

12-31-2019

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Recommended Citation

Koike, Makoto (2019). INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE PROMOTING SDGs IN INDONESIA: THE CASE OF THE SUMBANESSE CULTURAL FESTIVAL. *Journal of Environmental Science and Sustainable Development*, 2(2).

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7454/jessd.v2i2.1034>

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INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE PROMOTING SDGs IN INDONESIA: THE CASE OF THE SUMBANESE CULTURAL FESTIVAL

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(Received: 6 December 2019; Accepted: 30 December 2019; Published: 31 December 2019)

Abstract

From the perspective of anthropology, this article aims to explore why movements seeking environmental preservation and religious and cultural revitalization have been launched on the island of Sumba, and how the results of this research have contributed to promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially “Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation” and “Goal 15: Life on Land.” Sumba is one of the most sparsely populated and impoverished regions in Indonesia. Since the 2000, the process of marginalization of the Sumbanese has been drastic. They have suffered from the pressures of expanding agro-industry and mining. Most land on the beachside has been purchased and fenced off for future tourism development. Protesting the hardships, the people face, local NGOs collaborating with Sumbanese ritual specialists launched Festival Wai Humba (Festival of Sumbanese Water) in 2012. It aims not only to promote environmental protection but also to preserve the cultural heritage of Sumba, in terms of which the executive committee emphasizes the Sumbanese indigenous and local knowledge (ILK). The analysis of the Indonesian text, the prospectus of the fifth FWH, is important to understand the whole festival. Other data I discuss here were collected mainly by the qualitative research method. I interviewed the festival committee members and other attendants and conducted participant observation in various activities during the festival. The research shows the importance of a network connecting local communities all over Sumba and the translation of ILK into more adaptable and understandable knowledge. These two points are made possible by the collaboration between community leaders and NGOs, which is needed to negotiate with local and central governments and private companies.

Keywords: anthropology; indigenous and local knowledge; nongovernmental organization; revitalization; Sumba

1. Introduction

From the perspective of anthropology, this article aims to explore why movements seeking both environmental preservation and religious and cultural revitalization have been launched on the island of Sumba, the Province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, and how

the results of this research have contributed to promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) not only in Indonesia but also in other developing countries.

SDGs have a total of seventeen goals covering the whole aspect of human life and development. Among the goals, this research focuses on “Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all,” and “Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.” (Sumanto, 2008; Seth, Barrado, & Lalaguna, 2019; Sharma & Sobdt, 2018). Formerly, sustainable development was discussed mostly in relation to issues of resource management and environmental stewardship. With the introduction of the UN SDGs in 2015, however, the focus of discussion is expanding to encompass a much larger academic area, including not only environmental and agricultural sciences and economy but also sociology and cultural anthropology. Anthropologists have joined the discussion for the implementation of the SDGs. Among others, T. Reuter discusses the principles of sustainable economy from an anthropological perspective. One way he advises that the SDGs can be achieved is to pay attention to the important role of local peoples and their knowledge. “A vital part of localised cultures is their unique knowledge of a specific local environment and their practical strategies for sustainable coexistence, covering the planet with a plurality of human ecologies” (Reuter, 2017). Also, he insists, “We can reconstruct the emerging layer of shared global culture to make it socially inclusive and sustainable, without threatening localised cultures but, rather, by recognising local knowledge as a tremendous resource and local ways of life as a wealth of human diversity that is beautiful as well as indispensable for matching the diversity of ecosystems around the world” (Reuter, 2013; Reuter, 2017). The idea of “indigenous knowledge,” often called indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), has been adopted by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which assesses the state of biodiversity and ecosystem services all over the world (Lanzano, 2013). The website of IPBES declares that “IPBES aims to promote effective engagement with indigenous and local knowledge holders in all relevant aspects of its work” (IPBES, n.d.). It again highlights ILK in the following statement: “IPBES recognizes that indigenous peoples and local communities possess detailed knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem trends. This knowledge is formed through their direct dependence on their local ecosystems, and observations and interpretations of change generated and passed down over many generations, and yet adapted and enriched over time” (IPBES, n.d.).

On Sumba, ILK is closely related to the indigenous belief of *marapu* (ancestral spirits). *Marapu* refers to a folk belief which covers both the sacred and the profane, that is, religion and customs (“agama dan adat” in Indonesian) (Kipp, 1987; Forth, 1981; Palekahelu, 2010). Since the 1980s when I did research in East Sumba, the followers of *marapu* have decreased drastically. For example, according to the statistics of *East Sumba in Figures* (Kantor Statistik Kab. Sumba Timur, 1986; Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Nusa Tenggara Timur, 2018), the proportion of the followers (“kepercayaa lain” in Indonesian) is 12.61 % in 2016, which shows the sharp decrease compared to 37.59 % in 1986. Although villagers of old generation are still *marapu* followers, most of younger generation have converted to

Christianity. When children enter to junior high schools or high schools, usually teachers give them to Christian names and proselytize them in a formal way if their parents clearly refuse the conversion. This type of conversion is reported by Kuipers who did research in Weyewa, West Sumba in the 1990s (Kuipers, 1998). As the marginalization of the followers of *marapu* is proceeding, movements of revitalization such as Festival Wai Humba (Festival of Sumbanese Water) arise on Sumba. Anthropologists, Reuter and discuss the revitalization in Asia. They insist “social scientists need to acknowledge that revitalization has in fact become a ubiquitous contemporary phenomenon, responding to real and extremely serious and widespread contemporary challenges such as environmental degradation, economic inequality, external political domination, community breakdown and social isolation” (Hoskins, 2002; Reuter & Horstmann, 2013).

The book edited by Reuter & Horstmann (2013) is a sole reference concerning revitalization movements in Asia. Because the role of ILK in development has been rarely discussed in anthropology and other disciplines, this article is challenging a novel topic.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Area

This article is based on a research of Festival Wai Humba (FWH, Festival of Sumbanese Water) launched on the island of Sumba. which is a very suitable case study to discuss the importance of ILK promoting sustainable development and revitalization movements. Sumba is one of the most sparsely populated and impoverished regions in Indonesia (Fox, 1977). In the Dutch period, it held little to attract colonizers and traders and remained the province of a handful of administrators and missionaries (Keane, 2007). Irrigated rice fields are found only in a few areas, and maize and cassava are the subsistence crops. Apart from agriculture, the main economic activity is the breeding of cattle and horses. In the 1980s when I did an anthropological research, the Sumbanese people were economically poor and there were many “isolated and underdeveloped villages” (“*desa yang terasing dan tertinggal*” in Indonesian). However, they maintained their own rich heritage of cultures and customs, which were closely related to the indigenous belief of *marapu* (Forshee, 2001; Forshee, 2006; Forth, 1981).

Since the 2000s, the process of marginalization of the Sumbanese has been drastic. They have suffered from the pressures of expanding agro-industry, such as such as the planting of jatropha and sugar cane. As Vel and Makambombu report, “the expansion of agro-industrial exploitation to less fertile or even ‘marginal’ areas of the country has been largely a recent development” (Vel & Makambombu, 2011). In addition to agro-industry, mining projects affect the health and livelihoods of local people in East Sumba. In 2005, rivers in the area mining operations started to fall dry, and some people living close to the area suffered skin diseases because allegedly the river water had been polluted by the mining operations (Vel & Makambombu, 2009). Moreover, investors are showing an increasing interest in the largely untouched island with beautiful and unique landscapes. “I am very much looking forward to the next few years. While Sumba is a great place to make money on real estate, it is also so much more. It has the potential to grow into an amazing place to

live and, of course, holiday. I guess that's why so many people call it 'the next Bali,'" says Omri Ben-Canaan, the CEO of a Bali-based Sumba real estate investment group (Surewicz, 2016). Actually, most land on the beachside has already been purchased and fenced off for future tourism development.

2.2 Anthropological Research on Sumba and FWH

From 1985 to 1988, I did anthropological research in the Haharu region, the regency of East Sumba, the province of East Nusa Tenggara (Koike, 2005; Koike, 2006). I have since followed up on the subsequent social and cultural changes that have happened in this area. On October 26 to 29, 2016, I had a good opportunity to research the fifth FWH that was held in my field site, the villages of Wunga and Kadahang, the Haharu region. These research backgrounds and the materials I have collected on Sumba since the 1980s are very useful to discuss the research topic in this article.

To explore the missions and characteristics of the fifth FWH (Festival Empat Gunung "Wai Humba"), among others, the analysis of an Indonesian text, its prospectus (Panitia Festival Wai Humba, 2016), is very valuable. It was written by a key member of the executive committee. Other important materials I discuss here were collected mainly by the anthropological and qualitative research methods. Interviews with some festival committee members and other attendants were done in a non-constructed way. Among others, a committee member and a ritual specialist from Wunga village were indispensable informants. Also, participant observation which is a marked research method in anthropology was employed during various activities of the festival to understand how various actors of the festival were concerned with its procedures.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The FWH and Its Activities

Protesting the land grabbing and the other hardships the Sumbanese people face as described above, in 2012 local NGOs collaborating with Sumbanese ritual specialists and community leaders launched Festival Wai Humba (FWH) which means "Festival of Sumbanese Water." *Wai* means "water" in the Kampera dialect of the Sumbanese language, and symbolizes a source of all human activities (Kapita, 1982; Onvlee, 1984). The festival has been held every year in a different place relevant to one of the four renowned mountains that are the largest water suppliers on Sumba. FWH aims not only to promote environmental protection but also to preserve the cultural heritage of Sumba, in terms of which the executive committee emphasizes the Sumbanese "local knowledge" (*kearifan lokal*).

The prospectus of the fifth FWH stating seven characteristics of the festival can be summarized as follows. First, the development of ethnic identity as *tau Humba* (Sumbanese people) creates the "Wai Humba community" (*Komunitas Wai Humba*), which comprises people from four regencies on the island of Sumba. These are East Sumba, West Sumba, Central Sumba, and Southwestern Sumba. The latter three made up the regency of West Sumba until it was divided in 2007. The community has served as a forum in which the

members discuss problems each of the four regencies have faced, and through this forum, the idea for the first FWH came about.

Second, ideas of environmental protection in Sumba are closely related to the *marapu* belief (kepercayaan *marapu*). *Marapu* refers to ancestral spirits and other spirits. According to the belief, the “rite of water” (*kalarat wai*) is performed at freshwater springs, where *marapu* followers ask for clean water and express their gratitude to *marapu*. Springs are regarded as sacred places, and polluting them is strictly prohibited.

Third, the festival emphasizes mountains as suppliers of water, which is indispensable for everyday livelihoods. Therefore, FWH should be attended by all of the representatives from the four mountains throughout the island, that is, Wanggameti in East Sumba, Tana Daru in Central Sumba, Poronombu in West Sumba, and Yawilla in Southwestern Sumba. Also, mountains should be protected because inhabitants can obtain wood, food, and medical herbs from them, all of which support human life.

Fourth, environmental protection is entangled with the idea of local knowledge (*kearifan lokal*). According to the festival prospectus, before independence, the mountains had been protected and conserved by Sumbanese *adat* communities (*masyarakat adat*) based on their local knowledge.

Fifth, the prospectus conveys the committee’s disapproval of modern rational ideas. These brought modern religions (and new values, which are blamed for totally destroying the social, economic, and political order based on *marapu* communities (the original Indonesian text is as follows: *datangnya pemikiran rasionalitas yang membawa agama-agama modern dengan nilai-nilai baru, yang secara massif telah merusak tatanan kehidupan sosial, ekonomi dan politik yang telah lama melekat pada masyarakat marapu*).

Sixth, the festival clearly expresses a strong protest against expanding agro-industry, such as plantations of sugar cane. Investors are eager to grab the land, which has been used from generation to generation by local inhabitants. Massive pumping-up of underground water and substantial use of chemical fertilizers by the plantation companies negatively influence the local agriculture.

Finally, the festival insists that all the *adat* communities of the four regencies should be united to confront the above-mentioned problems, which seriously endanger Sumbanese lives. The theme of the fifth FWH, “*Tapanuangu*,” meaning “We are connected,” shows the indispensable unity and collaboration of all the Sumbanese people.

The main activities of the FWH can be divided into three themes: environmental protection and rural development, performances and exhibition of Sumbanese culture, and exploration of *marapu* rituals and history. The events of the festival illustrate the unique combination of these different but related elements. First, some NGOs had their own booths and held seminars to support environmental protection and rural development. For example, the “Assembly of Wise Women” (*Pa’uhi Kawini Pingu*), supported by Wahana Visi Indonesia, a Christian NGO, sought for economic empowerment of rural women and promoted locally grown and locally consumed food and wares. Wahana Visi Indonesia also hosted a booth for Uma IRED (House of IRED, Indonesia Rural Economic Development).

The IRED project was financed by the Australian government to promote economic development on Sumba. Protesting mining on Sumba was an important theme of the FWH. A seminar was held attended by a female activist who reported protest movements against a mining company in West Timor.

Second, the festival aimed to preserve various Sumbanese cultures and pass them on to the next generation. Groups of village women performed the Sumbanese dance, accompanied by traditional drums and gongs on the stage. Ikat textiles and other handmade goods were exhibited. Some attendants played traditional spinning tops, which have not been played by village children for a long time.

Third, the role of ritual specialists attending the festival became the most distinctive feature of various activities throughout the FWH. They are called *wunangu* in East Sumba and *rato* in the other three regencies. They visited the Cape of Haharu, which is believed to be the landing place of some Sumbanese ancestors (*marapu*) in their mythology, and other ritually important places in the Haharu region. They visited the ancestral village of Wunga (*parai wunga*), which is said to be the first (*wunga*) village on Sumba. The Wunga villagers explained their local customs and way of rituals and local history to the guests. This tour was intended to follow the routes of their ancestors (*napaktilas* in Indonesian). In settlements where the guests stayed, every evening sacrificial ceremonies were held to ask for the success of the festival to *marapu*, and meats of sacrificed pigs and chickens were shared by the guests and villagers. One night, the ritual specialists from the four regencies gathered to recite the journey and route of their own ancestors and compared several versions of Sumbanese oral histories. They were eager to find out the “oneness” of the Sumbanese people based on the journeys of ancestors.

3.2 Multifaced Activities of The FWH

The above description of the FWH shows the unique mixture of the NGO-led activities for environmental protection and protest against mining companies, along with the *marapu*-centered activities of the ritual specialists from the four regencies. While most members of the executive committee are Christian young adults who received their higher education outside Sumba and are very active in NGOs based in the cities, ritual specialists are the less educated old generation living in rural areas who are afraid of the marginalization of *marapu* belief. These two totally different types of actors join the FWH and collaborate to seek revitalization of the *marapu* belief, to protest against development projects damaging local Sumbanese lives, and to develop the identity of Sumbanese people (*tau Humba*). A banner at the festival read, “We, Sumba people, will not disappear” (“Kami bukan Humba yang Menuju Kemusnahan” in Indonesian). This sense of crisis has made the FWH activities enthusiastic.

What is worthy of special mention is the attitude of young NGO activists toward the old-aged ritual specialists. They never consider *marapu* ritualists as stubborn old men who tenaciously hold onto out-of-date customs; rather, they respect their indigenous knowledge about the surrounding environment and natural resources, especially water resources, which are indispensable for Sumbanese farmers who suffer frequently from the scarcity of water.

Customary taboos that regulate water resource management are enforced by sanctions of *marapu* (Fowler, 2003).

As the prospectus of the fifth FWH shows, the executive committee emphasizes the Sumbanese ILK (*kearifan lokal* in Indonesian) and the *marapu* belief which is inextricably linked to it. This is why the FWH seeking the two different elements, that is, environmental preservation and religious and cultural revitalization could be held successfully. The committee clearly rejects the development programs such as the plantation and mining run by external companies because they bring about environmental contamination and the marginalization of the Sumbanese people, and seek the revitalization of the Sumbanese ILK and *marapu* belief which contain ideas of environmental protection. The committee members do not think that the Sumbanese people need to recreate the exact conditions of the past communities based on *marapu* rituals. Rather, they would like to present “a reasonably good opportunity of restoring what is under threat or has been lost” (Reuter & Horstmann, 2013). I suppose that these concepts of the FWH can be adapted to various activities seeking to promote SDGs, especially, “Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation” and “Goal 15: Life on Land.”

The results of the research of the FWH illustrate the importance of a network connecting local communities all over Sumba and the translation of ILK into more adaptable and understandable knowledge. These two points are made possible by the collaboration between ritual specialists and other community leaders in rural areas and NGO activists in the cities. The collaboration allows these actors to negotiate successfully with local and central governments and private companies to solve problems. Along with the importance of ILK, this kind of networking which is made possible by the collaboration between the community and ritual leaders and NGO activists is necessary to promote SDGs not only in Indonesia but also in other developing countries.

4. Conclusion

This article discusses only a case study of the FWH held on Sumba. This is really a very specific topic, but the above-mentioned results show both the important role of ILK and the collaboration between local leaders and NGO activists are applicable to achieve SDGs in developing countries in general. ILK should not be utilized by various outsiders to accomplish their own purposes. I mean that these outsiders include not only government agencies and private companies but also NGO activists and academic researchers. From the viewpoint of anthropology, in order to achieve some of the SDGs, it is necessary for outsiders to listen to the various voices of local people and respect their knowledge. The case study of the Sumbanese festival, in which young NGO activists respected aged ritual specialists and were eager to learn their local knowledge, can be relevant to solve various problems arising in local communities facing development programs which are forcibly pushed forward regardless of their initiatives.

These are my tentative conceding remarks of a case study of the Sumbanese cultural festival. This research focuses on the festival that emphasizes ILK, but not on ILK itself. To explore how the Sumbanese ILK have contributed to environmental preservation and

pollution prevention, it is clear that subsequent research is needed to collect more data concerned with the theme.

Author Contributions

Makoto Koike as author are fully handling the whole article

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