



Strategic Framing of Adat in Land-Acquisition Politics in East Sumba

Jacqueline Vel & Stepanus Makambombu

To cite this article: Jacqueline Vel & Stepanus Makambombu (2019) Strategic Framing of Adat in Land-Acquisition Politics in East Sumba, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 20:5, 435-452, DOI: [10.1080/14442213.2019.1670239](https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2019.1670239)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2019.1670239>



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 267



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Strategic Framing of Adat in Land-Acquisition Politics in East Sumba

Jacqueline Vel* and Stepanus Makambombu**

This article is about the strategic use of adat arguments in the politics of large-scale land acquisition. While customary (adat) communities are commonly depicted as small local minorities living in the forests and being guardians of the environment, in many situations such communities occupy a majority position within the district. Majority adat communities are internally differentiated into categories of actors with varying and conflicting interests. This article focuses on Sumba in eastern Indonesia, where state and adat powers are not opposed but historically aligned. We analyse how five common ways of framing adat in Sumba are currently being deployed in land-acquisition politics, in situations supporting plantation land acquisition or protesting against farmers' land dispossession. We draw attention to what we call 'strategic adat framing' as a political activity. The article calls for analysing the historical and social context of local deployments of adat for understanding the impact of current government pro-adat policies.

Keywords: Customary Law; Land Grabbing; Indonesia; Sumba; Strategic Framing

Introduction

'Adat land in Sumba Island is being mapped' read the headline of an article in the national newspaper *Kompas* dated 29 January 2018. While Adat is the Indonesian term for customs, traditions and institutions, and is also used as a translation of indigeneity, the newspaper article referred to adat in terms of land claimed by customary communities as their property. The spokesman of the national adat social movement

* Jacqueline A.C. Vel is a Senior Researcher at the Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society (VVI), Leiden Law School, the Netherlands. Correspondence to: Jacqueline A.C. Vel, Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society (VVI), Leiden Law School, Steenschuur 25, Leiden, 2311 ES, The Netherlands. Email: j.a.c.vel@law.leidenuniv.nl

** Stepanus Makambombu is a PhD candidate at the Department of Development Studies, Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, Indonesia, and Director of the Stimulant Institute, Waingapu, Sumba, Indonesia.

Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) interviewed in the *Kompas* article, 'Tanah Adat di Sumba Dipetakan' (2018), complained that the larger part of the island's adat land (70 per cent of the total land surface according to the article) is now treated as government property. He said that the governments of Sumba's four districts are handing out this land to agro-industrial companies for the establishment of plantations. His hope was that mapping adat land would provide evidence to defend local people's customary land rights, and make the district government respect those rights. He explained the adat movement promotes mapping adat land to defend the island's natural resources against exploitation and appropriation by large agribusinesses, and that protection of adat land will assure that the local population and its next generation can continue their agriculture-based livelihoods.

However, our field research in a village affected by land acquisition for plantations in East Sumba indicated that the link between the strengthening of adat rights and the welfare of common members of adat communities is not as straight forward as his comments might suggest. In contrast, we observed a diversity of arguments related to adat playing a role in negotiations between government, society and companies related not just to land but also to water and labour. Moreover, we observed arguments based on adat sometimes supporting plantation companies' land acquisition and sometimes used in protest against farmers' land dispossession. Why can adat arguments support both parties simultaneously? How are these contesting adat arguments mobilised to provide discursive power in land acquisition politics?

Actors construct narratives about rights based in custom (adat) in land conflicts to argue why it is right and proper that a specific person can represent the larger group; why some have the authority to decide about land use; why some categories of people are more entitled to have access to land; and why it is right that some categories of people are excluded. In other words, adat arguments contribute to establishing the moral basis for exclusive claims. Adat narratives provide a normative underpinning of actions and policies and can serve to legitimate the exclusion (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, 18) on which the success of adat claims depends (Tejada and Rist 2017, 6). Such legitimation is always directed towards a specific audience (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, 19). Hence actors use different 'strategic framings' of adat, depending on the audience they are addressing.

Multiple interpretations of what adat entails render the term deployable for a wide range of political projects (Li 2007, 337). Contests between factions within communities about the implementation of adat rules and hierarchies have been common (Keane 1995). However, different interpretations have developed in a bi-cultural context, which make it necessary to distinguish adat from other normative systems (Weiner and Glaskin 2006, 4). In Indonesia, Dutch colonialism created the conditions for the articulation and definition of adat as a system of local jural and cultural practice (McWilliam 2006, 42). The legacy of this colonial project continues in contemporary relationships between the nation-state and adat communities, resulting in priority for economic development and constraints for state recognition and implementation of adat land rights (McWilliam 2006, 59). But in 2018, nearly two decades after the

decentralisation of political authority to the regions, relations between state and adat communities have become less oppositional, as will be clear from the case discussed below. We analyse the way arguments referring to adat are being used by powerful actors as well as less powerful stakeholders both in support of and in protest against plantation establishment. We trace the narratives back to five common ways of framing adat in Sumba, highlighting the context in which the narrative developed the dominant actors and their interests.

The article begins by introducing Sumba as a case in adat studies, including background information about the area, the population and adat law in relation to land. We present an account of a contemporary land conflict focusing on the positions on adat rights taken by different actors. We then introduce the concept of framing as an analytical tool that we use to identify five common ways of framing adat in Sumba, explaining how each mode contributes to legitimising claims that are purportedly based on adat principles. Finally, we present our conclusions about the strategic use of adat arguments and propose a critical perspective on pro-adat policies while asking that more attention be paid to securing rights to natural resources, including water, for the people who depend on the land for their livelihoods.

Sumba as a Case in Adat Studies

Sumba provides an important case in adat studies for five reasons. First, the adat community comprises the majority of the population on the island, with members living in both urban and rural areas. The concept 'community' is often associated with clear boundaries and small-size social units, but in Sumba, around 600,000 people belong to the self-identified adat community of ethnic Sumbanese. Second, the Sumbanese adat community has a strong internal hierarchy (inequality), which does not fit the stereotyped image of a peaceful egalitarian adat community. Third, there are no formalised adat institutions in Sumba which makes it different from other cases of majority customary (adat) groups such as the Minangkabau (von Benda-Beckmann and von Benda-Beckmann 2013) and Dayak (Bakker 2009). A fourth characteristic is that adat leadership and the state have been historically aligned rather than opposed. Finally, for the concerns raised in this article it is important to note that Sumba is a frontier area (Tsing 2005, 27–28) for the plantation industry. Because land is still abundant in Indonesia's frontier areas, powerful people are not the land-owners but those who are able to mobilise labour (Li 2014, 13–15) which may also invoke adat principles. Using their power as patrons of their clients, these powerful people are able to claim land ownership in negotiations about land acquisition based on the adat rights of the group they claim to represent (Li 2014, 14).

Both authors of this article have been engaged in research on Sumba for a long time: Jacqueline Vel since 1983 and Stepanus Makambombu since 2001. In our research, we have studied customary rules and practices in the local rural economy (Vel 1994); access to agrarian justice (Vel and Makambombu 2010); local politics as a combination of democratic and adat styles of governing (Vel 2008); and the role of government and

adat elites in the establishment of large plantations in Sumba (McCarthy, Vel, and Afiff 2012; Vel, McCarthy, and Zen 2016; Makambombu 2016). Our sources for this article include results of our previous research, other academic literature and newspaper articles. The case study below is based on field research by Stepanus Makambombu in 2017 and 2018, including a survey conducted among 40 households in a village affected by a plantation and interviews with stakeholders in the plantation area and in offices in the district capital of Waingapu.

Sumba Island is located in the most south-eastern part of Indonesia. Administratively the island is divided into four districts within the Province East Nusa Tenggara and, in 2017, had 781,093 inhabitants (BPS 2018, 87). The four district capital towns are the centres of government offices, schools, commerce and services. Although many people imagine Sumba as far away and isolated, there are two airports with daily flights to Bali and Kupang. The island is sparsely populated, especially in rural areas where subsistence agriculture provides the main livelihood. The climate varies: the coastal plains have a dry savannah climate, whereas in the hillside areas rainfall can be more than 2000 millimetres per year. The large areas of uncultivated land in the dry east and north have been the focus of interest for land investment for plantations, whereas the beach areas are now being sold to land investors expecting that ‘Sumba will be the next Bali’.¹

The population of East Sumba district was 252,704 in 2017 of which 29 per cent resided in the urban area of Waingapu (BPS East Sumba 2018).² The population density of rural sub-districts is very low, ranging between 58 and 9 persons per square kilometre. However, within the sub-districts, settlements are unevenly distributed. The area where plantations are now being established is located on an elevated plain inward from the coastal highway, out of sight from the road. On the other side of the highway, there are many villages surrounded by cultivated land with mainly rice and maize. Closer to the beach there are settlements of villagers whose ancestors originated from the nearby island of Savu, and for whom fishing is the traditional source of livelihood. We estimate that East Sumba’s population consists of 80 per cent Sumbanese, 14 per cent Savunese, and 6 per cent from other areas in Indonesia.³ The Sumbanese population is by far the majority in the district, and their customs, traditions and rules constitute the dominant adat system of the island.

Basics of Sumbanese Adat

The Sumbanese population bases its customary claims on land on the principle of prior occupation, regarding all of the land as their ethno-territory.⁴ According to the Sumbanese myth of origin, their ancestors landed on the northern tip of the island, long ago, after ‘crossing seven seas, and landing on the eighth island’ (Kapita 1976b). After arrival, they divided the tasks among the clans of their forefathers, with some acting as ‘lord of the land’ (Forth 1981, 249). The latter provided access to land, so that everyone would have a place to live, herd their livestock and grow

or gather food. Private property in land was not yet relevant in the context of land abundance.

The Sumbanese traditionally worship their deified forefathers, the Marapu. Rules regarding how to use the land, water, forest and other parts of nature are included in the normative system linked to Marapu beliefs. From their spirit world the Marapu can influence the fate of the living, and cause disease and destruction if they are angered. 'Following the rules laid out by the ancestors' is, therefore, one way of defining the adat law system—but that would be a very normative and static definition (Keane 1995). The term in eastern Sumbanese language Kambera that is roughly equivalent to the Indonesian word *adat* is *huri*, which 'can variously be translated as "culture", "way of life", "custom", "religion", "rite", and with regard to the "demeanour" of the individual, "behaviour" and "manners"' (Forth 1981, 427 n1). At present, Sumbanese often use the term *adat* to refer to this variety of meanings, and in this article we use *adat* accordingly.

The customary rules match the material context of the island. As an agricultural society, the Sumbanese sought ways of subsisting on an island that was only marginally fertile. Many settlements were isolated, and without roads trading products was difficult. But labour was relatively scarce compared to land. How much a household could produce depended on the size of the labour force that could be mobilised. Therefore many *adat* rules in Sumba regulate human reproduction and the use of human labour.

The social organisation corresponding with *adat* rules divides the community into patrilineal, patrilocal clans. Clan (*kabihu*) membership is the prime factor in self-identification. The clans relate to each other either as bride-giver or bride-taker, and there is no direct exchange of wives. The members of these clans maintain their social relations through ceremonial exchange. Horses, buffalo and golden ornaments are the main items of exchange that bride-takers give, while the bride-givers reciprocate with pigs and hand-woven *ikat* cloth. With every act of exchange the relations are reconfirmed, and the consequence is that those involved in the exchanges are reassured of their inclusion in the clan community. This is important when households depend on assistance from their fellow community members at peak moments of labour demand.

Internally the clans are differentiated into classes: nobility, freemen and slaves, which means there is a strong hierarchy within the community (Twikromo 2008). The core residential unit of a clan is the main village of origin (*kampung, paraingu*) in which the clan leaders' houses are situated. The household of a noble family (husband wife and children) is extended through inclusion of lower-status clan members who do most of the household chores, work on the land and take care of the animals. In concentric circles around the central *kampung* there are houses belonging to people with lower social status who live with only their nuclear family members in simple houses close to the fields. Several of these villages (*paraingu*) with the surrounding lands (*tana*) comprise a traditional domain. Each domain has leaders from the nobility class, called *maramba*, and a spiritual leader, the *ratu*.

Before colonial interventions there was no government above the *maramba* and their traditional domains (Forth 1981, 45).

Adat norms set the terms of communication and cooperation between the customary classes, creating a system of customary clientalism. Within the clan, the norm is that people share and help each other out in times of need.⁵ However, Janet Hoskins noted that in practice ‘everyone gives credit to a wealthy man, but no one is generous to a poor man. Generosity is always linked to the expected repayment’ (1994, 198).

The consequence of patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence is that a woman moves to the house of her husband after marriage. She does not inherit land from her own parents, but becomes a member of the clan of her husband; a fundamental gender difference in Sumbanese adat, apart from the class differentiation already mentioned above. Individual members are socially defined in terms of their position within the clan, and not as individuals per se. In summary, Sumbanese people are not equal before the law—the adat law.

So far this description has highlighted only some of the basic principles of the adat system in Sumba, related to land, labour, capital and social differentiation. There are many more nuances and further complications due to change processes on the island to which adat responds. And for some new situations there are no customary rules available.

A Case Study of Adat and Land Acquisition

One of those recent changes is land acquisition for large-scale agricultural projects. In the past, government officials and entrepreneurs developed plans for such projects in Sumba, but hardly any initiatives materialised (McCarthy, Vel, and Afiff 2012). However, recently, big Indonesian companies have begun investing in Sumba, not only with plans on paper, but with real land preparation, plant nurseries and building activities (Vel, McCarthy, and Zen 2016; Makambombu 2016). The case described below illustrates that there is no agreement on who has authority over adat land, or who can rightfully represent adat communities in negotiations about land. It also shows that non-elites and people critical about plantation projects are excluded from negotiations about transforming adat land into plantations. The case furthermore reveals how a plantation company has opportunistically used adat symbols, and strengthened power imbalances within the adat community to serve its economic interests.

In 2012, one of Indonesia’s largest business conglomerates, the Djarum Group, was exploring areas of Sumba for expanding sugar production. They sought a large area of empty land with sufficient water, suitable soil and climate conditions for growing sugar cane, and for deploying mechanical harvesting techniques. A previous attempt to establish sugarcane cultivation in the west of the island by another conglomerate, the Wilmar Group, had not been successful (see Vel, McCarthy, and Zen 2016), but Djarum opted for East Sumba. The district government welcomes large-

scale agricultural investments because of their positive effect on the district gross domestic product. After a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by the company and the district head, the district government designated land for the company to acquire in several areas of the coastal plains, areas where other plantation companies had previously been active, in particular a cotton plantation. The head of the tourism department heard about this plan and offered land belonging to his clan as a site for the sugarcane nursery. The district issued a location permit in 2015 for exploring nearly 53,000 hectares for sugarcane production. Included was an area in sub-district Umalulu, close to Wanga Village.

The permit described the land as 'state land', but as the Wanga village head explained in an interview, the villagers viewed the land as common clan property that had become part of the territory (*swapraja*) of the Raja of Umalulu during colonial times. Using this historical argument to claim his authority over adat land, a descendant of that raja took part in the negotiations between the district government and the sugarcane company and gave his approval for the company to use the land. The company treated him as the leader representing his people.

The villagers had a different view concerning land ownership. They argued that the land is the adat land of two specific clans and has never been state property, and that the raja's descendant was not 'the lord of the land'. When the company explained its plantation plans to the local population in June 2015 its spokesmen said that the company would not occupy any land currently in use by the local farmers, nor use their grazing pastures or destroy forests. They also assured them that the plantation would not have a negative effect on local rice irrigation. In other words: the company would not harm the local people's access to land and water. At the end of that information meeting, all attendees were requested to sign four copies of the attendance list, which the company later used as evidence of local farmers' approval of the plans.⁶

In the following year, the company started preparation works, and it offered the villagers an amount of money per individual household, using the expression *uang sirih pinang* (areca nut and betel money). *Uang sirih pinang* is, according to custom, a symbolic gift to the landlord clan confirming good social relations and allowing temporary use for growing one's own food. However, the sugarcane company interpreted acceptance of this gift as permission to use the villager's land for establishing the plantation. The company did not directly hand out the *sirih pinang* money to the villagers but instead asked the village government to distribute the funds. It also assigned some members of the village elite as labour recruiters. Both tasks increased power imbalances in the village. After only two years the largest impact that the plantation would have on village life became clear. Despite initial promises, the company used so much water upstream of the village that it harmed rice irrigation, and even caused shortages of clean drinking water. There were hardly any adat rules or arguments that the villagers could use in protection of their water resources.

Meanwhile in 2017 a new and democratically elected village head began to protest against the company's activities. The company officials refused direct contact and

referred all protest and questions to Raja Umalulu's grandson, with whom they had negotiated previously. Because the latter protected the interests of the company, protest against the company thus was perceived as protest against this adat leader, in other words, as subversive behaviour within the larger adat community.

In Wanga Village counter forces at work weakened support for adat arguments that contested land dispossession. Some villagers—among them Savunese who could not make adat land claims—welcomed the plantation because it offered them employment. One of them described it as 'a gift of God'. Other local proponents of the plantation stood to benefit from the compensation payments that the company promised to offer land owners.

In early 2017 AMAN came to Sumba in support of the opponents of the plantation who argued that the land was adat land and could not be taken by the plantation company without proper consent from the adat landowners. However, determining who the most legitimate adat owners were was not easy and caused disputes among clans. AMAN used their approach of participatory mapping, and this revealed the difference between the villagers who actually cultivated the land and those who claimed adat land ownership. The intervention of AMAN gradually turned the focus of the protest to land ownership and compensation; in this process, attention moved away from the issues that had been prominent in initial protests, such as the shortage of irrigation water in Wanga due to the plantation's water grabbing.

This case study touches upon many issues regarding adat regulation—whether through obeying traditional norms and values, or by applying more specific adat rules. Who has authority concerning use of adat land? Who can rightfully represent adat communities? Why did the plantation company use adat symbols in seeking approval from the local farmers? How did the company strengthen power imbalances within the adat community for its economic interests? One way of answering these questions is by analysing the differing ways in which adat is being strategically framed.

Framing Adat

How we think about, describe and analyse adat depends on what we want to know and in which academic, policy or discursive context the debate is located. Adat researchers—but also politicians, journalists or activists who refer to adat—focus their audience's attention on certain aspects of adat and place them within a field of meaning. They influence the perceptions of their audience, not only by providing information and explanation, but also by indicating how to think about the issue at hand. In theoretical terms this activity is referred to as framing. The concept of 'frame' originates in the work of Gregory Bateson who coined the term in theorising social interaction through interactive messages that operate as a form of meta-communication to convey the sender's understanding of a particular action or situation (Bateson 1972). Referring to a picture frame separating a painting from its background is a way of inviting the viewer to create an interpretation, a frame serves to provide meaning to what the viewer sees or experiences. Producing such frames is a core

activity of social movements, like the adat movement in Indonesia (van der Muur 2019, 77). A social movement needs a collectively shared, coherent view that identifies aggrieved victims and those who are to blame (Benford and Snow 2000, 616). Such framing commonly uses concepts that are already familiar and have wide social acceptance, in order to mobilise a wide constituency. Indigeneity social movements in Indonesia use adat as a framing device, as a concept that ties history, land and law (Henley and Davidson 2008). For the context of policy processes—applicable for the case of land acquisition for plantations—framing is defined as ‘a process in and through which policy-relevant actors inter-subjectively construct the meanings of the policy-relevant situations in which they are involved, whether directly or as onlookers or stakeholders’ (van Hulst and Yanow 2016, 97). More concretely, the actors who are doing the framing engage in sense-making, selecting, naming, categorising and storytelling (van Hulst and Yanow 2016, 92). Framing is an analytical approach commonly used in studies about access to justice (Bedner and Vel 2010) that has recently been applied to adat studies.

Five Ways of Framing Adat in Sumba

In this section we link the case study presented above to five common ways of framing adat in Sumba (the forms of adat documented in the anthropological literature), highlighting the context in which framing narratives developed; how the dominant actors selected, named and categorised matters according to their interests; and how they created narratives around adat.

Adat Combined with the Christian Religion

The idea that adat is flexible and adjustable if circumstances require can be linked to a discussion on the question of whether adat and Christianity are opposed or can be combined. Since the second part of the nineteenth century, Dutch Protestant Christian missionaries have been active on Sumba. The oldest written sources about adat in Sumba are articles, reports and letters of colonial government officials and the Dutch missionaries (van den End 1987, 44). One missionary while justifying the mission’s interventions in Sumba—before an audience of church authorities in the Netherlands who were deciding on mission priorities—depicted the situation in Sumba around the turn of the twentieth century as one of chaos and violence (Wielenga 1913). He explained that in the nineteenth century, Sumba was known to government and traders from outside as the island of slaves, horses and sandalwood. Sumbanese leaders would send their troops to raid villages outside their own territory, and barter the captives for rice or gun powder with traders from Ende in Flores and Makassar in Sulawesi. The commercial demand for slaves thereby reinforced and intensified the continuation of Sumbanese social class differentiation. Captured slaves were treated as trade commodities, pure labour and ‘the object of the big men’s cruelty and bloodthirstiness’ (Wielenga 1913, 127). This missionary’s framing

of adat was very negative, connecting adat to slavery and despotism, and arguing that the Christian religion together with state law should replace adat.

However, while living on Sumba Island the missionaries found themselves in another discursive context. They observed that for Sumbanese government leaders, reverends, teachers and congregation members, adat was the local legal system that pertained to all aspects of life, including rules for dispute settlement, family law and land governance. In the 1920–30s the Protestant Christian missionaries conducted heated debates about whether all of adat should be abolished or just parts of it (van den End 1987, 340–342). Proponents of the latter course argued that praying, worshipping and offering to the ancestors—the religious part of adat—should be prohibited, but that ethical, legal, economic and social customs could be maintained and adjusted to Christian norms (Lambooy 1933).

The Authority of Adat Elites to Rule and Represent

Government officials were the actors who deployed a second way of framing adat. By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial government needed local officials for the governance system of indirect rule (McWilliam 2006, 48). The government selected some of the traditional domain leaders and appointed each of them as the overall leader or raja (king) of a bounded administrative territory (*swapraja*, self-governing territories) while serving as local rulers for indirect rule (Kapita 1976b). With their position in the colonial rule system, the raja increased their power relative to other customary leaders, which created hierarchy between previously autonomous clan leaders. Because internal affairs were a matter which the rajas could deal with according to their own customs, the colonial indirect rule system supported the continuation of adat law. The interest of the colonial government was to create a safe environment for legal trade, considering that in the nineteenth century the sea around Sumba was not safe for passing ships, and slave trade was by then illegal (Wielenga 1913). A military campaign in 1906 was aimed at the ‘pacification’ of the island. The missions then established schools and invited the children of the raja and other nobility as their first pupils. The effect was that these elite children became the first generation of educated Sumbanese, who then could serve in the local government administration. Consequently, Sumbanese of the highest traditional social class also held the highest local government positions. State and adat rule could coexist. An article written by a Dutch government official in 1950 describes how the Council of Sumba (SumbaRaad)—the governance institution consisting of Sumbanese leaders—prioritised adat over state law as much as possible in matters relating to land and forests (Ouwehand 1951). The official noticed that in the discussions about regulations for preventing bush fires, tensions existed between the interests of the nobility as owners of large herds of horses, and commoner clan members who depended on cultivating food crops. After Indonesian independence the trend continued and local nobility occupied local state leadership positions. This led to a positive framing of adat: adat could coexist with state rule, and it justified the leadership of local elites.

Up to the time of writing, the normative elite narrative continues in the arguments that descendants of the raja are most entitled to represent the local population and their adat rights, especially in negotiations with plantation companies. The narrative also claims that the lower classes are well protected and taken care of within the social community of the clan.

Adat, Cultural Identity and Clan Hierarchy

Meanwhile, adat was not only a tool of elite politics but also the term used for the customary rules and norms that the Sumbanese practised in daily life and at ceremonial events. Therefore, the third framing of adat concerns Sumbanese cultural identity. Foreign scholars had various objectives in conducting studies to understand local culture. Louis Onvlee described many customary rules in a normative way, together with his local researcher Oemboe Hina Kapita (Onvlee 1973; Kapita 1976a). Their 'project' was to translate the Bible into vernacular languages and to do that they had to acquire a deep understanding of the local culture and norms. From the 1970s on, foreign anthropologists became fascinated by the structure and performance of adat—defined in the widest cultural sense—in eastern Indonesia, including Sumba (Forth 1981; Needham 1987; Adams 1974; Goh 1991; Forshee 2000). The studies investigated, for example, the symbolic meaning of weaving patterns, ritual speech and the meaning and performance of rituals, with a community-internal focus. In the 1980s other foreign anthropologists conducted thematic studies in Sumba. For example, Hoskins (1994) studied the concept of time; Webb Keane (1997, 2007) the articulation of the vernacular with a universal religion. While the central questions in these studies addressed academic debates within anthropology, they also provide a wealth of information on local identity politics (Kuipers 1990; Hoskins 1986; Vel 2008; Twikromo 2008). Their informants were mostly local elites who could explain best about culture and ways of thinking, and who had mastered the skill of ritual speech (Keane 1997). These studies include subjects that are very relevant for understanding present-day adat land politics. For example, the case study above mentioned how the plantation company paid *uang sirih pinang* as compensation for land use. That concept traditionally referred to a material gift (horses and metal pendants) that a tenant would give to the 'lord of the land' clan for using some land while securing the patronage of the land-owning clan (Forth 1981, 251–253). It gave use rights within a specific social relationship, but that is not equal to a modern renting contract.

In the *Reformasi* period of the early 2000s there was renewed domestic scholarly interest in local cultures, and Sumbanese intellectuals started to write about their own culture. Many Sumbanese who had lived in other parts of Indonesia as students, or worked in academia or the bureaucracy, became interested in their traditional culture which they referred to as 'adat'. The discursive context of regional autonomy occurred after the end of the New Order period (1966–98) in which the promotion of local cultural identity was regarded as subverting the nation's unity. Some of these intellectuals felt the urge to codify adat, describing the rules and procedures of the

main adat ceremonies in East Sumba (Woha 2007). Umbu Pura Woha's book, for example, is written from the perspective of a state official, commenting that 'the implementation of adat is often not in accordance with the actual adat law (of East Sumba), in particular when assessed on whether it contributes to progress or other national development goals' (Woha 2007). It illustrates how state and adat can be aligned. Woha aimed to create a guide to authentic adat (*adat yang sebenarnya*), implicitly claiming timelessness, while paying no attention to differences in interpretation or changes in what people accept as the adat rules. Following the earlier work of Kapita (1976a), Woha's book also contains a description of the clans residing in East Sumba. Such local historiography provides arguments for legitimising the land claims of particular clans in disputes with other clans.

Adat as Social Security and Burden for Community Members

The fourth way of framing emphasises adat as a cluster of rules governing the local economy, including ceremonial exchange. Adat in this sense concerns the shared values with regard to the material and social sustenance of the community (Gudeman 2001, 27), which Andrew McWilliam (2009, 163) has referred to as 'the spiritual commons' in the context of eastern Indonesia. In practical terms, access to agricultural land, organising help to build houses, working in the fields, arrangements for sharing and distributing food, deciding who would be a suitable wife or husband, settling disputes and determining appropriate sanctions are all daily matters regulated by adat rules (Vel 1994). The local expression 'arranging adat' refers to the material reciprocal obligations in the ceremonial exchange between households, mostly around weddings and funerals. Those who act in accordance with customary rules, position themselves in the traditional social hierarchy (lower or higher, and bride-giver or bride-taker) and confirm their community membership when they give the type and size of gifts that their peers and the ancestors expect (Keane 1997, 181–182). Not showing up at a ceremonial event or presenting another type or a low-quality gift is embarrassing. The consequence of such bad behaviour is that it will reduce the potential reciprocal gifts and help in the future. In a society with many natural hazards and risks, and very little formal social security arrangements, such reciprocal help is vital for survival. But such help may, at the time of writing, be just theoretical, due to changing circumstances. Companies from outside the island have entered the economy, government intervention has become very important in villages, local elites now share or combine adat with democratically elected leadership, and villagers are now in communication with the world outside their village. However, the ceremonial economy has not been replaced by the market economy but, rather, the two systems co-exist (McWilliam 2009, 174).

Many poor villagers complain in daily conversations that adat obligations are a heavy burden, but they see no escape options. In our research on household vulnerability in 2016 we found, for example, that in a relatively poor village 42 per cent of the respondents mentioned adat obligations as one of the factors causing household crisis. State social protection programmes provide some relief to poor households

but, in structural terms, such households depend on support of their traditional social networks. Realising this dependency, they will not easily protest against leaders in those networks—their own adat elites. The strength of the plantation company's strategy to adopt the raja's grandson as the representative of the local population and refer all protest to him, lies in that dependency of the community members on their elites. Piers Gillespie pointed out this dimension of power, arguing that the powerful prevent the formation of grievances by shaping perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way as to ensure the acceptance of a certain role in the existing order (Gillespie 2016, 312).

Finally, for some important problems that commoners experience in daily life, there are no adat rules available for resolution. For example, concerning water, there are local rules in areas where droughts occur frequently that pertain to the right to dig a well and protection of springs, but these rules apply to the traditional and limited use of the water resources by local community members only. Water shortages and water pollution caused by a large plantation are problems beyond the scope of such adat rules. Therefore, indigeneity NGOs that assist local communities in their struggle against water and land grabbing rather concentrate on adat related to land—even though it might divert attention from the most pressing community problems.

Sumbanese Adat in National Adat Campaigns

The national NGO AMAN has been the most important institutional advocate for indigenous rights in Indonesia since its founding in 1999 (Henley and Davidson 2008, 822). Its framing of adat supports the national campaigns for reclaiming adat land from the state, in particular from the Ministry of Forestry. In this perspective, Sumba provides another case for reference in AMAN's national framing of adat as the human rights of indigenous people. The activities on Sumba contribute constituency (on paper) for AMAN in gaining support from the president for recognition of adat communities and their forest land and pushing the parliament to pass the Bill on Recognition of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

While AMAN has built a network of branch NGOs in the regions over many years, the branch in Sumba was established only recently, in February 2017.⁷ The list of demands that resulted from the first meeting indicates how AMAN's national framing of adat is applied to Sumba, for example, by assuming that adat communities are clearly delineated and that there is a separation between state and adat communities. The recommendations are all directed towards the four district governments of Sumba: including to 'make a district regulation about adat communities', 'cancel the plantation permits that the government has issued', and 'provide government funding for rebuilding major adat houses'. All demands support adat community claims in general, but there seems to be no discussion on leadership, representation, local adat land rules or the impact of legalisation of adat communities on the internal distribution of rights to land and resources. Such a helicopter perspective on adat in Sumba is also clear from AMAN's website that shows the mapping of adat

communities—indicating that the population of the island is conceived as one adat community.⁸ This notion supports the political claims by local leaders that they can represent the whole population of the plantation area. Opportunities thus exist for the elite to capture plantation benefits when the authority for adat representation in land deals is not defined and when government subsidies are used to restore adat houses as power symbols of the elite.

Conclusion

How does strategic adat framing provide discursive power in land acquisition politics? In general, strategic framing contributes to the legitimization of the actors' claims and draws allies to the cause they promote, thereby increasing their power in negotiations (Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011, 170).

In the case of Sumba categories of actors legitimise their positions regarding plantation development by using adat arguments in contrasting ways. First, adat leaders use adat arguments to strengthen their position. In negotiations with companies, a member of the nobility class usually acts as though he were the landlord for the communal lands of his clan's domain. While the company officials gladly accept such a single representative, in Sumba representation of customary land ownership is always contested and the self-acclaimed representative has no full mandate of his traditional domain members. When adat leaders also occupy a high-rank position in the district government they can accumulate the powers derived from both positions, combining support from their clan members and access to clan resources with state power. In the case of the plantation project in East Sumba they can refer to adat when it suits their interests, and to state law in the opposite situation.

For the plantation company, adat law is not a threat when it can be used in favour of company interests. It opens options for divide and rule strategies. To invite one single representative of all the land owners to the land acquisition negotiations appeals to the historical leadership with which district government-cum adat elites can identify. The argument appears still valid in practice, despite the raja's representative legitimacy being based on a colonial invention, which has lost its meaning in the present situation of district democracy. The raja's grandson's self-ascribed role as representative land owner was contested and created disputes between clans that referred to their own versions of the history of prior land occupation. Such clan disputes undermine the potential of a protest movement, however. Directing *sirih pinang* money to selected village elites had a similar effect of increasing tensions between village factions. The company used the symbolic meaning of *sirih pinang* money—a sign of good social relations—as another way of asserting the legitimacy of its actions and hence suppressing protest.

How the operation of AMAN's common national framing of adat will work out in East Sumba is ambiguous. Mapping adat land might justify the claims of adat elites, including state officials who live in the capital town and are alienated from their clan territories. Adat land mapping as a core activity also implies inviting solutions

for land problems only, diverting attention away from the problems of pollution and water shortage. The combination of the company's focus on *sirih pinang* money and AMAN's emphasis on adat land mapping easily leads to a shared interest in an agreement on compensation payments for registered land owners and ignoring other issues, such as water grabbing.

Meanwhile, it is hard for common community members to link adat to their interests in keeping access to land and water secure and safe. For them adat pertains primarily to meeting their material obligations of ceremonial exchange, which will assure their inclusion in the community and provide informal social security. That comes at the cost of dependency on the patronage of adat leaders and prevents them from turning their grievances into protest or legal actions.

A general lesson from this article is that national pro-adat policies can harm the interests in the common adat community members because of the elites' capture of associated political processes. In circumstances like those on Sumba, the factors facilitating such harm include: 'adat community' as the majority of the population; internal social hierarchy and patronage; merging of adat elite and district government; and co-optation of adat community representation by land-grabbing corporations. We recommend that future academic research on adat that is linked to natural resources pay more attention to the adat community's internal differentiation and interests, and analyse the use of adat rules in the context of modern power politics.

Acknowledgements

We thank Emilie Wellfelt, Ahmad Dhiaulhaq, Willem van der Muur, Micah Fisher, Kathryn Robinson and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and constructive comments on earlier versions of this article.

The authors acknowledge with thanks the funding assistance provided by Leiden University's Asian Modernities and Traditions (ATM) towards the production of this special double issue.

Funding

The field work in Sumba for this article was part of our research for the project funded by The Australian Research Council (Discovery Project DP140103828) 'Household Vulnerability, Food Security and the Politics of Social Protection in Indonesia: Towards an Integrated Approach'.

Notes

- [1] *Bali Property Indonesia*. Accessed August 16 2019. <https://www.bali-property-indonesia.com/>.
- [2] Population of the sub-districts Waingapu city and Kampera are combined as 'urban population'.
- [3] This is a well-informed estimate by Makambombu because official statistics on ethnic composition of the population are lacking.
- [4] For elaborate normative descriptions of Sumbanese society, culture and traditions see Umbu Hina Kapita (1976a) and Forth (1981).

- [5] For more detail and nuance about general, balanced and negative reciprocity see Sahlins (1974), Vel (1994) and Keane (1997).
- [6] Makambombu interviewed the former village head of Wanga Village (2008–15), Wanga, East Sumba, June 23 2017.
- [7] Information about the first meeting of AMAN Sumba and the advocacy demands were published on the AMAN website on February 27 2017. Accessed April 3 2019. <http://www.aman.or.id/resolusi-dan-rekomendasi-muswil-aman-sumba/>.
- [8] The map of AMAN members across Indonesia is published on the AMAN website. Accessed April 3 2019. <http://www.aman.or.id/peta/>.

References

- Adams, Marie Jeanne. 1974. "Symbols of the Organized Community in East Sumba, Indonesia." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 130 (2–3): 324–347. doi:10.1163/22134379-90002699.
- Bakker, Laurens. 2009. "Adat, Land, and Popular Democracy: Dayak Politics in East Kalimantan." *Borneo Research Bulletin* 40: 202–220.
- Bateson, Gregory. 1972. *A Theory of Play and Fantasy: Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York: Ballantine.
- Bedner, Adriaan W., and Jacqueline A.C. Vel. 2010. "An Analytical Framework for Empirical Research on Access to Justice." *Law, Social Justice and Global Development Journal* 1: 1–29. Accessed September 12 2019. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2010_1/bedner_vel/bedner_vel.pdf.
- Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (1): 611–639. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611.
- BPS. 2018. *East Sumba in Figures 2018*. Waingapu: BPS Statistics of East Sumba Regency.
- Forshee, Jill. 2000. "Shifting Visions: Along the Routes of Sumba Cloth." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 1 (2): 1–25. doi:10.1080/14442210010001705900.
- Forth, Gregory L. 1981. *Rindi: An Ethnographic Study of a Traditional Domain in Eastern Indonesia*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Gillespie, Piers. 2016. "People, Participation, Power: The Upstream Complexity of Indonesian Oil Palm Plantations." In *The Oil Palm Complex: Smallholders, Agribusiness and the State in Indonesia and Malaysia*, edited by Rob Cramb and John F. McCarthy, 301–326. Singapore: NUS Press.
- Goh, Taro. 1991. "Sumba Bibliography." *Occasional Paper, Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies*. Canberra: The Australian National University.
- Gudeman, Stephen. 2001. *The Anthropology of Economy: Community, Market and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Hall, Derek, Phillip Hirsch, and Tania Murray Li. 2011. *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Henley, David, and Jamie S. Davidson. 2008. "In the Name of Adat: Regional Perspectives on Reform, Tradition, and Democracy in Indonesia." *Modern Asian Studies* 42 (4): 815–852. doi:10.1017/S0026749X07003083.
- Hoskins, Janet. 1994. *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hoskins, Janet A. 1986. "So My Name Shall Live: Stone-Dragging and Grave-Building in Kodi, West Sumba." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde* 142 (1): 31–51. doi:10.1163/22134379-90003367.

- Kapita, Umbu Hina. 1976a. *Masyarakat Sumba dan Adat Istiadatnya* [The Sumbanese People and Their Customs]. Waingapu: Gereja Kristen Sumba.
- Kapita, Umbu Hina. 1976b. *Sumba di Dalam Jangkauan Jaman* [Sumba Through the Ages]. Waingapu: Gereja Kristen Sumba.
- Keane, Webb. 1995. "Religious Change and Historical Reflection in Anakalang, West Sumba, Indonesia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 26 (02): 289–306. doi:10.1017/S0022463400007116.
- Keane, Webb. 1997. *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Keane, Webb. 2007. *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kuipers, Joel Corneal. 1990. *Power in Performance: The Creation of Textual Authority in Weyewa Ritual Speech*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lambooy, P. J. 1933. "Adat." *De Macedoniër* 37: 289–302.
- Li, Tania. 2007. "Adat in Central Sulawesi: Contemporary Deployments." In *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics: The Deployment of Adat From Colonialism to Indigenism*, edited by Jamie S. Davidson and David Henley, 337–370. London: Routledge.
- Li, Tania Murray. 2014. *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Makambombu, Stepanus. 2016. "Pembangunan Sumba Timur, Mau Ke Mana? Catatan Refleksi Masuknya Investasi Di Sumba Timur" [Development of East Sumba, in which direction? Reflections on the influx of large investment projects in East Sumba]. Waingapu.com, 5 November. Accessed August 16 2019. <https://www.waingapu.com/pembangunan-sumba-timur-mau-ke-mana-catatan-refleksi-masuknya-investasi-di-sumba-timur-bagian-ii/>.
- McCarthy, John F., Jacqueline A.C. Vel, and Suraya Afiff. 2012. "Trajectories of Land Acquisition and Enclosure: Development Schemes, Virtual Land Grabs, and Green Acquisitions in Indonesia's Outer Islands." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39 (2): 521–549. doi:10.1080/03066150.2012.671768.
- McWilliam, Andrew. 2006. "Historical Reflections on Customary Land Rights in Indonesia." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 7 (1): 45–64. doi:10.1080/14442210600551859.
- McWilliam, Andrew. 2009. "The Spiritual Commons: Some Immaterial Aspects of Community Economies in Eastern Indonesia." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 20 (2): 163–177. doi:10.1111/j.1757-6547.2009.00024.x.
- Needham, Rodney. 1987. *Mamboru: History and Structure in a Domain in Northwestern Sumba*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Onvlee, Louis. 1973. *Cultuur als Antwoord* [Culture as Answer]. The Hague: Brill.
- Ouwehand, C. 1951. "Adatrecht En Daerahwetgeving Met Betrekking Tot Bosbescherming Op Sumba" [Adat law and Regional Regulations Concerning Forest Protection on Sumba]. *Indonesië* 4: 536–549.
- Sahlins, Marshall David. 1974. *Stone Age Economics*. London: Tavistock.
- "Tanah Adat di Sumba Dipetakan" [Adat land in Sumba is being mapped]. 2018. *Kompas*, 29 January. Accessed August 16 2019. <https://kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2018/01/29/tanah-adat-di-sumba-dipetakan/>.
- Tejada, Laura, and Stephan Rist. 2017. "Seeing Land Deals Through the Lens of the 'Land–Water Nexus': The Case of Biofuel Production in Piura, Peru." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45 (7): 1247–1271. doi:10.1080/03066150.2016.1259220.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Twikromo, Yohanes Argo. 2008. "The Local Elite and the Appropriation of Modernity: A Case in East Sumba, Indonesia." PhD Diss., Radboud University Nijmegen.

- van den End, Th. 1987. *Gereformeerde Zending op Sumba: Een Bronnenpublicatie* [Protestant Christian Missions on Sumba: A Publication of Sources]. Alphen aan den Rijn: Raad voor de Zending der Ned. Herv. Kerk.
- van der Muur, Willem E. 2019. "Land Rights and the Forces of Adat in Democratizing Indonesia." PhD Diss., Van Vollenhoven Institute, Leiden University.
- van Hulst, Merlijn, and Dvora Yanow. 2016. "From Policy 'Frames' to 'Framing' Theorizing a More Dynamic, Political Approach." *The American Review of Public Administration* 46 (1): 92–112. doi:10.1177/0275074014533142.
- Vel, Jacqueline A.C. 1994. "The Uma-Economy: Indigenous Economics and Development Work in Lawonda, Sumba." PhD Diss., Wageningen Agricultural University.
- Vel, Jacqueline. 2008. *Uma Politics: An Ethnography of Democratization in West Sumba, Indonesia, 1986–2006*. Leiden: KITLV/Brill.
- Vel, Jacqueline A.C., and Stepanus Makambombu. 2010. "Access to Agrarian Justice in Sumba, Eastern Indonesia." *Law, Social Justice and Global Development Journal* 15: 2–22. Accessed August 23 2019. https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2010_1/vel_makambombu/vel_makambombu.pdf.
- Vel, Jacqueline A.C., John F. McCarthy, and Zahari Zen. 2016. "The Conflicted Nature of Food Security Policy: Balancing Rice, Sugar and Palm Oil in Indonesia." *Anthropological Forum* 26 (3): 233–247. doi:10.1080/00664677.2016.1190919.
- von Benda-Beckmann, Franz, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann. 2013. *Political and Legal Transformations of an Indonesian Polity: The Nagari from Colonisation to Decentralisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiner, James F., and Katie Glaskin. 2006. "Introduction: The (Re-)Invention of Indigenous Laws and Customs." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 7 (1): 1–13. doi:10.1080/14442210600551826.
- Wielenga, Douwe Klaas. 1913. *Soemba Voorheen en Thans* [Sumba Previously and Currently]. *Report Indisch Genootschap*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Woha, Umbu Pura. 2007. *Sejarah, Musyawarah, dan Adat Istiadat Sumba Timur* [History, Consensus, Culture and Customs of East Sumba]. Kupang: Cipta Sarana Jaya.