

## Refusal of Village Forest as Petalangan People Politic of Value in Community-Based Ecosystem Revitalization in Riau Indonesia



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**ABSTRACT:** This study is about the ethnography of the dynamics of Village Forest refusal as politic of value of the Petalangan People in Gondai Village, Pelalawan, Riau, in a community-based ecosystem revitalization of Teso Nilo (RETN) scheme. They refuse the social forestry scheme, which was proposed by themselves and a local non-governmental organization (NGO) and legalized by the state in 2017. The use of the refusal theory, relation of property, politic of value, and value commensuration approaches in studies of tenure claims by Indigenous people such as the Petalangan people, shows that the refusal here is the strategy of Indigenous People to get possibilities on claiming and using their land for commodity plantation such as palm oil and any of benefit to their interest, not as social forestry scheme regulates by government that some part of the forests must have the conservation zone. The Village Forest land at Mamahan Hamlet claimed by the Petalangan People full of palm oil plantations, housing, and all the public facilities for one hamlet. It shows from the relation of property of Petalangan People that the location of village forest is now under the control and ownership of migrants from North Sumatra, and only 1% of the total 9021 hectares are owned by themselves. The study found how NGO actors failed to mitigate conflict from internal politics inside the Petalangan People and only focused on how the legalization of Village Forests can be a solution to restore the Teso Nilo ecosystem. The implication is the revitalization of the ecosystem is only successful for legalizing the land and reducing conflict between the state and the Indigenous People, not for improving the environmental condition of the ecosystem. The theory used in this study gives nuance to the limited study using value theory to analyze the social forestry and Indigenous People that already have mono-crop culture livelihood in just the past two decades in Indonesia

**KEYWORDS:** Petalangan People, refusal, politic of value, relation of property, social forestry

### I. INTRODUCTION

The statement from the informant regarding the refusal of the Gondai Village Forest was surprising. This is because it almost contradicts all the stories from the NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) that accompany the Petalangan People in Gondai to get the Village Forest legalized. This scheme has become part of the social forestry scheme as a form of implementing Ecosystem Revitalization in Teso Nilo (hereinafter referred to as RETN) since 2017. Since 2016, Pangkalan Gondai Village, whose territory is included in the *Petalangan Pebatinan Pelabi* traditional area, has been included in the RETN social scheme. Gondai Village in Mamahan Hamlet is located outside the Teso Nilo National Park, in Pelalawan Regency, Riau. The refusal of the Gondai Village Forest by Petalangan People actors represents almost all of those involved in legalizing the Village Forest. Moreover, the residents of Mamahan Jaya Hamlet, which is inhabited by Pelabi's descendants and migrants from North Sumatra and Java (including Sundanese), as the location of the Gondai Village Forest, completely refused and once protested to *Batin Pelabi* as Chair of the LPHD (Village Forest Management Institution). This refusal resulted in Pak Batin's resignation from the management of LPHD Gondai. Since then, LPHD management can be said to have been in a vacuum. It only operates on a small basis through Batin's nephew who, although he refused, was forced to defend the Village Forest at the insistence of the Regent of Pelalawan.

This unexpected refusal also shows that there is resistance stemming from the different values and politics of those involved in the Village Forest application. The question that arises is why the Petalangan People initially wanted to be involved in applying for the legalization of this Village Forest? is there coercion? or manipulation? Village Forests in the RETN scheme are an inseparable part of the proposed civil society organizations appointed by the government to assist Gondai Village. It is a question

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why initially this Village Forest was proposed by *Pak Wali* (the term for the Village Head in Petalangan villages) and even the LPHD was led by *Batin Pelabi*, but together there has been consistent rejection until now even though there is Pelabi's nephew, the LPHD administrator, is continuing the implementation of this Village Forest on a small scale.

This ethnography of refusal regarding the Village Forest or it could be said to refuse the way of treating the Petalangan traditional area has the characteristic of a position of Pebatinan Pelabi's nephew actors that remains subordinate compared to other actors in the legalization of the Village Forest. The Petalangan People are one of the few Indigenous People in Indonesia who adhere to a matrilineal lineage that prioritizes the welfare of the descendants of the maternal line carried out by the maternal uncle. However, Pelabi's nieces and nephews also have different views and positions regarding the Village Forest's refusal. This refusal is not evenly distributed but is dominated by those who mostly refuse it. Even the nephews who continue implementing the Village Forest also have a certain degree of resistance. This ethnography shows the fragmentation of the Petalangan People and the actors involved in the Village Forest legalization process. There is an important debate in approaching the issue of village forest refusal, apart from regarding how the introduction of social forestry which is carried out has a community perspective that is different from its reality, also how the different values and political values in treating customary areas carried out by Pelabi's nephews are shown in this rejection. At the same time, it shows changes in the social value of land, and the changing conservation value of the Petalangan people themselves, which began to be shown from the last studies in the 1990s to two decades ago. The concept of refusal has some similarities with resistance but refusal is much better able to capture the complexity of the problem from an anthropological perspective, and the non-binary relationship between dominant and subordinate groups. In particular, the ability to capture divisions due to internal politics in subordinate groups, for example, can be less scrutinized if using resistance theory, which will only reveal a unified attitude towards the dominant (Ortner, 1995).

Studies on Social Forestry in Indonesia and Southeast Asia focus more on institutional aspects, social forestry achievements, as well as access and power (Sahide. et al:2020, Fisher. et al:2020, Diansyah, et al. 2021, Kartodiharjo & Muhammad, 2020). Studies need to highlight the tensions that arise in the process of transferring land management in social forestry, what happens when participating Indigenous communities stop their involvement in social forestry (Erbaugh, 2019), and what the introduction process looks like and how it is viewed about the community of actors involved as to what caused it to happen. In studying social forestry from the internal politics of communities that stop participating, the theory of refusal needs to be linked to value tensions, the actor's politic of value in the community with accompanying NGOs involved in the Village Forest legalization process, because basically value creation in social forestry also occurs mutually connected, harmonious, or also contradictory (Latin 2022, Graeber 2001, Lounela 2020). Including the social value commensuration of the Village Forest itself as seen by actors in the Village Forest (Lambek, 2008). Especially if it is related to the context of National Parks in Indonesia as conservation forests including Teso Nilo National Park which is experiencing the worst deforestation due to land scarcity, and the expansion of Palm Oil Plantations with concession permits given by the government to companies and also the involvement of communities around the area as reported by Auriga Nusantara regarding deforestation data in Indonesia on year 2023. So this research explores the Village Forest's refusal to be associated with value tensions and Value Politics between the actors involved. How and why do Petalangan People of Pelabi descent in Gondai refuse Village Forests in the RETN scheme? What kind of values are contested and what politic of values are causing the Village Forest's refusal? How is the social value of the Village Forest assessed by the people of Petalangan Pebatinan Pelabi? What are the practical implications of this rejection for the field of social forestry studies and the issue of values and value politics of Indigenous communities?

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

The subjects in the study were Petalangan People in Pangkalan Gondai village in Pelalawan Riau who were involved in the Village Forest application process in this community-based ecosystem restoration in Teso Nilo (RETN) scheme. Ethnography allows for alternative and diverse interpretations through data collected from an insider's perspective (Fetterman, 2010). Using an ethnographic approach, which pays attention to multivocality ensures that to the level of subaltern actors, their voices can be represented and can pay attention to the process of changing relationships and positions, paying attention to topology, namely the actual and metaphorical construction of space, namely its discursive production and reproduction, for example, not only being stuck paying attention to the actors in just this village but also how their relations are with communities outside their customary community, the state and companies, including NGOs involved in the ecosystem restoration process at the site level.

This research interprets the RETN model in social forestry scheme as a development instrument in the neoliberal era in Indonesia which introduced a lot of human involvement in conservation based more on economic targets rather than environmental considerations in the 80s - 90s era. This means that this research will try to examine it from a dwelling perspective or the perspective of local communities according to Tim Ingold, namely paying attention to what is lived or practiced by local

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communities in their interactions with forests and land, not about the concept, and is not based on general western readings about forests and conservation which are very human absence bias in conservation. This study also addresses the question of indigenous peoples' reflections on their capacities that can explain why certain rules and procedures work or do not work in ecosystem restoration models such as RETN (Campbell, 2005).

From the description above, the criteria for informants in this study are actors who are involved in the Pangkalan Gondai Village Forest process and actors who understand the context of RETN. The number of informants interviewed was 15 people (*Batin*, former *Pak Wali* (Village Head), Village Secretary, LPHD administrator, Mamahan Hamlet Head and Ninik Mamak (traditional elder), Petalangan Traditional Institution (LAP) administrator, NGO in Pelalawan, WWF Riau, Malay Tradisional Institution (LAM) Riau, WALHI Riau, Figure of migrants from Java in Girisako, Chair of the Social Forestry Acceleration Working Group) and data collection period in the form of several visits to the location of Pangkalan Gondai Village, Pekanbaru, Kuansing, for 8 months in the year 2022 until 2023.

The researcher used observation and in-depth interviews and explored relevant studies of the Petalangan People to construct the history of tenure, and property relations of the Petalangan People with the forest and land by comparing continuity and discontinuity with those that emerged in the past. The ethnography and historical exploration are analyzed by categorizing the themes from the findings. Data categorization is carried out based on what is obtained from the field so that it is more comprehensive.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Village Forest refusal from actors in Pelabi's descendants is part of their value politics which includes criticism of the inequality of individual land ownership by migrants which means something out of the interests of Pelabi's nephew's children. So far, the Petalangan People in general have had a close refusal to migrants from North Sumatra and Java, but Pelabi descendants who already live far from Gondai, such as in Pekanbaru, were selling their land little by little to these migrants. The migrants ended up taking control of the land slowly resulting in extraordinary inequality of control over the last 20 years. This village forest refusal also includes opportunities that Pelabi's descendants thought of from interactions with supporting NGOs and negotiations that existed during the vacuum in which the implementation of the Social Forestry scheme occurred. Refusal as strategy based on the hope that not only Village Forests can prevent them from losing their land, but they hope through refusal, they can change their status to Other Use Areas (APL), meaning that the Minister can finally issue a ministerial decision on this Village Forest area as not being a Forest area. With the fact that it is practically stagnant, the Gondai Village Forest is currently a hamlet with settlements and most of it is oil palm, and stagnation as a form of refusal has pushed the opportunity for APL to be finally possible. This is like the refusal of parents regarding vaccines and also the refusal of the Mohawk indigenous community which also shows political values and opportunities for change.

The social forestry values here that Pelabi's nephew opposes are related to issues of politics and power, which indicate issues that determine actions and important values. This can be seen from the way the NGO assisted Petalangan People in Village Forest process. They negotiated the vacuum of implementation by contacting the Regent, and also continuing to carry out implementation through Pelabi's nieces and nephews who had a lower level of refusal. The accompanying NGO presents only the main goal of legalization as its focus and does not capture the complexity of the assistance process for areas full of oil palm. Social Forestry here as a RETN scheme is an open stage like a ritual in anthropology which can test values to be displayed and contested, and actors can explain themselves in social drama to fight for something that is considered good and may be different from everyday political reality (Graeber, 2001, Lounela 2020). Ardhiyanto (2024) calls it a vehicle of social process, namely a place where the struggle for values is brought to the symbolic arena.

Here the value that is being disputed is the value of how to manage land that has been filled with oil palm into social forestry or the 20% areas that must be forced to do multi-planting instead of monocrop. On the part of those who refused, the actions taken apart from completely stopping discussions about this matter or protesting at social forestry meetings, also expressed reasons about the impossibility of demolishing their productive oil palms, and that ownership of just one percent of the land was difficult. to have a bargaining position with immigrants who dominate land ownership, and feeling abandoned by accompanying NGOs including the desire to become a Customary Forest were also expressed. The justification for the rejection in the case of the Petalangan traditional institution also shows that the political values of the Petalangan people who are not anti-palm oil have from time to time rejected immigrants and companies that control indigenous people's land.

For the descendants of Pelabi who do not completely refuse and are very few, especially to demolishing the oil palms on the remaining land, they have concerns formed by the accompanying NGO narrative that a scenario will occur if the Village Forest permit is revoked and then given to another party, namely the company. The living plants are only a formal requirement for the

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existence of non-oil palm intercrops that can be planted in areas that are still not planted and do not disturb the oil palms. This narrative also becomes a reinforcement for those who continue to carry it out even though it is just a formality.

This conflict of values also shows the cosmological morality of the Petalangan people in their refusal to reforest part of the proposed Village Forest area, the economic value of palm oil, and the perceived inequality of land controlled by immigrants and companies who do not want to return 20 percent of the land for living crops, resulting in central values about kinship, justice, and calculative. Although palm oil was not welcomed enthusiastically at first, as in Hery Santoso's (2023) depiction and analysis of the Sakai tribe in Riau. And there is absolutely no restoration or conservation value intended in the aims of this RETN scheme.

Contested values in social forestry itself, which are also rooted in advocacy and a narrow understanding of the involvement of Indigenous communities in conservation, are also shown in this rejection. The belief that the power of Batin or traditional leaders who have the authority to manage communal ownership among the Petalangan People can overcome friction in the *ninik mamak* (traditional elders) who all refused was also broken by *Batin's* decision to simply resign, and strengthened the rejection even though he appointed his nephew to continue the formalities of Forest implementation Village. The complexity of the problems in ecosystem restoration that is dominated by areas that are completely oil palm, ultimately requires skills in mitigating conflict with various layers and intensity of assistance to realize the initial plans for this social forestry scheme. Input from Pulhin and Tapia (2002) indeed needs to be considered beyond the mythic community with an approach that is not only more political and institutional, but carries out community adaptation whose value is almost without conservation, such as an approach to collaborative forest management.

Petalangan people's relationship with land (including forests and land) develops in two forms, namely social relationships and instrumental relationships. We can observe this social relationship from the strong moral attachment to kinship, namely that the interests of the Petalangan people's nieces and nephews are still maintained, and no matter how conflict arises from Inner decisions, these decisions are still difficult for the nieces and nephews to annul. In other villages, it can still be debated regarding Batin's power regarding his nephew's children. The practice of several rituals such as *balimo kasai*, *balimo sultan*, *fasting bongsu*, *tapung tawar* for example, is still practiced but ritual is not much related to land because there is no longer any wilayat land or communal land owned, which happened when the Petalangan People no longer did it, especially in the period of palm oil is full accepted by Petalangan People and shifting cultivation from rubber and food crops.

An instrumental relationship assumes that the Petalangan people's relationship with land can be converted into a medium of value: money, also known as economic value. In the previous examples, how the calculations of the Petalangan people in the *Pelabi Pebatinan* tell us that their difficulties are not only about the place where certain parts will be converted to forestry. But also the economic value of non-timber forest products is unlike palm oil. For the former Wali (Kades) or Pak Batin himself, it is impossible to commensurate the Village Forest values when the price of palm oil is so high. They compared the conversion to non-oil palm crops with the condition that the price of crops such as *jengkol* or jackfruit could not buy a kilo of sugar. It doesn't make sense to work on the Village Forest if that's the case. Currently, 1 kilo of palm oil is valued at 4000 rupiah, with the new planting period bearing fruit even after 3 years, with yields per harvest getting 14 million to 20 million rupiah.

How do Petalangan People treat the commensuration of ethical values and economic values in the context of strengthening palm oil, where land buying and selling is possible, and is also widespread with partnership models with companies? In this case, we need to clarify again that there is indeed a value translation mechanism. Among the Petalangan People, the movement from ethical to economic values is very dominant. Value translation here is synonymous with sacrifice. In this case, there is a standard that is referred to whether the sacrifice is negative or positive from a moral perspective, which is called meta value by Lambek or referred to as a higher totality according to Graeber. Specifically regarding the Village Forest, the most sensible idea is only to create legal status for the place used by *Pelabi's* nephews in Mamahan Jaya, regardless of legal sanctions from the state, and also for village facilities to be built for all residents of this hamlet to enjoy. The apparent sacrifice is the social risk of the vacuum of implementing the Village Forest plan and Pak Batin Pelabi stepping down as chairman of the LPHD. Even the former *Pak Wali* (Head of the Village) is convinced that taking back permission from the Village Forest is not a problem for the Petalangan People. So the dimension of liberal ownership here does not apply in full but still contains a social element, namely the relationship with nieces and nephews. The practice of transferring land from nephews to outsiders such as migrants has indeed turned into buying and selling. However, the transfer of land grants from the inner to the nephews still applies, and decisions for communal land partnerships with companies, for example, are made communally, not individually, under customary control. If we compare this with the ethnography of the death and funeral business in Ghana, which is completely individual transactional even though it is packaged with spiritual values to respect the family, individual market-style monetization and maximizing monetary profits is completely taking place (de Witte: 2003). The value of money or monetary value among the Petalangan people of Pelabi descent is still not like the money practices and funeral business in Ghana. Apart from the fact that transactions are under the control of

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the *Batin* or *Ninik Mamak* (traditional elders), in practice the priority is still given to corporate partnerships with a land revenue sharing system in the name of the communal and the comparison used in the case of non-asphalt road construction versus an acacia agreement which has a small monetary value per five years for 1 person got 3.8 million children from Pelabi's nephews alone, showing that monetary value is not always taken into account in absolute terms.

In this case, as Tsing (2015: 128) said in Matsutake's ethnography, indeed, existing capitalism may no longer be in the form of control but in the form of neglect. So capitalism is currently more interested in producing from non-capitalist regimes, in this case, the initial transfer of land in the village forest from the nephews was a gift from Batin as well. This facilitates nephews who sell to immigrants when their land is no longer productive or their capitalist relations no longer exist. The ethical value of 20% area of Village Forest must be forested (without any is considered unreasonable, but can still be recreated with several prerequisites in this type of RETN initiative. This means that the work is not enough to get Village Forests legalized, but NGOs and the government need to fulfill the prerequisites for this logic to work, such as providing revitalization funds and preparing markets for non-timber forest products that are equivalent to or surpassing today's palm oil. The interests of nieces and nephews in legal land as their home and what they have lived on although recreating the ethical value, is not enough and needs more strategy in economic site for the effectiveness of RETN implementation. The current situation and with persistent refusal only opening the opportunity and hope that the village forest area can be converted by the minister into a non-forest land use area (APL).

### IV. CONCLUSION

The ecosystem revitalization scheme has failed which can be shown by the Petalangan People Village Forest's refusal and the Village Forest implementation remains stagnant. It was because of the dominant economic value, and also from the reality of the inequality in land tenure by migrants which has occurred slowly in the last 20 years and during the palm oil period. Studies in social forestry or in community-based ecosystem revitalization need to continue with studies to examine the root causes of refusal, and of the value tensions that occur in cases where the community that applies ends up stopping a scheme that has already received permission. The practical implication of the study found that the land inequality structure of social forestry proposals will potentially hinder its implementation if there are no special schemes and facilities to mitigate conflicts that arise including the complexity of actors in the community.

The use of contested values and value politics theory in this analysis has implications for the study of indigenous communities concerning conservation or forest management. Especially in the political aspect, kinship values and justice values are keys to whether the introduction of village forest values can be considered commensurate by the Indigenous communities. The social values of kinship and hierarchy are factors that strengthen the need to continue carrying out the scheme, but they are only instrumental here, meaning that the value of Village Forest incommensurability remains negotiable. However, an actor such as an NGO needs the capacity to work with more than one actor in Indigenous communities and the layers of interests within kinship ties and be able to see the economic justice interests of the community more broadly to increase the effectiveness of social forestry implementation. In the case of indigenous communities that are fully oil palm, such as in Petalangan People, a combination of paying attention to the exchange value of non-palm oil, which has clearer implementation routes at a practical level, is very much needed, because of the high level of market attachment, making it more likely that this community-based ecosystem revitalization will work, even though it is instrumental.

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