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An Indonesian Overview

Indigenous Peoples' Writing on Forest Management:
A Counter Discourse?

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I. Rationale

This book, initiated by AMAN and Down to Earth, looks at the experiences of six communities and their relationships with the forests and land where they live. Both organisations have their own reasons for supporting this publication. As entities that press for the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights, they want to present to the wider world examples of the traditional knowledge and management systems used by indigenous communities to manage their forests that need to be recognised and protected. The stories from these communities have been selected to represent this picture.

This is not the first attempt to show that indigenous communities possess forest management skills. However, most existing studies have been carried out by academics, not the indigenous peoples themselves². This book is different, as the Preface makes clear. These case studies have been written by indigenous practitioners from their everyday experiences. This initiative springs from AMAN and DTE's shared belief that indigenous peoples should be given the opportunity to speak to a broader audience. They are the most appropriate people to talk about their knowledge, struggles, hopes and dreams. Yet this rarely happens.

In that case, what is the purpose of this chapter? I was invited to contribute by the commissioning organisations in the hope that I could provide some context and analysis for the case studies. My difficulty is that there are many more things happening in the field which are not apparent from the stories presented here. So, at the very least, I would like to highlight some of these complexities.

² See, for example, Centre for Environmental Law, HuMa, ICEL, ELSAM & ICRAF, 2002, *Whose Resources? Whose Common Good? Towards a New Paradigm of Environmental Justice and the National Interest in Indonesia*, CEIL, Washington DC; D Suhardjito, A Khan, W Djatmiko, MT Sirait & E Santi, 2000, *Karakteristik Pengelolaan Hutan Berbasis Masyarakat*, Pustaka Kehutanan Masyarakat-Studi Kolaboratif FKMM, Yogya; B Belcher, G Michon, A Angelsen, M Ruiz-Perez & H Asbjornsen, 2000, *Cultivating (in) tropical forests? The evolution and sustainability of systems of management between extractivism and plantations*, proceedings of a workshop 28 June-1 July 2000, Lofoten, Norway, World Agroforestry Centre/ICRAF

People who frequently visit villages in Indonesia, particularly those who have been to one or more of the case study locations, know very well that there are actually far more complex processes taking place which need to be portrayed. The problem is not that the authors do not know this – they certainly do. However, to observe these complex issues and think them over, extract their significance and tell the whole story on paper is not a simple transformation. It is by no means certain that even someone with a university education would find it easy.

However, I would like to offer a different way of reading the accounts from the villages presented here. I believe these stories can be seen as an attempt to create a counter discourse that challenges some of the premises that underpin the legitimization of state control over forest lands.

One way of understanding the context within which AMAN and DTE are promoting this challenge to the official line is to explore what Vandergeest & Peluso have called the process of ‘internal state territorialisation’ in the context of Indonesia’s forests³. Those authors argue that state control of forests is part of a strategy to gain power over natural resources and access to their exploitation. It includes having a hold over the population, through seizing territory, as will be explained below.

II. The process of ‘internal state territorialisation’ of forests

Vandergeest & Peluso’s study starts from their observations about the actions taken by states to secure the territory within their boundaries once those external limits have received international acknowledgement. According to these authors, all modern states then take measures to control the natural resources and communities within the state boundaries by “dividing up the territory within that state into economic zones”⁴.

³ P Vandergeest & NL Peluso, 1995, Territorialization and State Power in Thailand, *Theory and Society* (24), p385–426

⁴ Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, *op. cit.*, p387



Ngata Toro customary land and Lore Lindu National Park, Central Sulawesi

Using Thailand as an example, they show how the division of the state into a number of administrative bureaucratic units and the classification of land as forest - over which the state then claims power - are prominent parts of the process of internal territorialisation⁵.

⁵ NL Peluso & P Vandergeest, 2001, Genealogies of the Political Forest and Customary Rights in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, *Journal of Asian Studies* (60) 3, p637-643; P Vandergeest, 1996, Mapping Nature: Territorialization of Forest Rights in Thailand, *Society and Natural Resources* (9), p159-175

⁶ TM Li, 1999, Marginality, Power and Production: Analysing Upland Transformations, in Li (ed.), *Transforming the Indonesian Uplands*, Singapore, ISEAS, p1-44; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, *op. cit.*

The government classifies which areas are to be maintained as the forest estate whose management is the responsibility of a specific state body. In the case of Indonesia, this was the Department of Forestry. This department then further divides the area under its control into smaller units with specific purposes. In Indonesia, this classification established three zones: Production Forest, Conversion Forest and Protected Forest⁶. It then determines who has access to each area (through issuing licenses), which activities are and are not allowed there, along with the types of exploitation.

In this way the process of internal state territorialisation is basically one of exclusion (restricting and alienating) and inclusion (putting in and drawing together). In the case of forests, it is usually preceded by legislation which formalises the state's authority to divide up the land and determines its function and usage. Maps and censuses are key instruments employed by the state to support its actions⁷.

III. The impact on forest peoples

I shall not go over again the whole history of state control over Indonesia's forests as that story has been told elsewhere. However, it is worth drawing attention to several points to further our understanding.

Firstly, various studies show that the process of internal state territorialisation over Indonesia's forest resources began in the Dutch colonial period. The authorities started by claiming important areas of teak forests in Java – important, that is, to the colonial economy. The forestry office of the Dutch colonial regime also tried to exert control over other islands, but this was never as effective or extensive as on Java.

It should be noted that, in developing control over forests in the post-colonial era, the body that became the present Department of Forestry derived considerable advantage from the processes, bureaucracy and apparatus put in place by the colonial regime⁸.

⁶ See Introduction, p3-4

⁷ Li, 1999, *op. cit.*; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, *op.cit.*

⁸ Li, 1999, *op. cit.*; NL Peluso, 1992, Rich Forests, Poor People: Resource Control and Resistance in Java, University of California Press, Berkeley; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001, *op. cit.*

Secondly, and most ironically, once the Indonesian government had freed itself from the yoke of colonialism, it employed what were essentially the same legal instruments that the colonisers had used to validate state control over forests and other areas. These state powers provided the legal basis for the forestry department to designate vast areas as Indonesia's forest estate⁹.

Thirdly, the scale of the impacts of the state's powers over forests outside Java only became apparent during Suharto's 'New Order' regime, specifically with the introduction of the Basic Forestry Law No. 5/1967. More than two-thirds of Indonesia's total land area was declared to be state forest, including almost the whole of Papua.

In contrast to the concept of control over spatial planning evident in other legislation, the forestry department interpreted the designation of



Abandoned sawmill, West Kalimantan

⁹ Peluso, 1992, *op. cit.*

state forests as automatically conferring ‘ownership’ of this domain¹⁰. As such, the forestry department basically prohibited all activities taking place within the area it claimed as state forest unless it had issued permits for these. This meant that the whole of forest peoples’ lives - including what they were and were not allowed to do and who was given special permission to use areas designated as state forests - was automatically controlled by the Department of Forestry. In the case of Papua and other places where virtually the whole land mass was declared to be state forest, all settlements, communities’ agricultural land and even government offices and towns could be considered ‘illegal’ in the eyes of the forestry department!

Fourthly, the designation of state forest by the forestry department was based on a premise that Vandergeest & Peluso call ‘abstract space’¹¹. In other words, the state territory was seen as 2-dimensional empty space. Forestry officials drew their lines on maps determining the area that the department would claim as forest land. Although this forest zoning in Indonesia was called (literally) the Agreed Forest Use Plan (*Tata Guna Hutan Kesepakatan, TGHK*), in practice there was no process of seeking agreement from the millions of people who lived in and from these forests. In general, communities had no idea that, through these lines drawn on a map as a planning exercise on paper, they had suddenly lost their rights and access to forest lands that they considered their own and which they had been using - in some cases long before the Indonesian state came into existence.

Lastly, perhaps these people would not be so angry or feel such a sense of injustice if the government – in the form of the Department of Forestry – had behaved more wisely and taken on board communities’ needs. It is no longer a secret that the marginalisation of local communities by the state is often carried out under the guise of the need for development or the broader public interest. Nevertheless, we have seen how the exploitation of forests and other natural resources has always been closely associated with the interests of the private sector and a

¹⁰ A Contreras-Hermosilla & C Fay, 2006, *Memperkokoh pengelolaan hutan Indonesia melalui pembaruan penguasaan tanah: Permasalahan dan kerangka tindakan*, World Agroforestry Centre ICRAF, Bogor

¹¹ Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995, *op.cit.*

powerful government elite which collaborates with its close friends in the business community¹².

IV. Labels, legitimacy and illegality

The majority of those who derive most benefit from the licences for forest exploitation are outsiders. Meanwhile, it is local communities - many of whom live in poverty - who are criminalised, arrested, labelled as forest raiders or accused of 'illegal' activities. This is the basic reason why the culture of opposition takes root and grows in communities that live in and around forests¹³.

Branding local people with terms that have negative connotations - such as 'forest raiders', 'timber thieves', 'shifting cultivators', 'agents of forest destruction' - or labelling certain groups of society as 'alienated tribes', 'primitive', 'neglected', 'traditional' or 'backward', is a strategy employed by government officials to exert power or control over them through the use of language. These labels are not simply a means of describing particular groups, but are closely associated with the mechanisms used by the state to control the population¹⁴.

As the state is the only institution in society which can legitimately (by rule of law) use force or coercion, there are serious implications for the lives of those who are the objects of this labelling. Expulsions, intimidation, shootings, criminalisation and imprisonment carried out by agents of the state are declared legal on the pretext of law enforcement. Often such methods are used without examining whether the coercion is directed at appropriate targets or the reasons why local impoverished people are carrying out the activities which the state regards as 'illegal'.

It is therefore not surprising that during the 'Reform' period following Suharto's resignation as president, there was a great deal of support

¹² K Robinson, 1986, *Stepchildren of Progress, the Political Economy of Development in an Indonesian Mining Town*, State University of New York

¹³ Peluso, 1992, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ See for example Chapter 5.



Jopi [AMAN]

Access for some indigenous communities is difficult, especially in the rainy season, Batu Kerbau Jambi

for groups who were increasing demands on the new government to recognise the rights of forest peoples and to provide increased access to land and forest resources for other impoverished sectors of society.

Given this context, this AMAN-DTE publication can be seen as a contribution to the counter discourse against the branding or negative labelling which the state has imposed on its people. The development of challenges to these paradigms could also be regarded as a process of countering internal state territorialisation.

The accounts presented in this book are therefore intended to portray communities acting in very different ways from the labels forced on them. For example, they want to show that indigenous peoples have just as much understanding of forest management as people who have had years of formal education - be they in academic institutions or government offices. They illustrate that communities who are often labelled as agents of forest destruction are actually completely the opposite: they care deeply about forest protection. They strive to depict everyday lives of forest peoples that are in harmony with the surrounding environment.

V. The complexities of opposition and change

Another aspect on which I would like to focus is that of the complexities of opposition which, unfortunately, are not fully expressed in these case studies. Here we should bear in mind that the opposition of the poor to state control of forests is not a new phenomenon in the history of political power over Indonesia's forests.

There is no better, more comprehensive account of this than Nancy Lee Peluso's book¹⁵. *Rich Forests, Poor People* depicts the long history of state control of forests in Java and how the state criminalised the people who live around those forests. It also covers communities' culture of opposing state agencies – in this case the state-owned forestry company Perhutani – which has been handed down through the generations. Peluso's years of research illustrate the complexities of the implications of state control for forest people (in that study, Javanese communities living around teak plantations). She shows that the forms of opposition were never solely collective demands against state control. Alongside this 'vertical conflict' were 'horizontal conflicts' between individuals within the community.

In Peluso's view, this type of conflict may have arisen due to different perspectives which themselves resulted from a process of differentiation within the community. Such differentiation could reflect differences in tenure (those with land and the landless); economic power (the rich and poor); political power (village officials and the rest of the community); heredity (local nobility and ordinary villagers). Her findings on the complexities of social change, state control and the forms of opposition adopted by farmers on the plantation fringes inspire me to question the extent to which these problems also arise in the communities who have contributed to this book.

Many analyses portray indigenous communities as single homogenous entities. This point is well made by Agrawal & Gibson who point out that - in reality - fragmentation, sub-groups or other differences are

¹⁵ A Bahasa Indonesia version of Peluso, 1992, *op. cit.* has been published by the Jakarta-based NGO Konphalindo in 2006 as *Hutan Kaya, Rakyat Melarat: Penguasaan Sumberdaya dan Perlawanan di Jawa*

present in any community¹⁶. These differences may be based on class, age group, political position, access to power, gender and a range of other factors. As Peluso's work also makes clear, it is important to understand these differences within communities not only because they may give rise to different forms of opposition but because they can also motivate different forms of collaboration with outside parties.

VI. Future challenges

Similar findings are clear from more recent studies on natural resource management by indigenous communities. For example, Thorburn's work on customary controls on marine resources in Maluku province¹⁷ appears to show that traditional forms of exploitation which were fairly sustainable until recently are now no longer so, even though the *adat* institutions which control harvesting remain quite strong. In another paper, he takes up the issue of the growing international trade in live fish, sanctioned by an agreement under customary law, as a cause of destruction of coral reef ecosystems in the Kei islands¹⁸. These cases and others show that village elites and/or *adat* leaders, as well as local communities, do not always reject external finance or investors from elsewhere and that such collaborations can have extremely damaging impacts on local natural resources¹⁹.

At the very time that such communities have gained increased access to the wider world and vice versa, and a cash economy has become increasingly important in their lives, the relationship between indigenous peoples and their land and resources is undergoing a transformation. Land and resources are increasingly valued as commodities. Under these conditions, the picture of a village of people who all share the

¹⁶ A Agrawal & C Gibson, 1999, Enchantment and Disenchantment: : the Role of Community in Natural Resource Conservation, *World Development*, 27 (4), p629-649

¹⁷ *Sasi lola* is a system prevalent in indigenous communities in the Moluccas of controlling how, when and by whom certain fish and marine invertebrates may be harvested. See C Thorburn, 2000, *Sasi Lola* in the Kei Islands, Indonesia: An Endangered Marine Resource Management Tradition, *World Development* 28 (8), p1461-1480

¹⁸ C Thorburn, 2001, The House that Poison Built: Cyanide Fishing in the Kei Islands, Indonesia, *Development and Change* 32 (1), p151-180

¹⁹ See also Chapter 10.

same interests and motives towards forests becomes harder to accept as reality.

We need to study why certain communities have succeeded in overcoming this problem, where its members have set aside their different interests, with the result that there is some degree of sustainable forest management, while other communities have failed to do this – with disastrous consequences. Sadly these ‘stories from the village’ do not provide the all answers to this question. Nevertheless, they do show that it does happen and, by furnishing examples of sustainable community-based natural resource management, provide a basis for future exploration.

