

Palm Oil and the Dynamics of Community Changes: Lesson Learned From Aceh and West Kalimantan

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ABSTRACT

This paper argue that many experiences have occurred as a result of the introduction of oil palm as a global phenomenon in the context of fulfilling vegetable oil resources as an alternative energy for the future. By using ethnographic methods both in the process of data collection, data analysis and data representation, the authors want to show that community changes are very dynamic in relation to their response to the presence of oil palm as a cash crop. The results of the study show that there are different categories of changes that have occurred in West Kalimantan and Aceh related to the expansion of oil palms. In West Kalimantan, with the strong customary law which is an everyday value, the process of change can still be traced in detail starting from changes in settlement patterns, changes in modes of production and the dynamics that occur from the process of changing modes of production from fields, rubber and oil palm. Meanwhile in Aceh, the process of massive palm oil expansion has raised issues related to labor relations in the industrial context.

Keywords: *Plant Oil Plantation, Dynamical Change, labor right, Lesson Learnt, Aceh and Kalimantan.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Agrarian conflicts involving the state, corporations (markets) and society are a common phenomenon that has occurred in various parts of the world after the crisis of imperialism began to be detected in 2007 which was marked by a global economic and financial crisis. ¹This happens because the imbalance that occurs between developed countries, developing countries and other countries cannot be resolved until now. As a result, the world is experiencing a crisis both in terms of energy, food crisis and financial crisis. So that developed countries are starting to think about solving this problem for the sake of the need for food and alternative energy (biofuels). ²AGRA's prediction regarding the multidimensional crisis that hit the world and the solutions that will be taken by developed countries in the world seems to be coming true today. According to AGRA (2010: 11) One of the efforts made by these countries in order to overcome the imperialist crisis is to promote a solution in the form of " boosting the production and productivity of agricultural food, relying on the expansion of large-scale agriculture (*food estates*), and involving the agricultural industry" (agribusiness companies). Meanwhile, in overcoming the energy crisis, the imperialists are promoting the use of bio-fuel-based energy, as a substitute for fossil fuel-based energy (petroleum), which is expected to continue to shrink in production in 2020. With the shift from energy use to bio-fuel energy, it is necessary to expand plantation lands to increase production of bio-based energy. "

What AGRA (2010) mentioned above is one of the trends from the origins of land grabbing ³which then gave rise to various conflicts in various parts of the world. Land on a large scale is needed to carry out the global food security and energy security agenda. In the Indonesian context, various campaigns related to this can be seen clearly from the effort to make the Merauke Region a world food barn with the project name (Merauke Integrated

¹See: *Land Confiscation; The Causes, Forms and Consequences for the Peasants*¹ compiled by the Agrarian Reform Movement Alliance (Agra), Jakarta. Sept. 24, 2010.

²See: *Fueling Disaster: A Community Food Security Perspective on Agrofuels*, Report by Community Food Security Coalition International Links Committee, December 2007.

³See also trajectory of land grabbing and agrarian change by *Borras, SM Jr., and franco, J. 2012. Global Land Grabbing and Trajectories of Agrarian Change: A Preliminary Analysis of Agrarian Change Vol. 12 No. 1 January, 2012. Pages 34-59.*

Food and Energy Estate -MIFEE) where 2.8 million hectares are being converted into rice fields which will be managed with technology modern. ⁴Meanwhile, to overcome the energy crisis, since 2005 Indonesia has prepared 1.8 million hectares on the border of Indonesia and Malaysia to be converted into the largest oil palm plantation in the world under the name Kalimantan Border Oil Palm Mega Project.

Land conversion (land acquisition) is a common phenomenon in Indonesia in the context of alleviating the energy and food crisis problems as described above. As a result, agrarian conflicts over land conversion or land grabbing are events that often arise. In fact, cases continue to increase throughout the year. From 2010 to 2022, farmers' unions recorded an increase in cases of agrarian conflict which continued to increase with an average of nearly 87 cases per year. From these various cases, it can be concluded that several factors causing the conflict occurred due to the expansion of land for oil palm plantations, battles over land claims, and overlapping land policies.

The introduction of oil palm is a socio-cultural phenomenon that can be categorized as a form of *industrial agricultural expansion* aims as an effort to fulfill food and energy globally (Bollin, Anna. 2011); (McCarthy, 2010). Massive oil palm plantations in Indonesia in industrial terminology began to be felt in the 1980s which had an impact on local communities (Local Communities) and local/indigenous people (Colchester, et al. 2006; Colchester, Marcus and Chao, Sophie: 2011; Aditjondro, 2011; Nazaruddin, et al, 2016).

Since then, the Dayak people in Kalimantan have met and interacted with different cultures from what they had known before. One of the things that can be seen is the change in the mode of production of the Dayak community in Meliau. In the past, the shifting cultivation system was one of the characteristics of the Dayak people's mode of production in West Kalimantan. However, since the introduction of oil palm which has been managed for profit based on rational calculations, farmers who are people who are subject to customary rules are forced to change their style and mode of production. The existence of a shifting cultivation system (Clifford, 1977; Dove, 1988; Sellato, 2002) practiced by the Dayak community in West Kalimantan is a form of a harmonious relationship between nature and humans. And this harmonious relationship is a teaching that has long existed in the Dayak community and has been passed down from generation to generation to the next generation. Another change is related to the community's perception of land after the introduction of oil palm plantations in Meliau, if previously the community still held and valued the use and distribution of land in accordance with customary law which had been regulated in the Book of Authors. ⁵So after the introduction of oil palm, there has been a major change in the function and meaning of land for the community as well as the introduction of an economic moral which they believe is *more efficient and more accumulate* (Kamil, 2018).

2. METHODS

By using the ethnographic method, the researcher wants to show two experiences from two different locations related to the impact of oil palm on changes in people's lives in Aceh and West Kalimantan in their social, economic and cultural aspects. The definition of ethnography that I think is suitable for describing what I do in the field is, "*literally ethnography is understood as a portrait of a society, that portrait is not a reality that can be captured, it means that reality is not singular. Ethnography is a three-stage effort carried out by an ethnographer, namely initial imagination, access to the community (early work in the field and the writing process (returning to the academic world) (Harris and Johnson, 2007) Via Argo Twikromo (2011). The process of collecting data is done through Participatory observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions Comparative data from West Kalimantan are used to see how people live in two different cultural contexts but respond to oil palm with almost identical activities.*

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Lessons Learned from Aceh

October 2020 was a bleak day for Mr. Ahmad, his aspirations and hopes for a happy life in old age suddenly collapsed when they had to graciously accept the layoff letter sent by PT Mopoli Raya as their place of work all

⁴See: *Neo-liberalism, Social Conflict and Identity of Papuan Indigenous People. Case Study of Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) in Papua. Research Paper by Moureen Lamonge. thesis. International Institute of Social Studies.*

⁵Customary rules

their lives. Never mind training for preparation for old age, the severance pay that should be their ration has never been given.⁶

In addition to the issue of job security, oil palm companies also often receive reports from residents about their production activities that are suspected of polluting the environment. As happened on March 1, 2022 when the community reported an incident of water pollution by PT Mopoli Raya which had also happened before in 2014.⁷ Even though these reports were finally resolved through a mediation process by the authorities, the community is still always a victim of the impacts. -ecological impacts caused by the operation of palm oil companies that do not heed the rules.

PT. Mopoli Raya is one of dozens of palm oil companies operating in Aceh Tamiang. Various conflicts also often become a trend in the mass media, even conflicts between employees and companies are currently becoming manifest conflicts that appear to the surface after a company is declared bankrupt and does not fulfill its obligations. In addition, conflicts with local residents whose settlements are included in the oil palm area are also a characteristic feature in Aceh Tamiang.

In Aceh itself, various cases related to community conflicts with companies that manage certain areas through Cultivation Rights (HGU) for oil palm, mining and production forests have also occurred. These conflicts occurred in Nagan Raya, Takengon, and Aceh Tamiang. Even in Aceh Tamiang, the conflict between the oil palm company and the community has become manifest and is a daily conversation among the community. Conflict between PT. Rapala and the Sungai Iyu Plantation village community are real examples of how the conflict between government policies, corporations represented by palm oil companies and civil society in an effort to reinforce their respective interests with various narratives such as overcoming energy, food crises, poverty alleviation and equity income and create jobs.

These narratives were then developed by each party to gain access to good land by the state represented by the local government of Aceh Tamiang, the market represented by PT Rapala and civil society represented by various stakeholders in the Sungai Iyu Plantation Village community.⁸ The struggle between them to gain access then gave rise to a conflict that researchers currently see as a conflict over land ownership.

Even though the current conditions show that conflict is visible on the surface, this happened because there were efforts and negotiations made by various parties for the betterment and quality of life for the people of Aceh Tamiang. This can be seen from the results of preliminary observations that researchers have made that several palm oil companies in Aceh Tamiang have implemented the RSPO both the Principles and Criteria (PC) and Independent Smallholders.⁹ So even though on the one hand the company, local government and the community are in conflict with each other with their narratives, on the other hand they are developing mechanisms and negotiations to realize the conditions required by the RSPO.

3.2. *Lessons Learned from West Kalimantan*

After returning home from cutting rubber, father, as usual, came home at 8.30 WIB. Usually, Mr. Aden is assisted by his mother to cut it and even then if it doesn't rain. The rain became an obstacle for the rubber-cutting work. After arriving home, the mother who brought home the vegetables immediately cleaned the vegetables and started cooking. Pak Aden and I¹⁰ chatted while drinking a cup of coffee. The theme that we discussed that day was related to the changes that occurred in the Nek Lhan community¹¹ after the arrival of oil palm. All aspects of the life of the Nek Lhan people underwent changes. Especially the way of life and how to see the natural surroundings. The changes that have occurred can be seen from their changing modes of production. Religious life, social relations,

⁶ PT Mopoli Raya laid off 2018 people and has not been given severance pay. Can be accessed at (<https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2022/02/26/pt-mopoli-raya-pailit-selves-karyawan-terpaksa-di-phk-218-orang-belum-untung-pesangon?page=all>).

⁷ See how the government mediates regarding reports and public complaints about palm oil waste. (<https://kkp.go.id/djpsdkp/stasiunbelawan/artikel/38540-satwas-sdkp-langsa-tindak-Continued-dinding-community-terkait-limbah-sawit>)

⁸The definition of Access refers to Ribot and Peluso (2003). See Ribot, JC, and Peluso, NL (2003) A Theory of Access. *Rural Sociology*, 68(2), p. 153-181. See also the RSPO Principles which are one of the operational principles of sustainable palm oil which guarantees sustainable livelihoods and alleviation of poverty, fair and transparent relations between companies and smallholders and government

⁹See related RSPO PC and RSPO ISH at www.rspo.org.

¹⁰ All informant names have been disguised according to the informant's request.

¹¹ Nek Lhan is a village in the interior of West Kalimantan. The name of Nek Lhan Village has been disguised for research ethics purposes.

production resulting from their changing views of land and commodities. Previously the Nek Lhan people did not live in the area they live in now. However, they are scattered in several areas where they used to live (tembawang) around small rivers such as the Gerongk Suak, Seuboyu River, and several other tributaries.

Tembawang is the term for village people¹² for the area where they lived before. Tembawang Suak Gerongk and Tembawang Seuboyu are some of the areas where they have lived before. Then slowly, they gathered in one place which is now called Grandma Lhan. Even in the past, there were still many who liked to live in huts or huts in the middle of the forest. Even now there is still one family that still survives in a hut in the middle of the forest with all their lives.

Apart from the change in settlement patterns, there have been other changes that have occurred to the Nek Lhan community. Previously, Pak Aden said, the Nek Lhan people must have several skills or skills to be recognized as adults. This means that to be recognized as a young man or girl, the Nek Lhan people must have these skills to make their life smooth. This skill is *betopak* which is expertise in making all tools made of iron or blacksmithing. The second is *merimba*, namely the skill of slashing or the skill of using a pickaxe to extract wood from the jungle. The skill is to cut large logs. The third is a skill called *hoops*, which is the skill to make sheaths for machetes and small plaits related to the iron tools that have been made. Next is the skill of weaving *beusirat*, which is a skill that is specifically designated and required for women in terms of weaving all work support tools such as *keubudok* (*pengambang*).

Of the 4 skills that previously had to be owned by a village Dayak, 3 skills were taught to men and the rest were reserved for women. Pak Aden said, a person is considered an adult and can find a wife or family after having these skills. Of course for women, *fiery* and *concocting* is something set apart to do.

Previously, using hunting and gathering modes of production, they made their own means of production such as spears, machetes, *keubudok*, *saber*, *pickaxe*, *isuk*, and *podak* heads. For their daily life they depend on forests and small rivers. Their knowledge of the trees and leaves used for side dishes is very diverse. Therefore, said Pak Aden, at that time their beliefs were still worshiped and their safety depended on large trees. And one day, the safety that has been obtained will be released with a ceremony/celebration called *off bait* or *bait peudagi*. *Peudagi bait* will be released if someone intends it and it is also intended for the safety and protection of the village. Apart from that, there were also restrictions at that time, such as not being allowed to whistle and shout alone at night, not eating and burning rotten items such as crabs and shrimp, catfish and shrimp paste. And there are many other restrictions.

Because nature and the forest are still food providers for them, every day or on days when they catch a lot they always celebrate and eat together with their families. So if they get together, there is a separate term in the village language, which is full of pots. This means that everyone gathers still in one family bond to eat together.

Because they get side dishes and food ingredients provided by nature, in terms of consumption, sometimes they have lots of side dishes served on the table. And all the side dishes are usually eaten and eaten for one day. Such attitudes and actions are *ruak kabak* in village Dayak terms. According to Pak Aden, the attitude of *ruak kabak* has become a familiar thing in their daily consumption lives. They are also familiar with good preservation techniques for fish, fresh meat, vegetables and food ingredients. For meat or fish, usually they will preserve it by decomposing it, it can be dead or salted. If it's a vegetable, it's preserved with salt and the food ingredient they usually preserve is *durian* which they call *tempoyak*.

Rice business was not a problem for them. Because by still adopting a system of shifting cultivation, they can meet their rice needs for their lives. The shifting cultivation system also provides a surplus for their consumption life. Such as *corn*, *sabik uma*, *field mustard*. But this time I will not discuss the issue of *swidden agriculture*. I will only discuss the changes that have occurred in the Nek Lhan community at various levels of change.

The change that occurred first was due to the arrival of rubber as a commodity. As a commodity, of course, it causes changes in the social relations of their production which have been mediated by money and land. The issue of property ownership is no longer a significant issue for them. Because they have always practiced how to own a piece of land. Of course, after farming is done, in order to own the land, Dayak villagers will usually plant trees to mark that the land is theirs.

They have practiced the practice of owning land for a long time. Before there was rubber, they used to plant all fruit trees such as *durian*, *mentawai*, and all other trees to be able to mark that the land belonged to someone.

¹² Dayak Desa is one of the sub-tribes. Dayak Desa which is a sub-tribe of the Klemantan Dayak based on the classification given by Tjilik Riwut (1993).

According to Mr. Aden, this practice has been practiced for a long time by old people in the past. Another change according to Mr. Aden's narrative is the presence of consumer goods made by industry or multinational companies such as motorcycles, televisions and various other consumer products.

In the era of the former rubber commodity, the community was familiar with the patron-client bond, namely the bond between *tokeh* and subordinates. The *tokeh* remain as patrons to provide for the various needs of his subordinates or those with whom he has a client bond. The form of social relations of production among the principals can be said to take place in a profitable bond. The tokens will provide all the necessities for their clients, both in the form of goods and in the form of cash. But previously, everyone who partnered with the *tokeh* had to be prepared to sell the sap to the *tokeh* so that the relationship that was mediated by goods and debt was always maintained. Usually the rubber farmers will cut their acreage every morning and will store the results in the river or certain places for a long time. After some time in storage, usually the *tokeh* will inform his men or those who owe him that he will be downstream. This means that when the *tokeh* has said so, the clients must be prepared for the sap to then become the responsibility/payment for the debt in that period. Each debt payment first, there is no term for the monthly period. Payment of each bond or debt to the *tokeh* depends on when a *tokeh* will pay off or not. Usually not every period the debt is paid off (break even) or song in village language.

However, there are also those who cannot fulfill their debt payments, aka overdrawn (remaining). This means that the rubber that he sells to the *tokeh* cannot cover the debt / bond in one downstream period of a *tokeh*. According to Mr. Aden's narrative, usually a *tokeh* will *mehilir* every two or three months. After weighing the sap is done, and the results are known whether the song or overdrawn. Usually, clients will ask for more items that they feel are needed by them. Then the tokens will go downstream by boat and some of their men. At that time, before there was land transportation (there was no access by land) everything was traversed by them via the river. Even then, when the river is receding, practically all of the boat's belongings are pulled by the force of the crew. In the past, it was said that the distance to Meliau was one day or more, but now the distance between Meliau and Nek Lhan can be reached in 2 hours by motorbike.

Another change that has occurred in the life of the Nek Lhan community is regarding the lack of interest in school or education. The issue of interest in going to school does not lie in whether there is a fee or not but rather in the factors of access to transportation, the cost of school infrastructure and the correlation of education with the world of work. Therefore, from the past, many residents of Nek Lhan have started school, but not many have graduated from university.

However, since the arrival of oil palm, there have been some fundamental changes in their lives. Palm oil, which started to enter Nek Lhan in the 90s, has made Nek Lhan connected in one road access to several other areas. Even though the development of Nek Lhan and several other areas is based on economic development represented by private palm oil companies and state-owned enterprises, the community continues to respond carefully to these progress and developments.

In the past, for the *tokeh* who already have an established life and the social relations of production guarantee their lives. So the *tokeh* are reluctant to give up their sap land for the purpose of converting it into oil palm land. this reluctance is not without good reason, as stated by grandfather *ongky (dolop)*. At that time, according to Kek Dolop, he did not want to give up his land because at that time he was trying to find a balance point and was making progress. Therefore he was reluctant to hand over his land to the company. A different situation happened to Pak Aden's family. In the past, Pak Aden and Mamak Gugun received 3 plots of oil palm land and each of their children received one plot each.

Apart from the social relations of production, another change due to the arrival of palm oil is the new standardization of how to make work comfortable and enjoyable. Changes in people's understanding of time and space have changed. A good and comfortable job is working with oil palm in the lands close to the main road (land access). And that work gradually became a monthly category with the number of times a month following the standardization of factory productivity. Their consumption is also a monthly calculation. Because every month they will get a salary from the work every month they do.

With the arrival of palm oil companies to Nek Lhan in the 90s. Practically all production equipment and technologies are becoming increasingly diverse. Starting from chainsaws, hexagon, excavators, motorbikes, cars. If in the past people still used simple technology, now it is slowly changing. Even for lifestyle matters such as motorbikes. In the past, only one person in this village owned a motorbike, namely Pak Jenny. As a rubber figure with large capital, it was only natural that Mr. Jenny could afford to buy a new motorbike which was still trendy at that time. Even though at that time Nek Lhan only had a footpath, Mr. Jenny already had very luxurious things. As Pak Aden said, if Pak Jenny took out his motorbike and walked around the village, all the children would run

and follow him from behind. And even ladies and gentlemen will come out of the house and look at the motorbike in crowds. So after the arrival of oil palm, it wasn't just Pak Jenny's motorcycle that was of concern to the public. At that time all the palm oil employees who entered Nek Lhan became a new spectacle for them. Practically at that time people became more willing to own these goods. The arrival of palm oil not only changed lifestyles, but also changed people's mindsets about education and the world of work.

Palm oil employees who wear formal clothes, pants and boots with charming trail bikes become a reference for them about the image of a decent job. And of course for them to get such a job it has to be achieved by education. Because after the arrival of oil palm, many job vacancies were opened for local residents as an ethical political practice to make it easier for oil palm companies to carry out land conversion from rubber to oil palm. When education becomes one of the conditions or categories to qualify oneself for a decent job, then immediately education becomes the dominant discourse when it comes to an established job and life and all of this can be achieved with education.

Therefore, it is not surprising that now there is interest in the community to go to school and send their children to the level of higher education. Some went to school in Meliau, Pontianak, Sintang, and some even went to Java, such as Jakarta, Semarang, Jogja and several other big cities. Of course, these changes were influenced by the introduction of a new commodity called palm oil.

They understand that money has become a better medium of exchange than mere commodities. With money, their children can go to school and can buy all their lifestyle and entertainment needs and of course, money will ensure the accumulation of oil palm land. This accumulation is either in terms of opening new land with a system of cooperation with factories/companies known as (self-management) or buying other people's plots of land. In fact, they are willing to leave their old traditions that are not compatible with the spirit of progress and prosperity. Of course there is something they forget about the progress they have thought. Competition and the birth of new workers because of the reluctance to cut sap or even open fields is an example of how oil palm influences work dynamics. Therefore there are some people who are willing to sell plots of oil palm in order to get job security from the tokeh by becoming permanent laborers for the toke such as Cabam or Agung. Although others become laborers while preparing their oil palm land to produce optimally.

4. CONCLUSION

As a solution to the problems of the energy and food crises that have hit the world since the 21st century, oil palm also has another impact, namely changes in people's lives as a whole. Oil palm on the one hand is a non-food crop that brings in cash, so that they can believe that they can achieve a better life. However, with this change in production mode, they are increasingly connected to the market, so that they have to spend the income they earn from oil palm to meet their daily needs, which were originally available on land that has been converted into oil palm plantations.

In addition, changes in the social relations of production between the production modes of agriculture, rubber and oil palm are very dynamic. One of the social relations that continues to change is related to the patron-client relationship formed as a result of these changes. In the hunting and gathering mode of production, the social relations of production between them are bound by the principle of reciprocity to share the burden on labor needs. Then these social relations change and are structured into social insurance which in fact has changed their position and bargaining power due to changes in the value of the exclusivity of property that can be transferred.

However, oil palm remains the current solution, the problem is not the existence of oil palm as a plant, but rather industrial management that does not pay attention to the surrounding environment, massive land conversion, changes in labor relations and industrial relations.

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