The Fantasy of National Rice Barn and Reality of Farmers in Indramayu

Rhino Arriefiansyah  
*Department of Anthropology, Universitas Indonesia*

Rivaldo Herman  
*Anthropology of Global Futures and Sustainability, SOAS University of London*

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The Fantasy of National Rice Barn
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Rhino Ariefiansyah
Department of Anthropology, Universitas Indonesia

Rivaldo Herman
Anthropology of Global Futures and Sustainability, SOAS University of London

Abstract
This paper centers on Indramayu's designation as the "national rice barn" (Daerah Lumbung Padi Nasional). Contrary to the believed narrative, our findings show that Indramayu’s agricultural dreams have been subsidized by other income generating activities, particularly from migrant remittance. We argue that the extensive environmental degradation and ecological vulnerabilities experienced in Indramayu have compelled small-scale farmers to pursue opportunities as migrant workers to sustain and expand their agricultural endeavors. Considering the inherent risk of fraud, robbery, blackmailing, human trafficking, physical and mental torture experienced by migrant workers, we suggest this agrarian imagination as "cruel optimism" that Indramayu farmers endure while bearing the prestigious "national rice barn" title. This perspective then opens up room for counternarratives that challenge the neoliberal optimism surrounding migration and rural development in Indonesia and beyond.

Keywords: Environmental narrative, Cruel optimism, National rice barn, Farmers, Indramayu

Introduction

In 2015, Rhino met Wati (pseudoname), a former woman migrant worker from Indramayu. She decided to leave for Saudi Arabia with a dream that, when she returned, she would have had enough money to buy a rice field to improve her family’s livelihood. Unfortunately, she ended up displaced and trafficked into the civil war zone in Syria, sold from one employer to another. There, she was locked up, physically tortured, and was forcibly transferred from one place to another. For some period of time, she had no access to contact her family. She finally made it home after a dramatic evacuation process by the Indonesian embassy, and now she lives in her village with physical and mental trauma. The dream of owning land had gone; the hope of achieving prosperity had turned into a hurdle.

We delve into the environmental aspects of the agricultural landscape in Indramayu to discern the motivations of individuals aspiring to become migrant workers—whether it serves as an alternative economic opportunity or aligns with the aspiration to support the somewhat idealized notion of the "national rice barn." In order to navigate the intricacies of this issue, we scrutinize the environmental narrative surrounding Indramayu's role as the "national rice barn" for Indonesia. By understanding the evolving processes at play, we might gain insights into its current positioning and future implications. Furthermore, we attempt to elucidate its
interconnection with the perpetuation of structural labor inequalities as an ongoing and pressing challenge in Indramayu.

It is imperative to juxtapose the socio-ecological fragility with the agricultural imagination of Indramayu. Drawing from our ethnographic experiences and prior research on agricultural ecology and climate change (Ariefiansyah and Webber 2022; Winarto, Walker, and Ariefiansyah 2019; Prihandiani, Adlinanur F. Taqqiudin, et al. 2019), it becomes evident that the region's small-scale farmers struggle with environmental challenges and ecological vulnerabilities. By delving into the intricate connection between socio-ecological vulnerability and migration, we aspire to unveil an alternative account that challenges the prevailing environmental discourse associated with Indramayu.

This paper seeks to shed light on the concealed structural issues of agricultural hardships and the actual experiences of migrant workers obscured by the prevailing national rice barn narratives in Indramayu. This paper argues that despite various optimistic narratives on the enhancement of agriculture and the economics brought by agricultural development, there are ongoing structural and ecological problems that are latent and will continue in the future. Such optimism may only serve to mask the structural problems that have left small-scale farming communities—who are the majority in Indramayu—vulnerable with uncertain livelihoods. This paper offers a distinct comprehension on the relationship between environmental narrative agendas and agricultural conditions to supplement anthropological studies on farmers in Indramayu conducted over the last 20 years.

The Problematic Narrative and Indramayu Structural Inequality

The narrative of a national rice barn in Indramayu is inextricably linked to Indonesia's agricultural development movements. According to the Center For Indonesian Policy Studies (CIPS) report on the Political Economy of Rice Policy in Indonesia (Panturu and Ilman 2019), several rice-related agricultural programs were massively implemented, such as the Kasimo Plan (Soekarno era), the Green Revolution (Soeharto era), and the post-Soeharto era (1998-present). Each plan aimed for a different outcome. The Kasimo Plan aimed for rice sufficiency by regulating rice hoarding and storage. Meanwhile, during Soeharto's reign, the government pushed for food security (Swasembada Pangan) by increasing rice production on a large scale and establishing a rice team (tim beras) to manage rice production, marketing, and storage (Paturu and Ilman 2019, Luthfi, 2019). The narrative on the programs has become a popular discourse to date and still influences many development programs on the agriculture sector in Indramayu.

Obtaining food security, or Swasembada pangan, is the foundation of this national-scale environmental narrative. According to Fairhead and Leach (1995), environmental narratives are used to justify policies and create an imperative role to control resources. We need to acknowledge that the global world also plays a part in preserving such a narrative. For example, Dewan (2021) in her ethnography showed how the development industry tends to simplify the complexities of a delta wetland in Bangladesh that may exacerbate environmental risks and vulnerabilities of the people. Meanwhile in the case of the national rice barn, western powers were involved to stabilize Soeharto’s development agenda by providing development aids to increase rice production, which at that time was focused on enhancing food security to deem
the radicalization and instability of Sukarno’s era (Davidson, 2018). In metaphorical senses, MacRae and Reuter (2020) stated that the food security agenda in Indonesia is based on a system of storage of harvested crops and sharing of surpluses, which they refer to as a *lumbung*-complex.¹ The implementation of this agenda also impacts small farmers, especially women, who have a central role in reviving agriculture and increasing its capacity (Agarwal, 2014). However, they may also face substantial constraints, such as insecure rights in the land they cultivate, lack of an assured water supply and technology.

Efforts made by small farmers to avoid such limitations might lead to what Berlant (2011) refers to as *cruel optimism*. Such optimism becomes cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually hinders the expansive transformation that a person or a group would strive for (Berlant, 2011:2). Indramayu’s cruel optimism is found in the motivation and hope that emerge from stories and dreams of becoming a "successful migrant worker." In Indramayu, a post-colonial reality, the smallholder farmers’ precarities today are inseparable from the continuity of agrarian governance and land tenure policies that can be traced to pre-colonial and colonial era. The historical study of agrarian and land tenurial policy during the pre-colonial, colonial, until present day, provides explanations on how small farmers exist in a continuum of uncertain livelihoods or precarious conditions.

Lombard (2005) explained that until the middle of the 20th century the tenure system in Java might be a relic of the *sima system* and the formation of *Desa Perdikan*² that had existed since the 10th century. The system was based on granting concessions from the monarchs to the nobility and educated individuals to autonomously control productive lands including the rights to govern its inhabitant, the commoners, as well as to subordinate those who are in charge, who were most likely the ancestors of the smallholder farmers today. Scholars in the agrarian field in Indonesia agree that the continuity of agrarian problems in Indonesia cannot be separated from the past agrarian policies from the colonial era, post-independence era, the new order era, the reform era, and the present day (e.g., Andreas et al., 2019).

Despite various changes on land acquisition policies (which were formerly owned by landlords), and the fact that nationalized foreign plantations and sugar plantation fields distribute to cultivators, becoming smallholders and farm laborers are still considered unprofitable even in large agricultural areas. Anthropologists Geertz (1963) and Scott (1976) argued that the problems on the subsistence commercialization of agriculture in Java were related to rapid population growth and the absence of significant peasant revolution. However, critics of Geertz and Scott asserted that the commercialization of rice for the export market indeed caused famines such as the one that occurred in West Indramayu from 1883-1884 (Fernando 2010a; 2010b,). The famine occurred in the private domain owned by private colonial companies. Ambarwati (2019) explained that the structure of land ownership in rural areas in Indonesia is still centered on a small group that was the legacy of the rulers in the past.

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¹ The government extend this lumbung complex by continuing Food Estate project, a national program led by the Ministry of Defense. The project’s goals are to achieve food security, particularly rice security, by intensifying and expanding paddy fields on peatland (Pantau Gambut 2022).

² *Sima* was known as a system introduced in the Majapahit Empire to free an area from any taxes to the states and implemented based by the King’s decision (Satrio et al., 2018: 290). Slightly different, the term *Desa Perdikan* or *Perdikan* also was an area freed from any taxes. It protected old grave, house of worship and any sacred places (Kumara 2022).
Therefore, agrarian reform policies will rely heavily on highly contextual lower-level initiatives. In other cases where these initiatives are impossible to implement, it becomes difficult to overcome inequality between smallholders and wealthy farmers. Thus, many farming families are constantly in a precarious state, and they must rely on other job opportunities as well as monetizing other social capital, one of which is to work abroad in informal sectors with all the risks entailed.

**Agricultural Struggle and Ecological Vulnerability in Indramayu**

Indramayu, spanning an area of 2,040,110 square kilometers, dedicates over half of its territory to rice cultivation. The agriculture is primarily supported by technical irrigation canals fed by the Cimanuk River, Jati Luhur, and Jatigede Dams. Its status as a "national rice barn" derives from its impressive rice harvest area and yield, ranking as the largest in West Java, Indonesia. According to the Statistics Center (Badan Pusat Statistik), cited on the Indramayu Regency website, Indramayu boasts 226,626 hectares of rice cultivation, yielding 1,363,312 tons of dry grain, equivalent to 782,132 tons of rice. This achievement solidifies Indramayu's position as the leading rice producer in Indonesia, surpassing 415 other regencies across the archipelago (Amanda, 2021).

However, despite being the largest rice producer, there are still ongoing problems related to the environmental conditions. Indramayu agricultural areas are mostly located in flat lowland areas, subject to dynamic and extreme drainage conditions. During rainy seasons, certain areas are flooded and later experience severe drought during dry seasons. Farmers who grow rice in areas unreached by the flow of water from irrigation canals find farming a precarious activity, due to the uncertainty of water supply until the harvest period. In Indramayu, the rice growing season only takes place during the rainy season (the first planting season), while in the second and third planting seasons, the risk of total crop failure looms over the years.

The narrative of the national rice barn field conceals the struggles faced by small farmers in Indramayu. Small-scale rice farmers cultivate land less than 2.1 hectares—it is not regarded as a business nor as an income-generating activity. According to the farmers, cultivating land of that scale can only fulfill the needs of family’s everyday meals (cukup buat makan sehari-hari). Meanwhile, other economic needs must be obtained through various jobs. Until now, agricultural land in villages in Indramayu is generally owned unevenly by a small part of the elite. For example, in Karang Layung Village, West Indramayu, from approximately 35 hectares of its productive rice fields, more than half are owned by 5 families. The remaining half is owned or rented by more than 730 families. That means, most farming families in the region only have access to small agricultural land or even no land at all!

Reflecting on the statistical data at the district level, the average agricultural land ownership of farming families in Indramayu is only 0.3 hectares. Such a tiny land obviously has no economic value for commercial agriculture. The desire of landless farmers to access agricultural land outside the village means dealing with state power over land that is mostly production forest areas since it is almost impossible to acquire productive land in the village. Therefore, to meet the need for culturally important commodities, farmers try to find other
economic sources that can subsidize their farming activities. While efforts to expand farmland are too difficult, the possible choice; and one of them is to work abroad.

Small farmers in Indramayu are also dealing with ecological vulnerability that has occurred by their efforts to maximize crop yields. Since the adoption of the green revolution in the 1970s, rice farming in Java has relied heavily on high chemical inputs (mainly synthetic chemical pesticides). Indonesia is generally regarded as a prime example of excessive chemical use in the agricultural sector which triggers man-made pest outbreaks (Prihandiani et al. 2021; Sogawa 2015). Various studies later showed that the outbreaks of pest populations occurred repeatedly from the mid-1980s until today (Ariefiansyah 2011; 2018). Malignant rice pests such as Brown Plant Hoppers (BPH) and stem borers are rice farmers’ main enemies. The outbreaks that occurred in 2017 was one of the largest BPH pest outbreaks that hit many areas in Java including Indramayu.

On a national scale, the situation provoked a political uproar among the political elites due to depleted national rice reserves. The outbreaks last for more than three planting seasons which urged the central government to import rice because the domestic production was not enough to fulfill the need. Meanwhile, farmers lost a lot of money because many attempts to grow new seeds failed. Rhino met one farmer who planted five times with new seeds but continuously failed. In that condition, all resources are deployed to cover agricultural losses, including remittances from abroad. However, these efforts are in vain because the lucky farmers are precisely those who do not spend money nor do farming at all. Those who constantly spend money to buy seeds, fertilizer, and pesticides, pay laborers and rent land are precisely those who lose the most. So frustrated, Rhino found some people who were forced to sell tiny farmland to pay the debt.

Figure 1. As large as 34 hectares rice field in East Indramayu experiencing failure due to long dry seasons in 2015. Source: Rhino Ariefiansyah documentation.

In another situation in 2015, large scale crop failure occurred due to a long drought when the global climate was impacted by El Niño. Farmers did not get enough information on
the impact of global climate events, what would occur, and how to properly anticipate economic loss. In most cases, farmers complained that it was currently difficult to predict the start and the end of a rainy season, especially during El-Niño or La-Niña. Farmers who live outside irrigation networks still plant rice instead of drought-resistance commodities. Under normal condition, that decision would bring benefits. However, what happened in 2015 was extraordinary, not even a single raindrop for at least 3 months. It was one of the longest periods of consecutive dry days in Indramayu. Like the pest outbreaks, all resources are deployed to subsidize crop failures.

Ecological vulnerability is not only thing small farmers in Indramayu need to mitigate. There is also an ecological burden that must be mitigated by other regions to support the status of Indramayu's national rice barn. As a consequence of the geographical position and characteristics of the Indramayu agricultural area, the source of water for Indramayu rice fields must be supplied from its neighboring districts, one of which is Sumedang which has mountainous and water catchment areas. In 2015, dozens of villages in three Sumedang Sub Districts were sunk by the dam of the Cimanuk River. The building of the second largest hydro dam in Indonesia sacrificed premium rice-producing villages in West Java which had a multi-effect impacts on its population; reduced welfare and loss of livelihoods took place, while long-term adjustments are required due to the drastic changes in ecosystems from landbased ecosystem livelihood to water-based ecosystem livelihood. The Sumedang people whose villages were submerged felt that the development of irrigation infrastructure and flood control were not helpful and even created new social and ecosystem burdens. One of the elders in Karangpakuan Village who became the victim of the Jatigede project told Rhino that before the tragedy, many young people from his village could pursue their education to university as the family income from farming and raising livestock was enough to pay for their schooling. That situation is changing now, for most young people only study until high school and then work as day laborers or factory workers, or wandering in cities to do menial work—a decline of their life quality.

Subsidizing the “Fantasy”

The struggles of small farmers in Indramayu pushed them to look for other ways to supplement their income, one of which was working abroad. Migrant workers from Indramayu mostly fill informal employment sectors in several major destination countries, such as Taiwan, Malaysia, and some other countries in the Middle East. Working abroad gives them the opportunity to become a "successful migrant worker," which is defined as having the ability to provide for the household income and to purchase land to expand their agricultural activity.

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3 El Niño typically brings drier and warmer conditions to Indonesia, particularly in the western parts of the country. This can lead to reduced rainfall and an increased risk of drought, forest fire and crop failure. La Niña is associated with cooler sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific, which can lead to increased rainfall in parts of Indonesia. This can result in wetter-than-average conditions. The increased rainfall during La Niña may lead to flooding in some areas of Indonesia, especially in regions already prone to inundation. Heavy rainfall during La Niña may also increase the risk of landslides in hilly or mountainous areas. Further details, see Naylor et al., 2007.
with their remittances. This demonstrates that whatever the job they are doing, it was all part of an effort to subsidize the agricultural sector.

The economic contribution of Indramayu migrant workers through remittances is significant for the regional economy, with the average remittance sent through Western Union reaching 40 billion Rupiah ($2,695,417.79) per day or no less than 500 billion Rupiah per year ($33,692,722.37) – according to data from Indramayu Post Office 2022 (Indramyujeh, 2022). In contrast, the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) for 2019 stood at 80.9 billion Rupiah. This highlights that remittances from migrant workers surpassed the combined contributions of various other economic sectors including manufacturing, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, services, and mining - amounting to six times the GRDP. This data illustrates the significant role of income from working abroad in supporting the local economy and agriculture dream.

According to the data from the Indramayu Regency Manpower Office, most migrant workers from Indramayu are women. In 2019, the gender composition of Indramayu migrant workers consisted of 90% female and 10% male. As it is widely acknowledged, the feminization of migrant workers places women-migrant workers, who are regarded as "pahlawan devisa" (foreign exchange heroes), in vulnerable, abused, and exploited conditions at all stages of the migration process, from pre-departure to reintegration—like how Wati had suffered (in the introduction). The feminization of migrant workers also creates burdens for families and children who are left behind (Agustina 2021; International labor Organization 2021; Setiawan et al. 2018). We also need to address the institutional gap where the industry flourishes but not the institutions that protect workers (Aziz et al. 2020). In reality, women migrant workers undergo suffering, sacrifice, loneliness, poverty, and jealousy, as expressed in the local popular music genre called tarling (Rizka 2020). This story may seem insignificant or merely a semiotic expression, but it describes the real desperation of women migrant workers.

Despite the optimistic images on Indramayu as a "national rice barn" and the largest provider of migrant labors with a high number of remittances, the Indramayu Regency is also known as one of the poorest areas in the province of West Java (Kusnandar, 2021). Indramayu has the third-highest percentage of poor population out of 25 other cities/regencies in West Java. More than 13% of Indramayu's population falls into the category of poor people. According to the National Statistical Bureau, Indramayu is in the yellow zone in terms of the Human Development Index (ranked 353 out of 514 regencies). It is among the poorest regencies in Java in terms of the average achievement in key dimensions of human development indicators, including health, education, and standard of living.
In relation to the ecological vulnerability that hinders agricultural activities to sustain livelihoods for small-scale farming families in Indramayu, it is equally important to look at how people spend money from remittances. Risnawati and Triadikusumah (2020) conducted a household survey of families with female migrant workers in Juntinyuat, one sub-districts with the largest population of female migrant workers in Indramayu. Their study shows that most of the remittances were spent on building houses, daily living expenses (food, schools, etc), paying debts, buying vehicles, and capital for farming (Risnawati and Triadikusumah, 2020: 428). It illustrates how income from agricultural activities alone is in fact unable to meet the basic needs of the family, let alone to expand their farming business. Thus, remittances that were intended as supplementary become the main family income. Indeed, in certain cases, there are families who can save enough to buy rice fields or rent a larger plot (so their farming becomes more profitable), but is rare as rice farming is considered as “tidak menguntungkan” or not profitable. An informant said that migrant workers who could afford rice fields are “successful migrant workers” instead of “unsuccessful migrant workers.” Usually, these successful migrant workers are those who have worked abroad several times.

At this point, we suggest that the narrative of the "national rice barn" has influenced people’s thoughts and actions, resulting in an intuitive mechanism for them to sustain agricultural activity. Even with severe environmental burden and ecological vulnerability, they still try to find other ways to fulfil this agrarian ideal. We can see that even when they work abroad, their goals still to acquire rice fields, or to become successful farmers in the village. This narrative then creates a situation that Berlant (2011) refers as "fantasy," by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux on how they and the world “add up to something” (2011:2). They seem to believe they need to maintain such a title, even though they live in poverty with high-prone crop failure. We then regard the ecological vulnerability and migrant
workers condition as a counternarrative. Considering this counternarrative is important to unfold the intertwined relation between the agrarian ideal and reality in Indramayu. Their inability to foresee environmental challenges and explore overseas opportunities confine them within a distressing cycle, potentially obstructing their path to leave poverty.

Conclusions

The national narrative surrounding Indramayu's role as the "rice barn" conceals a harsh reality about the living conditions of its residents. It establishes a seemingly hopeful mechanism that, upon reflection on the experiences of former migrant workers from Indramayu, can be viewed as a form of cruel optimism. Initially, the desire to secure a "better" life through overseas work led them to a path that often took a turn for the worse, leaving them with traumatic experiences. The optimistic rationale for seeking employment abroad, with the goal of sending remittances home to alleviate poverty and support the agricultural sector, is rooted in the aspiration to maintain Indramayu's status as the "national rice barn." However, beneath these narratives lie deep-seated issues within Indramayu, including disparities in land ownership, high rents, and exorbitant ritual expenses. These issues are intricately linked with vulnerabilities in the ecosystem and a lack of preparedness to anticipate the consequences of environmental changes and the burdens imposed by infrastructure development aimed at upholding its prestigious status. It is essential to recognize that some migrant workers can be considered ecological refugees, compelled to seek livelihoods abroad due to environmental circumstances. They face numerous risks and limited choices and support systems. This situation may not be unique to Indramayu and could potentially be observed in other regions as well. Given the prevalence of "green" agendas, such as addressing climate change, it is imperative to comprehend their interconnectedness and anticipate their impacts on our uncertain future.

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Reference


