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Primates and birds of *sabulungan*; Roles of animals in sculptures, shamanic songs and dances, and the belief system of traditional Mentawaians

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Primates and birds of *sabulungan*

Roles of animals in sculptures, shamanic songs and dances, and the belief system of traditional Mentawaians

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Abstract

Mentawaians sing ritual songs enshrined in archaic texts referring to particular primates and birds, while ritual and traditional dances imitate how gibbons, sea eagles, and other animals live in the natural world. Mentawaians craft sculptures of endemic primates and unique birds. The *bilou* gibbon ape and various other animals also symbolize specific sacred knowledge within the *sabulungan* spiritual belief system and traditional cosmology of Mentawai society. Although some do succeed in surviving, many older traditions have faded away. Among the traditions which continue intact, this report aims to examine the roles of primates and birds across the arts and in the Mentawai belief system to reveal the profound depth of connection between humanity and the natural world throughout Mentawai traditional culture.

Keywords

Primate; gibbon; *bilou*; bird; sculpture; song; dance; art; shaman; *sabulungan*; ritual; Mentawai.

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1. Introduction

To discuss the natural world of Mentawai and its relationship to the traditional arts in Southeast Asia, we should seize the opportunity to examine indigenous songs, dances, and sculptures, and their roles in the traditional belief system of the resident clans of the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia. In Mentawai, spiritual belief does not require the building of temples or the writing of sacred *lontar* palm-leaf manuscripts. Mentawaians have other means of expressing their arts and their links to the Divine and nature. Honing their skills by tirelessly exercising them, Mentawaians masterfully craft different ritual items, melodiously sing unique songs, and alluringly imitate primates and birds in their dances.

Just as Mentawaians do not build temples with sculpted ornaments and figurative stone images depicting elements of the natural world, they do not require theatres in which to perform their music and dance, or museums in which to exhibit their artistic works. Their cultural values as revealed in their traditional arts are indispensable sources of information from which younger generations learn about the fundamental values of their ancestors. The archaic symbols, motifs, shapes, colours, and forms of cultural objects unshakeably demonstrate that the ancestors of the Mentawaians clearly relied on the natural world. In this report, we look at how the Mentawaians perceive the natural world and imbue it with cultural meanings and religious purpose. In doing so, we look at the overlapping roles of those primates and birds in the visual and performing arts as well as in traditional Mentawai cosmology.

Before we present the roles of primates and birds in arts and cosmology and elaborate on the importance of motifs and designs in artistic sculptures, we provide a brief account of the life of traditional Mentawaians. Understanding the basics of the culture allows the basics of the culture, allows us to comprehend more readily their appreciation of the role of nature in the performing arts and iconographic cultural objects. Thereafter, we specify the social and political pressures of change which have impacted on Mentawaian traditional culture and arts. Social and political suppressions have unquestionably contributed significantly to the disappearance of some fundamental traditional culture of the Mentawaians. To some extent this has also had an impact on the artistic objects and the performing arts we currently encounter.

2. Mentawaians and their traditional culture

The Mentawai Islands of Indonesia are unique; nothing in the world really resembles this extraordinary archipelago. Their geographical isolation dramatically sets their traditional culture, as well as their fauna, apart from that of the rest of Southeast Asia, and has allowed the survival of relict Indo-Malayan fauna and the evolution of many endemic species. Globally, the Mentawai Islands are second only to the Galápagos group in the sheer number of endemic species (WWF 1980; Burman-Hall 2017: 118). This also applies to the people. The *Suku bangsa* Mentawai or *Orang* Mentawai (Mentawai people) is an ethnic group with its distinctive culture who live on four main

islands (Siberut, Sipora, North Pagai, and South Pagai) in the seventy-island archipelago, located about 150 kilometres off the west coast of Sumatra (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Mentawai Islands and research areas.

Of the approximately 100,000 people currently living in the Mentawai Islands, somewhat fewer than 80,000 are Mentawaians inhabiting traditional and government villages. The remainder are migrants from Sumatra and other islands of Indonesia. There is no official record reporting the total numbers of traditional inhabitants of Mentawai Islands. However, with twenty to twenty-five traditional settlements containing about 500 people in each settlement, there must be about 10,000-12,000 people who still maintain traditional life ways, mainly in the interior of Siberut. The majority of Mentawaians living in government villages have adopted a modern way of life with some traditional intermingling.

There is little information about Mentawai prehistory. The traditional Mentawaians are one of the oldest and most genetically distinct ethnic groups in Indonesia. DNA studies by some scholars (Meryanne K. Tumanggor et al. 2013: 167-170; Georgi Hudjashov et al. 2017: 2446-2448) show the closest relatives of this isolated and genetically rather un-diverse population elsewhere in the world are among the indigenous tribal mountain peoples of Taiwan and the Philippines.

Relying on oral narratives, the islanders themselves consider that Siberut was the place of first settlement (Reimar Schefold 1989; Tulius 2012a). Information on different aspects of traditional culture has been extensively published and discussed by various scholars (Edwin M. Loeb 1929; Hetty Nooy-Palm 1968; Herman Sihombing 1979; Stefano Coronese 1986; Schefold 1988; Gerard A. Persoon 1994; Tonino Caissutti 2015; Tulius 2012b), so we shall just give a resumé of some relevant information about the natural world, particularly Mentawai communal clan life, spirituality and shamanism, and the relationship of Mentawai birds and animals to traditional cosmology.

2.1 *Uma*: communal house and clans

The social and cultural structure of traditional Mentawaians is centred on the *uma*, a communal house standing on a riverbank, which is home to a clan descended from common ancestors. More precisely, an *uma* hosts various nuclear families descended from the same ancestors in a patrilineal lineage (see Schefold 1988: 120-129). It is usual for the clans to build an *uma* on their ancestral land as a centre from which they can look after their communal land and natural resources. Members of the clan cultivate the land, multi-crop the rainforest and hunt for primates, deer and wild boar. To avoid conflicts, first settlers established rights to particular areas of land not yet claimed by other clans (Tulius 2017) and even today it is unusual for a clan to permit another clan to build an *uma* on its territory.

The *uma* is the greatest cultural object ever constructed by traditional Mentawaians. Each *uma* also hosts many other cultural objects made by the clan with which it is associated. Loeb (1929) in the Pagai Islands and Schefold (1988, 2017) among the Sakuddei in Siberut have documented the festive rituals (*punen*) and elaborate process of *uma* construction, including the preparation of the building materials, offerings to wood (forest) spirits, and the specific taboos a clan must obey to avoid any misfortunes. The elegant *uma* architecture reflects Mentawai cosmology, and providing spiritual connections between those living or meeting in the *uma* and the plants and animals inhabiting the forest (Schefold 2003). It is highly significant that the building of an *uma* requires a huge ritual and festivities at which many pigs are sacrificed (Loeb 1929: 207-215; Schefold 1988: 112-120, 2017: 41-43) but, until it has been traditionally adorned with cultural and ritual objects displayed and preserved on its walls, wooden posts, and beams, the *uma* is still considered spiritually incomplete. Some of these objects are described in the following sections of this paper. The *uma* is one of the most important elements in Mentawai cosmology.

The word *uma* also refers to the group of people descended from the same ancestors living in the valley in which the *uma* is located (Tulius 2012b: 54-55). Some clans have an ancestral relationship with other clans dwelling in other valleys. Each *uma* group has a clan name to identify its ancestry easily. In the period of the early settlement of the Mentawai Islands, there were several *uma,* but no one yet knows which was first and which others were

subordinate to the initial one. In the course of time, some *uma* acquired very large memberships and their clan members migrated to different places in the islands. Therefore, their clans can be found in all four major islands.

Currently, there are about 220 clan names of *uma* as genealogical groups; however, the *uma* as communal buildings have been decreasing as most Mentawaian clans currently live separately in nuclear-family houses in government villages. Among clan members, particular people have certain skills which contribute to the creation and sustenance of Mentawai traditional culture.

2.2 Lay people, shamans, psychics, and herbalists

Every clan is autonomous in making decisions about the life of the clan. The need for self-subsistence has emboldened clan members to exercise particular skills so that the clan can support its needs independently. There are skilled hunters (*simapana*) and talented craftsmen (*siagaikabei*), like those who can build canoes and make paddles. Some individuals, called *siagaititiboat*, can compose and tell stories and others are talented singers of songs. They compose songs by drawing upon their personal feelings and experiences. Talented singers (*siagaimuurai*) can be men and women.

Skilled and talented people memorize stories of their ancestral family and heritage, including songs, mantras, and dances, passing them down to the following generations. Singers learn to sing melodiously, dancers to be agile and attractive, and sculptors skilled and refined. Excellent as they might become, Mentawai artists should not be considered professionals, since they receive no remuneration from their talents to support their families. In fact, their main daily work is to extract a subsistence living from the forest. Consequently, they multi-task as shamans, hunters, horticulturalists, farmers, and so on.

Besides talented, skilled lay people, one group of special people occupies an essential position in Mentawai traditional society: the *kerei* (shamans) who perform a full range of rituals to communicate with spirits in the Other World (see Schefold 1992). Mircea Eliade (1964), in his study of shamanism, argues that both men and women who have a guardian spirit can attain this position. However, in Mentawai only adult men with a guardian spirit are able to be a shaman. Michael Harner mentions, "The fact that a person has a guardian spirit does not in itself make him a shaman" (1980: 43). Therefore, a training process must be undertaken. This guardian spirit can befriend a man naturally at an early age or at the later stage in his shamanic training. To become a shaman, one needs to maintain a physically and spiritually pure state during rituals.

For a woman with or without a guardian spirit, to become a shaman is impossible. Women by their nature, hampered by menstruation and other physical limitations, are traditionally considered to be excluded from this privilege. A woman with a special ability to see spirits is called a *siruamata* or psychic. A *siruamata* can cure ill people concocting herbal medicine with the help of her guardian spirit. Individuals with special skills and abilities are

key actors in sustaining Mentawai traditional culture.

Besides *kerei* and *siruamata*, there are also lay people with an important knowledge of herbal medicines called *simatak siagailaggek*, who restrict themselves to dealing with traditional herbology and do not aspire to be shamans. *Kerei* (shaman), *siruamata* (psychic), and *simatak siagailaggek* (herbalist) learn about herbal medicines empirically by acquiring an understanding of the colour, taste, smell as well as the kinds and types of plants. They identify poisonous plants, edible herbs and plants which are medically efficacious. They can also learn about herbal medicines by following their tutors who are senior shamans or herbalists (Tulius 2000, 2020: 169-172; Wanda Avé and Setyawan Sunito 1990).

As they seek to gain knowledge of particular medicinal herbs, the Mentawaian traditional healers carefully observe the behaviour of animals which want to cure their injured cubs and chicks. For example, the *kemut*, the greater coucal bird (*Centropus sinensis*) is known to feed a chick with a broken leg a particular leaf to heal its injury. After noting the species of plant whose leaves the *kemut* uses to do this, the Mentawai healers have sought it out and studied it as herbal medicine. By applying these medicines to their patients with broken legs or other limbs, Mentawai healers can help their patients successfully. They then pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Learning from animals is an essential skill by which human beings can obtain the maximum benefit from the natural world (Tulius 2020).

3. Political levers of change and their impacts on Mentawai arts

In 1901 Protestantism was initially introduced into the Pagai Islands and later to the rest of Mentawai Islands by German missionaries. After the liberation from Japan of the war-torn Netherlands East Indies in 1945 and the founding of the Republic of Indonesia soon after, the Mentawai Islands became part of Indonesia. Islam was introduced by Muslim organizations from Sumatra in 1952 (Mas'oed Abidin 1997). In 1955, Roman Catholicism was also introduced to Mentawai Islands by Italian missionaries (Coronese 1986; Caissutti 2015) and became the third faith accepted after Protestantism and Islam by Mentawai converts. *Arat sabulungan* (a supposed non-monotheistic belief system) was forbidden.

In 1953, the Vice-President of Indonesia, Muhammad Hatta, visited Mentawai (Tulius 2020; Abidin 1997). This visit apparently marked the starting-point of significant changes in Mentawai. Decree Number 167/ PROMOSI/1954, reinforcing the unity of Indonesia, was issued by President Soekarno's administration. Mentawai had to change in order conform to the unity of Indonesia. A few months later, in 1954, the Protestant church, representatives of the local government and police officers organized what became known as the *Rapat Tiga Agama*, a meeting of three religions: Protestantism, Islam, and *arat sabulungan*, to reach an agreement on various points, especially that Mentawaians must thereafter officially embrace one of the "monotheistic" religions recognized by the government of Indonesia.

The other consequences of the meeting were that the traditional belief system of Mentawai was forbidden and that *sabulungan* artefacts and shamanic regalia were confiscated and burned, as both were judged to be hostile to the norms of the acknowledged religions (Coronese 1986: 38; Sihombing 1979). Many traditional *sabulungan* cultural artefacts were destroyed, artistic artefacts certainly among them. After enduring social turbulence and political pressure, the majority of Mentawaians were forced to abandon some elements of their traditional cultures.

In the late 1960s, several large logging companies, immigrant workers, and government officials from the Sumatran mainland and other parts of Indonesia arrived, bringing more rapid transformation. Consequently, many Mentawaians have now become more dependent on a mixed resident immigrant population of Minangkabau merchants dominating the local cash economy as well as Javanese and Batak teachers and government officials leading educational institutions, both teaching Mentawai youth and steering Mentawai government programmes (Persoon 1994; Myrna Eindhoven 2019; Schefold 2017: 189-194).

Historical records from the 1960s up to the present reveal great damage to natural resources, the ecology and habitat of the endemic species of the Mentawai Islands; falling victim to extensive deforestation by logging companies, including significant illegal "harvesting" within the Siberut Nature Reserve (Down to Earth / DTE 2006).[1] Similarly, curtailing numerous traditional cultural practices, particularly in areas served by Protestant churches, schools, and clinics, has resulted in incremental transformations and degradations of both the Mentawai traditional culture and the natural environment.

Beginning in the 1970s, the majority of Mentawaians were moved from traditional settlements in various valleys in the interior of the islands to government villages near coastal areas so that they could participate in government programmes (Persoon 1994). The nuclear families of clans were divided so that they could live in single-family houses. The *uma* as a building in which an entire clan could reside was barred from the government villages. In order to survive the strong current of change, Mentawaians made slight adaptations to their way of life, realizing that totally rejecting modernity is not always the best solution for survival in a global context. They began to adjust to a new lifestyle: children in school, families getting medical care from clinics, and attending church services in the villages (see Persoon and Schefold 1985; Eindhoven 2019).

By the early 1980s, the pressures on traditional Mentawai life were gradually raised as tourism was linked to government programmes and – a quarter century after attempting to destroy all vestiges of pre-colonial customs – the traditional lifestyles themselves suddenly became tourist attractions which should be preserved (see Laurens Bakker 2007; Jess Ponting et al. 2013;

[1] Https://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/sites/downtoearth-indonesia.org/files/68.pdf, last accessed on 31-5-2021.

Christian S. Hammons 2015). Some cultural objects have been recrafted by the Mentawaians and used to decorate their *uma* in order to attract tourists to come to stay in their homes. Attempts were made at that time to revitalize the traditional Mentawai life as described by scholars such as Nooy-Palm (1968), Schefold (1988), and Tulius (2012b). Some families even seized the opportunity to rebuild their traditional *uma* in the forest, abandoning their nuclear-family houses.

Moving toward the twenty-first century, the traditional lifestyle was again being comparatively tolerated by a governmental policy which had a good grasp of the value of tourism. Therefore, those who continue to live the traditional lifestyle have been brought to the attention of documentary producers. A number of ethnographic films and videos focusing on the traditional life of Mentawaians have appeared over the last four decades. Documentaries have been broadcast worldwide on various networks. Most depict groups of traditional Mentawai people living in the forest where they cope with the natural world dressed in traditional leaf and fibre garments. They hunt various forest animals with bows and poison arrows. The Mentawaians also demonstrate how to process the pith of the sago palm to produce their staple food. They show how to raise pigs and chickens, perform rituals, dances and sing for the camera (Eindhoven et al. 2007). Bakker (2007: 277) writes:

> Over the years, film companies from around the globe have made a considerable number of documentaries on traditional Mentawaian culture. Broadly, these films all feature the same aspects. The daily life in a traditional *uma* is depicted, usually focusing on the exploits of a hunting party, women foraging in the forest, and preparation of sago and tree-bark cloth. The natural surroundings and landscape are shown, *kerei* performing ceremonies are included and, possibly, somebody getting tattooed. Although the interests of film crews and tourists are similar, the needs of filmmakers are quite different.

Documentary images show that Mentawaians perform their rituals with a panoply of artistic dancing and singing. They use different artistic items and some of which resemble natural elements such as primates and birds. The documentaries show that Mentawaians live in harmony with nature and the films preserve aspects of the intangible culture in motion media.

Currently, some small numbers of Mentawaian communities continue to live a semi-nomadic hunter-horticulturalist lifestyle in the rainforest and coastal environments and, to a significant extent, traditional Mentawaians depend on the natural resources available in their surroundings to obtain housing materials, medicinal botanical specimens, and protein for proper nutriment. Traditional Mentawaians also usually cultivate traditional crops and domesticate animals, mainly pigs and chickens. This signifies that these traditional Mentawaian communities have succeeded in building a strong cultural foundation, some of which has survived the various social disturbances and political pressures.

In government villages as well as in traditional dwellings, knowledge of specific traditional rituals, stories of the ancestors and ancestral lands, and

some cultural practices, like carving cultural artefacts, have been kept alive by Mentawaian artisans, storytellers, and *kerei*. Therefore, limited numbers of traditional objects which used to be part of the essential attributes of the *uma* can sometimes still be found in family houses in the government villages. The limited availability of traditional cultural objects and the high demand for them have prompted artisans to reproduce copies of particular artefacts, selling them as genuine antiques.

4. Cosmology, traditional belief, and rituals

We argue that the remarkable foundation of the traditional belief system and ritual life of the Mentawaians is centred on their cosmology. We are also convinced that this foundation has inspired the creation of particular cultural objects, performance arts, and forms of behaviour among Mentawaians in their relationship with their natural surroundings. Therefore, in this section we shall now describe the cosmology of Mentawaians and how it is elaborated in rituals and material culture (artistic items).

4.1 Cosmology: *arat sabulungan* and spiritual essences

Speaking of the cosmology of traditional Mentawaians leads us to a discussion of *arat buluat* and *sabulungan*. The Mentawaians' traditional belief system is called *arat buluat*. It lies at the core of Mentawai culture. *Arat* (like the familiar Indonesian word *adat*) can be translated as meaning tradition, custom, or cultural value. *Buluat* is translated as an offering. The Mentawaians offer a small part of every ritual meal to the spirits of their ancestors and other denizens of the spirit world. These spirits are generally divided into groups called *sabulungan*.[2] As the Mentawaians address *sabulungan* in their rituals, government officials and church leaders in Mentawai identify the traditional belief system of the Mentawaians as *arat sabulungan* in order to distinguish it from world religions.

Offerings are made to entities in two domains: the natural or physical world and the spiritual world. In the Mentawai belief system, all spirits (of any domain, including human spirits) are addressed as *sabulungan* and the system which supports this belief is called *arat sabulungan*. So, *arat sabulungan* can be defined as a traditional belief system focusing on spirits to whom a special offering (*buluat*) is made. In short, *arat sabulungan* is a belief focused on the existence of spirits and human beings can come into contact with spirits through various rituals (Tulius 2012b: 69). The indispensable purpose of making an offering is to please the spirits so that the soul and the spirit of humans remain permanently unharmed.

Cosmologically, the complete natural world consists of elements such as sky, water, the soil (earth), underground, and living beings (humans, animals, and plants). Schefold (1988: 75) describes the cosmology of the Mentawaians

[2] *Sabulungan* is formed from *sa* meaning a plural unity (group) of something and *bulungan* is a spiritual essence. So, *sabulungan* is a group of spirits.

as divided into three domains: sky, the Earth, and beneath the Earth. In their cosmology, the Mentawaians express the dualism they perceive between the natural world and the spiritual world. The natural world is the domain of people, animals, plants, rivers, mountain, waters, seas, stones, corals, soil, and so on. Meanwhile, the spiritual world is the normally invisible side of the natural world. These two worlds are inseparable. The invisible spiritual world is subdivided into various domains and spirits are identified according to their domains.

Mentawaians are familiar with the supernatural essence called *ulaumanua*. Tulius (2012b: 70) argues that the word *ulaumanua* is formed from *ulau*, meaning 'outside', and 'bright' indicating the existence of light, and *manua* meaning the 'sky' or the 'universe'. *Ulaumanua* literarily means the brightness of the universe. The domain of *ulaumanua* is uncertain and unknown; it can be a universe, including the domains of human beings and spirits. This essence cannot be personalized. It does not have any particular entity or personality. It has supernatural power over the spirits in the spiritual world as well as in the natural world.

For Mentawaians, imbued with its supernatural power, *ulaumanua* can sustain or terminate the life of people, animals, and plants. No rituals and mantras have been devised or prepared to honour this supernatural being, therefore shamans do not build any direct connections with *ulaumanua* through rituals. If shamans and lay people want to cure and prolong a person's life by performing rituals, they address the rituals to the spirits residing in the spiritual world. The ancestral spirits and other spirits in the spiritual world are expected to "convey" the purpose of particular rituals to the *ulaumanua*. The Mentawaians receive different signs through life experiences encountered before and after rituals. At first sight, they perceive these signs as having been sent by spirits from the spiritual world; and in the final analysis the origin of the signs is presumed to be *ulaumanua* (Tulius 2012b: 71, see also Caissutti 2015: 32-33). As Mentawaians do not have any rituals with which to approach the *ulaumanua*, they communicate with other spirits instead.

Mentawaians personify the spiritual entities in order to understand them more easily. Traditionally, spirits are classified according to their domains in the natural world, for example, the sky or celestial spirits are called *taikapata*. The *taikapata* spirits take care of rain, wind, rainbows, and flying animals. On the Earth, there are *taikabaga* (chthonic spirits). Earthquakes, volcanoes, and creatures of the Earth are overseen by these spirits. In the sea, there are *taikabagatkoat* (sea spirits) who look after all fish and other marine life. In rivers are water spirits called *sikameinan*, who usually take the form of crocodiles (*sikaoinan*). In the rainforest, there are forest spirits called *taikaleleu* (see Coronese 1986: 49; Caissutti 2015: 32) who usually dwell in big trees. Mentawaians believe that forest spirits can also take the form of animals living in the forests. Therefore, forest spirits can still be specified as *taikatenganloina* (tree spirits), also called *silakkokoina,* in the ritual language called *silakkikiau* as they inhabit on trees. Different animals, especially primates, live in tall trees,

and one of the classes of spirits which takes care of them is called *sanitut bilou* (gibbon spirits).

4.2 Soul, spirit of living beings, and rituals

Each living being and other natural elements on this Earth and in the universe has a *simagere*, which is translated as 'soul'. The *simagere* of humans, animals, and plants are absorbed from the natural world through food and other forms of nutrition eaten by people, animals, and plants to live. The *simagere* functions to keep humans, animals, and plants dynamically alive. However, the *simagere* residing in large stones or other natural elements are not originally intrinsic; big stones and other natural elements do not have *simagere* themselves. The *simagere* residing in them are those of dead people, animals, and plants which need a host for their souls to continue to live in the natural world invisibly.

Humans and other living beings also have another element of life called *ketcat*, which also cannot be found in natural elements such as stones, rocks, waters, rivers, and so on. *Ketcat* is best translated as 'spirit'. The spirits of humans, animals, and plants (*ketcat*) originate from and return to their own spiritual world; each has its own domain. The domain of human spirits is called the *beu laggai*, the big village. The spirits of animals return to the domain of animal spirits, wherever the animals have ever lived and the plant spirits return to the domain of plant spirits in the forest. The Mentawaians believe that primates are cared for and protected by the forest spirits, since they live in the rainforest domain. Forest spirits are believed often to reveal themselves visibly as primates, especially as gibbons, so as to communicate with humans. So, humans endowed with *ketcat* and *simagere* build their connections with the natural world and its elements through rituals, songs, dances, and artistic objects. All is maintained and encapsulated via the oral tradition.

Rituals are the proper way to communicate with spirits. Consequently, Mentawaians perform various specific rituals. Two examples of the many are given here: a healing ritual named *pameru* to cure people who feel unwell and a cleansing and purifying ritual called *panasai* to erase bad omens and the potent spirit radiation called *bajou* from an *uma* and other human dwellings. When Mentawaians open up a new garden or intend to fell a giant tree to make a canoe, they perform a ritual called *panaki* which involves preparing a special offering meal for the spirits in the forest to pay for the land for the garden they will open or for the life of the tree they will harvest. Mentawaians hope to prosper and achieve success by conducting their activities by following the proper rituals to the letter. While performing rituals, shamans sing rituals songs, verbalize mantras, and dance. Shamans and their families adorn themselves with colourful flowers and beads. Some people beat drums, creating rhythmic sounds in order to enhance the exuberance of particular rituals.

5. Roles of primates and birds in the belief system

Cosmological ideas and rituals help Mentawaians understand the roles of primates and birds in their belief system. These animals are vital intermediaries in the relationship between human beings and spiritual entities. In this section, we describe the important roles of particular primates and birds in this relationship.

5.1 Endemic primates

Figure 2. *Bilou*, male Kloss's gibbon (*Hylobates klossii*), © Rob Williams.[3]

Mentawai is remarkable in having seven endemic primates, some of which have significant cultural and spiritual importance. The most significant is the tailless gibbon called *bilou* (*Hylobates klossii*) (see Figure 2, also C.J. Burgin et al. 2020: 266).[4] Mentawaians are among the Asian cultures which have historically considered the call of their endemic gibbon as a mournful weeping, but only in Mentawai do we find a full-blown cosmology using a gibbon image as the day guardian of the forest, a reliable guide to the human spirit's proper place in the spiritual world and sacred protective symbol as a nocturnal guardian of the women and children in the *uma*. Nowhere else have people credited any primate with this degree of spiritual knowledge and power. The *bilou* is central to the traditional culture and is featured in stories, songs, dances, and artwork, both sacred and secular. Next in importance is the macaque,

[3] Https://www.alamy.com/mammal-gibbon-kloss-dwarf-image1723976.html.

[4] Genetically, the consistency between gibbon and human DNA is about 96% according to the sequencing of Hylobates species DNA (Lucia Carbone et al. 2014), compared with 98% consistency for chimpanzee DNA.

differentiated into two species, called locally *bokkoi* (*Macaca siberu*) in Siberut and *siteut* (*Macaca pagensis)* in southern Mentawai (Burgin et al. 2020: 220-221). There are also two distinct types of langurs: the golden-bellied Mentawai Island langur called *atapaipai* (*Presbytis potenziani*) in the southern Mentawai Islands (including Sinakak Island off the east coast of South Pagai) and a related species, the Siberut langur, called *joja* (*Presbytis siberu*) (Burgin et al. 2020: 250-251).

Unfortunately, the favourite "jungle meat" of the majority of native hunters is the smallest and now rarest primate, the shy pig-tailed langur, a single species of leaf-monkey which exists in two very closely related "critically endangered"[5] sub-species, called *simakobu* (*Simias concolor ssp. siberu*) in Siberut and *mesepsep* (*Simias concolor ssp. concolor*) in the three larger islands of southern Mentawai, although its range once included several southern Mentawai smaller islands (Burgin et al. 2020: 256; also see Burman-Hall 2017: 124; Marcell Quinten et al. 2014: 6390). Although the *bilou* is rarely hunted as it is firmly protected by taboos,[6] unfortunately, all ape meat is considered delicious and, with the effects of progressive primal forest habitat loss and the easy availability of air rifles and arrow poison (Febrianti 2020), all the primates are now in danger of extinction within our lifetime.

Burman-Hall states (2017: 130)

> Only in Mentawai do we find the beliefs of an animist culture interwoven profoundly with an endemic gibbon in this way. The isolation of both the *bilou* and the Mentawai population has created a unique aspect of local cosmology, a symbolic cultural relationship between humans and gibbons that exists nowhere else.

Forest spirits use these primates, especially gibbons, to communicate impending death to the people by uttering long, sad calls at odd intervals and times. Hence, the *bilou* both channels and expresses the supernatural power of the forest spirits. Traditionally, hearing a male *bilou* call at an uncharacteristic time – anytime other than pre-dawn as is normal – means the spirit *(ketcat*) of someone in the village is being called home to the *beu laggai*, the big village.[7] The fact that the voice of the gibbon spirit reliably guides the *ketcat* home is a sign that the gibbon spirit can be trusted in this vital duty.

[5] IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) "Red list of Threatened Species' 2020". Https://www.iucnredlist.org/search, last accessed on 31-5-2021.

[6] A *bilou* is a difficult target. It is highly alert and does actually function as the daytime guardian of the forest. Should any hunter try to shoot a primate, the *bilou*'s warning cry is usually so loud that the hunting for kilometres around is ruined for the entire day. According to stories and legends, as a tailless ape, the *bilou* is considered to be closely related to humans (see note 9); a *kerei* cannot eat *bilou*, because a *kerei* might sometimes indirectly consult the *sanitu bilou* to discover what an ill person in the village could have done to offend the forest spirits. Finally, *bilou* flesh is reportedly unpalatable and not worth the trouble. Muslims in Mentawai and elsewhere are prohibited from eating the flesh of any primates because it is considered *haram* = unclean.

[7] See Performance for recorded songs, Song 4: Male *bilou* call.

5.2 Rare and unique birds

We have seen that the *manyang* sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) (see Figure 3) also holds an honoured place in Mentawai traditional culture.

Figure 3. Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*).[8]

In Mentawai shamanism, eagles are often mentioned in ritual songs. Eagles soaring in the sky symbolize the eyes of the sky spirits looking down upon living beings, including humans, on Earth. The Mentawaians believe that, on account of its relatively large size, the *manyang* is a strong bird. A sky spirit might therefore manifest itself or use a *manyang* to appear to humans. Furthermore, a *manyang* examining the carcase of a dead animal represents the sky spirits looking down on this animal's remains, signalling they are taking care of the spirit of that animal. Given its relatively large size and majestic bearing as it flies above the sea, the sea-eagle fills Mentawaians with awe. This bird is perceived to be the visible guardian of the celestial (sky) spirits.

Spirits in the form of birds can also appear in their natural surroundings as harbingers of death. A couple of unusual small- to medium-sized birds are also thought to intimate or foretell a death in the clan because of their habit of flying low to the ground over semi-abandoned land such as a graveyard in a disorganized, "weak", fluttery fashion and actually darting among the graves, suggesting the struggles of a soul on the point of leaving the body. One is the *kuilak* or Ashy Tailorbird (*Orthotomus ruficeps concinnus*) (see Figure 4), a finch-sized insectivore (Kemp 2000: 95; Imam Taufiqurrahman et al. 2019: 85, 94). Its small size means this bird is perceived to be an eye of the spirits. Ashy

[8] Http://orientalbirdimages.org, last accessed on 3-9-2021. In some regions of Siberut where the sea-eagle is not often seen, the Mentawai name *manyang* is also coincidentally applied to another large water-bird, the storm stork (*Ciconia stormi*), an endangered medium-sized stork occasionally seen in lowland Indonesian, Malaysian and Thai tropical rainforests (see Neville Kemp 2000; Wikipedia.org, last accessed on 11-9-2021).

Tailorbirds fly in groups and frequently play around graveyards, abandoned cemeteries and large trees. These birds normally sing in the morning. Hence, Mentawaians think it as a bad omen if they sing at midday, in the late afternoon or as evening falls.

Figure 4. Ashy Tailorbird (*Orthotomus ruficeps concinnus*).[9]

Another death-omen bird found on all four main Mentawai Islands is the somewhat larger *kemut* or Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*, see Figure 5; Kemp 2000: 85, 96; Taufiqurrahman et al. 2019). This bird is also not a strong flyer and is often seen flapping confusedly close to the ground. It usually walks to hunt. It perches on palm fronds and sometimes on trees in a graveyard. The cry of this bird is relatively low and ponderous. It is rarely seen as it hides itself among the palm fronds; its sound scares people who think a ghost was lurking nearby. Like the *kuilak,* the *kemut* also exhibits a unique sort of flapping, disorganized flight. In different ways, both birds cause Mentawai *sabulungan* believers to envisage a terrified human spirit trembling as it weakly struggles to leave its dying body.

Yet another bird of bad omen, locally called *soalap*, strikes terror into the hearts of all in Siberut, perhaps also on other islands, who might happen to hear it. The *soalap* is said to be a dark-coloured wild duck whose natural habitat is deep in the swamps and low scrub far from human habitation. Its cry is just like a screaming (ghost) baby and, when Mentawaians walking through the dark forest at night hear it, they choose to go back home rather than to continue with such a frightening noise ringing in their ears. This bird, which

[9] Https://www.nparks.gov.sg/florafaunaweb/fauna/5/0/502#gallery-1, last accessed on 3-9-2021.

is rarely seen by humans, has been quite difficult to identify, since nothing about the species has appeared to date in the literature. Kemp's 2000 study of Siberut birds identifies no duck-like avian and the more recent study of Mentawain birds describes only the Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*), a common Indonesian light-tan bird with darker wings which quacks innocuously (see Taufiqurrahman et al. 2019).

Figure 5. Greater Coucal bird (*Centropus sinensis*).[10]

By geographical elimination and auditing the calls of all possible candidates, Burman-Hall (2017, Forthcoming) believes the most likely suspect for the *soalap* is the endangered White-winged Duck (*Asarcornis scutulata*), a large duck which ornithologists formerly confused with Muscovy ducks. Historically, the White-winged Duck was once widely distributed from Bangladesh and northeast India throughout Southeast Asia as far as Java and Sumatra. Now extinct in Java and also thought to be extinct in Malaysia, 150 of the approximately 450 currently documented worldwide live in the Way Kambas National Park in Lampung, South Sumatra, and the bird is also known to be still present in the canals on the plantations of Riau in Central East Sumatra. It is also probably hiding elsewhere deep in the Sumatran marshland. This omnivorous pair-bonded bird is secretive in habit, feeds only at twilight or at night and prefers to hide in the trees and inhabit the stagnant waters of dense tropical evergreen rainforests characterized by swamps and sluggish rivers.[11]

Despite the phrase "white-winged", its body is quite dark, and the white on the wings is mainly visible in flight so, in the water, might appear uniformly

[10] Https://ebird.org/species/grecou1, last accessed on 3-9-2021.
[11] Https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White-winged_duck, last accessed on 28-10-2021.

dark except for its head, a heavily mottled off-white. The baby-scream impression of its call can be appreciated in the recording posted on Xeno-canto.org made in the Way Kambas National Park by Mike Nelson in 2015.[12] No other anserine (waterfowl) seems vaguely plausible as the mysterious *soalap,* so it is likely *Asarcornis scutulata* has long been secretively present in Mentawai, or at least in Siberut Island, but has not yet been officially reported.

Mentawaians believe that particular animals related to spiritual entities who guard the forest can cause people bad luck. Nevertheless, Mentawaians are constantly active in the forest, leaving them thinking themselves vulnerable, physically, and spiritually. To protect themselves from harmful spiritual essences, Mentawaians craft fetish panels, create protective designs, compose mantras, and sing songs. Cultural items with protective designs are attractive, artistic objects and some become celebrated iconographic representations of natural elements. In the next section we indicate some important artefacts traditionally created with natural world designs which Mentawaians consider spiritually protective.

6. Protective designs and artefact displays

Traditionally, the crafting of various tools and other cultural objects has been intended to help Mentawaians perform their tasks easily and with a minimum of effort. Cultural objects must be functional but also beautifully crafted to inspire their owners while using them or in their vicinity. A particular item must be ergonomically functional as well as having the power to protect people from threatened attacks. The *uma* is the largest cultural object Mentawaians have ever built. An *uma* accommodates various nuclear families of the clan who live in it, offering them as a safe, comfortable abode and a storage place for all the ritual objects and communal tools. Not only does the *uma* make people feel safe; some of these ritual objects and tools have been designed and crafted for protective purposes. At times, human souls and spirits are fragile and vulnerable to attack by invisible powerful spirits haunting the vicinity of the *uma* or any other dwelling. Therefore, inspired by natural elements imbued with cosmological significance, Mentawaians have created protective motifs and designs for shamanic implements as well as ritual items.

6.1 The protective panel, *jaraik*

Mentawai has traditionally produced a range of implements, artistic artefacts, and ritual objects. Some of these are now quite rare. A number of these rare objects have become valuable items in museums and tribal art collections. Some of those artefacts are discussed in this section in their relationship to particular traditional Mentawaian beliefs about the natural world.

A powerful protective panel is the *jaraik* (Schefold 2017: 45, figures 38, 39, and 42, 2017: 159-162, figure 170) (see Figure 6). The *jaraik* fetish panel

[12] Https://www.xeno-canto.org/explore?query=Asarcornis%20scutulata%20, recording XC243401 (31 seconds). Last accessed on 28-10-2021.

has a characteristic curving motif inspired by different organic shapes like buffalo horns, palm fronds, and the roots of trees. It can be considered a map of the world according to Mentawai cosmology. The *jaraik* consists of two parts: united in a single wooden piece of handicraft. The top part of the *jaraik* curves upwards, symbolizing the sky, the domain of the sky spirits. A space in the middle connects the upward with the downward part. This middle section equates to the domain of humanity. The bottom part features a curve downwards, like the roots of giant trees symbolizing the lives of the Underworld, the domain of the chthonic spirits. In Mentawai, there are two types of *jaraik* fetish panel: *jaraik uma* and *jaraik kalabba* (respectively: for a clan house and a canoe).

Figure 6. *Jaraik uma,* the fetish panel in Professor Reimar Schefold's collection in Amsterdam. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2015).

Extremely important to the creation of a *jaraik* fetish panel is the aggression and protection of the male Mentawai macaque symbolized by its skull, an indispensable motif on the *jaraik* to initiate a newly constructed *uma.* The building of new *uma* is quite rare now that Protestant Christianity, Islam, and Roman Catholicism are so solidly established in the archipelago and now any *jaraik* surviving from pre-conversion days is likely to be found in private or public collections. Similarly, the elimination of headhunting, now more than hundred years ago, has reduced the number of genuine *koraibi* shields to no more than a few. *Salipak* shamanic boxes do occasionally turn up, but for all three of these categories, most of what "art" or "antique" dealers sell is as "original" pieces are forgeries, often carefully copied from art books by carvers from Nias, West Sumatra, and Bali (see Bakker 2002; Cathtryn M. Cootner et al. 2002).

A *jaraik uma*[13] is a fetish and protective panel hung above the entrance to the main house door. On the middle bottom part of the *jaraik*, equating to the human world, Mentawaians attach an *uttet bokkoi*, the skull of male macaque.[14] To obtain this skull, a family performs a preparatory ritual after the completion of the complex building process to construct an *uma* (Schefold 1991: 47). Because of its character and appearance, a male macaque is indispensable as a warrior guardian: as it is aggressive, territorial, protective, and frightening with its pronounced canine teeth. A male *bokkoi* (or *siteut*) is perceived as the patriarch of this species of monkey. Mentawaians consider that a father is biologically charged with protecting his family, so the spirit of the individual macaque plus those of all the forest spirits which protect this tribe of monkeys are therefore expected to protect the clan members living in the *uma.* This skull adds its own specific power to the general guardianship of the double curving sacred *bilou* form of the *jaraik* itself, protecting the people inside the *uma* from any strong *bajou* and/or any malicious intentions harboured by visitors to the *uma*.

One of the best-known *jaraik* is now considered a treasure of the Dallas Museum of Art. It is carved in the classic double-curved overall form and is dated to approximately 1930. It originally came from the *uma* of the Samalakkopa clan of south Siberut. The clan told anthropologist Reimar Schefold that it was originally created by their master carver ancestor to represent the body of a squatting gibbon with arms outstretched and hands hanging down.[15] It is striking that a stylized *bilou* image over the clan's altar in the *uma* was chosen to guard the sleeping women and children. Probably because the gibbon is the actual guardian of the rainforest, an attribution acquired by its vigilance and its loud alarm calls. Furthermore, as all-purpose guardians, gibbons play a central role in Mentawai culture, especially the traditional belief system. Sculptures of gibbons are therefore interesting and important items in any artefact collection.

Jaraik kalabba is a wooden panel placed on the prow of the traditional large canoe called *kalabba*, which was used for long-distance journeys. This *jaraik* does not have a skull attached to it (see Schefold 2017: 152, figure 161). However, it has a hole in the middle of the panel called the *lobok matat rusa* or hole for wind. The *kalabba* carries a sail. On a windless day, the *kerei* blows through the wind hole of the *jaraik* as he pronounces mantras summoning the wind to blow. The *jaraik* was placed on a *kalabba* to protect the people and their voyage as they sail the volatile sea. In former times, this *kalabba* was used for headhunting raids

[13] For more information about *jaraik uma*: see https://www.artoftheancestors.com/blog/jaraik-reimar-schefold, last accessed on 2-5-2021.

[14] *uttet*=skull; *bokkoi* is the local name for the North Mentawai macaque, *Macaca siberu* in Siberut. The closely related species in the three southern islands is the *Macaca pagensis,* whose local name is *siteut.* In the southern islands, the corresponding designation for a male macaque skull is *utet siteut.*

[15] This remarkable *jaraik uma* was collected from *Desa* Taileleu in South Siberut in 1967. Schefold mentions discovering it lying cast aside and forgotten in a storage attic for some decades following the conversion of the clan to Christianity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is the cover photo of *Toys for the souls* (2017). Https://collections.dma.org/artwork/5323974, last accessed on 28-5-2021.

of one village on another or for long-distance voyages (see Schefold 2017: 65, figure 58).

6.2 The shamanic fetish box, *salipak*

Similar swooping curve motifs reminiscent of *jaraik* shapes are also found in the painted motifs on either side of the traditional shamanic fetish box called *salipak* (see Figure 7; note the motif third from right appears to be a stylized *bilou*; see Schefold 2017: 153, figure 162, 2017: 207, figures 248, 249, 250, and 251). The motifs resemble the figurative image of the gibbon and reflect the tripartite spirit domain of Mentawaian cosmology. A *salipak* box contains a shaman's amulets and fetish objects; therefore, the box is covered with protective motifs to protect (insulate) these important properties from the *bajou,* best defined as "powerful emanations" or "radiations" both positive and negative and which can reside in any unknown object, including a shamanic one. Whenever a shaman uses his power, he must be careful not to be ambushed by any strong *bajou* residing in any of his own possessions.

Figure 7. *Salipak*, shamanic boxes decorated with the protective motifs of the *Sakuddei* clan of southwest Siberut. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2006).

6.3 The traditional shield, *koraibi*

Like shamanic boxes, the traditional Mentawai shield, called a *koraibi,* was also decorated with swirling protective motifs (see Figure 8; also see Schefold 2017: 128-132, figures 134-141). In former times, the shield was made for use in headhunting raids or in inter-clan conflicts. Prior to making and painting a shield with protective motifs, the craftsman was usually required to observe some taboos such as not eating cold or uncooked food. Traditional shields

were made of solid hardwood, coconut shell, and rattan, painted with the juice of the *kalumanang* fruit which produces a maroon colour and stained with black firewood cinders. Shields were made small and light enough to use in a rush attack on enemies, but just large enough to protect from arrows. The decoration was dominated by the graceful motifs of fern leaves and small water hallows.[16] The round swirling hallows in the water which followed the wake of their canoes on the river were the inspiration for putting this motif on shields; the underlying idea being that any arrows aimed at a shield protected by this motif would become confused by the mini-whirlpools and be deflected from their mark. The mystical power of the twisting, curving motifs is intended to distract and deflect the arrows.

Figure 8. *Koraibi*, the Mentawai shields in Prof. Reimar Schefold's collection in Amsterdam. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2015).

6.4 The art of Mentawaian tattoos, *titi*

The same vital protective motifs which are found on *jaraik uma*, *salipak,* and *koraibi* are also traditionally applied to the bodies of the Mentawaians. The human body does not remain healthy and strong all the time. A recent study on water spirits in Mentawai mentions that "[...] a person is said to fall ill when their soul wanders too far from their body" (Manvir Singh et al. 2021: 63). Furthermore, Singh et al. (2021: 64) have discovered that people fall ill as the result of:

[16] Mentawaians consider the mini-whirlpools which form as the paddle propels the canoe to be both a natural phenomenon which can be represented as a symbol and a minor water-spirit or "hallow".

(1) being attacked by sorcery; (2) violating taboos; (3) inadvertently encountering spirits in the forest or while bathing; (4) being scratched by the forest spirit *Silakikio*; (5) being attacked by the water spirit *Sikameinan*; or (6) being inadvertently affected by magic prepared for non-malicious purposes. (7) People are also said to fall ill if they eat at irregular intervals or (8) if a terrible, deadly illness sweeps through a community.

When the human body assailed by weakness, the soul (*simagere*) tends to leave it. A *kerei* must perform a ritual to attempt to lure the soul back and restore it to the body. Failure to restore the soul can have fatal consequences: the spirit (*ketcat*) might leave the body and the person die. Mentawaians need to protect their bodies from potent emissions (*bajou*) by applying tattoo motifs resembling the *jaraik uma* protective design. Certain motifs and designs are beautifully tattooed as adornments for specific parts of human body.

The purpose of the art of Mentawaian tattoos is to attract the human soul and spirit to the human body and encourage both to remain there happily as long as the body can live. One hand-width up from the navel of the human body is used as the central point to differentiate between the upper and lower parts of the body. The major protective motif decorating the upper front of the human torso is named a *logpog*. Its purpose is to reduce any strong *bajou* emanating toward the human body. Various other motifs can decorate the back of the torso, upper arms, thighs, palms, and even face, according to individual preference. As said, this *logpog* motif resembles the *jaraik* design (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. A Mentawaian in the Pagai Islands with a logpog tattoo motif on his chest telling a story of his ancestors. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2004).

Tattoo motifs reveal the identity of Mentawai clans and communities residing in separate valleys. In each valley, the community has its own traditional motifs to differentiate identity, with variations according to taste. By looking at a person's tattoos, others immediately recognize that person's valley of origin and gender. Particular tattoo motifs can also signify significant occupational skills, talents, and social rank. A skilful hunter who can shoot monkeys, wild boar, or deer might choose to have these animals tattooed on his body as a proud public display of his skill.[17]

7. Primate and bird sculptures and hunting trophy displays

Many of the cultural values and traditions of Mentawai have obviously been inspired by elements of the natural world. The skulls and remains of endemic Mentawai animals like apes and monkeys and also deer are decorated and ritualized before being displayed in their appointed places in the *uma* in the hope that the forest spirits will bless the clan with great prosperity and health. Consequently, for traditional Mentawaians, the cycle of hunting, eating, honouring, and ritually displaying the skulls and remains of the species goes far beyond the fulfilment of any nutritional requirements. It allows the clan to continue to ensure the uninterrupted compliance of the spirits by honouring and expressing gratitude to the living and the dead and to the forest spirits themselves. To some extent the traditional visual and performing arts play indispensable roles in this cycle.

One of the potential origins of the rich variety of Mentawai visual arts lies in the traditional ritual display of horns, skulls, and other hunting trophies which continues to this day. Animals which Mentawaians have successfully hunted are respected and ritualized by placing their skulls and remains at specific places above the shamanic fire (*abut kerei*). Whenever the family in the *uma* makes a fire, the intention is that its smoke and heat will give the skulls and animal remains "warmth". Hunting trophies - horns, skulls, feathers - are furnished with carved wooden sticks as a display-stand to show them off (see Figure 10). Mentawaians put a wooden bird on the top of a skull as an extension of their cosmological idea that birds soar in the sky above deer and monkeys. Monkey skulls and the remains of other wild animals are tied tightly to a beam.

[17] Certainly, during the headhunting centuries prior to the mass conversions of the mid-twentieth century, and also prior to the recent and partial availability of identification cards and cell phones – given it remains dangerous to be away from the village for days at a time, as multi-tasking hunters and horticulturalists still often are – the advantage of individualized clan tattoos is that it usually makes it possible to allow the proper identification of human remains (or partial remains), providing closure for families when someone has gone missing.

Figure 10. Hunting trophies preserved in the *uma* of the Sakuddei clan in southwest Siberut. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2006).

The Mentawaians believe that, by taking care of the skulls and remains of animals and by warming them with the smoke of a fire, the spirits of the animals consumed and the forest spirits will refrain from cursing the hunters. Instead, the clan will be blessed and should have no difficulty in hunting these animals whenever they need to do so in the next hunt. Wild animals live freely in the open air exposed to the elements and they are not husbanded by humans. Therefore, if humans take their lives from the forest, their skulls and remains must be treated with respect.

By contrast, the skulls and remains of domesticated animals like pigs, buffalos, cows, and chickens which are fed and raised by humans are placed above the entrance to the veranda close to the outside and at some distance from the fire. The Mentawaians consider these animals have been fed and cared for by the clan. Throughout their lives, the animals have been the recipients of people's care. In order to connect their skulls and remains to their spirits, they just have to place their skulls and remains close to the open air.

While it is common to carve images of animals and human figures, in Mentawai, depictions of plants are usually drawn.[18] Some of animal sculptures are ritual items; others are used for artistic and decorative purposes (see Figure 11). Another purpose behind the handcrafting of wooden animals is to please and protect people physically and spiritually. Sculptures and images are used to

[18] While primates and birds are sometimes painted as décor in houses or *uma*, plants are not the treated in the same manner. However, the shapes of leaves do inspire people to create cultural objects. Some tattoo motifs are derived from the shape of leaves, especially those of the *sago* "tree of life".

decorate and complete the communal house: a *jaraik* is created and placed above the entrance to the *uma.* And, instead of carving a mini *jaraik* for the sacred box called a *salipak*, Mentawai shamans draw a protective motif of *jaraik* using the maroon dye obtained from the *kalumanang* fruit and stained with the blackened firewood cinders. As they work, they have to intone a protective mantra.

Figure 11. Primates, birds, and deer paintings on the house wall of the *Saroro* clan in southwest Siberut. (Photograph by Juniator Tulius, 2006).

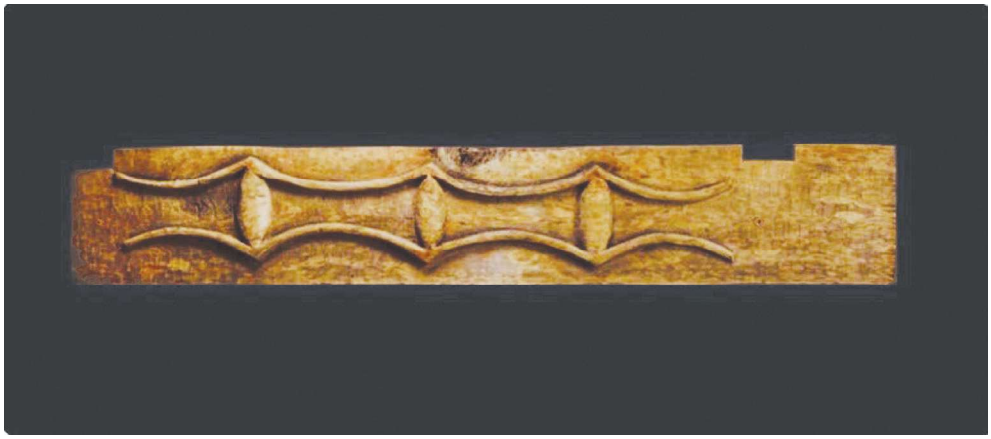

Figure 12. Carved door panel with traditional gibbon motif. Mentawai, mid-twentieh century. Auction item from a Dutch collection, sold by De Grave Tribal Art, The Netherlands, 2019.[19]

[19] Https://www.catawiki.com/en/l/27271645-carved-tribal-door-panel-monkey-motif-wood-mentawei-indonesia, last accessed on 16-9-2021.

For generations, Mentawaians have crafted gibbon sculptures in different styles, shapes, and forms. Wooden abstract *bilou* designs are traditionally carved on panels placed in both the *uma* and individual family homes and the *bilou* and other primates and significant animals can sometimes be carved in relief as a decoration on panels and doors (see Figure 12). Some are carved as individual statues; others are painted on planks hung on walls. Some are carved relief panels in a traditional *uma* or house. A limited number of original Mentawai artefacts have been preserved from the destructive bonfires which began in the mid-1950s and the subsequent climate of hostility towards traditional culture. They have become part of various private collections. Because of his long work with the Sakuddei clan in an area too remote to be fully converted to Protestant Christianity or Roman Catholicism, anthropologist Reimar Schefold now owns some and he has studied these in detail (see Schefold 1991, 2017). Various museums in Europe and America have hosted exhibitions of iconic material culture such as primate and bird sculptures.[20]

Figure 13. *Tulangan Bilou*. Gibbon sculpture in the collection of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.[21]

Jerome Feldman et al. (1999) have published a catalogue of Mentawai art containing artefacts which resemble figures of primates and birds. The picture

[20] National Museum of Ethnology in the Netherlands has several collections of Mentawaian cultural objects and hosted an exhibition in 2018 on work of Reimar Schefold. See https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en/whats-on-0/exhibitions/mentawai, last accessed 28-5-2021. Dallas Museum of Art has a unique fetish panel *jaraik* of Mentawai. See https://collections.dma.org/artwork/5323974, last accessed on 28-5-2021.

[21] Https://cantorcollection.stanford.edu/objects-1/info?query=mfs%20all%20%22gibbon%22&sort=0&page=7, last accessed on 28-5-2021.

of a gibbon sculpture, in Mentawai called a *bilou*, is featured on the cover. This sculpture is currently in the collection of the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Centre for Visual Arts at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California (see Figure 13). Because of their limited numbers, gibbon statues have triggered local dealers in Indonesia to make or commission copies of them (Bakker 2002). This has raised a debate about the authenticity and historical value of at least one important gibbon sculpture among tribal art scholars and collectors (Feldman 1998-1999; Schefold 2002; Cootner et al. 2002).[22] Most recently, on the basis of Feldman's identification of the piece as traditional, Schefold (2017: 184, figure 200) has considered this gibbon sculpture, shown on the cover of *Mentawai Art* (1999), to be a superb example of contemporary and innovative Mentawaian art created by Appak Kerei from Sagulubbe village.

For various purposes, Mentawaians also carve life-like, relatively large sized two-piece wooden birds (*tulangan siaggau*) which they raise high on top of a wooden stick between skulls of deer or wild boar (see also Figure 10). The soft-wood bird sculptures, which might be considered trophies of a successful hunt on certain occasions, are believed to possess their own spirits. Mentawaians use these wooden birds to adorn their *uma*. The carving of birds and other animals is, to some extent at least, meant to show other people in the region that the people living in *uma* are skilled carvers of different animals. Larger and smaller wooden birds carved to decorate their houses are also meant to delight people's souls and spirits of the people living in an *uma*. As Schefold (2002: 334) writes:

> The souls are supposed to come and realize how beautiful the home of the living is, so that henceforth they will remain in the vicinity and not succumb to the temptations of dangerous faraway regions. The [wooden] birds that are here on display are not conceived of as art by the people. But perhaps the Sakuddei can inspire us with their own way of expressing what they are all about: 'toys for the souls'.

The spirit birds are intended to coax ancestral spirits to participate in the ceremonies; human souls love beautiful things and spirit birds can be considered "toys" for the souls of the departed. After the ceremonies have been completed, the spirit birds are hung from the rafters as guardians of the family. Over time, through observation, the Mentawaians have come to consider that certain animals in the rainforest are particularly important to their belief system and traditional cosmology.

[22] Tulius discussed this and other pieces in the debate about the authenticity of Mentawai arts in a mini-symposium organized by DeYoung Museum in San Francisco in 2012. The major part of his presentation can be seen on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzUiRHJ4Aj4, last accessed on 28-5-2021. Unfortunately, the two final slideshows of his presentation, one of them about the *tulangan bilou* (gibbon sculpture) in the collection of the Cantor Centre for Visual Arts at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, are not included in this video.

8. Songs and dances

The arts in Mentawai are visible in both in the material culture and in the performing arts. Mentawaians love to sing and dance. A range of genres of songs and different styles of dances can be found in Mentawai. Some are for rituals; some others are for entertainment. In this section, we elaborate on the songs and dances of Mentawai.

8.1 Mentawai songs

Mentawaians usually preserve their knowledge of the natural world in songs. Both the highly trained *kerei* and lay Mentawaians compose and sing songs describing the actions of primates, birds, and other creatures. There are different genres of songs. Sacred songs are sung only by shamans in rituals as they contain mantras and other invocations of mythical powers. *Kerei* perform ritual dances mimicking one or other primate or bird for spiritual purposes. Secular songs, which reveal personal feelings, are usually sung by lay people. The creation, practice, and transmission of this intangible cultural heritage is embedded in Mentawai core spirituality.

Nature in its widest sense is a very important theme in many songs. "In all categories of songs, nature is often used in a metaphorical sense or elements of the landscape (mountains, islands, rivers, sun, moon, stars, rain, or rainbow) are referred to. They are used as markers for time and place" (Persoon and Schefold 2017: 585). Furthermore, Persoon and Schefold (2017: 586) write that:

> The interaction between different categories of animals, and between animals and humans is also interesting. All these texts make it abundantly clear that people are impressed and fascinated by the natural world in general and the animal world in particular. The texts reveal a great deal of knowledge about this natural world. Singing is not limited to human beings. Animals can sing too and the Mentawaians believe that there is a special meaning in this animal singing, just as with the singing of humans. The singing of the gibbon (*bilou*) in the early morning, for instance, is said to be calling for the sun to rise. However, the natural world is also the domain of ancestors and spirits. In this context, the calling of the gibbon can be given an uncanny association, as the *bilou* are seen to be the companions of dangerous supernatural beings which can harm people.

Persoon and Schefold have categorized song in Mentawai into seven genres according to activity, context, and mood: 1) boys' songs (*urai silainge*) or girls' songs (*urai siokko*); 2) dance songs (*urai turuk*); 3) the songs of shamans (*urai kerei*); 4) dirges (*urai sou*); 5) melodic texts or the sound of the beat on the wooden drums (*lamou tuddukat*); 6) nursery rhymes or lullabies (*urai tatoga*); and 7) songs introduced by outsiders (*urai sasareu*) (Persoon and Schefold 2017: 586-589). Examples of these songs have been recorded in Maileppet and Sakuddei by Persoon and Schefold (2009).

Tulius (2012b) classifies songs quite broadly, making his main distinction into two broad categories, each of which subdivides: sacred and secular: *urai kerei* (songs of shamans) and *leleiyo* (songs of ordinary folk/non-ritual

songs), alternatively called *urai simatak* (songs of lay people). *Urai kerei* are sung by shamans during the performances of rituals with or without dancing. *Leleiyo* or *urai simatak* include new songs (*urai sibau/urai sasareu*) created by Mentawaians whose music has been infiltrated by outside influences. Taking into account the state of feelings, meanings, and purposes expressed, Tulius writes, "ordinary songs may be divided into several types, such as *urai soubaga* (sorrowful songs), *urai belet baga* (sad songs), *urai goat baga* (lonesome songs), *urai angkat baga* (happy songs), and *urai nuntut baga* (love songs)". Although a song itself can be categorized as of lay people, shamans can also sing *leleiyo* (Tulius 2012b: 223).

In their relationship to the natural world, the songs sung by shamans predominantly depict the life of particular animals and their relationship to the world of spirits. Primates like gibbons frequently feature in Mentawai shamanic songs. On some occasions, gibbon songs are sung during a dance imitating gibbon behaviour. Mentawai oral tradition reveals the origin of gibbons in a story song which places the *bilou* directly in line with people; an offshoot of a dejected, angry youth who climbed a tree after his prize sword was accidentally broken. This song, recorded in Sipora, tells that the youth refused to come down from his tall tree, even though his maternal uncle and other family members begged him to return to the human world; he eventually became the first gibbon. In Siberut, the tale persists in the oral tradition, but is not sung as in Sipora.

In 2019, we recorded *uliat bilou,* (gibbon songs) sung by a *kerei* named Aser Sakeletuk (see Figure 14) living in Tiop, *Desa* Katurei in the southeast of Siberut Island.[23]

- *Kauan takau ulianta, ulian bilou teitei leleu koai ii ...* (Let us imitate gibbon on a mountain ridge, crying *koai ii ...*)
- *Airaiba loibokna koai ii ...* (It is seeking a place to stay, crying koai ii ...)
- *Ka rubat mancemi, igendei tubuna, koai ii…* (On the branch of a mancemi tree, it amuses itself, crying *koai ii ...*)
- *Aipanaibu ekeu tasipurorourou, eina le teiteina, koai ii ...* (You have been chased away by hunters, turning your back on them, crying *koai ii ...*)
- *Karuba eilagat, igairau teiteina, togat bilou leleu, luimata saleteunu ii ...* (On a branch of an *eilagat* tree, on its back it carries its baby, child of the gibbon of a mountain ridge, a pet of our grandchildren *ii ...*)
- *Ituituiake ka pueirajatna, ka pulibaijatna, ka beai manua, koai ii ...* (It leaves its place, its feeding-place, in the sky, singing *koai ii ...*)
- *Bulat nia, masura bagatta* (It is finished, thank you)

The song of the male *bilou,* entreating the sun to rise while it is still dark, has been famously called "the finest music uttered by a wild land mammal" (Joe T. Marshall Jr. and Elsie R. Marshall 1976: 237) but, when the sun rises, the male *bilou* can still be far from finished with his duties. If his pre-dawn call, which

[23] See Performance for recorded songs, Item 1: *Uliat Bilou* sung by Aser Sakeletuk from Tiop, *Desa* Katurei in the southwest of Siberut Island.

he delivers from his sleeping tree is heard at an unusual time of day or night, traditional Mentawaians know a call at the "wrong time" signifies someone in the village will soon die and that it is a forest spirit, the *sanitu bilou* (gibbon spirit) who is endowing the male *bilou* with a supernatural ability to guide an unmoored human spirit (*ketcat*) safely to its destiny in the spirit world by riding on his melody all the way to the "big village" of other human spirits, so it cannot lose its way on its journey and become a wondering forest ghost.

Figure 14. Aser Sakeletuk, a *kerei* in Tiop, *Desa* Katurei. (Photograph by Linda Burman-Hall, 2019).

A senior *kerei*, Aman Boroiogok (see Figure 15) of *Desa* Muntei, southern Siberut, was recorded singing this song in the shamanic language about the *sanitu bilou* in 2018. The song is sung to comfort those who are worried.[24]

- *Tagalainu muliat mata uliat kahu bale oi* ... (We imitate its tyle, the style of eyes *oi* ...)
- *Togat bilou leleu, sipuanggoi baga, i ... i* ... (Gibbon of the wilderness, it grieves, *i ... i ...*)
- *Meleian meleian isogai teiteira sipurereureu* (It grieves, calling the spirits of those who go astray)
- *Nai tainiuake, mapueraijatna buttet ailibakbak leuleu* (It calls from its home in the treetop of *ailibakbak leuleu*)
- *Itainiu ake pusubukatna, bananan leleu* (*soggunei*) (Hoping for its meal, the fruit of the wild banana)
- *Ikaleleleuna itatainiuake mapuiraukatna suat masunnene* (In the forest it hopes to bathe in clean water)

[24] See Performance for recorded songs, Item 2: *Teiteira sipurereureu* by Aman Boroiogok from *Desa* Muntei, southern Siberut.

- *Simainene baiga, jangan loi ende siaingeku ekeu* (Heart cleansing, wishing that you would be my boy)
- *Jangan loi kumai siabaiku ekeu oi ... i ... i ...* (Wishing that you would be my girl *oi ... i ... i ...*)
- *Anai ipamelei ngangana isogai teitei sipurereureu ale ... i ... i ...* (It sounds sad calling to those who are worried ... *i ... i ...*)[25]

Figure 15. Aman Boroiogok, a senior *kerei* in *Desa* Muntei, southern Siberut. (Photograph by Linda Burman-Hall, 2018).

There are also songs about unique birds like the song of the sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) (Mentawai: *manyang*) and the song of the greater coucal bird (*Centropus sinensis*; Mentawai: *kemut*). Like the *Uliat Bilou* song, *Uliat Manyang* is also commonly sung during a dance performance. An *Uliat Manyang* was sung by Aben Sakobou (see Figure 16) from Peipei, *Desa* Taileleu in southwest Siberut, and recorded in 2019 on a small boat in a quiet cove in Katurei Bay to avoid the noisy roosters and motorcycles on land.[26]

- *Kalimanyang ka koat, iteteuan ekeu ka pulaibangannu lek, ipulalaibangi, teitei pululetu ka,* (Eagle flying over the ocean, superb are you as you fly, soaring over the sea)
- *Talagat keru, limayang ka koat le, aisaksak tubuna, ka pulaibanganna, ailimok ibana* (Over the deep sea, an eagle flying over the ocean, displaying itself, in its domain)

[25] As he finished, he remembered another line and surprised all of us by suddenly recommencing it; at the end, he also proudly indicated his protective *bilou* arm tattoo.
[26] See Performance for recorded songs, item 3: *Uliat Manyang* sung by Aben Sakobou from Peipei, *Desa* Taileleu, southwest Siberut.

- *Kalimayang ka koat, ipuninibaiji, teitei pululektu, limanyang ka koiat, ailimok ibana giagiat koiat,* (Eagle over the sea, looking for prey among the waves, eagle above the sea, waiting for its prey, flying fish).
- *Aisaksak tubuna ka pulibaijatna ka talagat keru, limayang ka koat lettu, rapanaibu ekeu,* (It gives an ostentatious display over the deep sea, the eagle flying over the sea, they might hunt you)
- *Tasipulalaigat ka pulibaijatnu, limayang ka koian, aisaksak tubuna, kapuraraukatna ka jorot manua* (Fishermen in your domain (in your element), eagle over the sea, showing itself off, at its bathing place during the royal rain)
- *Limanyang ka koat leu, aipuraraukingan jorot manua, ka talagat keru, limayang ka koiat,* (Eagle flying over the sea, showering in the royal rain, out over the deep ocean, eagle flying over the sea)
- *Aisaibuakean, ka puraukatnya ka talagat keru, limanyang ka koat oi le oi ...* (Flying away from its bathing place, in the air over the deep ocean, eagle flying above the sea ...)

Figure 16. Aben Sakobou, a *kerei* from *Dusun* Peipei *Desa* Taileleu, southwest Siberut. (Photograph by Linda Burman-Hall, 2019).

In addition to the widely known and performed *uliat manyang* and *urai manyang*, other birds celebrated in Mentawai shamanic and secular song include the previously identified *kémut,* as well as the *piligi*,[27] *bisaksak*,[28] *aro*,[29] and *pipirere*.[30] There is also the widely known *urai bilou samba manyang* (song of

[27] Blyth's hawk-eagle (*Nisaetus albonizer*), a mountain eagle (Craig Robson 2008).
[28] A small forest bird which sings just before and around dawn; not identified in Kemp (2000) or Taufiqurrahman et al. (2019).
[29] Pacific reef egret (*Egretta sacra)* (Kemp 2000: Appendix I).
[30] White-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) (Kemp 2000: Appendix I).

the gibbon and the sea-eagle), a traditional dance song describing an encounter in which a mischievous gibbon deliberately annoys a sea-eagle.

The songs which accompany dance performances are not exclusively ritual songs. The purpose of the *leleiyo* in these dances might not be intended for rituals. Dances can also be staged purely for entertainment. Those secular dances are held in the *uma* or other places; recently, sometimes on stage at a public event celebrating Mentawai traditional culture.

8.2 Ritual and entertainment dances

Mentawai dances are divided into two types: ritual and entertainment dances. The ritual dance performed by shamans (*kerei*) is called *mulajo* or *lajo*, which literarily means sailing. In their performance of *mulajo,* shamans form a circle in the middle of an *uma*, intoning a mantra to the spirits supplicating for a safe passage for the journey to be undertaken by human spirits. This journey can be intended to heal an illness or to complete a young shaman's training. This type of dance is accompanied by a log drum called a *kateuba*, about two to three feet in length, made out of the trunk of a cylindrical palm-tree. One end of the palm cylinder is covered by a snake- (*Python reticulatus*) or lizard-skin (water monitor - *Varanus salvator*), depending on what is available. This dance is also accompanied by the hypnotic sound of the shamans' feet pounding on the wooden floor of the *uma*. There is no melodious variation in sound. The monotonous sound just gets faster and faster as the shamans twirl round and round until they fall into trance. A ritual master, usually a senior *kerei,* holds a bamboo pole or *obbuk turuakenen* (Schefold 1988: 451-454).

Another dance performed in Mentawai is called *turuk*, a secular dance purely for entertainment. As it is meant to amuse audiences, this dance must be attractive. The dancers' feet stamp out melodious sounds as they move around the wooden dancefloor to the rhythm of the *kateuba* drums. As they dance, the dancers sing about the primates or the birds they are imitating. The imitation of animals in dance is called *uliat* and there are several types of *uliat,* like the *uliat bilou* (gibbon dance) and *uliat manyang* (sea-eagle dance). Entertainment dances can be performed by both lay people (mostly men) and shamans. A senior dancer leads the group dance, imitating the animal and singing its song. In Siberut, women also perform the so-called *turuk pokpok* (clapping dance) without a drum accompaniment. Three to five women dancers, adorned with flowers and colourful leaves, move in a circle patting their buttocks as they move continuously.

9. Discussions

As shown throughout the foregoing discussion of traditional and visual arts as well as sacred and secular songs and dance-songs, the endemic primates and birds of Mentawai are central to the life of the rainforest itself and therefore have become embedded as central elements in Mentawai human spirituality. There are several endemic primates in Mentawai which are imbued with

spiritual importance; the most significant of these is the *bilou* gibbon ape, featured in songs, both sacred and secular.

As the most prominent of the endemic primates and the *de facto* daytime guardian of rainforest animals because of its loud alarm cry, the *bilou*, is transformed not only into a spirit guardian of the clan sleeping in the *uma* but also a *bilou* spirit able to help a shaman determine what a sufferer might have done to offend the forest spirits and how to make things right so healing can occur. A stylized *bilou* guardian image frequently appears on the *jaraik* fetish panels, other decorative panels, *salipak* shamanic boxes and as a traditional tattoo motif.

Prior to the deforestation which followed Mentawai becoming part of modern Indonesia, the incredible music of the call of the male *bilou* would have been heard by all Mentawaians before dawn every day for at least two millennia, an audible reminder that all was well overhead, in the sleeping trees high above and around the *uma.* Whenever this call, which can sound like human weeping, is heard at an uncharacteristic time, Mentawaians know that it signifies someone in their settlement will soon die and his/her soul needs a spirit guide as it leaves their moribund body to be able to reach other human souls in the other world safely. So, with the introduction of humanity to the Mentawai Archipelago, the gibbon, the self-acting natural guardian of the other animals in the forest because of the interconnectivity of human culture with the natural world, has also become the monitor of human respect for the environment. It is also the guardian of human safety, the restorer of human health, and the guide so that the human spirit will safely reach the invisible world of other human spirits.

Meanwhile, the *manyang,* a fully positive cultural image throughout the nation of Indonesia, gazes down from high in the sky and represents the sky spirits' lofty perspective on humanity and on all nature. The sea-eagle proudly rules the ocean, air, and shores of Mentawai. Most other Mentawai birds are comparatively neutral in their symbolism for Mentawaians; only a few of the 147 birds commonly seen in Mentawai today are singled out because of their cries, for instance, the *soalap,* or the erratic nature of their flight (the *kuilak* and *kemut*) invariably thought to presage misfortune.

To respect and to express their understanding of particular primates and birds, Mentawaians carve sculptures of these animals or they draw or paint them on special places. Most of these sculptures are found in the *uma* clan house where special rituals are performed; we have also noted some in the houses of *kerei.* Sculptures and drawings express the artistic aspects of Mentawai traditional culture and, through the performance of rituals, these images and figures captured in sculptures and drawings are conveyed to the domains of the spirits. Our research confirms that certain primates and birds occupy indispensable positions in Mentawai traditional arts. Nevertheless, the role of the *kerei* and their cosmological knowledge are essential to maintaining this spiritual context. The Mentawaian indigenous religion, *sabulungan,* exerts an enormous influence on the production and use of traditional cultural and artistic objects. When making protective panels and hunting tools, Mentawaians

observe and maintain the elements of nature they hold sacred and imbue with spirits, therefore their cultural products encapsulate the mythical power to be derived from nature and also provide a bridge to the denizens of the spiritual world. Why does this all matter?

Simply put, down through the ages, humans have always wanted to know whether the boundary between this world and the world of the spirits is porous and whether we can be heard and seen by spirits beyond so as to engage them in productive dialogue. Nearly all ancient and modern cultures agree that we must consider that our spirit somehow will live on and that how well we live our current life will have a consequence in our life to come. Through the ages, world cultures from both East and West have been concerned with trying to understand the transformation from life to death, following the heart of the conversion from life as we experience it, moving through trance or death into the other world in which we can see and hear spirits who have gone before us.

People of all faiths seek contact and proof that there is life after death. In many cultures, including Mentawai, shamans regularly enter into trances to contact spirits and gain knowledge which will be helpful in healing or assisting their clan or tribe (see Eliade 1964; Harner 1980: 20-ff; Schefold 1992). This is generally a selfless gift of service. In Mentawai, *kerei* are trained to be able to see and hear spirit communications without endangering themselves. Mentawaians know that spirits can send messages to the living and that they can be heard and appreciated. Although *kerei* might be able see and hear spirits in the forest, spirits cannot appear to lay people because the powerful *bajou* of these spirits would be harmful to humans' *bajou*. Spirits therefore appear in other guises or personalities: they use animals, large lush trees, big stones, and so on to ensure the safe delivery of their message to humans.

10. Conclusion

We are fortunate that we can broaden our anthropology of mind to include Mentawai and its culture. It is a place unlike anywhere else, a rich culture with remarkably consistent patterns which concentrate principally on the endemic primates and particular birds as doors to the unseen world. It is our good luck that in Mentawai many excellent stories, beautiful images, ritual sculptural objects, and moving songs and dances which focus on particular primates and birds survive and are still relevant to a group of core believers, allowing our immersion in the symbology of a consistent culture which enfolds us in its embrace.

Cosmological concepts have become a source of guiding inspiration for Mentawaians in crafting their cultural objects, especially those used in protective rituals. Some motifs and designs are copied from the shapes of natural elements, like particular leaves in the forest, watercourses, animal figures, the moon, and so on. Everywhere, the realms the spirits represent – sky, rainbow, rivers, forest, earth, sea – the characteristic colours, shapes, and forms are transformed into sources of inspiration for artists to design and produce their artistic cultural objects. Mentawaians observe the behaviour of particular primates and birds

in their quest to capture and embody these characteristics in particular ritual objects.

To maintain the proper relationship between humankind and the spirits established by tradition, the *kerei* of Mentawai must continue to perform various spiritual rituals organized by using various elements and carried out according to a time-honoured, complex process. For the success of these or any other rituals, those who wish a propitious outcome will need to sacrifice something of personal significance. In return, humans will be given assistance, direction, protection, and prosperity by the spirits in the spiritual world. The Mentawaian traditional belief system centres on ritual to supplicate various spirits with strong connections from the visible to the spiritual world. For traditional Mentawaians, all spirits are actually an invisible part of the natural world, and many aspects of the material and performative culture may be considered as coded reminders of this unity.

Performance for recorded songs

Song 1: *Uliat bilou* sung by Aser Sakeletuk from *Desa* Tiop, Katurei Bay in southwest Siberut Island. Video-recording © L. Burman-Hall, 2018. (Https://youtu.be/jRjUcOa6nmk).

Song 2: *Teiteira sipurereureu* sung by Aman Boroiogok, *Desa* Munteo, south Siberut. Video-recording © L. Burman-Hall, 2018. (Https://youtu.be/nhsKpbYjw2I).

Song 3: *Uliat manyang* sung by Aben Sakobou from *Desa* Peipei, Taileleu in southwest Siberut Island. Video-recording © L. Burman-Hall, 2019. (Https://youtu.be/UOvigBXAlWg).

Song 4: Male *bilou* call. Photo by Alamy, by permission. Recording by Thomas Geissmann 1988, by permission. (Https://youtu.be/UIAVJs3e9AY).

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