

## Sago and Oil Palm Forests: Local-Global Economic Contestation in Marind-Anim Land, Papua

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### Abstract

The study explores the narrative of oil palm expansion in the Marind-Anim area, where the land and its natural surroundings are not empty spaces without meaning but an eternal identity that is preserved because it tells the historical relationship between local people and their ancestors. Owning land, even the smallest parcel, can enhance self-esteem and social security. This study traces the narrative of oil palm expansion in the Marind-Anim areas and examines the encounter between the indigenous Marind-Anim community and the global economic forces. This local-global intersection is examined using an ethnographic approach with data collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). The results show that the function of sago land as an economic foundation is decreasing due to the global economic pressures from the monoculture oil palm plantations. On the one hand, the Marind-Anim indigenous land has become a frontier area for global economic expansion aiming to supply the global food demand. On the other hand, the sago plantation as a safety valve for the traditional economy and local food security has been reduced by oil palm plantations.

Penelitian ini menelusuri narasi ekspansi kelapa sawit di kawasan Marind-Anim, di mana tanah dan alam sekitarnya bukanlah ruang kosong tanpa makna melainkan identitas abadi yang dilestarikan, karena menceritakan hubungan historis antara masyarakat lokal dengan leluhurnya. Kepemilikan tanah sekecil apa pun juga meningkatkan kepercayaan identitas dan jaminan sosial. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan masyarakat adat Marind-Anim terkait pengaruh ekonomi global dengan mengkaji interaksi lokal-global, dan metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan etnografi dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara, observasi, dan *Focus Group Discussion* (FGD). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa fungsi lahan sago sebagai basis perekonomian masyarakat Marind-Anim mulai berkurang akibat tekanan ekonomi global dari perkebunan kelapa sawit. Mengingat hasilnya, tanah adat masyarakat Marind-Anim merupakan daerah perbatasan bagi ekspansi ekonomi global yang bermimpi memberi sumber pangan dunia. Pada saat yang sama, tanaman sago merupakan katup pengaman untuk menjamin ekonomi tradisional dan pangan lokal yang telah berkurang akibat keberadaan perkebunan kelapa sawit.

**Keywords:** local food; Marind-Anim; oil palm; Papua; plantation; sago

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## Introduction

Marind-Anim (sometimes called Malind-Anim) is an ethnic group inhabiting the Melanesian archipelago. The people have a good relationship with nature and lead spiritual lives grounded in mythological knowledge (Kadir 2017; Suharno et al. 2016). The mythology represents and expresses ancestral heritage, manifested in local ideology and cultural space. It narrates sacred tales about the creation of nature and humans by gods according to the native religion. Such tales usually contain miraculous events far from historical facts (Kadir 2017). Anthropologists are often intrigued to examine their significance and find out how close they are to historical facts.

Ethnic groups' actions are often guided by mythological knowledge and moral philosophy (Daeng 2002; Kadir et al. 2021), which often necessitates a reciprocal relationship between humans and nature. In the Marind-Anim mythical perspective, although ancestral spirits live in forests, rivers, and seas, separated from human life in settlements, the two groups share spaces. Humans live side by side with the spirits of their ancestors and share sacred places or the origin place of their ancestors. Therefore, maintaining harmony and reciprocity becomes life principles of the Marind-Anim people. Culture and environment are interrelated, so humans position themselves as partners with nature and build a reciprocal relationship with the natural environment (Daeng 2002).

The mythology of the Marind-Anim people also refers to mystical beings that become the origin of the division of clans into their social structure (Boelaars 1986) and the embodiment of the supernatural world (van Baal 1996; Muller 2011; Muntaza 2013; Suryawan 2018).

This acknowledgment forms the basis of social and cultural activities. Ahimsa-Putra (2020) and Akhmad (2005) call it a 'religious device'—a symbol of communication with the supernatural world, birthing sacred tales about the creation of nature and humans by gods.

In the Marind-Anim mythology, *dema* is a spirit that can incarnate into anything in nature—humans, animals, plants, or stones. All universes originate from their power, including nature's supernatural forces, the spirits of the dead, and anything under the concept of totemism. Therefore, *demas* of nature are worshipped alongside their totems. The characteristics of each *dema* are shaped by their myths, originate from the ancestor of the phratries, and become key components of their clans. *Demas* transform into a human or an animal, such as *yorma* (sea dema), *wonatai* (crocodile totem), and *yawi* (coconut dema). *Demas* are also an identity marker to distinguish a group from other ethnic groups. They strengthen the collective consciousness and build collective strength to deal with problems. Although external forces classify the Marind-Anim people as oppressed, according to Basiago (1998), the group is a solid community with a strong communal culture amid human suffering and tragedy.

Under these conditions, mythology, socio-culture, and local wisdom form an inclusive identity (Daeng 2002; Muntaza 2013; Sidiq et al. 2021). Totemism, which can be personified by animals and plants (Suryawan 2018), plays a big part in this. On Marind-Anim land, totems are believed to be materialised as native animals and plants (Yarman, Basuni, and Soekmadi 2013). The beliefs are then passed down to the next generations and revered in Marind-Anim cultural institutions. In this case, it is necessary

to revisit Jan Boelaars' study (1986), stating that the Marind-Anim people in the South Coast of Papua are a closed community, satisfied with their circumstances, easy to laugh with, and are open and sensitive to humour, but they are difficult to approach by others. According to Muntaza (2013), Marind-Anim culture is the most untouched in Papua.

The critical question in this study is to what extent the local wisdom protects the survival of the Marind-Anim people when threatened by global economic forces. In other words, we seek to discover how their local ideologies survive in the face of the global market economy. This study considers the local-global struggle, the small versus big traditions, and the traditionality versus modernity dynamics. Therefore, the ethnic culture of Marind-Anim is not seen as a single entity but as a multifaceted intersection.

The establishment of oil palm plantations often changes a local community's culture (Sidiq et al. 2021). The conversion of sago forests has reduced sources of staple food for the community. This study aims to determine the effect of oil palm plantation development on the sago cultivation that supplies staple foods for local communities in Merauke and its social and cultural impacts.

This research is a qualitative study with an ethnographic approach aiming to explore the encounter of the Marind-Anim indigenous community with the global economic forces at the intersection areas (Figure 1). The data were collected using in-depth interviews, observation, and focus group discussion (FGD).

The snowball technique was used to source respondents using a pre-set guide. The informants consisted of traditional leaders, tribal

chiefs, and clan heads, as well as the representative of the conservation circles (BBKSDA), government staff at the sub-district level, community holding sago totems (Mahuze clan), sago observers, and the general public. The total number of respondents was 78. The interviews were scheduled around the respondents' daily activities to ensure the readiness and willingness of prospective respondents to partake in the interview.

The analysis started with processing and preparing the data, followed by reading the entire data, analyzing them in more detail, and coding them to describe the settings, people, categories, and themes. The themes were presented in the form of descriptive-interpretive narratives.

### **The Marind-Anim People**

The name Marind-Anim reflects its tribal identity. Anim means male (*anem* for male, *anum* for female). The tribe inhabits an area on the vast plains of southern West Papua from the Muli Strait (Marianne) to the border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. This area is a lowland savanna with flora similar to the Australian continent. The swampy plains along the rivers are overgrown with sago palms. The people are distributed around the watersheds of the Buraka, Bian, Eli, Kumbe, and Maro rivers, located within the Okaba, Kimam, and Muting Districts in Merauke Regency, Papua Province. The Marind people live in the south of the lower Digul River, east of Yos Sudarso Island, and west of the Maro River (a small area that passes through Maro at the bottom, including Merauke).

The people of Marind-Anim belong to the customary territory of Anim Ha, which means

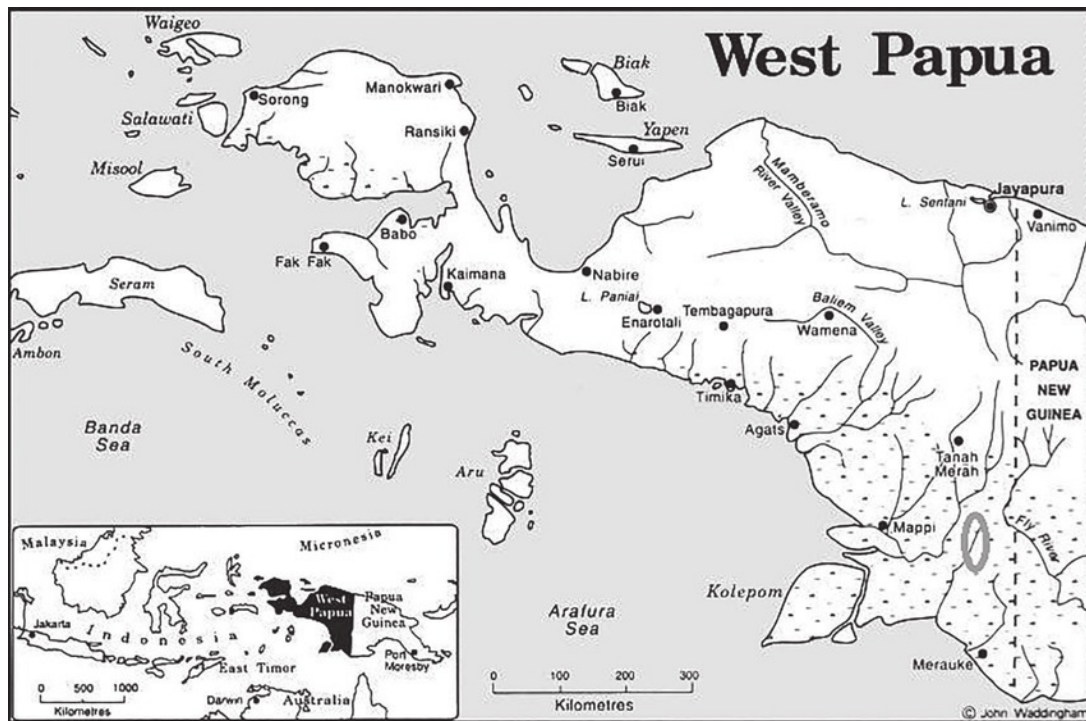


Figure 1  
Location of the study of the local Marind-Anim community  
in the lowland area of Merauke. (Image Source: Chao 2017)

real humans. According to Muntaza (2013) and Kadir et al. (2022), the term 'real human' is not just an identity arbitrarily attached to individuals. Anim-Ha is also believed to be Malind-Anim with physical strength and supernatural powers. According to Boelaars (1986), this identity represents the maturity of Marind-Anim men. It is manifested into physical strength and represented by traditional jewelry and attributes attached to their bodies. Bourdieu (Kadir et al. 2021) stated that in social relations, 'recognition' is one of the most important assets to improve social standing in a group, strengthen status, prestige, and authority over other people or groups, and legitimizes self-identity as a representation of 'the best' or

'what one should be'. According to Sahlins in 1963 (in Boelaars 1986), this leadership system is how bourgeoisie appears in some societies.

The Marind-Anim people were known and had intensive contact with the outside world in 1905 when the Dutch Colonial established a government post in Merauke. According to Muller (2011), the headhunting and conflicts between tribes involving thousands of soldiers prompted the Dutch Colonial to establish the first government post in the southern jungle of Papua. The establishment of this post was also triggered by the killing of a British administrative officer in New Guinea. In Muller's ethnographic record (2011), the British government at that time was infuriated and demanded

the Dutch open a representative post near the border and stop the Marind attack. For the Dutch, stopping the culture of war and headhunting was not an easy matter. It required the power of modern weapons. With this approach, the Marind-Anim tribe in southern Papua gradually left the tribal warfare and headhunting. At the same time, government posts and churches were established. The religious values gradually changed in mindset, speech, and actions.

Headhunting is a gloomy period in the cultural history of the Marind-Anim people. Like a tribal war, this phenomenon was often triggered by the struggle for livelihood spaces, such as fighting over sago hamlets, hunting-gathering areas, fishing, and sago sticking places. Stories about tribal wars and headhunting become historical storylines of the conquest. They symbolise virility, might and masculinity, and courage. The group continued to attack other groups, although, according to the historical record, none conquered the other. As a result of these inter-tribal wars, people migrated to other safer areas.

The Marind people in southern Papua remained secluded for a while before they encountered contact with the outside world. Due to the long dark history, their lives changed and developed into a strong and socially, economically, and culturally stable community. Changes only emerged from the harmonious interaction of the Marind-Anim people with their environment and social interaction among the people. The land is a cultural property of "*Ini Kitong Pu Tanah*" (Akhmad 2005), which talks about the origin of human events. For the Marind-Anim people—and the Papuans in general—the land is the most sacred narrative

in human culture. It is personified as a mother's womb that conceives and gives birth to life. With such sacralisation, the land becomes a permanent identity highly upheld by the Marind-Anim people.

The Marind-Anim is not an agrarian community, but they live from natural resources and depend solely on the forest for food and daily needs. They go hunting, gathering, and fishing. The game animals include deer, wild boar, mouse deer, tree and land kangaroos, and birds. Meanwhile, the forest products they gather include sago, fruit, and forest vegetables (Muller 2011). For sago, the production methods and rites are performed mainly by women in the family (Kadir et al. 2022). This plant is the main food source because of the lowland ecological area. Sago is extremely valuable and can function as a dowry for marriage, is served in traditional feasts, is offered as a peace offering in conflict resolution, and totems for clans.

The study results show that the Marind-Anim community in Merauke still lives in a hunting and gathering culture. Meanwhile, other communities have shifted to modern farming, especially the immigrants. It could be a critical point because the culture gap is wide. Therefore, the national food production plan must be re-examined, especially concerning environmental sustainability. According to Zakaria, Kleden, and Franky (2011), many government programs, including the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE), also need adjustments.

Sago has a high socio-cultural value for the Papuans. Sago plants are an integral part of forest functions and a staple food source (Kadir et al. 2020). In the Marind culture, sago is not only a staple food but something to be respected

and not taken for granted. Traditionally, this plant is part of the valuable goods of the Marind tribal clan (Mahuze). The Marind community in Merauke is based on kinship, and their social networks are both intra- and inter-groups. The kinship-based relationships maintain harmony in the community, including the maintenance of sago plants.

From the ecological aspect, sago helps control the environmental conditions in coastal areas and lowlands with high rainfall and erosion. Sago forests protect and store groundwater, becoming a buffer for coastal zones, supporting fish production, and preventing coastal abrasion and seawater

inundation. They absorb CO<sub>2</sub> and play a producer role in the food chain. From the economic aspect, sago plants help local communities meet their daily needs, i.e., food and housing.

The Marind-Anim local knowledge classifies sago into several types, and its names are different for each community group in each village. The classification of sago palms is based on the plant's morphological characteristics, such as the presence or absence of leaf spines, stem size, leaf size, and starch colour (Figure 2).

In Muting Village, local people recognise six types of sago (*Daah*): *Haliti*, *Mbof* (no spines), *Ndiah*, *Kaweh*, *Komba*, *Timin* (with spines). The local community has good knowledge about this



Figure 2

Diversity of sago species based on local wisdom of the Marind Community in Papua: a) *Haliti* (Image Source: Suharno, 2021), and b) *Kaweh* (Image Source: Kadir, 2021).

plant. They press the stem to obtain the juice, from which they extract the starch. For housing materials, they use the leaves for the roof and the stems for the walls. According to Kadir et al. (2022), the Marind community processes sago to create a typical Papuan food called *sago sep*. This dish is served at large-scale traditional events, such as memorials or special festivities. Other dishes include *papeda*, *sago ebayak*, *sago kwetahuk*, and *sago sinoli*.

The large Marind tribe lives in communal clusters in villages dotted across the Merauke Regency. An important finding in this study shows that each village has different sago species with different traditional groupings. The Marori tribe in Wasur Village recognizes six species; the Kanum tribe in Rawa Biru recognizes three species, the Kanum tribe in Yanggandur Village recognizes four species, the Mandobo tribe (Wamdon or Marind tribe) in Tambat and Koiburse Villages recognizes seven and four species, respectively. The differences emerge because each village's basic principle of classification differs. Meanwhile, spiny species were not found in the eastern area of Merauke. There were only two clumps discovered in Tambat Village. This finding confirms that spiny sago species are most commonly found on Papua's northern region and southern coast, such as Mimika, Asmat, and Mappi.

Referring back to the Marind-Anim mythology, although everything in the forest is available for use, people need to obtain permission from the spirits. Failure to do so will result in a penalty in the form of accidents, travel difficulties, or bad luck. They believe that ancestral spirits protect and punish depending on how humans maintain a relationship with the spiritual world.

From the economic perspective, the activities in Marind-Anim are subsistent. James Scoot (1989), in the farmers' moral economics stated that the traditional economy has 'spare' or 'partial' activities that can be activated during famine season. Subsistence economic activities such as farming, gardening, fishing, and collecting forest products are the valves that sustain traditional communities. The absence of these activities will jeopardise the tribe's livelihood and existence.

### **Deforestation and Loss of Subsistence Economic Safety Valves**

The surge in global economic expansion over the past three decades includes the development of new economic fields (Cisneros, Kis-Katos, and Nuryartono 2021), such as the palm oil industry. The oil palm plantations continue to encroach on the local food resources. Barraclough (2013) and Pacheco (2012) emphasised that the changes in land use have caused a global food crisis. In the case of the Marind-Anim tribe in Papua, the practices include land grabbing using political power (Andrianto et al. 2014). Savitri (2013) stated that a company named Medco acquired 300,000 hectares of land from the Marind-Anim people with an IDR 300 million compensation to the *ulayat* (customary) rights owners. This money is called 'the introduction fee' or colloquially known as *uang ketuk pintu* (literally: door-knocking money).

With this 'purchase', the Marind-Anim people are slowly denied access to their land, especially the sago land. Consequently, land and sago no longer unite individuals as a community. Sago is also closely related to the production culture of the community, so changes in the surrounding physical environment also impact their lives severely. In other

words, the expansion of oil palm plantations has damaged the nature and culture of the Marind-Anim people at the same time. On a deeper look, Purningsih (2020) stated that the Marind-Anim tribe find it hard to accept the oil palm industry into their culture. The plantations have not only eroded their customary land rights but also their identity as gatherers, their beliefs in nature as an ancestral residence with sacred places, their totemic plants and animals, and so on. The massive land clearing has reached and desacralized areas considered sacred by the locals. Places that were once sacred and closed are now open and unholy. When the sacred places disappear, the Marind people also lose the life-sustaining mother figure. In short, the conversion of forests to oil palm plantations has brought about profound changes in the way of life and local culture.

From the government's perspective, the expansion of oil palm plantations is a positive

wave. Traditional communities such as the Marind-Anim can participate and play an active role in national economic development. However, in reality, oil palm plantations, with their various instruments, have forced them to relinquish their customary land (Figure 3). The flow of global economic power through oil palm plantations seems to have dragged a traditional community such as the Marind-Anim to the brink of collapse.

The study's results have also revealed that most people (85.42%) felt they had lost their sago forests. Table 1 shows that the community's concerns about losing sago forests were high (81.25%) as these were the source of community livelihoods. Only a few people (12.50%) considered the phenomenon reasonable and not a problem. The high concerns make sense because most people (89.58%)

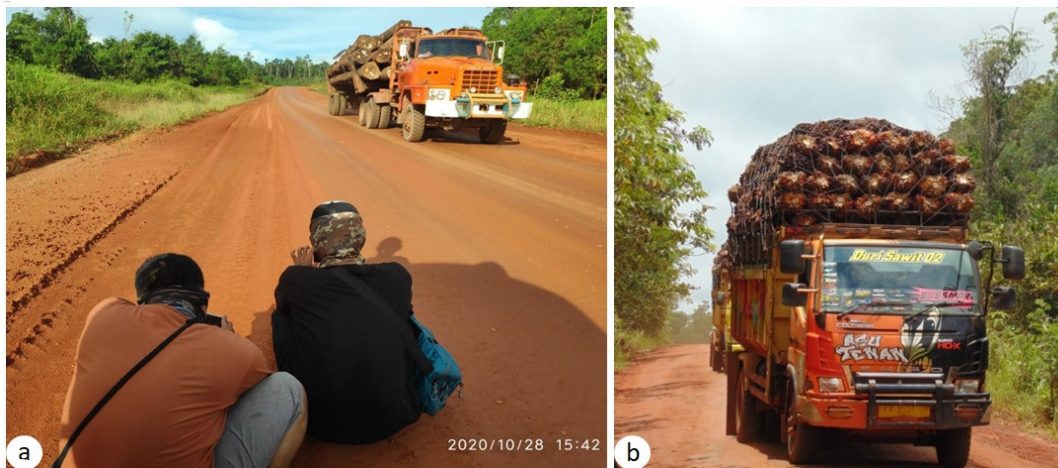


Figure 3

a) Activities of Wood Processing Companies in Papua

(Image Source: Papua Province Natural Resources Conservation Center Team; 2020),

b) Oil Palm Plantation Business in Merauke (Image Source: Kadir, 2021)



Table 1  
Community Knowledge and Opinion on the Existence of Sago  
and Oil-palm Forests in Merauke

No	Knowledge and Community's Opinion	Total Respondent	Respondent's Response (%)		
			Important	Don't know	Not important
1	The Marind-Anim community cares about sago as a local food	48	81.25	10.42	4.17
2	The Marind-Anim community cares about the existence of the sago forest as a source of local food	48	93.75	4.17	2.08
3	Is sago still an important local food source?	48	89.58	0.00	10.42
4	Must sago be served at traditional ceremonies?	48	83.33	2.08	14.58
5	Is sago a part of cultural identity?	48	81.25	12.50	6.25
6	Are there any sacred places in the sago forests that need to be preserved?	48	60.42	20.83	18.75
7	Do people think that the existence of oil palm plantations is very important?	48	33.33	20.83	45.83
8	Do people consider oil palm plantations more important than the existence of sago forests?	48	31.25	16.67	52.08
9	Do people feel they have lost their forests to oil palm plantations?	48	85.42	10.42	4.17
10	Do people feel worried about losing their sago forest land?	48	81.25	2.08	12.50

considered sago an important local food ingredient. Around 81.25% of the respondents cared about sago as food, and 81.25% considered sago part of their cultural identity. Regarding culture and beliefs, 60.42% of respondents believed there were sacred places in the forests. Most of them also considered the existence of oil palm plantations unimportant (45.83%) compared to sago forests.

It can be concluded that these political undertaking—achieved through state-sponsored economic activities in collaboration with capital owners—threaten local communities' survival. In the case of the Marind-

Anim people, the subsistence economy is threatened by extinction (Suryawan 2018). The opening of hundreds of hectares of oil palm plantations on their customary lands has jeopardised the Marind-Anim people's livelihood and existence. Status of the land—once belonged to the clans with customary land rights and management within the control of the indigenous peoples—has turned into the property of the investors. The land management rights and profits were transferred to the capital owners and the state (through tax payments). Statistical data shows that over the last two decades, Papua's natural forest coverage has

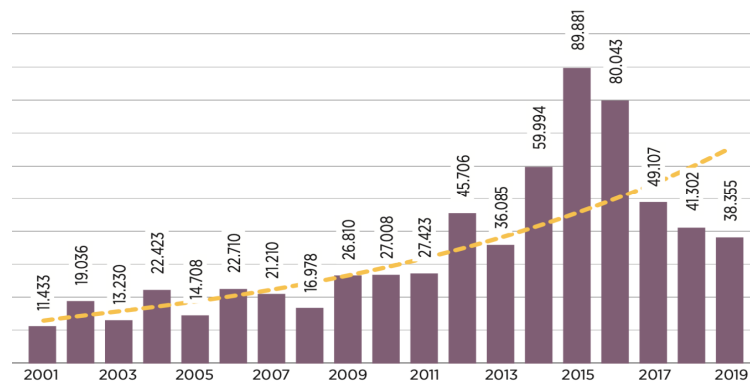
decreased by 663,443 hectares, 29% in 2001-2010 and 71% in 2011-2019. On average, annual deforestation reached 34,918 hectares, with the highest in 2015, when 89,881 hectares were lost (Figure 4).

As a result of the deforestation, the local community lost thousands of hectares of land and bore the brunt of the environmental damage. The adverse impacts include difficulty meeting local communities' needs, the loss of sacred places, the loss of spaces where children can learn to protect the environment with traditional knowledge, and the loss of sources of hunting, gathering, and farming traditions. With such significant losses, it will be challenging to transfer local knowledge through a natural learning system like what has been passed down from generation to generation. Likewise, maintaining the socio-cultural system will also be an uphill battle. Worse, forest exploitation has occurred since the New Order regime. Forest exploitations have been both legal and illegal. The impact is not just environmental but also social and cultural. Although the pace of change is not comparable to the speed of development

outside Papua, it remains devastating to the indigenous communities.

The expansion of oil palm plantations to the Marind-Anim land has made forests and rivers—where indigenous people hunt, gather, and fish—increasingly remote and limited. With parcels of land falling into the control of entrepreneurs, forests considered sacred by the Marind-Anim people are gradually turned into oil palm plantations. Economic development has become a justification for releasing forest areas for the agricultural sector. Most of the forest area released (84%) in Papua—amounting to an area of 1,307,780 hectares—was allocated to this sector. Some may argue that the sector provides employment to the Marind-Anim people. Community members earn daily wages of up to Rp. 200,000 per day as oil palm pickers, garden cleaners, and transport workers. However, these new jobs have eroded the traditional economic life of the Marind-Anim people. Popkin considered this interaction an exploitative patron-client relationship (Raharjana 2003). The patrons try to keep their clients to remain economically bound without

Figure 4  
Progress of Deforestation and Forest Release in Papua  
(Source: Indonesia Monitoring Coalition, 2021).



having the ability to bargain against all the demands brought to the table.

The changes in land use as part of the national economic development programs have changed the living environment of the Marind-Anim people. It has greatly impacted people's social life and subsistence economic activities. Changes in the natural environment include the encroached natural forest areas for modern economic enterprises. Natural forests with rich biodiversity are destroyed by clearing thousands of hectares of land for oil palm plantations. This is exacerbated by either forest concession companies' or local residents' 'illegal' logging. Under these conditions, the capacity of nature to meet food needs has plunged to its lowest point.

Past studies have examined the decline of food sources for local communities due to ambitious global economic policies. These policies aim only for profit and neglect the traditional communities' social structure. Andrianto et al. (2014) in Bouven, Digoel, and Savitri (2013) even showed the occurrence of land grabbing through economic politics. As a result, local communities are slowly being deprived of their land. With the loss of soil and sago, individuals are no longer united as a community. Sago is deeply rooted in people's production culture, so any changes in sago and its environment may turn the traditional people's lives upside down. In Merauke Regency, the economic network of oil palm companies has damaged the forests and anything that rely on the resources. In line with this, important findings by Chao (2019) are stated as follows.

"I encountered many indigenous communities who have surrendered their lands to palm oil companies, and some even signed contracts to sell other tribal lands without their consent, which is so chaotic. Furthermore, their dependence on forests is also

decreasing due to the rate of deforestation and expansion of monoculture plantations. The people use the term that their customary territory has become 'dry'. The water that has given life has run out, including rivers, groundwater, as well as the blood of animals or the sap of plants. Like rivers, people's bodies dry up. Crocodiles and fish are intoxicated by poisons from factories—pesticides and fertilizers".

The megaproject construction does not translate into community welfare. This is evident in the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) development in Merauke, which supposedly prioritises infrastructure development using a welfare approach. The MIFEE's development of food products includes plantations, livestock, and fisheries, involving 36 investors in the fields of plantations, food crop agriculture, inland fisheries, livestock, construction, and wood processing industries, operating on an area of 1,283 million per ha (Zakaria et al. 2011). The goal is to build a civilised world through MIFEE, which unquestionably entails an increase in population. Food production to meet the population demand means bringing in workers from outside Merauke Regency to work as farmers. However, instead of solving Papua's problems, it will create new problems through the marginalization of the indigenous people.

Savitri (2013) reported the political economy and land grabbing involving the Marind-Anim tribe in South Papua. She highlighted how the Medco company takes advantage of people with good intentions. Underlying the exchange were false promises, deceptive tactics, and *abuti* (*abunawas tinggi*)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Abuti* stands for *Abunawas Tinggi*. This is a typical Papuan expression (not only for Marind-Anim people) to refer to people who talk civil but turn out to be deceitful.

disguised as monetary donations displaying gratitude and appreciation for customary land rights. In this way, the Medco Company acquired 300,000 hectares of land from the Marind-Anim people with only IDR 300-million compensation money. This money can be referred to as *uang ketuk pintu* (the introduction fee) or money for the provision of a generator and the church construction. Companies that manage oil palm plantations may even use divisional tactics and compensation orientation. The community is trapped in pragmatic demands, which eventually means compensation money for land, water, and electricity. Changes in the main production system from subsistence to meeting market needs affect the patterns of social interaction and demand the development of social institutions and cultural values as a frame of reference.

The balance is tipped in the practice of exploiting natural resources on Marind-Anim's

customary lands. The exploitation is massive, but local people's access to jobs and economic sectors is becoming increasingly difficult due to the lack of skills and abilities that meet the growing industry's needs. There is access for local residents to the job market, but it is limited to low-level and part-time jobs. Local people realise that they have sacrificed a lot for the existing business operations, from selling productive land for oil palm plantations (Figure 5) to environmental damage and changes in socio-economic culture in the community that are increasingly open to outsiders. An informant revealed that:

“Sago is currently far from the village. We have to walk and take a boat before getting to the forest. We rarely eat sago because we eat rice. *Sago sep* is only served at traditional ceremonies. Meanwhile, children prefer to eat food from convenience stores, such as noodles, sweets, and biscuits, which are also commonly found in immigrant stalls.”



Figure 5  
Expressions of Local Peoples in Response to Oil Palm Plantation Activities  
“The Mahuze clan's customary land is not for oil palm.” (Image Source: Jubi admin 2021)

Theoretically and historically, land grabbing has always been related to the existence of a world market economy in the form of global capitalist investors searching for large land to meet various needs, such as food, energy, natural resources, water, minerals, wood, and many others. Land grabbing by big global companies is always in collusion with the state. It is often claimed that land management on a large scale for the benefit of large global investors will also boost national development and supply both domestic and export demands. The development will also have trickle-down effects, such as more job opportunities and local income. However, the new world order introduced by investors of global capitalism, such as oil palm plantations, has made the Marind-Anim people feel like they are nomads on their own land or spectators of the market economy parade. This new world order turns land and labour into commodities, with certificates, professionalism, working hours, managerialism, and resettlement village houses—something with a totally different function and meaning from the cosmology of the old community world order.

### **Sar: A Conservation Effort**

One of the characteristics of a simple subsistence community is that they use only the available resources to meet basic needs. The management of natural resources is performed based on exploitation, and ownership or access to resources is communal, managed together through certain institutions (Kadir et al. 2021). The sago forests are struggling to exist among the increasingly dominating crops such as oil palms and rice. However, the people of Marind still have the local wisdom to protect and utilise their natural resources (Kadir et al. 2022). The

Marind people from the Marori sub-tribe are familiar with the *sar* system: the prohibition of resource extraction for a certain period of up to two to four years and the respect for relatives that have passed. *Sar* was set 40 days after the passing, during which the hamlets cannot be harvested for their natural products. As such, resources are restored naturally. It is one of the local wisdom of the Marind people to conserve natural resources (Hallatu et al. 2020; Mote and Mahuze 2016). From time to time, other forms of local institutions such as this, which are adaptive to ecological, social, political, and economic problems, have been developed by the community (Abdullah 2015).

The *sar* system as local wisdom is an inseparable part of the food security policy of the Marind-Anim people (Kadir, Suharno, Reawaruw, Komari, Mahuze, 2022). It is officiated by stamping the wood sticks on the four corners of a square board with coconut leaves, which is then placed on the *sar* location. With this, any harvest is prohibited for a period determined by the family installing the *sar*. As a customary institution, it allows natural resources to grow and develop continuously. Natural resources such as sago palms and other plants are conserved within a period. Meanwhile, in the philosophy of the Marind-Anim people, this is intended for the deceased so that they can fulfil their daily needs. This system also ensures the protection of local wisdom, which considers animals and plants as part of the self-symbolisation of the Marind-Anim people. Although many consider mythological knowledge such as this irrational and non-adaptive to modern life, this local wisdom can also function as an adaptation tool. According to Hudyana (2017), local wisdom often shows that the current human adaptation system lies in the use of appropriate and

environmentally friendly technologies and socio-economic arrangements with human values, and it is not to be underestimated by modern humans as they are more vulnerable to socio-economic crises.

## Conclusions

A valuable lesson learned from the arrival of regional and global investors is that it can evict an ethnic group such as the Marind-Anim people from their land, customs, and culture. They have lost their food sovereignty and solidarity as sago and forest were transformed into oil palm plantations. Thousands of hectares of sago land—their food source—were lost to oil palm plantations and other economic activities. The exploitation has resulted in the loss of thousands of hectares of local community land and the destruction of the natural environment, which poses difficulty to the local communities to meet their daily needs.

In traditional communities such as the Marind-Anim people, sago land becomes the livelihood and social security valve. Aside from being food for consumption, sago can be exchanged for other foods. At traditional parties, sago dishes are served. It becomes a symbol that strengthens the ties of kinship between community members. Amid this order, chaos arises. Oil palm plantations massively clear areas considered sacred by local communities, desacralizing ancestral and spiritual places. The areas once sacred and closed by the local community are now open and polluted, rendering them unholy. Under this condition, the Marind people lose the life-sustaining mother nature.

The presence of oil palm plantations on a large scale not only robs the customary land of the people but also threatens their cultural

identity, endangers the survival of their beliefs, and degrades their values of life and social life. Soil and sago no longer unite individuals within a cultural community, although the sago plant is firmly rooted in the community culture. Changes in the subsistence production system towards the fulfilment of market-oriented needs have influenced the pattern of social interactions and changed the social institutions and cultural values. In addition, it seems that the existence of oil palm plantations is forcing the Marind-Anim to change their social order and values. Therefore, they are struggling to accept this plantation.

To mitigate the impact, it is necessary to have an environmentally friendly economy in accordance with the social and cultural environment of the Marind-Anim tribe. In the cultural system of the Marind-Anim people, *sar* is local wisdom that can be maintained and sustained. It is highly adaptive to the environment and supports the conservation of natural resources.

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