

## Toys for the souls: life and art on the Mentawai islands by Reimar Schefold

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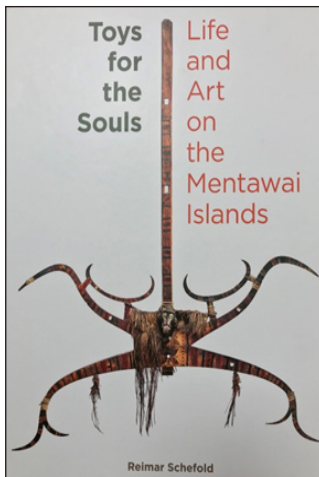
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## Book reviews

Reimar Schefold, *Toys for the souls; Life and art on the Mentawai Islands*. Bornival: Primedia, 2017, 228 pp. + illustrations, maps, portraits. ISBN 9782960137590. Price: EUR 45 (hardcover).



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The author presents in this book a traditional way of life and significant art of the Mentawaian people living in Mentawai Islands located off the west coast of Sumatra in Indonesia. The initial versions of *Toys for the souls* have been published in Dutch titled *Speelgoed voor de zielen* in 1979 and German titled *Spielzeug für de Seelen* in 1980. Both books are catalogues for Mentawaian art exhibitions that were organized in Delft, the Netherlands, at the

Nusantara Museum, and in Zürich, Switzerland, at the Rietberg Museum some decades ago. *Mainan bagi roh* published in 1991 is an Indonesian version of *Toys for the souls*. A brief summary of the book is also presented as a chapter of another recent publication of a tribal art book titled *Eyes of the ancestors; The arts of island Southeast Asia at the Dallas Museum of Art* edited by Schefold and Alpert (2017: 29-41). In comparison with the previous versions, the content of *Toys for the souls* is more comprehensive with two additional chapters. In this book, the author aims to depict how different cultural objects of Mentawaian people play important roles in any aspect of their culture, especially in rituals and the interactions between people, nature, and spirit world.

*Toys for the souls* consists of twelve chapters explaining remarkable ethnography of Mentawaian people with marvellous pictures of Mentawaian art. This book does not solely contain information about Mentawaian material culture, but also their traditional cultural values. In chapter two, the author presents a historical explanation and archaeological review pertaining to ornamental patterns in Mentawaian art, depicting the correlation between the Mentawaian culture and Dongson tradition in Southeast Asian regions (pp. 21-23). The author portrays and characterizes the way of making a living, life circles, local group and alliances, ritual and spiritual concepts by explaining

about architectural buildings. The presence of Austronesian traditions in Mentawai culture is described thoroughly as to discussing the particular pattern and motifs of Mentawaian cultural objects.

According to the anthropological and linguistic research done by the author, Mentawaian culture represents a less complex Neolithic tradition. The author discusses the complexity of Mentawaian culture with multifaceted influences from different times and traditions in Southeast Asia. The author states that "The Mentawaians do not know metalworking, weaving, or rice cultivation so it can be assumed that their culture predates the early Metal Age" (p. 21). Machetes, small knives, and axes that were obtained from Sumatran traders are the tools used by Mentawaians to produce their tribal art. Different cultural objects are made out of natural products taken from the forest and the sea, for example woods, rattans, and shells. Sizes, shapes, functions, and purposes of the objects are adapted to the ritual and social needs of Mentawaian communities. These features can be seen on the illustrative pictures in the catalogue of the book.

According to the author, in the Mentawaian spiritual view, human beings, plants, animals, and objects have souls. To persuade these souls to stay in harmony with each other, Mentawai people crafted ritual objects with artistic designs inspired by nature, dreams, imaginations, and experiences. Art, ritual, and aesthetics are intertwined in this way of life. Mentawaians commonly produce limited pieces of tools and artistic objects for cultural and social purposes. A limited number of cultural items preserve the uniqueness of Mentawaian material culture.

The author furthermore discusses the functions and purposes of particular objects in rituals, ceremonies, and daily life of Mentawaian communities (pp. 150-162). Specifically, the author describes different techniques of plaiting, appliqué, the application of colour, incising, the excision of parts of a surface, the piercing of surfaces, and sculptural carving, which are ways how the Mentawaian people make their ornamental and figural art. Some of those ornamental motifs are adopted from shapes of leaves, flowers, and other forms found in their natural environment. They are inspired by colourful flowers, green leaves of trees, and dark colour of their home tools. Handcrafted objects are coloured with a substance extracted from natural products like fruits, barks, leaves, and tubers.

In Mentawai, almost everyone can sculpture and handcraft particular objects. By regularly practicing they turn up to be the skilled handcrafters (*siagai kabei*). Some handcrafters may have specific skills in making of hunting tools or paddles and canoes, while some others are skilled in producing ritual objects. Particular handcrafters make wooden birds, fetish panels, and human figures. Some objects have passed through family generations and they have moved through different places as families migrated to different places. Some of those ritual objects comprise different family stories. As stories of objects are told, people recollect memories of their relatives that separated from them a long time ago and currently live in other places of the Mentawai archipelago (Tulius 2012).

Current developments instigated by governmental, non-governmental organizations, and religion institutions have been influencing Mentawaian people's ideas in producing their cultural objects as described in the last two chapters of the book. The author points out several current changes occurring in the last two decades that the producing of material culture and artistic objects is shifting from ritual and cultural purposes to commercial demands and interests. The significantly growing eco-tourism and surfing industries have encouraged *siagai kabei* to produce replicas of old objects in instant ways. Sometimes, they creatively invent new items in terms of design and form in order to fulfil the interest of tourists as the buyers. Most of the time, those objects do not have any cultural relevance to Mentawaian material culture, although they are offered for sale to tourists as if the artistic items were Mentawaian cultural objects.

To meet the demand of the tribal art markets, Mentawaian handcrafters produce a number of primate statues or duplicate cultural objects, such as fetish panels and tools as some examples shown in the *Mentawai art* catalogue by Feldman et al. (1999), which are also discussed by the author (pp. 183-187). In my own experience as I conducted my field research, tribal art collectors, sometimes at the local level, modify particular items so that they look fancier, older, more dramatic, artistic, and "authentic" than their original appearances in order to attract tribal art buyers with high prices. Consequently, some Mentawai tribal artistic objects that are listed in some catalogues are losing their originality and cultural values.

I find that *Toys for the souls* is lacking in necessary information about, for example, dimension and specified materials of objects that are pictured as illustrative images of the book. Mentawaians usually select particular trees, palms, and other natural products to make an artistic object. They even decide a particular time to cut off a tree in order to get a good quality of timber. In order to make a paddle for instance, they have to wait for a moonless night. They then go to the forest to cut off a particular tree of locally called *Lolosit*. There is also no information indicating when the objects were made and who had made them. Without properly dating an object, readers of the book miss a historical matter of the object. Some objects do not also have explanation of its place of origin where they were collected. A matter of fact, an object relates to a particular valley in Mentawai. Mentawaians can recognize that an object like a paddle or human statue with painted particular tattoo motif tells from where an object has been produced. Nonetheless, description of their cultural values given to those objects distinguishes this book from ordinary catalogues of tribal art.

My conclusion is that this book, *Toys for the souls*, becomes an imprinted memory of the past of Mentawaian ancestors, which is needed to be appreciated and referred as an indispensable source of knowledge of Mentawai art for young generations of Mentawaian people and Mentawaian art lovers. A lot of significant historical and cultural explanation is pertaining to Mentawaian artistic and ritual objects. Therefore, the strength of this book lies in its

historical explanation and cultural description. It is suitable for anthropological scholars and scholars of material culture. *Toys for the souls* reveals the richness and creative power of artistic imagination, deeply rooted in Southeast Asian prehistory.

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