
Dayak Women's Struggle to Protect the Forests in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia

The Dayak Indigenous Peoples perceive the universe as a nurturing mother who expresses her love and sustains human existence through her abundant resources. They follow a life philosophy called "Sesukup Belumbah Adat," which means: "where the Earth is stepped, the sky is upheld." This philosophy emphasizes their core value of respecting where they live. Consequently, the Dayak People prioritize the caring of their forests as a means of demonstrating respect for the universe and their ancestors. Regrettably, the greed of those in power has jeopardized the well-maintain equilibrium of the universe.

Background

Since the New Order era (1) during ex-president Soeharto's regime (1966-1998), the lands of the Dayak Indigenous People in Kalimantan have been targeted for investment opportunities. The expansion of oil palm plantations in the region started from the early 1980s. During Soeharto's regime, state-owned plantations expanded and sourced labor through the transmigration program, which started during the Dutch colonial ruling mainly to ensure a workforce for plantations in less populated areas. The forest and land clearance permits granted by the Ministry of Forestry during the 1980s, led to approximately two million hectares of forests being destroyed for oil palm plantations and transmigration purposes. The government also awarded extensive concessions to domestic conglomerates involved in the logging industry. In 1984, authorities in Central Kalimantan, through the Plantation Development Master Plan (RIPP, for its Indonesian acronym), designated oil palm as a commodity to be massively cultivated.

When the economic crisis hit Indonesia in the 1990s, the expansion of oil palm plantations intensified. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) gave a package to the government to liberalize foreign investment in the palm oil sector. Under the pretext of recovering from the economic crisis, the government promoted the expansion of transnational oil palm plantations companies. These include: PT. Kalimantan Lestari Mandiri (KLM Ltd), located between the village of Mantangai Hulu to the village of Kalumpang, and PT. Usaha Handalan Perkasa (UHP Ltd) in the village of Mantangai Hulu.

KLM Ltd. is a subsidiary of a Chinese group called Tianjin Julong, which now operates at least 50 thousand hectares of oil palm plantations in the country, and has an additional 140 thousand hectares of concessions still to be developed. It also has three mills, two river port storage facilities and one processing facility. (2)

For its part, UHP Ltd., which started operations in the country since 2010, covers an area of more than 15 thousand hectares of oil palm plantations, surrounding the districts of Kapuas Hulu Barat and Mantangai. People living in these districts lost their fertile lands without any explanation about the permit.

The enormous expansion of oil palm plantations however has not been enough.

Kalimantan has also emerged as the target of a large-scale Food Estate program. The stated objective of this program is to overcome the food crisis by maintaining national food stocks, notably rice. It is planned to be developed on land that used to be the ex-Peatland Development (PLG, for its acronym in Bahasa Indonesian) (3) as well as on private land belonging to residents in Central Kalimantan. The Food Estate has been included in the National Strategic Program (PSN) 2020-2024. However, it has no difference with previous policies that mostly aim to pave the way for land dispossession. According to a recent analysis, more than 1,500 hectares of forests, including peatlands, have been cleared for Food Estate program. (4)

On top of this, the government has started its plans to develop a new capital city in the forests of East Kalimantan, generating a new set of impacts for Indigenous communities. (5) At the same time, the rush for 'carbon concessions' to sell carbon credits to polluting companies and governments add pressures on Indigenous' land and has negative effects for its inhabitants. (6)

Resistance to Preserve Local Wisdom

In every account of land dispossession, resistance and struggle inevitably emerge as a response.

Dijah is a Dayak Women who courageously took a leading role when her land was seized by UHP Ltd. In collaboration with women from Mantangai, she orchestrated a protest in August 2013 to remove oil palm seeds and replace them with rubber seeds. They repeated this action in December 2014. Moreover, in June 2020, they fearlessly impeded UHP's access to their land by installing a wooden gate and occupying the land for 12 days. Dijah remains committed to safeguard her ancestral lands, regardless of the threats she encounters. "I personally have no fear because it is my rightful inheritance from my ancestors," she expressed with conviction during a conversation in October 2022 with members of the feminist Indonesian organization Solidaritas Perempuan.

According to Dijah, the land grabbing process occurred abruptly. She explained how the company took advantage of her absence and swiftly cleared the land. "When we returned, the land had already been cleared, and our newly planted trees had been destroyed," she recounted. While Dijah acknowledges the serious consequences that exercising resistance has, Dayak women consider defending their land an imperative, regardless of the persistent intimidation they face.

The BRIMOB (The Mobile Brigade Corps), which is the special operations, paramilitary, and tactical unit of the Indonesian National Police, detained Dijah. Nonetheless, she remained fearless, even fortified by the support of her collective.

Since the land conflict, Dijah and other women in Mantangai have been active in organizing a collective group called "Hurung Hapakat", which means "Working Together". Founded in 2017, 25 women managed to reclaim half a hectare of land back from the control of UHP Ltd. On that reclaimed land, they have planted various kinds of vegetables to meet the family's food subsistence—such as beans, kale, eggplant, chilies, ginger, lemongrass, turmeric, cucumber, and galangal. Collectively, they maintain the plot. This initiative also thrives on planting local rice using traditional seeds and wisdom.

The company still threatens with bringing her to the police. "They exploit people's lack of familiarity with legal procedures as a tool of terror", she explained. Despite all, Dijah finds her strength and empowerment in resisting as part of a collective. The safe space these women have established and maintained serves as a platform for discussions, including issues related to the threat of criminalization, providing her with a sense of support.

One of the concerns of the collective is the displacement of local rice seeds because of the mass use of hybrid seeds. This is a consequence of the mercantilization of this grain under capitalist production logic.

One crucial way to preserve the local seeds in indigenous Dayak wisdom is through the practice of shifting cultivation. However, many seeds are damaged and can no longer be planted. This is because land is now limited and soil conditions are different, coupled with the complexity of applying their ancestral practices in these circumstances and with the difficulty of understanding the changing nature.

Food Estates that ignore ancestral practices also exacerbate the situation. The rice seeds planted on those Estates are commodity seeds, such as Inpari 16. As a result, this project is incompatible with the characteristics of Kalimantan's dominant soil: the peatland. For Dayak women, Food Estates have the potential to damage their environments instead of creating prosperity, as the government claims. "After all our local crops have been removed, how can we be prosperous?", affirmed Dijah.

To ensure the protection of their land, Dayak women have adopted a strategic approach to cultivating. Remi, another member of the Hurung Hapakat collective, firmly believes that cultivating the land serves as a tangible manifestation of defending it. "If we allow it to become overgrown, people will perceive it as idle land, making them feel entitled to seize it. However, by consistently cultivating it, they will no longer dare to do so," she asserted with conviction in October 2022.

The ongoing process of reclaiming their land is closely intertwined with raising awareness through discussions and meetings, particularly concerning the continuity of the women's movement they have established. Sri, another member of Hurung Hapakat, explains: "It is crucial to have a women's movement because sometimes women are perceived as weak when acting alone, but when we come together as a group, our voices are more easily heard," emphasizing the vital importance of creating and maintaining a women's movement.

Weaving The Rattan, Sewing The Hope

Women organizing resistance together has not only happened in Mantangai. Another women collective was also created in the Kalumpang Village, Kapuas, in Central Kalimantan. Their resistance to large-scale land clearing has fostered a sense of solidarity among women in the village. When the authorities ignore their voices and demands, they find ways to strengthen one another.

The social construction regarding gender roles inside the village unfortunately makes the collective decision-making very biased, by identifying only men as the deciders. Due to this, many of the projects in the village are carried out without the women's knowledge or consent. This situation encouraged them to propose a Village Regulation that promotes and facilitates women's involvement in decision-making. The initiative has been met with a positive response from the village chief, who has showed willingness to embrace and support increased female participation in shaping of the village's decisions. For Rica, a woman from the Kalumpang village, "women's involvement in decision-making is prominent".

Women from Kalumpang have also formed two groups for economic independence: a collective harvesting group and a rattan-weaving group. The former has 20 members aiming to grow vegetables for their daily needs while ensuring food sovereignty, while the latter has 8 members aiming to preserve their traditional knowledge of rattan weaving.

As the Dayak philosophy of life, Rica and the Kalumpang women continue to maintain the balance of their lives in the forests by preserving and respecting what is around them, including the rattan, which was burnt completely during the 2015 forest fires. “Since then, it [the rattan] has been hard to find, so we started planting it again, to make it still useful,” said Rica.

Through the rattan, women groups in Kalumpang have introduced various kinds of weaving items - from bags, accessories, mats, and various other forms of handicrafts. Weaving also makes their discussions much more enjoyable. Currently, many people know their products through their collective sales. Another advantage is that it can also help them to extend the continuity of the struggle. As long as they weave, that rattan will still be on the ground of Kalimantan. “By planting rattan or other trees—that’s how we defend our land too,” she said enthusiastically.

A reflection about and with Dayak People will never be complete without a reflection on Kaharingan, the indigenous religion of the Dayak. Kaharingan means “to exist, to grow or to live”. It is symbolized as Garing or the tree of life, which means balance or harmony in the relationship among human beings, between humans and nature, and between humans and God. The Dayak people, especially the Benawan Dayak, uphold the value of respecting land, water and forests. For them, all of these contain life that must be continuously guarded. Therefore, the Dayak People are very wise in how they treat nature as well as in building their social life, in accordance with their ancestors’ mandate, which is contained in the expression "Haga Lewun Keton, Petak Danom, ela sampai tempun petak nana sare", which means "Take care of your land, don't let land owners farming on the outskirts". This mandate is internalized by the Dayak People to guard their villages and land.

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(1) The New Order (Indonesian: Orde Baru, abbreviated Orba) is the term coined by the second Indonesian President Suharto to characterize his administration as he came to power in 1966 until his resignation in 1998.

(2) [China Dialogue, From palm to Plate.](#)

(3) President Soeharto issued a presidential decree in 1995 to develop one million hectares of Central Kalimantan's peatlands into rice fields. In 1999, president B.J. Habibie terminated the project, but enormous damage had already been done and vast communities affected. The degraded peatlands can no longer function as water storage or hydrological regulator, hence the dramatic fluctuation in groundwater levels, which leads to frequent flooding during the rainy season and fires during the dry season. There are currently dozens of oil palm concessions in this area. Fires are often found inside these concessions, but the companies who own them are rarely charged. See further [here](#).

(4) Mongabay, [High-carbon peat among 1,500 hectares cleared for Indonesia’s food estate](#), April 2023.

(5) WRM Bulletin 259, [The Coercion of the Indonesia’s New Capital City Mega-Project and the Neglect of the Balik People’s Voices](#), January 2022.

(6) WRM, 15 years of REDD, [The Katingan REDD+ Project in Indonesia: The Commodification of Nature, Labour and Communities' Reproduction](#), April 2022.

