

II – Forest people?



Against the myths

Indonesia has around 80 million to 95 million forest-dependent people, and the Philippines 20 million to 30 million. Some 40 million to 65 million people live on lands classified as public forestlands in Indonesia and 24 million in the Philippines.

We have worked for some time among these millions of people who manage forest resources and forest lands. They were swidden farmers (practicing slash-and-burn agriculture), permanent farmers, former forest nomads, small-scale entrepreneurs looking for profit in the forest, jobless urban dwellers chased by the economic crisis from the urban centres. Can all these different people then be called 'forest people'?

How far are they from the mythical image of 'indigenous forest people' carried from the Amazon? Are they wise managers of forest riches, living in harmony with an undisturbed nature, as many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) claim? Or are they destroyers of old-growth forests because of their endemic poverty and rudimentary agricultural practices, as commonly thought in professional forestry circles? How many of them are nomadic and live isolated in empty old-growth forest in temporary huts made of palm leaves? How many live in autarky, from hunting and gathering, far from the turmoil of international markets and politics? What is their connection to the outer world?

These questions need to be answered. The dominant perception of 'indigenous forest people' in forestry administrations and among policy-makers and development agencies, national or international, deeply affects the ideology and practice of forest management as well as the way these people are 'treated' in forest policies and projects. It also allows people-related forest policies or projects to concentrate on a few groups of true forest dwellers and to completely avoid addressing the fate of the hundreds of thousands of farmers living on official 'forestlands'. For example, in Indonesia, the strong belief that forestlands are empty or inhabited by, at most, a few scattered groups of semi-nomads helps to justify the government's allocation of large tracks of the supposedly uninhabited State Forest Domain to timber and plantation companies. In 1996, 600 logging companies were holding official 25- to 50-year concessionary rights to 62 million hectares of the production forest domain. Tens of pulpwood and oil palm estates were holding either long-term tenure rights or full property rights on 10 million to 15 million hectares of the forest domain. In contrast, until now, none of the 40 million to 65 million people living in the forest domain have been able to get any official tenure rights to the lands they manage or to the forest resources from which they make their living.

People in the study areas, like most forest people in South-east Asia, are obviously far from the folkloric image that urban dwellers have of 'forest dwellers'. No half-naked and tattooed bodies, no communal 'longhouses'. These people live in settled villages, sometimes away from forest margins, and always rather easily connected to the city centres (the most isolated village in East Kalimantan was located two days upriver by motorboat). All of them are aware of the changes currently happening in the world, in national policies and in the global and national economic environments. All of them are farming lands for rice production. Most of them extensively use manufactured goods: outboard motors in the case of those living upriver, motorcycles in the case of those connected to road systems, iron tiles for roofing, radios and tape recorders. Most of the villages have satellite television. All people wear modern, though often quite extensively worn, clothes like T-shirts, jeans, caps etc.

1. 'Indigenous', in the context of island South-east Asia

Contrary to the American continent, where 'indigenous' people (Amerindians) obviously contrast with European and African migrants, and survive with a heavy historical heritage of ethnocide, the concept of indigenous people in the context of Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, the Philippines is not fully relevant, neither historically nor politically.

Indonesia has well-defined ethnic groups, with singular traditions and institutions. Most of the ethnic groups have well-defined territories, like the dominant Batak and Minangkabau in Sumatra. Some, like the Talang Mamak of eastern Sumatra, have seen their forested homeland shrink during the last decades because of the encroachment of more spatially aggressive groups like the Melayu. Others, like many of the ethnic groups in Kalimantan, have been migrating extensively along and across river basins, and it is therefore more difficult to define their homeland.

Some ethnic groups have been historically dominant in terms of political power, demographic extension or land colonization. Most of the ethnic groups of the Outer Islands legitimately perceive the Javanese as politically dominant. Present forest conversion patterns linked to agricultural development and resettlement policies that clearly favour outsiders (poor transmigrants from Java as well as powerful financial groups) over local groups are perceived as political, socio-economic and cultural 'colonisation' by the Javanese and their relatives. This colonisation is expressed by, among others, a physical occupation of customary ethnic lands by smallholder migrants and government-sponsored estates, which causes the number of conflicts over lands and resources confronting local ethnic groups and outsiders to escalate. In this context, local groups use the concept of 'indigenous people' in order to claim their anteriority and their greater legitimacy in regard to customary lands. It is, however, far less relevant in present land disputes regarding 'original land rights' and anteriority of land occupation pitting two related subgroups against each other. (The Punan in the Bulungan regency are an example.)⁽¹⁾

The Indonesian constitution does not use the concept of 'indigenous people', but that of 'isolated tribe' (*suku terasing*), which permits policies to be formulated for the removal of such peoples from isolation (including resettlement programmes that displace forest villages from their resources).

The Philippines also have numerous ethnic groups, but they have been more subjected to inter-island migrations, especially from the north towards the two large forested islands of Mindanao and Palawan. Small ethnic groups belonging to the

1. Kaskija 2000.

larger Negrito group are truly 'indigenous', like the Batak of Palawan, who represent the original group there. Philippine law has recently integrated the concept of 'ancestral domain', acknowledging the prevailing rights of original ethnic groups in forestlands.

Local people involved in the project belong exclusively to local ethnic groups (we have not included any inter-island migrants). They include

- *in Sumatra*: the Melayu of Jambi and Riau; the Talang Mamak of Riau; the Lampung Pesisir of Krui in Lampung Province; the Maninjau Minangkabau in Maninjau, West Sumatra; the Batak Toba and Batak Pak-Pak in North Sumatra
- *in East Kalimantan*: in Bulungan regency, various Kenyah groups in the Bahau valley and the Punan of the Malinau and Tubu rivers; in Pasir regency, the Pasir (formerly known as Melayu)
- *in the Philippines*: the *Batak* of Palawan.

Some of these ethnic groups, such as the Pesisir Krui of Lampung and the Maninjau of West Sumatra, are symbolically as well as socially and politically well grounded in their territory. Others have migrated locally, sometimes repeatedly, from a mythical place of origin: the Bungo-Melayu in the Bungo valley trace their origins back to the Minangkabau highlands, and the Toba Batak in the highlands claim they all came from one village on Samosir island in Lake Toba and founded the present villages two or three generations ago. The Punan keep migrating along the Tubu River and its tributaries, and some claim they came from across the mountains. Some of the Pasir have been relocated (others relocated spontaneously) along the road leading from East Kalimantan to South Kalimantan. All surveyed groups, however, have strong connections with surrounding ethnic groups, migrants and urban dwellers, through temporary migrations of their members, as well as through family, labour or trade exchange links.

2. Nomadic forest tribes or permanent and swidden farmers?

The old myths associated with indigenous forest people are still strong (see the critical report of Bahuchet *et al.* 2001), particularly the image of nomadic bands of a few individuals living in a hunting-gathering economy. In spite of numerous scientific reports showing the importance of historical relations between local people and forests in the shaping of the present forest facies, the tropical rainforest is often perceived as 'virgin nature' and described as largely uninhabited, with only scattered groups of 'indigenous forest people'.



Forest people are usually considered as nomadic hunters and gatherers or primitive horticulturalists.

But

The vast majority of people managing forests are farmers practising either swidden farming or permanent agriculture.



Traditional hut in West Timor

Few forest people still live in temporary huts.

But



Village in East Kalimantan



The wooden huts of the Punan people in the Tubu valley of East Kalimantan bear solar panels for electricity supply.



Large wooden houses in the Toba Batak highlands of North Sumatra

Most of the people managing forests live in long-standing houses and sedentary villages.



Forest people are perceived as living in harmony with nature in the heart of the forest. They are presented as the stewards of the forest riches. Their forest management practices and 'traditional shifting cultivation systems' are considered to be in balance with the natural.



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Farmers on forest margins are designated as the main destroyers of the forest, through 'pioneer' shifting cultivation and rampant poverty.



Forest areas in the region are considerably more densely populated than the forests of the Amazon and the Congo basin. Truly nomadic people are few and scattered in small, disjointed groups: altogether only about 1,000 Kubus in Sumatra, Batak in Palawan and Punan in Kalimantan. Not all Kubu, Batak and Punan are nomadic. Most of them live in semi-permanent or permanent dwellings and practice at least rudimentary forms of agriculture.

The vast majority of the forested lands is inhabited by large groups of smallholder farmers, living in permanent villages and practicing either swidden (slash and burn) agriculture or some form of permanent farming, in addition to off-farm activities. Temporary migration towards urban centres and exchanges with neighbouring regions are common habits in most of the surveyed areas. It is precisely these large groups of smallholder farmers who have been, for centuries, the main managers of forest resources and lands in our study areas. They are still the most prominent and knowledgeable among present forest managers. (In this book, the term ‘smallholder farmer’ refers to swidden cultivators and farmers practicing agriculture on permanent fields.)

In addition to farming communities belonging to local ethnic groups, migrant settlers, transmigrants and other types of displaced populations—usually from overpopulated areas of rural Java, Bali, Madura or South Sulawesi in Indonesia or from the northern islands of the Philippines—have invaded accessible forestlands during the last decades. These migrants practice permanent or semi-permanent forms of rice culture and usually do not have a strong tradition of forest management. They do, however, also manage forest resources as part of their livelihood strategies, for both subsistence and cash needs. The recent political and economic turmoil in the region has brought urban dwellers back to their original farmlands and forestlands, where they try to make a living with hardly any tradition. Unlike rural migrants, who more or less follow local patterns of forest management, these neo-rural people tend to be quite destructive to natural resources, which they mine until exhausted.

3. ‘Good forest people’ and ‘bad shifting cultivators’?

A small fraction of all these local and migrant forest dwellers are ‘integral shifting cultivators’: the Batak of Palawan, some Talang Mamak of Riau in Sumatra and some Kenyah groups in Bulungan, East Kalimantan, farm their lands exclusively through slash and burn agriculture. However, the vast majority of present forest dwellers in our study areas (Pesisir Krui, Talang Mamak, Pasir, Jambi and most migrants) practice mixed agriculture combining permanent rice farming and one of numerous forms of swidden farming. Some (Batak, Minangkabau) live predominantly, but never exclusively, from sedentary

rice farming. All of them rely on the forest for subsistence and cash.

A common image in conservation circles, blended from a re-interpretation of scientific studies⁽²⁾ and former colonial perceptions of shifting cultivation, tends to differentiate ‘good’ forest stewards from ‘bad’ shifting cultivators. The first group supposedly consists of wise ‘indigenous communities’ living ‘in harmony with nature’ in the heart of the forest, practicing forest collection and rotational agriculture (‘traditionally shifting cultivation’). The second group consists of poor and often displaced farmers (‘pioneers’), who destroy the forest to establish their fields, produce until soil fertility is exhausted and then move forwards.

This caricatured misperception of shifting cultivation and the related partition of shifting cultivators in ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ is echoed by a large part of the scientific and donor communities (see the first rationale of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research–based Alternative to Slash and Burn (ASB) initiative)⁽³⁾, as well as by NGOs working for sustainable development. In Indonesia and the Philippines, for the combined sake of social development and forest conservation, it serves as a justification for national policies that promote the conversion of ‘traditional farming’ to intensive sedentary farming, the resettlement of small groups living in the forest to large villages on forest margins or the establishment of development projects based on large-scale industrial agriculture. It also supports policies and projects that promote ‘good forest managers’ (a few groups of emblematic ‘forest people’ like the ‘Dayak’—which is not an ethnic group, but a common appellation for ‘people of the interior’—in Kalimantan) through participatory forest management and devolution processes, while trying to find alternative resource management models for the bad ‘pioneers’ (most swidden farmers).

One of our major conclusions is that swidden farmers (shifting cultivators), who constitute the bulk of actual day-to-day forest users, are also the most imaginative and the most innovative forest managers and cultivators, and that their forest management systems should inspire more widely the theory and practice of forest management in general. These points are discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

2. Clarte 1966; Spencer 1966; Pelzer 1978; Dove 1983.

3. Sanchez *et al.* 1993.

4. The forest is not only for subsistence

NGOs advocating for the rights of forest communities often claim that forest resources are essential for the subsistence of local people. This emphasis on the subsistence function of the forest conceals the facts that local communities, as any other economic actor on the forest scene, often manage forest resources for commercial purposes and that the sale of forest products constitutes a substantial share of their cash income.



Emphasis is regularly put on the importance of forest resources for the subsistence of forest people. Forest foods in particular are thought to be essential to balancing the local diet.

But

Local people also manage forests in order to get income. For example, they organize expeditions to collect eaglewood, a forest product that provides important, though quite irregular and unpredictable, amounts of cash income. Cash from forest products is used to purchase manufactured goods.



Forest people are thought to follow traditional lifestyles and live deep in the forest, having limited contact with the outside world.

But



Most people managing forests are connected to the modern world through their economy and culture. They use manufactured products, are connected to large media communication networks, and have lifestyle aspirations influenced by the outside world.

In Indonesia and the Philippines, the cash benefits obtained from 'forest collection' and 'forest culture' largely exceed the value of locally consumed forest products. In some of the surveyed villages, they may represent the only source of cash income (for the Batak in the Philippines or the Talang Mamak in Riau). Among important commercial products, rattan, which is second only to timber in terms of traded volume and national income in Indonesia, represents the most 'universal' forest product collected for trade (rattan collection was present, though sometimes sporadically, in all the surveyed villages). In all surveyed villages it constitutes a relatively stable source of cash income. Honey represents a good commercial product, which constantly gains in value (five of nine sites). In many of the surveyed villages, timber, though its access is often legally restricted for smallholder farmers, presently represents the main source of cash. Timber extraction or production was developing in all the surveyed sites. In addition to these regular products, Indonesia and the Philippines harbour some of the most valuable forest products in the world, prices of which reach several thousand dollars per kilogramme of product: sandalwood in eastern Indonesia, eaglewood in Sumatra and Borneo, and animal products such as birds' nests in Sumatra, Borneo and Palawan. These high-value products occasionally provide large amounts of money to villages. (We have documented the sandalwood decline in western Timor, eaglewood dynamics in East Kalimantan, and birds' nest business in Palawan, Kalimantan, Java and Sumatra.)

The misperception of subsistence versus commercial use of the forest in local communities is used to justify the allocation of concessionary rights to timber and other valuable forest products to outsiders, which tends either to lead local people to engage in illegal harvesting or to lock them in the management of marginal non-timber forest products. Integrated conservation and development projects, as well as community forestry projects, most often remain focused on the development of subsistence or low-value products (among them the universal 'weaving mats and baskets' projects), excluding those that could represent a real economic challenge for local people.

5. Forest communities and the global world economy

The myth of social and economic isolation of forest communities is still strong in spite of mounting evidence showing that almost all forest people have developed close connections with the outside world through trade and migration⁽⁴⁾.

In island South-east Asia, the involvement of forest people in long-distance trade networks (mainly to China) is mentioned from the third century B.C.⁽⁵⁾. During the ninth century A.D., the trade in forest products gained in importance with the development of

4. Dunn 1975; Hutterer 1988.

5. Dunn 1975.

the Indian maritime kingdoms (the Srivijaya Empire) and the spread of Islam, which opened new trade roads to Arabia and Yemen. European colonisers arrived in the region during the sixteenth century in search of spices (cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, pepper), which were, at that time, collected from natural forests. Through the colonial empires, forest people's links to the occident increased. Throughout the nineteenth century forest people found themselves linked to the early development of the Western industrial revolution through products like latex and oleoresins⁽⁶⁾. They have since been affected by the replacement of many of these products by chemical substitutes, starting shortly after World War II. Most of the forest products being extracted and traded in the early twenty-first century are still traded on the international market. Birds' nests and bezoar stones, eaglewood, rattan and resins, as well as gold or plant chemicals, and now 'indigenous knowledge', directly link forest dwellers to the global economy and to the fluctuations of the U.S. dollar, to the conversion of China to economic liberalism, to financial operations of corporation fusion or national economic bankruptcies, and to the Rio Convention and the Kyoto Protocol.

Nevertheless the myth of isolation persists among national policy makers and international donors. It supports all the official enterprises of 'human welfare development', which often become enterprises of cultural homogenization.

6. Sellato 2001.

6. Forest people are more interested in non-timber forest products than in timber

Considering the abuses and damages linked to timber extraction, non-timber forest products (NTFP) have been promoted during the last 15 years from the status of 'minor forest products' to that of 'good forest products', whereas timber has been somehow considered an evil commodity, management of which is incompatible with sustainable forest management⁽⁷⁾. Forest management based on NTFP development is now commonly supposed to be the best strategy to solve, altogether, the problems related to profitability and sustainability of natural resource management, poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation⁽⁸⁾. NTFP development presently dominates small-scale projects for sustainable local forest management, including most social forestry projects, and all integrated conservation and development projects (ICDP)⁽⁹⁾.

The reality shows that forest people do manage timber, either through extraction or cultivation. They need timber for their own use, but they also need it as the potentially best source of cash income obtainable through forest management.

Is the distinction between NTFP and timber a productive one? What are its positive or perverse consequences? Why should not farmers engage in timber management in parallel to professional foresters?

7. CFAN 1993.

8. Shanley *et al.* 2002.

9. Panayotou & Ashton 1992.

We have carefully studied local forest management activities linked to both timber and non-timber products and illustrated the fact that current local forest management indistinctly concerns NTFP and timber. As timber from natural forests is being exhausted, timber management by local people is gaining in importance all over the region. Our studies have shown that, if local dynamics of timber extraction from the last forest patches are highly unsustainable, timber management in cultivated forests is always conducted in a sustainable way and therefore bears high prospects for further development of local forest culture.

Whereas timber, as a category of products of different qualities, is quite uniform from both a management and a policy point of view, NTFP do not constitute a homogenous category either from a biological point of view or from management, economic or institutional considerations. They range from quickly renewable resources to almost non-renewable ones. Harvest of NTFP may entail very little damage to the plant from which it is collected, as in the cases of leaves, latex and fallen fruits, or will kill it, as in the case of essential oils from wood like sandalwood and rosewood. They include products without market value, such as vegetable leaves locally used as greens, as well as highly coveted and priced items, such as fragrant sandalwood and eaglewood, birds' nests and bezoar stones. These differences are directly expressed in local management practices, public policies and regulations on collection and marketing and are as significant as the ones that can exist between a given NTFP and timber.

In the practice of forest development in South-east Asia, forestry policies, regulations and practices totally exclude local people from the commercial management of timber, and from the benefits of timber exploitation, which appears to be highly detrimental to local development. Our studies have shown that local people cannot accumulate much capital if they stick to the collection of NTFP in purely extractive systems, even for high-value NTFP where most of the benefits accrue to either external collectors or traders. However, they have recently reaped quite substantial benefits from the collection and local sale of logs. Unfortunately, timber extraction from natural forests is illegal and is therefore conducted as a mining and totally unsustainable activity.

Present examples of smallholder-cultivated forests in the region are founded on the cultivation of specific NTFP (benzoin, cinnamon, damar, fruits, rattan, rubber etc.). For decades, timber from either cultivated or self-established trees was locally used as a by-product. As its economic importance on local and regional markets has considerably increased during the last decade (a consequence of timber from local forests being exhausted), timber has become an important product of local forest culture. In most of the existing examples, timber production is increasing through the utilization of over-aged NTFP species, the fostering and harvesting of self-established forest trees or actual cultivation of timber species. Because the marketing of timber outside district boundaries is forbidden, the price local farmers get for their timber is far below national market prices. But even with these adverse policy conditions, in all documented cases, the marketing of timber can easily double farmers' income.



Local people do not restrict their forest management activities to the exploitation of non-timber forest products, but exploit and manage timber for their own needs as well as for income generation. Because regional policies disfavour timber exploitation by local communities, most local exploitation is illegal.



The damar cultivated forest is rich in naturally regenerated timber species.



Cultivated forests provide a large part of the locally exploited timber. Timber management in these forests has proven to be quite sustainable over decades.



Naturally regenerated *Peronema* trees in local oil palm gardens.



Timber from overaged rubber cultivated forests, sold to furniture industries in the West.

The common distinction between timber and NTFP prevents the development of discourse on timber management by smallholder farmers or forest collectors. As a consequence, the likelihood that timber may well be the number one crop for farmers in the twenty-first century is totally concealed. The prospects for developing sustainable farm cultivation and marketing of timber through multipurpose cultivated forests, which has proven not only possible but also positive, are blurred.

Dissociating timber from NTFP in scientific forest research, in international discussions on forest management and in development projects indirectly contributes to reinforce policies that deprive local communities from the large benefits of timber management. It brings a fresh and 'scientifically neutral' justification of the historical evolution, which has locked local people into the management of NTFP, whereas timber harvesting, trade and utilization were the privilege of professional foresters.

We have accumulated enough evidence from the field to conclude that policy and technical support of forest development at a local level will be more sustainable if they are based on a close integration of NTFP and timber in the same management units. This is particularly true for the success of forest culture on farmlands.