
[‘No’ to Energy: Life Beyond Electricity](#)

Whether they live on the islands of Siberut and Roté in Indonesia, or in an indigenous Ka'apor village in the Brazilian Amazon, the people with whom we spoke – whose testimonials are shared below – have one thing in common: they have decided to live without electricity. They are convinced that electricity is not part of their culture. Despite the fact that an ocean separates them, they have something else in common: their territories are constantly being attacked and threatened by invasion and destruction. It is worth stressing that these attacks are usually perpetrated by the dominant capitalist society – the very one that is trying to provide them with electricity. But the conversations we had were not focused on this conflict. Our aim was to better understand the world and worldviews of those who have proven that electricity is not an essential resource for human life. In fact, for them, it is essential to go without it. *This question is inevitably related to the cycle of the day: the sunny day and the completely dark night.*

The Indonesian Archipelago: stories from the islands of Roté and Siberut

The following excerpts are from conversations we had with inhabitants of the islands of the Indonesian Archipelago. Two women participated in this conversation: Lidia Sagulu and Loudya Messakh Lenggu. Each of them shared stories about what life is like outside ‘industrial urbanism’, the predominant lifestyle of the city. The stories they shared are common for people who live on these islands, especially those who inhabit the many small islands of the region. While electrification programs and kerosene and gasoline generators have become available on some of these islands, life without electricity is not a thing of the past for many women and men here – including those who live on the Mentawai group of islands and Roté.

Image

Lidia Sagulu, Loudya Messakh Lenggu and Itahu Ka'apor (Photos: Heronimus Tatebburuk, Matheos Messakh and WRM)

Lidia Sagulu: Light and darkness in the daily rhythms of the island

Lidia Sagulu (61) lives modestly with her family in the rural part of Siberut island on the western coast of Sumatra, the largest of four large islands in the 99-island group of Mentawai. Her surname, Sagulu, refers to the Sagulu tribe, a prominent tribe from the island to which she belongs.

Siberut is located in the warm tropical rainforest climate zone, which receives 4,000 mm of annual precipitation. The life-blood of the island is the intricate network of rivers that interlace with the dense forest that extends along the western side, as well as the sagú palms, nipah forests and mangroves.

Hendro Sangkoyo: Meinan (aunt) Lidia, we met a few years ago just after sunset, near the berth. You held me in your arms along with your *paluga* (oar) in the house, and with an innocent smile and eyes full of sparkle you left me standing there, as you calmly pulled your *abak* (canoe) out into the open water. The only word you said was "*cari udang*" (shrimp fishing). Could you tell me what night and darkness mean to you?

Lidia Sagulu: Okay. It is common for women to go out in canoes at night. The waterscape is mainly women's place. Indeed, I've been doing this since I was a child. To me, there is nothing odd about doing it. When we make *sagú* (by cutting the *sagú* trunk, preparing the cut pieces and floating them like a raft in the water) we sometimes spend the whole night, or longer, on the river. We also catch crabs in the mangroves at night. During the day we do many different things. And at night we do many others.

HS: You certainly are having a sharp sight to be able to roam the waterscape in the dark at your age. Are you comfortable operating in the dark, or is that because you are accustomed to the uneasiness of doing things without ample lighting at night?

LS: I don't have a problem (with darkness). I am not afraid of the dark. I am not afraid of anything in the dark.

HS: I was also struck, when I came to your house for the first time at nightfall, that you have not connected your house to the power grid, even though it would not be too hard to do so. It is definitely not a matter of whether it is affordable or not, because electricity has also come to Kampong. Could you tell us why?

LS: Since I was much younger, we felt good about what we had. Nighttime is when there is darkness. Just like we have sunlight in the morning. We are not alone in this. It is a common thing.

HS: Of course you need some kind of lighting at night, whether you are in your house or outside. What kind of light do you use?

LS: The most modest one is called a *bubukèt*. It is a tree branch or piece of dry wood. You can find it anywhere around here. With such a smoldering *bubukèt* we can walk at night or canoeing easily. Sometimes we use a *surak* (soo-ruck), which is the outer part of a coconut with the shell intact, wrapped in rope and set on fire. The coconut oil that we made at home also good for lantern. We call

it pakalé. The list is longer actually. Actually, the list is longer.

(Note: the conversation with meinan Lidia Sagulu was facilitated by her son, Heronimus Tatebburuk. We thank him).

Loudya Messakh Lenggu, oma (grandmother in old Malay): about Kusambi, Nitas and kerosene

Lodya Messakh Lenggu (77), who holds an M.A. degree, is the daughter of the chief of the Landu *nusak* (territorial designation). During her childhood she would take the ferry back and forth from the island of Roté to the city of Kupang in the northwestern tip of Timor Island, which is home to a large population of the Roténese diaspora.

Roté Island shares the tropical savanna climatic condition with the rest of the Lesser Sunda Islands. Still, 19,000 hectares, or about 16 per cents of Roté's land area, are covered with forests, including 1,900 hectare of mangrove forests. Kosambi (*Schleichera oleosa*) and Nitas (*Sterculia foetida* L.) are two important tree species on the island beside the lontar sugar palm, have been the staple source of energy and various other uses.

HS: Oma, could you tell me how nitas or kosambi is used in the family?

Loudya Messakh Lenggu: Well, we use something called a *bandu*, which is basically a lamp. One part of the *bandu* is a tin container with holes in the top to plug the light sticks. (Note: in another conversation with Petson Hangge, a Roténese elder, he told us that people use all sorts of homemade *bandus* in their homes). We use both kosambi and nitas. In the case of kosambi, we peel the seed sheath and grind the seeds into a course powder. We then spread the greasy powder on spun cotton or on a used rice bag, and we roll it on a wooden stick. It is easier to do this with nitas, because we don't have to grind the seeds, and we simply stick the seeds onto wooden skewers and light them.

HS: Do you use it at home only, or do you also use the bandu in a gathering, for example?

LML: We use it in our homes. When honored guests come, we light more *bandus*. Only when there is a big gathering will people sometimes also use what we call "petromax," which uses kerosene. *Bandus* are better than kerosene lamps because they do not produce soot. When you use a kerosene lamp your nose are full of soot in the morning. With kosambi and nitas we do not have such a problem.

HS: It turned out the bandu is "cultural". I was under the impression before, that the use of the bandu lighting is associated with people of lower social economic status or the older people only. So people only make use of such a lamp when in dire economic situation.

LML: No it is not like that. Oyang (her father, who was the "Rajah"/head of nusak of Landu) used it all the time. When I was sent to school in Kupang, he regularly sent me a big can of kosambi seeds. When they sent me to school in Kupang, he would periodically send me a big can of kosambi seeds.

(Note: the conversation with Loudya Messakh Lenggu was facilitated by her son, Matheos Messakh. We thank him).

In the Brazilian Amazon: A Story from the Alto Turiaçu Indigenous Territory

The following conversation was held with Itahu, an indigenous leader of the Ka'apor people, and a warrior of the Tuxã Ta Pame ancestral organization in the Alto Turiaçu Indigenous Territory.

The work of this organization has been key to protecting this vast territory of 531,000 hectares of rainforest. The Tuxã Ta Pame self-defense guard is responsible for expelling illegal loggers and miners who invade their territory. Thanks to their work, this area remains the last bastion of Amazon rainforest in the region.

In the territory there are lush forests, while outside of it there is absolute devastation. This highlights the important role that Itahu's people play in defending the rainforest and its culture. But devastation of the forest is not the only threat to the Ka'apor culture. Below, Itahu tells us how electricity could erode their culture, and why they decided to reject it.

Itahu Ka'apor: 'What passes through our sieve is what we consider to be good'

WRM: How important is it for the Ka'apor people not to have light at night?

Itahu Ka'apor: I will explain about the territory at night. We need darkness, and the animals need it too, because they move at night. It is not necessary to have lightness, it is not necessary to have light; we do not need it at all.

So darkness is very important for us, as well as for the enchanted beings, for the connection with the spirit world, as in the case of the pajés (shamans). They chant and invoke the spirit world for healing, and that requires darkness, not light. For us, night is a time of rest, without the interference of lights or noises. Hence the importance of darkness to the Ka'apor people.

WRM: Is this the reason why the Ka'apor people of Tuxã Ta Pame decided to reject electricity?

IK: Electricity has a great impact and is very detrimental to people's lives. Because the life of the Ka'apor indigenous people is not adapted to electric energy, it is not part of our customs. Since it is not one of our customs, electricity is not part of our life. Energy can bring many problems to the community. Electricity is like money. We don't know how to use it; it is not a part of our culture.

WRM: What impacts does electricity have on the culture of the Ka'apor people?

IK: We know that electricity brings problems, because we have already gone through that experience. I lived in the Ka'apor village of Ximborenda, where there has been electricity for more than 10 years. I was born and raised there. I left more than two years ago, because electricity caused a lot of damage in the community: too much light, too much noise, too much alcoholism. It brought us many problems. So it is not a good thing for the community.

WRM: Many indigenous peoples in Brazil have been affected by the construction of hydroelectric plants promoted as 'clean energy.' The Ka'apor people have been very active in the fight against the construction of the Belo Monte dam, in the state of Pará, due to the impacts this project would have in several territories. Did the impacts caused by energy production also influence your decision to reject electricity?

IK: This is what we think: we do not need electricity. Electric power and its projects bring many

problems to territories, so we do not want this kind of electric power. Hydroelectric dams affect the territories; they affect riparian, quilombola and indigenous peoples. We mobilized to stop the company and the Belo Monte dam, but even so, the government went ahead with this project. In reality, it is dirty energy. For us, clean energy is that which has no impact.

WRM: You once said that you sifted the white people's culture through a sieve, and what remained was only that which helped strengthen the Ka'apor people. Did any kind of energy make it through that sieve?

IK: We use a little bit of solar energy; we have a solar panel. We use solar energy to charge cellphones and briefly connect. But we do not use it much; we only turn it on for a few hours a day. We use it to communicate, to keep up with the news, and to transmit information about the territory. We have to filter through what is good and bad from the white culture. What makes it through our sieve is what we consider to be good. In this respect, we use cellphones, but very carefully, because where I lived previously, energy and cellphones took over everything. There is no agreement about coexistence, there is nothing else there. That is why I came to another village that doesn't have energy.

These conversations were conducted by the WRM team secretariat in Brazil, and by Hendro Sangkoyo in Indonesia.