

At the Edge of Mangrove Forest: The Suku Asli and the Quest for Indigeneity, Ethnicity, and Development

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Discussion of indigenous groups in contemporary society is very interesting and relevant, especially in these times of rapid landscape transformation. Indonesia's 1,331 indigenous groups (Badan Pusat Statistik 2021), or tribes as they are sometimes referred to in the English-language literature, are distributed across several regions of the archipelago. These groups maintain and practice their customs, language, and culture as they navigate the current discourses and politics of indigeneity. Recent laws and government decrees use the term *Masyarakat adat* to refer to indigenous peoples. The National Organization of Indigenous Peoples, Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), estimates that the number of indigenous people in Indonesia is between 50 million and 70 million. The popular Indonesian saying *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) symbolizes unity among all the ethnic groups of Indonesia and has been codified as the official motto of the Indonesian government. The walls of government offices and ministries display this recognition of ethnic diversity, signifying the complexity of the Indonesian social fabric. Osawa Takamasa's *At the Edge of Mangrove Forest: The Suku Asli and the Quest for Indigeneity, Ethnicity, and Development* explores the articulation of identity of a local ethnic group and how the notion of indigeneity is enmeshed with state notions of development and social integration.

For most Indonesians, the ethnic groups inhabiting the country's various regions are considered "indigenous groups" as long as they practice and uphold their customary law (*hukum adat*). These include the indigenous groups of Badui (in Banten Province); Kesepuhan (Lebak, Banten); Marga Sarampas (Jangkat, Merangin, Jambi); Ammatoa Kajang (Bulukumba, South Sulawesi); Tengger (Lumajang, East Java Province); Sunda Wiwitan (West Java); and Rimba, Sakai, and Kubu (Riau-Sumatra) along with groups of Dayak (in Kalimantan) and many others. In this book, Osawa presents his work with the Suku Asli, Akit, and Rawa on Bengkalis Island, Riau Province. He argues that their indigeneity can be characterized by their fluid and extensive identity as *peranakan* (original birth). Among the Akit and Rawa, dependence on resources in mangrove forests is flexible and open. It is managed by *adat*, without fixed institutions, and supported by ritual practices including the worship of natural spirits (p. 210). In this context, the government recognizes "native tribes and indigenous groups" through "Regional Regulations" (Peraturan Daerah/Perda). The implementation of these regulations is very strict and can only be adopted and legalized by members of local parliament and heads of regencies and laws (Undang-Undang). The legality of Perda provides legitimacy, protection, and services to maintain the economic needs and social characteristics of these groups. However, for indigenous tribes that do not carry out their customary law but only practice their language and culture, the government's recognition is limited to an admin-

istrative level. These tribes do not receive the same protections and services economically and socially.

As a result of the many conflicts over resources between indigenous groups and private companies, the Suku Asli or indigenous groups experienced a drop in their economic, social, and ecological conditions during the Soeharto regime. They had no access to land for agriculture or to the forests for gathering resources (agarwood, rattan, fruit, honey, and medicinal plants) and hunting animals. Their economic plight and social marginalization highlighted the need for reforms to the existing policies. Osawa critically discusses the terrible conditions at the end of the Soeharto regime. During the subsequent era of decentralization, various local actors gained opportunities to access land and resources (p. 211). Within this larger political-economic trend, Osawa argues,

[It] seems to be the case in the sense that rural communities may have some room for choice in their identities. This happened after Reformation era in 1998 when the Indonesian policy changed and national or international activists began the indigenous movement in the scheme of struggling with the state. (p. 211)

In certain regional contexts, the presence of indigenous peoples and the rise of *adat* in politics are positive signs. The revival of *adat* is not the same as *adat* itself; however, that is not to say that the “customary rights” advocated by today’s indigenous peoples are necessarily “invented traditions”—especially when related to conflicts between the state or private companies and indigenous tribes or indigenous peoples over land rights, which became the most important issue during the Reformation period (1999–2010). Even in the context of contemporary customs, the term *adat* is used to refer to certain customary practices and institutions that must be respected because of their long traditions inherited by the community, rather than those encouraged or implemented by the state, and which are seen as having continuity and relevance to current political issues.

This book is the culmination of a collaboration between Kyoto University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the University of Edinburgh, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (now referred to as BRIN [Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional]/National Research and Innovation Agency), and Dinas Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata (Cultural and Tourism Agency) of Bengkalis Regency. The research findings presented in the book are part of the author’s doctoral dissertation, based on long-term field work. Osawa has cultivated strong relations with Suku Asli, the process and challenges of which he introduces in the text. This constellation of research interactions is reflected in the comprehensive and multi-perspective analysis of Osawa’s ethnography.

Osawa’s analysis covers a wide terrain, including insightful discussion of indigeneity and language, expressions of identity of the Suku Asli, their relationship with ethnic Malays on Riau, as well as the spatial dynamics of foraging. He explores how the daily cultural practices of the Suku Asli work to create a sense of homogeneity in the face of the multitude of socioeconomic and

political forces that frame their livelihoods.

Picking up on the nuances of ethnic representation, Osawa explains in Chapter 2 that Suku Asli in the village are familiarly referred to as the Utan. In 2006, the Indonesian government recognized the change of their ethnic name from Utan to Suku Asli as a result of negotiations by their ethnic organization. Suku Asli is a familiar Indonesian name for “Indigenous People” or “Indigenous Tribe” (p. 71). When used with the implication of identity, it refers to three different categories of people. First, in terms of settlement area, there are the Suku Asli living around the estuary of the Siak River. Utan, Akit, and Rawa are included in this category, to distinguish them from Malaysians, Javanese, and other ethnic groups. Second, “Suku Asli” refers to the people who were previously called Utan, whom the government recognized as *Komunitas Adat Terpencil* (remote indigenous communities). These Suku Asli are geographically and politically isolated *adat* communities. Third, “Suku Asli” indicates the original Suku Asli whose endonym is Peranakan, which signals their origin as descendants of Chinese men and Utan women. According to oral history, the Suku Asli’s ancestors moved to Bengkalis Island and were recognized as Utan by the Siak kingdom in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (p. 73).

The Siak kingdom was governed by Malays. According to Osawa’s findings, Malays were very progressive and had dynamic cultures spanning north coastal Sumatra (the kingdom of Deli, Johor kingdom/coast of Western Malaysia) and the Siak kingdom (Riau). In terms of social relations, Malays were the dominant cultural force and were in the powerful position of communicating between *hamba raja* (Malays) and *rakyat raja* (Suku Asli). According to *adat*, *rakyat raja* are not allowed to eat together with *hamba raja*, and the latter do not give their daughters in marriage to the former, nor do they obtain daughters-in-law from them. This therefore suggests that Malays avoided communication with Suku Asli in the hierarchical system of the Siak kingdom (p. 76). Currently, marriages between Malays and Suku Asli are very rare, and there remains a social boundary between the two, inherited from the former hierarchical system.

Osawa’s Suku Asli informant Odang offered important insights on why Malays generally reject marriage with Suku Asli. It is due to differences in religious beliefs (p. 76). Malays are Muslim, while Suku Asli are non-Muslim—they maintain their *adat* practices and non-Islamic doctrines. For this reason, there is a boundary between Malays, Javanese, and Suku Asli. Marriages do occur between Malays and Javanese as the dominant ethnic groups, because of their beliefs and traditions being similar to Islam in Bengkalis District. It is rarer for Malays and Javanese to marry Suku Asli, due to their different religious beliefs and practices. The former also perceive Suku Asli as having strong supernatural powers and knowledge of magic, and they believe that such qualities make them dangerous (p. 77).

Suku Asli’s relations with their ecological surrounds are key to understanding their discourses of ethnicity. Osawa explains how for indigenous people, land and forest resources are their main means of livelihood, and he further describes how Suku Asli want to protect their right to access

natural resources. This connection with the land is necessary for their economic survival (pp. 101–102). In this sense, for indigenous people land is essential for their very existence. Suku Asli operate according to the historical views of land utilization that are backed by the ancestral cultures of particular regions. Thus, local authorities and activists define land that has been utilized under local *adat* (*tanah adat*, *tanah ulayat*) as ancestral land and try to protect locals' rights to it (p. 101). Until recently, Suku Asli were able to maintain self-governance in land utilization; but in the near future the legality of government-recognized "land certification" may be upheld. The Suku Asli's land and natural forest ownership may lead to land-use conflict and cause them to lose the legality for utilizing their land.

In Chapter 6, Osawa explains that the government of Indonesia protects and provides a conducive space for people to practice their religious beliefs. In Indonesia, identifying one's *agama* (religion) is very significant in civil life. The Pancasila as a basic philosophy is to be applied vertically (with God/Allah) and horizontally (with human beings) (p. 183). Even though Suku Asli practice *adat* and not religion, their members are obliged by the government to register a religion—Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism—and list it on their citizenship cards (*kartu tanda penduduk*). During the Soeharto regime, religious beliefs were enforced through various policies. For instance, when registering for national identity cards, people had to fill up a column for *agama*. In 1974 a statutory marriage law (Number 1/1974) was enacted decreeing that marriages should be conducted under the rules of a couple's *agama*, and that their religion should be stated on the marriage certificate. Thus, *agama* became the essential identifier in Indonesian citizenship (p. 187).

I have two criticisms of *At the Edge of Mangrove Forest*. The first relates to the title of the book and the main thrust of the ethnography. The role of mangrove forests is not central to the analysis, and a more representative title could have foregrounded the identity struggle of Suku Asli among Malays and Javanese. This would have underscored the relevant dynamics of their identity, assimilation, and development. Second, the discussion does not address the role of the local government (Bengkalis Regency) in the application of the Affirmative Policy Action to the development of Suku Asli. A chapter on that would nicely supplement Osawa's explanation of the model of the economic, social, and ecological aspects of empowering the Suku Asli, rounding out what is otherwise a valuable contribution to our understanding of ethnicity, identity, and development in Indonesia.

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Early Theravādin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology

ASHLEY THOMPSON, ed.

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Theravāda Buddhism is a branch of Buddhism that has been practiced in mainland Southeast Asia from as early as the thirteenth century. Scholars in Buddhist studies, however, have raised questions on the definition and usage of the term “Theravāda.” Two important publications in Buddhist studies, *The Ascendancy of Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia* (Prapod 2010) and *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities* (Skilling *et al.* 2012), brought significant attention to this Buddhist lineage. These two books trace how and where the term was derived and how it spread from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia. The former, written by the Thai scholar Prapod Assavavirulhakarn, raises questions on the usage of the term and its historical and conceptual contexts. The latter is an anthology edited by a group of Buddhist scholars (Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham). It covers the transformation of texts, literature, and religious practices from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia. In the introduction, Peter Skilling questions the use of the word “Theravāda”: “Might it have simply been that South and Southeast Asians did not choose to identify themselves as Theravadin—that the term was not part of their everyday vocabulary?” (Skilling *et al.* 2012, xix).

A new anthology, *Early Theravādin Cambodia: Perspectives from Art and Archaeology*, edited by the Khmer art specialist Ashley Thompson, focuses on Khmer Buddhist material culture between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. It consists of eight chapters written by art historians, archeologists, and cultural anthropologists in the field of Khmer and Southeast Asian art and architecture. Cognizant of the two books mentioned earlier, in the introduction Thompson carefully defines “Theravāda.” She compares and contrasts the practices of Mahayana, Vajrayana (Tantric), Tantric Theravāda, and Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia. She also addresses the use of Sanskrit and Pali in inscriptions and in different canonical sources and liturgical verses. Thompson traces the development of Buddhist imagery and styles loosely into two periods: the early Middle Period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and post-Angkor period (fifteenth to eighteenth century). She also thoroughly reviews each chapter of the volume in her own “Chapters” section.

Six chapters of the book (1–4 and 7–8) are written by art historians and anthropologists in the