

Indigenous Women's Connection to Forest: Colonialism, Lack of Land Ownership and Livelihood Deprivations of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Forest is essential for indigenous women in Indonesia. This article discusses the connection between Dayak Benawan women's lives with their land. Dayak Benawan women today face the challenge of preserving their forest and traditions. Meanwhile, the existence of the Dayak Benawan women is the source of protecting native forests in West Kalimantan. Indigenous women's identity is often connected to living in poor conditions with low quality of life and limited access to various public services. Their daily activities in the forest are part of the way they maintain their traditions in ecological knowledge. Based on long-term ethnographic research, we concluded that the indigenous women's tradition represents the closeness between humans and nature. The connection between ecological and women's knowledge have existed for hundreds of years in the Dayak Benawan community.

Keywords: forest, indigenous women, Dayak Benawan, land ownership, livelihood

INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges faced by indigenous people in South-East Asia today is the threat to the forest in the form of palm oil plantations and illegal logging (Andrianto, Komarudin and Pacheco, 2019; Dallinger, 2011; Obidzinski, Andriani, Komarudin, and Andrianto, 2012; Stephenson and Dobson, 2020; Unjan, Nissapa and Phitthayaphinant, 2013). Moreover, the development of the indigenous concept stems from the experience of colonialism, where indigenous peoples experienced marginalisation due to colonialism (United Nations, 2009).

The connection between indigenous women and forests has been a topic of growing interest in recent years due to its importance for both environmental conservation and social justice. In Indonesia, the Dayak Benawan community is an indigenous group that has a deep connection to the forest and relies on it for their livelihoods. However, their way of life has been threatened by a lack of land ownership and livelihood changes, which disproportionately affect women in the community.

Indigenous women across Asia experience particular forms of discrimination because of their multiple identities, discrimination against them as indigenous people, and discrimination of a different form against their gender (Tugendhat and Dictaan-Bang-oa, 2013). In Southeast Asia many indigenous peoples are not legally recognised as indigenous people with inherent collective rights. The alienation and marginalisation of indigenous women in Indonesia can be attributed to the fact that they do not have a specific law to protect them as a community. This can be seen also in the subordination (marginalisation) of women in accessing not only development, but also land tenure and use.

In Indonesia, the expansion of palm oil plantations can be observed in Sumatera, Kalimantan, and Papua (Petrenko, Paltseva and Searle, 2016). The land of Borneo (Kalimantan) is the last paradise on earth and is the lungs of the world, as well as the source of livelihood for indigenous peoples (King, 2013). The Dayak indigenous people in Kalimantan today are threatened with loss of their land and livelihood as an impact of illegal logging (Sirait, 2009). They are the target of expansion, and the forest targeted is part of the legacy of their ancestors (Sirait, 2009). The Indonesian state has constitutionally recognised the existence of indigenous peoples through the 1945 Constitution, 18B paragraph 2, which states:

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The state recognizes and respects integrated legal indigenous communities along with their traditional customary rights as long as these remain in existence and are in accordance with the societal development and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, and shall be regulated by law. (Lubis *et al.*, 2019)

Based on the national constitution, it can be said that as a civil society, every indigenous community in Indonesia has the right to live in security and sovereignty over the land that they manage themselves, including the rights of indigenous women in accessing land tenure and management. This means that the mandate of the Constitution is in line with the mandate of the opening of the 1945 Law, which explicitly states ‘social justice for all Indonesian people.’ This affirmation includes the inclusiveness of access for all indigenous women to get involved in the administration of the state. But, in fact, most of them are still poor and marginalised. Poverty that occurs in rural areas is often closely related to the concept of social class, social stratification, and social structure (Gounder, 2013; Wrigley-Asante, 2012). The different concepts and measures of poverty are found in a study conducted by Richman (2002), Arnold (2001) and Wright and Wright (2009).

Most of indigenous people in Kalimantan are against planting palm oil. One such community is the Dayak Benawan community that will be highlighted in this study. Generally, women in Dayak communities are in charge of the knowledge of forest management systems. However, the existence of palm oil plantations does not only change the involvement of women in traditional agricultural systems, but also destroys forests which change the patterns of obtaining and consuming local foods (White and White, 2011). Furthermore, the process of marginalisation is still happening, especially seeing the Dayak communities through the growing prominence of ethnic politics (Tanasaldy, 2012).

This article aims to explore the relationship between indigenous women and forests by examining the case of the Dayak Benawan community in Indonesia. Specifically, the article will investigate how the lack of land ownership and changing livelihoods have affected indigenous women’s roles and responsibilities in the community and their connection to the forest. By examining this case, the article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the complex relationships between indigenous women, forests, and land tenure in Indonesia and beyond.

The combination of ecological threats and marginalisation faced by Dayak Benawan people, especially women, has pushed the urge to fight back against these issues. Therefore, the initial knowledge of how Dayak Benawan women’s connection with the land that they are currently occupying has to be highlighted. This article highlights the importance of recognising the unique experiences of indigenous women and the critical role they play in sustainable forest management. It also emphasises the need for policies and practices that promote gender equality and respect the land tenure rights of indigenous communities. Accordingly, this study aims to answer the questions:

- (1) how is the connection between Dayak Benawan women and forest?
- (2) how do Dayak Benawan women experience an increasing lack of land ownership and livelihood changes?

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND FOREST

The literature on the connection between indigenous women and forests is extensive and covers a wide range of topics, including land tenure, livelihoods, gender roles, and forest conservation. In the context of Indonesia, several studies have examined the experiences of indigenous communities, including the Dayak Benawan, and the challenges they face in accessing and managing forest resources.

Land tenure is a critical issue for indigenous communities in Indonesia, as the government often grants concessions to extractive industries without recognising indigenous land rights. This has led to conflicts between companies, government, and indigenous communities over forest resources. For example, a study by White and White (2011) found that the expansion of oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, has resulted in the loss of land for indigenous communities, including the Dayak Benawan. This loss of land has particularly affected women’s access to forest resources and their ability to generate income from traditional livelihood activities.

Livelihood changes are also affecting indigenous women’s connection to the forest. In many cases, government policies promoting commercial agriculture and mining have displaced indigenous communities and altered their traditional livelihoods. A study by Alcorn and Royo (2000) found that the Dayak community in Kalimantan has experienced significant changes in their livelihoods due to the expansion of the oil palm industry. Women in the community have been particularly affected, as they are often responsible for gathering non-timber forest products and engaging in traditional subsistence agriculture, which have become more challenging due to the loss of forest land.

Gender roles within indigenous communities also play a crucial role in the connection between indigenous women and forests. A study by Lestari *et al.* (2020) found that Dayak women in West Kalimantan play a significant role in forest management, particularly in protecting the forest from illegal logging and poaching. However, their role is often unrecognised, and they have limited decision-making power within the community. This lack of

recognition and decision-making power can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and practices that are essential for sustainable forest management (McIntyre-Mills *et al.*, 2021; Widianingsih *et al.*, 2023).

Indigenous women have long played a critical role in preserving forests and the biodiversity they contain (Niko, 2018, 2020). This literature review examines the various ways in which indigenous women contribute to forest conservation and the challenges they face in doing so. One important aspect of the role of indigenous women in forest conservation is their knowledge and use of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). TEK refers to the traditional knowledge and practices developed by indigenous communities over generations to manage and sustainably use natural resources, including forests. Studies have shown that indigenous women often have extensive knowledge of local plant and animal species and their uses and are important custodians of this knowledge (Padoch *et al.*, 2019). Their knowledge is often passed down through oral traditions, and they play a critical role in preserving this knowledge and passing it on to future generations (Niko, 2021; Harini *et al.*, 2022).

Indigenous women also often take a leadership role in forest conservation efforts, particularly at the community level (Widianingsih *et al.*, 2023; McIntyre-Mills *et al.*, 2023). A study by Lestari *et al.* (2020) found that Dayak women in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, play a significant role in forest management, particularly in protecting the forest from illegal logging and poaching. Women are often involved in community-level decision-making processes related to forest management and are important advocates for sustainable forest use.

However, Lestari *et al.* also show that indigenous women face significant challenges in their efforts to preserve forests. One key challenge is the lack of recognition of their role and contributions to forest conservation. Indigenous women's contributions are often overlooked or undervalued, and they have limited decision-making power within their communities and in larger-scale conservation efforts. This lack of recognition and decision-making power can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and practices that are essential for sustainable forest management.

Additionally, indigenous women face significant barriers to accessing the resources and support they need to effectively manage forests. This includes limited access to education and training programs, as well as limited access to financial resources and markets for sustainably harvested forest products (Niko, 2022). Their knowledge and leadership are essential for sustainable forest management, but they face significant challenges in their efforts to do so. Policies and practices that promote gender equality and recognise the contributions of indigenous women are crucial for effective forest conservation and the empowerment of indigenous communities.

DAYAK IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Traditional identity is indeed an unclear concept. Even in international policy, non-traditional minority groups are not recognized as indigenous peoples even if they claim a native identity, this is because ethnic groups internationally are seen as empowering terminology (Corntassel and Primeau, 1998). For example, in many economic empowerment programs, non-traditional minority groups are not to benefit from economic growth.

Weaver (2001) actually questioned whether indigenous identity is the same as cultural identity which is reflected through indigenous values, beliefs, and perspectives. There are various definitions of indigenous identity. Formally, the government provides specific detailed definitions so that they can be useful for legal protection actions and the fulfilment of certain rights to indigenous peoples (Jacobs, 2019).

The term 'indigenous' has been commonly mentioned since centuries before Indonesia became independent. Indigenous people can be preferential by other terms such as tribes, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and others. Additionally, when referring to geographical location there may be mentions for land people, sea people, mountain people, hill people, etc., where this practical purpose is used to refer to the terminology 'indigenous peoples'. Martono *et al.* (2022) study that identity has a positive impact on maintaining national stability. There are about 370 million people in the world who could be specified as indigenous communities. They are spread across 70 countries, including Indonesia. The National Indigenous Peoples Alliance (AMAN) estimates that around 70 million Indonesian citizens are indigenous. They still practice unique traditions, they retain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics different from the dominant society in which they live.

It is undeniable that in many cases the terminology 'indigenous' can have a negative connotation. It is possible that many people do not use the word to express its definition of origin. However, of course these choices of use of the word must be respected to counter and eliminate structured discrimination among indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples are always what is conceptualised as '*orang Asli*/Native People', and when it comes to indigenous peoples, the idea of marginalists is also important to address (Tamma and Duile, 2020).

There are many other terms used in government policies that basically refer to the terminology 'indigenous peoples', for example local communities, traditional communities, indigenous villages, Indigenous Papuans (OAP) and others. This shows that the customary identity that is managed has not been established in the use of one terminology. The Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago (AMAN), an institution that conducts Judicial Review (JR) claims against Law No. 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry, uses the term Indigenous Peoples with the



Figure 1. Maps of Dayak Benawan settlement in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet (Source: Google Maps)

following definition: ‘Indigenous Peoples are a group of people who live based on ancestral origins in a certain geographical area, have a distinctive value and socio-cultural system, are sovereign over their land and natural wealth and regulate and manage the sustainability of their lives by law and indigenous institutions.’

Most of the indigenous peoples in Asia territories are in mountains, plains, river basins, forest, and coastal area. Indigenous peoples in Kalimantan are a group of people who live in the rain forest areas of Kalimantan. The literature states that the words ‘indigenous’, ‘tribal peoples’, and ‘indigenous peoples’ have different terminologies (Benjamin, 2016). However, in this article, we choose to utilise the word ‘indigenous’ because we want to take the concept of whole community action at the local to international level. Veeger (1985) stated that society is not only a forum, but also action, namely social action.

The Dayak community originates from the Kalimantan Island. For thousands of years, they lived in a nomadic system (hunting and gathering) to survive (Roth, 1892; King, 2013). Apart from the new steps taken in recent times, the Dayak community still maintains the same cultural system, customs of the past and the traditions of their predecessors. Because of this, the Dayak community is often represented as being very close to nature (Cleary, 1997; Gönner, 2000).

The term Dayak is divided into two terms: *Dayak Darat* and *Dayak Laut* (Tillotson, 1994). *Dayak Darat* represents the Dayak people who live in wilderness areas under the foothills or on the hill, while the *Dayak Laut* represents the Dayak people who live close to the coast/sea. Tillotson further explains that the terminology of *Dayak Darat* and *Dayak Laut* was used at that time due to the fact that there was no customary term to unite or to distinguish these two groups.

METHOD AND DATA

This research utilised an ethnographic approach. Ethnographic context in this research is the process of documenting women’s experiences to generate knowledge about culture and oppression, and to provide a space for women to explore existing knowledge and resources (McNamara, 2009; Schrock, 2013; Visweswaran, 1997). Primary data collection techniques in the ethnographic method applied were participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary studies. Niko, who identifies as a native Dayak Benawan, spent some time living with the community in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet. This researcher has ‘insider knowledge’ and fluency of the native language and consequently fluently speaks with informants in the native language which generates a rich knowledge base (Watts, 2006).

Our study is specifically on indigenous people of Dayak Benawan community in Pejalu Sub-Hamlet, Cowet Village, Balai Sub-district, Sanggau District, West Kalimantan Indonesia. Based on the data from the Cowet Village office, the population of Dayak Benawan is around 1,558 peoples. Fieldwork for 11 months took place between June 2017 to November 2018 and November 2019 to February 2020 (Figure 1).

In the data collection process, the researchers were not assisted by assistants or other parties. The ethnographic data collection techniques included participant observation, in-depth interviews, documentation studies, and living with the Dayak Benawan community. Fieldwork was aimed to understand the way of thinking and acting of the Dayak Benawan community through involvement in the activities of the Dayak Benawan community. By being



Figure 2. Dayak Benawan women in conversation before leaving for the fields (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2019) (© Nikodemus Niko)

directly involved, the researchers were able to document the women's knowledge in everyday life. This is in line with Williams (1995) assertion that ethnography is designed to explore how one interprets the world of experiences.

In the field, the researcher interviewed 20 Dayak Benawan women informants using a purposive sampling technique. All of them are native Dayak Benawan who were born and raised in the Pejalu Sub-Hamlet. They are not native Indonesian speakers, so the researcher interviewed process in their mother language of Dayak Benawan. Interviews with informants lasted an average of 45-60 minutes in their home. The interview questions were focused on how their daily activities connect to nature. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The interviewer (Niko) was a native Dayak Benawan.

Data analysis was carried out simultaneously with the writing of this research report, so that data verification was also carried out at the same time. Data verification is based on primary data sources, namely verification through informant statements. Direct quotes from the informants were then catalogued under the themes of their experience and knowledge. Therefore, the data validation method is informant triangulation.

DAYAK BAWAN WOMEN LIVES CONNECTED TO FOREST

Shifting cultivation is part of the Dayak Benawan community's tradition of survival and maintaining forest sustainability. Clearing fields by burning and shifting is intended to maintain the balance of their forest. The largest content of phosphorus in tropical forests is stored in trees, so it is necessary to burn the land to release the phosphorus (Setyawan, 2010). Furthermore, in terms of their farming system, the indigenous people only cultivate enough for their family's food needs (subsistence). After farming, the cleared forest is then abandoned for 10 to 15 years. After that, the community will find and open new forests for farming in the following year. In farming activities, women take part in clearing land, cutting trees, burning land, and harvesting rice.

Before clearing the forest to clear fields, there are several rituals performed, such as the *berai't* ritual which means giving offerings to the forest; rituals before burning the land; and rituals before *nugal* (planting rice). Women are a lead in the ritual, and the ritual is a form of their respect for the forest.

The Benawan people cannot afford to not have fields. From the time of our ancestors, we have been farming. There is nothing to eat if there is no field. Nowadays, things are very expensive, you cannot afford to keep buying rice. (*in conversation with Ibu MD, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the interview, it is shown that in every ritual related to the farming system, women are the ones who perform the whole series of rituals (Figure 2). There is an intense psychological bond between the women and nature, causing this ritual tradition to indirectly maintain the balance of the natural ecosystem, respect human nature, and maintain good relations with nature (Shiva, 1986, 2001). So in the Dayak Benawan tradition, women are always seen as the masters of the forest.



Figure 3. Dayak Benawan women’s daily activity in their home (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2019) (© Nikodemus Niko)

Dayak women are closely related to the forest in their daily activities. They wake up earlier than men, usually they wake up at dawn starting with lighting up the fire and opening the windows in their houses (Roth, 1892). They leave for the forest before sunrise, and return before noon. Every day, they do the same activities; out and into the forest. From an early age of Dayak women, the introduction of life in nature and the surrounding forest is a must (Riwut, 2011) (Figure 3).

Every Dayak Benawan family has an average income in one day between IDR 15,000-IDR 20,000 (equivalent to 1 or 1.5 US Dollars). Poverty in indigenous women occurs not only because of economic problems but also due to structural issues—discrimination, lack access to education, health care and ancestral lands, and subjected to domestic violence, which curbs women’s lives as indigenous peoples (Alcorn and Royo, 2000; Duile, 2020; Elmhirst, Siscawati, Basnett and Ekowati, 2017). Rural poverty is also synonymous with agricultural aspects that are linked with people’s livelihoods (Dao, 2004). Situations in the household that often occur are a lack of fuel, insufficient household income, and poor housing conditions (Thara, 2017; Todd and Steele, 2006).

The Dayak communities in Kalimantan are still dealing with massive oil palm expansion, illegal mining, and illegal logging, and poverty is one of the consequences (Alcorn and Royo, 2000). Dayak women are the most disadvantaged with their forests being besieged by oil palm plantations. Furthermore, gender inequality is seen from inequality between men and women, in areas such as access to education, health services, and tenure/ownership of land (Tyer-Viola and Cesario, 2010; Balagopal, 2009; and Delisle, 2008). They cannot buy many things, while household needs must be met. Other needs such as the children’s school needs then become a new burden. This is evident from the interviews with informants as follows:



Figure 4. *Mawant pade* (drying rice), traditional knowledge of Dayak Benawan women (the individual depicted in the photo has given their consent) (2020) (© Nikodemus Niko)

Motong'ke (tapping rubber) at this time the rubber price was low. The needs of the house are many and not all of them are fulfilled, I feel lucky just to be able to buy salt and seasoning. (*Ibu NL, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Nowadays, everything is difficult. We only work *motong'ke* (tapping rubber), there is no other work to do. Meanwhile, my children need money (for snacks and to pay for school needs). (*Ibu NT, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the interviews data, household income of Dayak Benawan women has still low. The aspect of poverty in the household can be seen from household income (Thara, 2017). The dependence of the Dayak Benawan household economic system on *motong'ke* as their only source of livelihood, creates income uncertainty. Rural women have low levels of formal education and very limited competitiveness, as well as very limited quality of human resources due to economic, political and cultural dimensions that oppress them (Alkire and Shen, 2017; Poonacha, 2010). Even in agricultural management, a gender gap can be observed between the severity of poverty experienced by men and women, with women's poverty being twice as severe in developing countries (Dao, 2004, 2009) (Figure 4).

For the indigenous Dayak Benawan women, nature is believed to be sacred and fruitful for the survival of the community and their descendants. This is evident from the informants' statements as follows:

The forest is what feeds us. If there is no forest, we die, you cannot eat, you cannot live. (*Ibu MT, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

If there is no forest we cannot live, we just have to wait to die. We keep the forest for life. Even if we don't have property (money), the important thing is there is a forest, we can definitely live. (*Ibu HY, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

We concluded that regarding the life of the Dayak Benawan women, their survival cannot be separated from the forest around them. Apart from the routine of daily work in the forest, the Dayak women always have various things to do, and are never lacking in work, such as taking firewood for cooking purposes, fetching water, and caring for children/babies (Roth, 1892).

LACK OF ACCESS TO LAND OWNERSHIP AND LIVELIHOOD CHANGES

Currently, the Dayak Benawan women face local expansion of palm oil plantations in their surrounding forests. Palm oil plants are a new commodity entering the Benawan forest area. Palm oil trees were planted by the Dayak Benawan men, as shown in the following interview:

...yes, there is planting of palm trees, we follow the lead of other people. Hoping to be successful like everyone else. We are women, so we follow our husbands. (*Ibu MG, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

...yes, we plant too. Rubber plantations were cut down into fields. After that, palm trees were planted. We don't plant (but our husbands do), we women go along with our husbands. (*Ibu LN, a Dayak Benawan woman*)

Based on the field data, the Dayak Benawan customary system does not accommodate women's rights to inherit land. However, the data collection system at the village level requires the male head of the family as the name of the landowner. This has made the Dayak Benawan women to become increasingly marginalised in regard to land ownership. Moreover, this situation makes women dependent on men for accessibility and land management. The aspects of poverty faced by the Dayak Benawan women are the lack of access to land ownership and limited access to land management. The aspect of gender inequality is seen differentially according to men's and women's access to control/ownership of land (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017; Tyer-Viola and Cesario, 2010).

The data from the Central Statistics Agency of Sanggau District (2020) stated that the superior plantation products in the Sanggau region are palm oil plantations (TBS/*Tandan Buah Segar*), rubber plantations (Latex, Lumb), pepper plantations, and cocoa plantations (wet fruit). In 2009, a palm oil company (through the village government) conducted an outreach to get the attention of the Dayak Benawan community in Cowet Village to convert their land which was deemed unproductive—turning forests and fields into palm oil plantations. At that time, most people disagreed. Palm oil companies almost entered the Dayak Benawan customary area, but that did not happen because there was resistance, including the Dayak Benawan women who firmly refused to convert their forest into plantations (Figure 5).

On the one hand most of indigenous people are against palm oil corporation; on the other hand, they are clearing land for planting palm oil in their native forest areas. They have changed forest rubber plantation, to palm oil plantation. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the boom in the international market caused forest rubber to be exploited more intensively and competitively, and planted with a type of Para rubber (*Havea brasiliensis*, *Euphobiaceae*) (Dove, 2011). The decline in rubber commodity prices is correlated with Indonesia's export account balance which is in deficit (Noviantoro, Bondan, Emilia and Amzar, 2017). The low price of rubber commodities has an impact on the purchasing power of rubber farmers, changes in family income sources, and the ability of farmers to invest (Syarifa *et al.*, 2016).

The existence of palm oil plantations does not only change the involvement of women in traditional agricultural systems, but also destroys forests which change the patterns of obtaining and consuming local foods (White and White, 2011). This change in farming norms has a negative social impact on palm oil plantations (Suryadi, Dharmawan and Barus, 2020). The existence of this smallholder palm oil plantation is accommodated by the various companies by utilising middlemen/collectors to buy TBS (*Tandan Buah Segar*) produced by the indigenous community.

The conversion of the fields of the indigenous people today is increasingly being carried out, this can also be seen as an impact of the West Kalimantan provincial government policy which issued the Governor Regulation Number 39 of 2019 concerning Forest and Land Fire Prevention and Management policy, which in the article prohibits everyone and legal entities (companies) to clear land through burning (Pemerintah Provinsi Kalimantan Barat, 2019). This policy had an impact on the indigenous people in Kalimantan generally. They have grown fearful in opening fields using their traditional methods, because they usually burn the land. Another option is to plant former fields with palm oil trees. This palm oil expansion has a negative impact, where farmers transform their livelihoods from subsistence shifting cultivation to planting palm oil, which also has an impact on decreasing biodiversity in the landscape (Suryadi, Dharmawan and Barus, 2020). In Dayak Benawan, they lost their water sources to pollution, and the fish that are the source of protein for their young are contaminated by harmful chemicals.

DISCUSSION

The Dayak women in Kalimantan face a situation of massive ecological expansion (Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017; White and White, 2011). This expansion creates conflict, in which women are positioned as victims (White, Borrás, Hall, Scoones, and Welford, 2012). The land conversion from forest into oil palm has had a significant transformative impact on indigenous livelihoods (Haug, 2014). For the Dayak women, nature is a source of breath that is important for the sustainability of life. Nature is a place for the Dayak women to find and process various types of food to feed their families and children (Roth, 1892; King, 2013).

Traditionally, the indigenous women have played an important role in preserving nature for the survival of their children. Significantly, traditional ecological knowledge contributes to maintaining biodiversity and building



Figure 5. Dayak Benawan women in their field rice (the individuals depicted in the photo have given their consent) (2020) (© Nikodemus Niko)

resilience of environmental ecosystems in the face of global change (Gómez-Baggethun, Corbera and Reyes-García, 2013). In the Dayak Benawan Women's case, they have traditional knowledge in preserving their forest. For example, women safeguarding their customary forests for a sustainable food supply. Unfortunately, the natural ecosystems in Kalimantan are being degraded by the massive expansion of palm oil and mining companies (Elmhirst *et al.*, 2017; Elmhirst, Siscawati and Basnett, 2015). This threatens the lives of the indigenous people and their nature, culture, and customs (Brainard, 2011; Petrenko *et al.*, 2016).

Our study found that in the last 20 years, the people of Sanggau District have lost 18% of their living space due to the expansion of palm oil plantations. Some of indigenous people have converted their forest to palm oil plantations, this situation adds to the number of palm oil expansion in Sanggau District. This expansion has slowly shifted the traditions of the Dayak Benawan, where women find it increasingly difficult to find their living space and livelihood. Moreover, in the hierarchy of palm oil plantations, women are one of the most negatively impacted by the industry (White and White, 2011).

The indigenous women traditionally have a double workload, working as family breadwinners as well as being housewives. The social order also legitimises this dual role, if there are women who do not work in the fields, they will become the talk of the villagers; being called lazy and unproductive. In this case, women suffer more than men in line with the increasing modern patriarchal economy which prioritises productivity (Shiva, 2001).

Access to basic livelihoods for Dayak Benawan women's households still rests on relying on natural resources such as rubber tapping (*motong'ke*) and farming/rice fields. The existence of oil palm plantations that promise economic benefits and improve family income, instead this extractive crop takes away the roots of women's knowledge about farming with traditional systems and the loss of fertility of the land in which women daily livelihood. Palm oil actually marginalises women from arable land that is the source of household livelihoods, then the layers of marginalisation experienced by women because of their land ownership and management rights to land are also lost.

The indigenous women still maintain their knowledge of caring for nature. Caring for the environment with this tradition of women's knowledge has existed in the life of the Dayak Benawan people in the past and present. This psychological bond between the women and nature shows how women are an important element in sustainable environmental management (Shiva, 2001). The local knowledge that is part of the lives of the indigenous women indirectly maintains the balance of the natural ecosystem; where there are humans that respect nature, and maintain a good relationship with nature. The local knowledge of indigenous peoples has an important element in maintaining the remaining biodiversity of forests (Setyawan, 2010). Through their persistence in occupying the land despite economic disparities, women are highlighting the significance of the land as a valuable asset and a fundamental aspect of their cultural heritage.

Today's indigenous women of Dayak Benawan continue to participate in nurturing and preserving the tradition despite the large amount of expansion in their land. Their inability to access and control land results in their helplessness to prevent the conversion of rubber plantations and fields to palm oil plantations. Their livelihood structures have changed. Women's participation in palm oil plantations is inevitable, because they have no other choice, and their access to land tenure and ownership is still very limited (White *et al.*, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The lives of Dayak Benawan women exist closely side by side with their knowledge of nature management—land, forest and water. The findings of this study showed that Dayak Benawan women's lives have a specific connection to nature, namely, household livelihoods and land rights. The connection between Dayak Benawan women and the forest experiencing threats by the expansion of palm oil. There is impact on changing the livelihood of the Dayak Benawan family.

The experiences of the Dayak Benawan community illustrate the complex challenges faced by indigenous communities in accessing and managing forest resources, particularly for women. As such, policies and practices that promote gender equality and recognise indigenous land rights are crucial for sustainable forest management and the empowerment of indigenous women. Therefore, their forest-related traditions are intended to maintain the balance of the forest in the area where they live.

The land expansion is a serious threat to the indigenous people of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia. Therefore, the marginalization that may be faced by the Dayak Benawan women in the future is not only a matter of household economy and lack of access to control and land ownership, but also related to changes in livelihood systems that depend on palm oil and bringing further changes in lifestyle towards modern forms of consumerism. It means that Dayak Benawan women's lives and their connection to their land is threatened. Their knowledge of cultivating land is facing the threat of palm oil expansion and related industries. It is important to recognise the basic rights and local knowledge of the Dayak Benawan community in local government regulations and to consider how to manage the land sustainably without further marginalising these women.

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