

October 2023

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Recommended Citation

Ansori, Sofyan (2023) "Retelling Environmental Narratives in Indonesia: A Prologue," *Antropologi Indonesia*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 1.

DOI: 10.7454/jai.v44i2.1024

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/jai/vol44/iss2/1>

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Retelling Environmental Narratives in Indonesia: A Prologue

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Indonesians have been familiarized to environmental narratives such as “*ibu bumi*” (*mother Earth*), “*tanah surga*” (*heaven soils*), “*hutan untuk kesejahteraan*” (*forests for prosperity*), “*lahan tidur*” (*idle lands*), “*bencana alam*” (*natural disaster*), “net sink,” among many others. While the propagation of such jargons, histories, or myths might not necessarily be ill-intended, the impacts of some of these shared narratives have been lethal to Indonesian lifescapes. Accordingly, the selected articles in this special issue do not take narratives for granted. Rather, they discuss various mechanisms through which state institutions, conservation NGOs, local populations, corporations, experts, and intermediaries proliferate particular environmental explanations to validate actions, instill thoughts, manipulate feelings, or obscure realities. Collectively, the articles here offer a textured analysis of the magnitude of narratives to people and the environment in Indonesia.

Environmental narratives are stories with seemingly irrefutable logic, script, and explanation of the relationships between people and nature (Fairhead & Leach 1995; Forsyth & Walker 2008). These narratives are authoritative, I argue, because they impose meaning and structure pertaining to how nature and its resources are construed, lived, managed, and/or exploited. Anthropologists and other scholars have posited that such “nature-making” reasonings (Lowe 2006) are powerful in directing environmental management, shaping policy, and reconfiguring both geographical and societal lives. Environmental narratives are central for political actors in justifying development agendas (Fairhead & Leach 1995), appropriating forests (Vandergeest & Peluso 2006), and validating conservation efforts (Oates 1999) while discriminating certain populations (Smith 2020), and integrating people into the market economy (McElwee 2016). Key to this arrangement is the imperativeness of Western science and imagination, instead of local knowledge and realities, in the production and dissemination of the rhetoric—schemes that are apparent in our current climatic crisis and the subsequent interventions.

Anthropological (or, Sociological) inquiry into narratives must be privileged today as we witness various attempts to appropriate the Earth through “new conceptualization of nature” (Fairhead, Leach, & Scoones, 2013: 8). Green grabbing patterns, carbon-oriented solutions, and other types of “accumulation by conservation” (Doane 2010) have been widely imposed on lands that are already well conserved to ensure the Global North interventions work. These discursive framings are achieved by establishing nature as object of intervention, mapping/visualizing the discussed cases, and naming the environmental “problems” (McElwee, 2016: 14). Consequently, over the past three decades—or perhaps, even longer—people in developing worlds have been surrounded by environmental buzzwords propagated by development industries in order to simplify problems (Dewan 2021), making them attractive for aid donors, corporations, brokers, and other investors (Fiske & Paladino 2016). Within such an arrangement, equipped by its politics and discourses, science is fundamental as ideological camouflage to seduce people within intervened spaces to accept realities defined for them (Smith 2006).

¹ Sofyan Ansori is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University, USA. This work was conducted under the auspices of the Arryman Scholars Initiative with funding from the Indonesian Scholarship and Research Support Foundation and its generous donors. Sofyan thanks the Mellon International Dissertation Research Fellowship, Northwestern Buffett Dissertation Research Travel Award, and American-Indonesian Cultural and Educational Foundation for supporting his dissertation project in Indonesia. He also thanks all authors who participated in this special issue and Geger Riyanto for the role he successfully played in this initiative.



Under the pretense of compromise and collaboration, the world is persuaded to celebrate the notion of emission offsetting and individual green lifestyles as the answer to climate calamities instead of pursuing meaningful structural changes.

The apprehension—a culmination of perception, emotion, and action at once (Nixon, 2011: 14)—about environmental narratives and their lasting impacts is even more pressing for present-day Indonesia. Like its Global South counterparts, Indonesia has become an arena where countless environmental programs are being formulated, negotiated, and performed. The lingo articulated for conservation and other green/sustainable life is often nothing but a neoliberal market-based development strategy that often turns rural villages into out-of-the-way places (West 2006). Such a scheme, I contend, could not possibly work without creating a framework for the people to believe that the “primitives” need to catch up with twentieth-century progress and civilization (Tsing 1993). It is almost like seeing a complete rebirth of what Syed Hussein Alatas, a Southeast Asian scholar, inferred as “the lazy native” myths through which white colonizers justify the monopoly of essential resources as they rendered “dependent native requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress” (2013: 8). We deserve to feel disappointed that this particular premise, the ghost of colonial ideology, is still at play in today’s climatic initiatives and environment-related programs. This denigration needs to stop.

To avoid being complicit in reproducing misleading and perilous rhetoric (Fairhead & Leach 1995), we need to be aware of the politics and the dire consequences of such environmental repertoires. In the Indonesian contexts, the tale of food belt programs perhaps provides an apt illustration. Throughout different periods, the Indonesian government recycled identical myths of rice/food self-sufficiency that eventually led to multilayered ecological crises. In the mid-1990s, galvanized by the “swasembada beras” (rice sovereignty) jargon, the Soeharto regime initiated the Mega Rice Project in Central Kalimantan. This project involved transforming the deemed “barren” and “underutilized” lands, mostly peat swamp forests, into agricultural stations—disregarding the risks and the impacts on local communities. Not only did this project fail to produce the intended outcomes, but it also transformed the landscape into a firescape where repetitive fire episodes occur (McCarthy 2013). Amid the struggle to mitigate the ecological disaster caused by the program, in 2007, the government made the second attempt by launching Merauke Integrated Rice Estate (a year later turned into Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate). Recently in 2020, the Indonesian government developed the Food Estate program in several provinces. Both projects failed miserably. Equally striking is the case of *Lumpur Lapindo* in Sidoarjo by which politicians, business associates, and some scientists appropriated the “natural disaster” plot to describe the mudflow disaster that happened within the concession of an Energy Company, Lapindo Brantas. Mud and hot gasses have been continuously spewing since 2006, sinking dozens of villages, displacing countless people, and rewriting the sociocultural modalities in Sidoarjo (see Mohsin 2017). Establishing the “naturalness” of mudflow was pivotal for the company to evade full responsibility while simultaneously gaining the support of the national budget for disaster mitigation and relief plans. I can go on with other cases, but at this point, I think these two prime examples have served the purpose of augmenting that environmental narratives are not just any other stories.

This special issue was inspired by my ongoing fire research in Central Kalimantan. In my previous works, I have identified that since the first notable episode, the Indonesian government has considered fires as malignant to forests and concurrently condemned swidden agriculture and farmers (see Ansori 2019; 2021). In explaining fires, government officials would cast repeated spells such as “cuaca panas” (dry season), “bencana alam” (natural disaster), or worse, “api dari orang berladang” (swidden fires), establishing scapegoats while deflecting official accountability and safeguarding extractive businesses (Dennis 1997; Harwell 2000; Barber and Schweithelm 2000). These tactics are not, by any means, novel.



Apparently, to comprehend fire governance and the attempts to reconfigure fire/human relationships in Indonesia means, firstly, grasping the persistence of fire narratives itself. Michael Dove (1983) has long diagnosed the lasting impacts of swidden agriculture myths in Borneo's heartland, including the use of fires in establishing cultivation planes. He argues that by framing swidden practices as wasteful, dangerous, and destructive, both the Indonesian government and earlier Dutch colonial authorities, set a rationale to stimulate development interventions and further the extension of external control over local cultivators' territories. The Dutch labeled it *roofbouw*, "plunder farming," as they considered that swidden agriculture was robbing the soil's resources and thus hindered the government's attempts to capitalize on the land (Eilenberg 2021). The perpetuation of such propaganda by the independent Indonesia then fostered lingering consequences for many Indigenous and local people throughout the country for years to come.

Realizing that the impacts of these narratives are far greater than mere fire issues, I organized a panel at the 2022 International Symposium of Journal Antropologi Indonesia. This panel invited Indonesian scholars to address how environmental jargons, myths, tall tales, legends, or chronicles have been deployed and maintained as part of state-making strategies (Forsyth and Walker 2008)—governing practices that have led to natural resources depletion, biodiversity loss, anthropogenic disasters, and multiple forms of injustices across the archipelago. Presenters there critically questioned the underlying assumptions behind existing environmental narratives. The discussion centered on how the abundance or potentiality of natural resources, as well as fires, floods, and other catastrophic events, are being framed by state actors and their associates in pursuit of their interests. Following the symposium, I invited Indonesian scholars, including the panel presenters, to explore anthropological thoughts on environmental narratives through this special volume. On their final forms, in this special issue:

Sulastri Sardjo sheds lights on the struggle of farmers residing within and around the Halimun Salak Corridor in West Java, an extension of the existing National Park. In the pursuit of effective conservation, she reckons, the Indonesian government denies access to forest land and resources and insists such a scheme is necessary for the "common good." This understanding then empowered a green grabbing mechanism that eventually led to displacement and criminalization of Indigenous and local communities. She argues that Indonesian authorities were informed by a biased interpretation as the common good narrative brought no good consequences to the livelihoods and well-being of the local population.

Rhino Ariefiansyah and Rivaldo Herman flip the "national rice barn" jargon by exposing the everyday realities faced by farmers and migrant workers, and how remittances subsidized Indramayu's agricultural sector. Their ethnography illuminates the ways narrative of abundance obscures uneven land distribution, ecological decline, and employment precariousness. Further, Ariefiansyah and Herman argue that such an agrarian fantasy "motivates" people to sustain poverty and endure the terrifying risks of working abroad, manifesting cruel optimism scenarios and revealing a total opposite of what a "national rice barn" might infer.

Sundjaya and Syarifuddin offer a reflexive piece of how a crisis condition was negotiated by various parties involved in Forest Ecosystem Restoration projects amid the increasing efforts in ecological repair. The authors argue that definitions of the environmental crisis, including the kind and the extent of ecological ruins, significantly shape the development and implementation of the whole restoration plans. In the presence of experts, state officials, and corporate representatives, the pair highlight how farmers in Puncak and Lombok actively influence the meaning of the crisis. They eventually came to a mutually agreed "solution" that can mitigate environmental risks for downstream urban people and simultaneously empower upstream rural communities. The case exemplifies how marginal actors can



advocate for their community and resources when they are afforded to contribute to the conversation meaningfully.

Irfan Nugraha scrutinizes the mythical realities of the Korowai people in Southern Papua that have been propagated by the Indonesian government as the “tree people.” The imagination of primitive people who live in the towering treehouses within the pristine forest, he argues, has been influencing the state to sustain the “preserving nature, developing local” intervention programs. His ethnographic reflection details the ways Korowai people play the drama of otherness toward the government, resettlement project, tourism, and repeated development failures within their territory. Emphasizing the overlap between cultural conservation endeavors with tales of hopes and betrayals, Nugraha argues that the treehouse-related narratives have been essential in prolonging cultural appropriation and inequality endured by Korowai community.

Perdana Roswaldy critically investigates the gendered and binary-oriented presentations of human/nature relationships through the experience of Indigenous Batak Toba women in post-conflict North Sumatra. Juxtaposing ecophenomenology and queer phenomenology, Roswaldy examines metaphors, presumptions, and expressions of and toward nature in queer(ing) ecology. Queering ecology promotes a social world reorientation of nature, including new forms of inhabitation and recalibration of socio-cultural categories in relation to the environment. She postulates that such an alternative should be useful in combating the ever-present disproportionate impacts and haunting injustices felt by women and gender minorities from the current heteronormative environmental understandings.

It was indeed intentional to organize the papers in that order. Like a story plot, I hope the readers would enjoy our compelling opener, drama and reflection in the middle, and intriguing finale of this collection. The objective was, and still is, to illustrate analytical possibilities as well as intellectual prospects that merit our attention when we retell the environmental narratives in Indonesia.

Retelling here can be construed as simply reiterating both well-known and less-circulated accounts, serving us a reminder of the influences of certain jargon, myth, or discourse on political and environmental beings. Rehearsing such stories is especially important to keep them visible and recognizable, preventing them from smoldering into slow violence (Nixon 2011). Retelling, too, ideally, includes possibilities to recite them differently—countering, twisting, or even condemning harmful environmental explanations. Either way, the selected cases here are designed to serve as a starting point to grasp the gravity of certain narratives in our current ecological epoch. Soon, I believe, narrative-dedicated research would potentially open an avenue through which decolonial messages can be transmitted more effectively. We undeniably need richer stories that suit our times to eradicate colonial legacies on human-nature relationships, conservation ideology, and other resource management practices (Parreñas 2018). In that sense, being critical of the narratives appropriated by authorities might be meaningless without our efforts to embrace and center “truths” from the marginalized ones, allowing them to argue with/through myths and stories (see Riyanto 2017). The works in this special issue adhere to such purposes. Whether or not we, as raconteurs, are successful in conjuring valuable imaginations and thoughts in these articles is another story. We will leave that for our readers to (re)tell.



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