservationists, indigenous groups also entice foreign donor organizations to make monetary contributions. "The founding of a local NGO has thus proved to be an easy way to make a living" (Eindhoven 2002:362). There tends to be an additional transformation of social identity, however, as individuals acquire new skills, attitudes, and values by participating in a market economy (Godoy et al. 2005), even in the case of NGOs. Moreover, NGO leaders are often torn between facilitating local needs and meeting the expectations of their western donors (Igoe 2003). Here we can see differential benefits within the context of change, and that local traditions are persistently in juxtaposition with external forces. Many activists are aware of these differential benefits, and are pressured to select certain issues from a broader social canvass in order to establish regional and international alliances (Li 2000). While registered NGOs do seem to provide community leaders with a formal institution to coordinate local land movements on the international level, the broader institutional effects of these alliances are commonly overlooked (Igoe 2003).

Though many Mentawaiian groups continue to display a great deal of cultural variation, the one issue that they all seem to have in common is coercive environmental degradation. As Holt (2005:208) explains, "the threat to the environment is external, not internal." So despite efforts to maintain a conservationist image, one of the most significant threats to social solidarity is still related to issues regarding land rights. Here yet another basic social paradox seems to be at work: a group's ability to maintain a conservationist image on the world stage becomes even more important as they are increasingly pressured towards urbanization and ecological degradation. The demarcation of land rights is a central element of social organization, and is thus crucial to understanding some of the fundamental processes of change. Moreover, Freire (2003:363) explains that "as land use changes, land rights change, and these are redefined according to the context in which they are discussed." In this case, land uses are often redefined according to an international context in the absence of local perspectives. Thus indigenous perspectives are eroded and reformulated while land uses and rights change under the differential pressures of the market economy.

In relation to this basic problem of property rights, Freire (2003:367) argues that "property is an expression of human relations, agreements and mutual understandings," and that "negotiations over land right have been characterized by a lack of real means of communication between the two [traditional and market] systems of property." An important element of this issue is the problem of translatability (Freire 2003), local subsistence practices may be incompatible with those which characterize market production. In addition to this basic problem of land use and demarcation, monetary incentives must also be translated into compensation that is culturally appropriate to local frameworks. However, the case is generally that neither land demarcation nor monetary incentives are adequately translated to local contexts. Here we can see some of the more tangible social effects on differential market penetration: some groups are geographically isolated enough to effectively resist these pressures and maintain

autonomy, others are trapped between assimilation and equality, and some have become fully integrated into the market economy. Yet despite this great deal of variability, once again, all of these groups are collectively labeled as a discrete unit in contrast to the Indonesian core.

There is clearly a drastic transformation of 'traditional' lifeways in the process of adjusting to sociopolitical fluctuations in the global context. Local notions of social identity assume a widened public sphere, and indigenous perspectives must be adequately translated at the local level rather than universally reformulated on the international level. We are engaging in the act of representation when we talk about other cultures, and even this particular analysis is exclusively based on external perspectives. Local articulations of indigenous identity are hardly present in the international discourse that tends to homogenize the area's great deal of cultural variation. Thus there are clearly some empirical inadequacies with this sort of 'armchair anthropology' in the total absence of subjective experience. As Shweder (1991:76) points out, "we should not expect reality to be independent of our participation in it." Given what anthropologists now know of the ubiquity of change, however, it *is* possible to assess many of the complexities within the world-system in order to draw applicable conclusions to properly framed questions. We can better understand the adaptive capacity of indigenous groups within a political-economic framework (Thomas 2001), but we must remain wary of the inevitable overgeneralizations in analyzing and describing such complex processes.

## **Conclusion**

The process of globalization appears to increase inequality both among and between countries (Fort et al. 2004), but international discourse often acts to perpetuate these inequalities. Social identity is clearly a dynamic process, and the role of agency is another commonly overlooked element of change. Yet even agency is partially shaped by external factors, particularly socioeconomic variables with basic implications of land use transformation. In the context of globalization, indigenous identity has become "firmly interconnected with non-localized material realities involving the state and world-system" (Reeves 1999:49). In addition, social identity on the local scale is contextualized by particular shared struggles between different groups (Li 2000), and these struggles are often framed by the same non-localized realities of a world-system.

The basic question of 'us vs. them' is fundamental in constructing local conceptions of identity. Traditionally, Mentawaiian cultures would differentiate themselves from neighboring groups based on geographic and organizational differences. Those regional differences, however, have become clouded by the augmenting sphere of socioeconomic variables. International discourse homogenizes the region's great cultural variation, yet local heterogeneous groups have also begun to voluntarily identify themselves as part of a larger cohesive whole in the pursuit of common interests within the context of globalization. So as social variability actually increases under differential market penetration, emergent ethnicity is uniformly valorized on the world stage and cultural distinctiveness becomes clouded. Moreover, indigenous groups are stuck in a catch-22 in their struggle to maintain 'conservationist' and 'traditional' images in the face of modernization. Here they adopt the ideas of change in order to resist the implications embodied by those ideas. Yet by adopting the preconfigured images of indigenous

communities on the global scale, many groups are virtually stuck between development and tradition. The processes of globalization are extremely complex, to say the very least, and it is nearly impossible to properly assess all of the different variables in a single comprehensive analysis. Not only does change effect social groups in different ways, it also affects individuals in different ways.

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