Indigenous women, forest, and the battle for livelihood rights of Dayak Benawan in Indonesia

Nikodemus Niko*, Ida Widianingsih*, Munandar Sulaeman*, Muhammad Fedryansyah*

*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji, Tanjungpinang, Indonesia.
*Public Administration Department, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia; Center for Decentralization and Participatory Development Research, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia.
*Animal Husbandry Faculty, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia.
*Department of Social Welfare, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia.

Abstract This research delves into the pressing issue of indigenous peoples’ livelihoods in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, highlighting the imminent threat they face. The study underscores the urgent need for government intervention to safeguard the rights of indigenous communities, which are consistently eroded in the name of development. This erosion stems from government-sanctioned land concessions, biased policies, and the involvement of capital interests, all of which disproportionately affect indigenous groups. Employing an ethnographic approach, the research aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics at the nexus of gender, indigenous identity, and environmental justice. Through extensive interviews and observations, the study examines the distinct roles played by indigenous women in forest conservation and community sustainability. It challenges stereotypes portraying indigenous communities as underdeveloped or backward, emphasizing their agency and rejecting their characterization as mere beneficiaries of development. Consequently, indigenous peoples face dwindling access to resources, shrinking livelihood options, and the erosion of traditional knowledge, all while their rights remain largely unrecognized. The findings contribute significantly to the discourse on indigenous rights, particularly highlighting the indispensable role of women in environmental preservation. The research advocates for a more inclusive and equitable approach to natural resource management in Indonesia, emphasizing the need for policies that respect and uphold indigenous rights.

Keywords: identity, forest, landlessness, livelihood, indigenous women, left behind

1. Introduction

The Asian continent hosts a wide array of indigenous populations dwelling across diverse landscapes, encompassing mountains, plains, river valleys, forests, and coastal regions. In Kalimantan, specifically, indigenous communities primarily inhabit the rainforest areas of the region. Scholarly discourse, as outlined by Benjamin (2016), underscores the nuanced distinctions among terms like ‘indigenous,’ ‘tribal peoples,’ and ‘indigenous peoples.’ Nonetheless, for the scope of this manuscript, the term ‘indigenous’ is employed, with the aim of encapsulating a holistic approach to community engagement that transcends local and international boundaries.

The Dayak ethnic group traces its origins to the island of Kalimantan, where they have practiced a nomadic lifestyle primarily centered around hunting and gathering for thousands of years (Roth, 1892). Despite advancements in contemporary society, the Dayak ethnic community continues to uphold the cultural traditions and customs inherited from their ancestors. Consequently, the Dayak ethnic group is frequently portrayed as embodying a lifestyle deeply intertwined with nature (Cleary, 1997; Niko, 2020).

This study examines the marginalization of indigenous Dayak Benawan women in Indonesia and how they sustain their livelihoods. The lives of Dayak Benawan women are closely intertwined with the forest, from which they derive their food sources. Discussing indigenous peoples cannot be separated from forest governance which has direct links to their cultural, spiritual, ecological, social, economic, and political elements (Astuti & McGregor, 2016; Kepkiewicz & Dale, 2018; Suiseeya et al., 2021). The existence of indigenous peoples is highly important as the main actors who are directly involved in the management of the forest and its contents (Niko et al., 2024). On the other hand, their existence also clashes with the concept of investment by the state which actually damages the environment (Witter et al., 2021).

On a global scale, indigenous communities worldwide confront a common threat: the risk of losing access to their natural resources. This loss not only endangers their survival as distinct societies but also undermines their economic stability, socio-cultural cohesion, and human dignity (Berger, 2019). Consequently, indigenous peoples become more susceptible to poverty and are at heightened risk of experiencing various forms of violence (Richman, 2002).
Land reform initiatives often exacerbate the marginalization of indigenous groups and exacerbate communal conflicts among them (Fontana, 2014; Wilson, 2013). This marginalization stems from the disconnect between governmental authorities and local communities, further evidenced by the subjugation of indigenous peoples in their efforts to access and govern their ancestral lands.

Based on the literature review conducted on the Scopus database, using the keywords "indigenous" AND "women" AND "forest," it is evident that studies on indigenous women are inseparable from forests and nature, which are their sources of livelihood (see Figure 1). The interconnectedness between humans, forests, and nature is integral to the way of life of indigenous communities. Previous research indicates that indigenous women and forests have a psychological connection that fosters mutual dependence.

Many studies have highlighted the reliance of indigenous women on forests for their daily basic needs (Affonso et al., 2024; Baruah and Biskupski-Mujanovic, 2023; Ameneshewa, et al., 2023; Niko et al., 2024). The World Bank, IFAD, and FAO study (2009) indicated that women in forest communities derive half of their income from the forest, while men derive a third. Indigenous women and local communities have been the subjects of extensive research (as depicted in Figure 2). The interconnectedness and mutual dependence between indigenous women and forests are beneficial; women obtain their basic needs from the forest, while the forest is preserved (Niko, 2022; McIntyre-Mills et al., 2023; Niko et al., 2024).

The marginalization of indigenous communities in Indonesia persists due to the absence of adequate legal safeguards and the substantial gap between these communities and governmental authorities, limiting their access to resources and decision-making processes. This marginalization remains particularly pronounced for the Dayak indigenous people, who continue to experience ongoing marginalization exacerbated by evolving ethnic dynamics (Tanasaldy, 2012; Niko, 2022). Indigenous communities residing in remote areas of Kalimantan continue to engage in subsistence farming practices. According to the national constitution, every indigenous community in Indonesia is entitled to secure and sovereign livelihoods on their self-managed lands, including access to land tenure and governance. This assertion aligns with the principles outlined in the preamble of the 1945 Constitution, which emphasizes "social justice for all Indonesian citizens." Consequently, this reaffirms the importance of inclusive participation of indigenous peoples in various aspects of state administration. Nevertheless, various issues persist in these regions, including challenges related to community organization, land rights allocation, and community disputes, which remain unresolved by governmental authorities (Hanley & Davidson, 2008).

Figure 1 Co-occurrence Network Research on indigenous women and forest.
Source: Analysis by authors using Bibliometrix R Studio (2024).
Figure 2 Thematic Map Network Research on indigenous women and forest.
Source: Analysis by authors using Bibliometrix R Studio (2024).

Figure 3 Thematic Evolution on indigenous women and forest.
Source: Analysis by authors using Bibliometrix R Studio (2024).
The subgroups of the Dayak ethnic group residing in the remote regions of Kalimantan are numerous and difficult to enumerate (White et al., 2012; Niko, 2021). Among these subgroups is the Dayak Benawan, whose settlements are predominantly located in Cowet Village, Sanggau Regency, West Kalimantan Province, Indonesia. This Community encompasses diverse cultural elements, including mystical beliefs deeply rooted in their ancestral connection to nature (such as the reverence for soil, water, and trees).

In the context of human interaction with the environment, the Dayak Benawan community continues to engage in rituals to honor nature. For instance, prior to clearing land for cultivation, they perform ceremonies involving offerings placed on the soil, believing each plot of land possesses mystical energies inhabited by supernatural entities. Similarly, before conducting slash-and-burn agriculture, they present offerings to appease the spirits of the land, believed to oversee the burning process.

Indigenous forest management is characterized by the close bond between Indigenous communities and the forests they oversee (Niko et al., 2024). These communities demonstrate a deep ecological knowledge of their forests, combining traditional wisdom with contemporary scientific methods to promote sustainable stewardship. Extensive research, such as that conducted by Widianingsih et al. (2022), underscores the diverse benefits of Indigenous forest management. Beyond fostering biodiversity conservation, maintaining ecosystem services, and mitigating climate change, it also fosters economic prospects for local inhabitants through sustainable resource extraction and the encouragement of ecotourism initiatives.

Historically, the Dayak Benawan community adhered to animistic and dynamic belief systems, venerating spirits and sacred objects believed to possess supernatural abilities. However, the arrival of Catholic missionaries in Kampung Pejalu, Cowet Village in the 1970s introduced Christianity, a faith that persists within the community to date. Despite the influx of external influences, such as advancements in information technology, the Dayak Benawan community maintains its rich cultural heritage, preserving the traditions and customs passed down from their ancestors (Roth, 1892; Mulyoutami et al., 2009; Niko, 2018).

In contemporary times, the Dayak Benawan community finds their forest habitat increasingly encroached upon by oil palm development, posing a significant threat to their cultural heritage and potential displacement (Sunker & Santoso, 2019). The expansion of oil palm plantations also threatens the traditional food sources and customs of local indigenous populations (Haug, 2014; Fujiwara, 2020). According to Haug (2014), the conversion of forested areas into oil palm plantations brings about profound changes in the socioeconomic dynamics of indigenous populations.

Despite regulations of Perda Kabupaten Sanggau (Sanggau Regency Regulation) No. 1/2017 aimed at recognizing and safeguarding indigenous communities, governmental issuance of concession permits for oil palm cultivation persists, exacerbating the marginalization of indigenous peoples responsible for environmental stewardship. Consequently, there is a risk of their forced displacement and migration due to disruptions to their customary practices (Sobeiro, 2015). Moreover, involvement in the oil palm industry often leads to heightened impoverishment and marginalization among indigenous communities (White & White, 2011). So, the objective of this study is to elucidate the challenges encountered by the indigenous Dayak Benawan community in sustaining their livelihoods.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method with an ethnographic approach. The research focused on the Dayak Benawan community residing in Kampung Pejalu, Cowet Village, Balai District, Sanggau Regency, West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Fieldwork was conducted from November 2019 to February 2020, involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, and living among the Dayak Benawan community in Kampung Pejalu. Concurrently, qualitative data analysis was performed alongside the research write-up, with ongoing data verification based on primary sources, particularly through informant statements. To achieve research novelty, researchers employ literature review techniques using the Scopus database. Subsequently, researchers analyze the data using Bibliometrix R Studio to identify current research trends and the novelty of studies concerning indigenous women and forests.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Sustaining Traditional Livelihood and Environmental Stewardship

“Ken lah nen muwat umek. Narai anak ade’ ngak namah inik-inik, bela nyocol ngan nebeng kayu ngen. Ngak da nugal, bela ngitemp anak kedadepe nen merejawa, narai anak mereja laba lain.” (Almost every part of the work in the fields is done by us (women). Our husbands indeed usually help when cutting trees and burning land. However, the rest, from sowing seeds to harvesting, is done by us. It is because our husbands do a lot of other work too.) (An interview with a Dayak Benawan woman).

The Dayak Benawan community continues to uphold traditional ways of life, such as engaging in communal work in the fields, constructing houses, caring for the sick, and resolving incidents within the village. For instance, when opening a field; from clearing the land, burning it, planting, to harvesting, it is usually done through mutual cooperation and assistance.
In meeting their livelihood needs, the Dayak Benawan people work as shifting cultivation farmers (nomadic field) or rubber tappers. They spend more time in the fields or rubber plantations. The main products from their fields are rice and various types of green vegetables. The produce from their fields is for family consumption. If there is an excess, it will be distributed to their neighbors free of charge.

Work in the fields and rubber plantations is carried out by both men and women. However, the role and knowledge of women in farming is more dominant. From tree felling to rice harvesting, women take on a larger role. When conversing with Dayak Benawan women in their fields, there is no specific reason why women play a larger role in the fields while they also dominate household chores. However, there is a perception that women who are lazy to work in the fields will be ostracized from society. Therefore, women must diligently perform all tasks without exception.

The types of rice varieties planted in the fields are not arbitrary. In this regard, women have better knowledge in selecting rice seeds. The rice varieties planted in their fields are local rice and harvested when they are 6 months old. The names of these varieties in their language are pade imbang, pade gogo, and pade purut. Rice produced from the fields is only for family consumption because the tradition of the Dayak Benawan community does not allow the selling of rice from the fields. They believe that if they sell rice, then the rice will cry and no longer want to approach the family that sells it.

From an outsider’s perspective, farming is only limited to clearing land, burning land, planting rice, harvesting, and finishing. However, for the Dayak Benawan community, farming is their spirit (self-spirit). It contains spirituality and livelihoods. Almost every part of the land and water around the Dayak Benawan community can be utilized. Their land is fertile and can be planted with corn, tubers, and others. Meanwhile, regarding water, almost every part of the river, lake, and canal has fish in it. Various types of river and lake fish live not far from the settlements of the Dayak Benawan community. In other words, nature provides them with everything they need.

However, agricultural activities on the land of the Dayak Benawan community have decreased in intensity from year to year. This raises the question: "Why are there so few Dayak Benawan people opening new fields for farming?" Our answer is that there is no longer any area for new fields. Lands that were once fields have been converted into oil palm plantations. In another situation, indigenous communities are afraid to open new fields by burning them. They are afraid of being sprayed by helicopters from above or visited by authorities (police) for being caught burning fields. In many cases, traditional farmers of these indigenous communities are often scapegoats for forest fire disasters in Indonesia.

Although the livelihoods of the Dayak Benawan community are farming, the area for farming is becoming narrower from day to day due to provincial government regulations that do not allow people to open forest land for more than 2 hectares. This regulation is contained in *Pergub Kalimantan Barat* (West Kalimantan Governor Regulation) No. 39/2019 concerning the Prevention and Management of Forest and Land Fires. In 2021, several people in Kampung Pejalu were visited by police officers because they were caught burning forests. The officers were then directed to a newly burned field. This situation instills fear in people to open land for farming.

Throughout the fieldwork in the Dayak Benawan indigenous villages, there were many reports of farmers in West Kalimantan being brought to court for allegedly causing forest fires. In fact, they burned fields to plant rice to implement their traditional knowledge of farming. This phenomenon is like an iceberg, where what appears on the surface is only a few cases. Honestly, many people occupy the bottom parts that are not visible, as experienced by the Dayak Benawan community threatened by environmental threats, food crises, and natural disasters.

Not only farming, the Dayak Benawan community also raises livestock. Every family has at least pets, such as pigs, free-range chickens, dogs, and cats. They can sell these animals anytime, except for cats. In raising livestock, women play a significant role. Every morning, women release chickens from their cages and feed them. In the afternoon, they confine the chickens again. In addition, every morning and afternoon, women also feed their pigs. The same goes for dogs and cats, when a family eats together, dogs and cats are also fed at that time. Dogs and cats eat together with their owners.

The indigenous Dayak Benawan community has unique knowledge of forest management and has a direct attachment to cultural, spiritual, ecological, social, economic, and political elements (Niko et al., 2024). Their presence is crucial as key actors directly involved in forest and its contents management because they depend on the forest. With ancestral knowledge passed down through generations, they uphold the sustainability of the forest ecosystem.

The biodiversity of the forest within lands managed by the Dayak Benawan community comprises various types of flora and fauna. However, numerous species of rare wood that were once abundant are now gradually disappearing. Additionally, there are approximately five types of bamboo that are becoming increasingly scarce. Moreover, medicinal plants, forest vegetables, or forest fruits are also challenging to find nowadays.

Presently, many forest-dwelling animal species are facing extinction. Various species of snakes, birds, and quadrupeds (such as deer, wildcats, wild boars, and others) that are typically hunted and consumed by the Dayak Benawan community are dwindling. This suggests that if the supply chain is disrupted, the community may no longer have access to forest-dwelling animals for consumption due to their unavailability.

Numerous types of forest vegetables, medicinal plants, and fruits serve as local food sources for the community. However, if forest areas continue to diminish or disappear entirely, these plant species will vanish, leading to the loss of both vital food sources and local knowledge. Currently, much indigenous knowledge has already been lost due to the declining
state of the forest. At present, the Dayak Benawan community is striving to regain their livelihoods after oil palm plantations have seized control of their land.

Economic values imposed upon nature also perpetuate the perception of indigenous people as 'unproductive characters' (Foster, 1973). These biases and assumptions facilitate the exploitation of natural resources by capital owners, resulting in the displacement of women (Shiva & Shiva, 1991). One of the root causes of gender inequality lies in the loss of women's land rights and agricultural sustainability.

Oil palm plantations within the Dayak Benawan customary territory utilize fertilizers and pesticides, leading to soil and water contamination. Consequently, water used for vegetable washing, laundry, and drinking may have become contaminated, posing health risks to the community. Additionally, toxic substances from fertilizers and pesticides absorbed by plants may inadvertently be consumed by individuals living in the vicinity as part of their meals, potentially impacting their health.

3.2. Losing Forest, Losing Indigenous Knowledge on Land Management

Forests symbolize the source of breath and life for the indigenous Dayak Benawan community. Within the forest, they can find various plant species that can be processed into food for their families. Their forest wealth consists of both timber and non-timber products. Timber products are used for building houses, tools, and shelters for livestock. Meanwhile, non-timber forest products include wild vegetables, natural plants, and numerous medicinal plants that can only be found there.

As of now, the ownership of Dayak Benawan customary forests has not been recognized. Consequently, forest privatization has commenced by transferring ownership rights to capital owners (private palm oil companies). Asset ownership by specific entities (privatization) has repercussions on the poverty experienced by women and children in rural areas. Ownership by capital owners affects ecologically unsustainable farming practices.

The Benawan forest is at risk of disappearing in the future. Today, forests managed by the Dayak Benawan community have not been acknowledged as customary forests. This is because the recognition of customary forests requires a lengthy administrative process. Firstly, communities must conduct participatory mapping of customary forests. Subsequently, it will be registered with the Indigenous Territory Registration Agency (BRWA) Indonesia. Then, it will be submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) Indonesia to obtain a customary forest certificate. The lack of government recognition of Dayak Benawan customary forests raises the question of whether the state is protecting their customary rights.

Forests are believed to hold sacred land for the survival of the Dayak Benawan community and their descendants. Destroying the forest is equivalent to destroying women because women's livelihoods originate from the forest. The knowledge of Dayak Benawan women is largely acquired through their experiences with natural phenomena. Therefore, indigenous knowledge is highly recommended as a reference for implementing sustainable development, provided it is inclusive, based on, and integrated into intervention programs from the outset.

Knowledge derived from nature is related to their knowledge of field agriculture. For example, if there is a full moon or no moon in the sky, it means they are not allowed to plant rice seedlings in the fields. This indigenous knowledge is a specific knowledge held by certain communities in sustaining their livelihoods and the sustainability of the living systems in their area. Indigenous knowledge of the Dayak Benawan community is often overlooked in the framework of sustainable development work programs. Therefore, special investigations are needed to ensure that indigenous knowledge becomes the basis for making sustainable development policies for indigenous communities for the benefit of the poor and marginalized. This is to organize indigenous communities to prioritize institutions and practices within their communities. Knowledge of land management and forest clearing (i.e., the implementation of rituals before clearing the land, burning the land, placing initial stakes, and harvesting) will be lost.

4. Final considerations

Indigenous Dayak Benawan women face layered marginalization; on one hand, they confront land encroachment by oil palm plantations, while on the other hand, they lack strong legal protection to combat corporations. Government issuance of land concessions to oil palm companies results in the reduction of Indigenous community-managed areas. Consequently, Indigenous communities are marginalized in managing natural resources, which are their livelihood sources. The loss of Indigenous Dayak Benawan community-managed areas will lead to the disappearance of their local knowledge in traditional natural resource management. The experiences of Dayak Benawan women in meeting their family's needs through traditional knowledge are threatened by modern pressures forcing them to adapt to capitalist systems. Future research needs to reassess the recognition and strengthening of Indigenous collective rights neglected in government policies.

Acknowledgment

The researchers express gratitude to all the Dayak Benawan women informants who provided valuable information for this study. Additionally, our appreciation extends to Mr. Donatus Sebeli (the Tumenggongk Adat/Traditional Leader of
Dayak Benawan in Cowet Village) and Mr. Asan (the Pesirah Adat/Traditional Leader of Dayak Benawan in Pejalu Village). Thanks are also extended to all those who assisted in the completion of this research.

**Ethical considerations**

Not applicable.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Funding**

This research did not receive any financial support.

**References**


https://www.malque pubb/ojs/index.php/mr


