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## The Land and The Sources of Livelihood for the Sakai Tribe in Bathin Solapan District, Bengkalis Regency

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### ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the existing life of the Sakai Tribe in the context of land use and natural resources. The method used was qualitative by interviewing village government, traditional leaders, women's leaders, and youth leaders. The results of this research found that the source of the problems that are faced by the Sakai Tribe came from unequal control of the land and the natural resources. Besides it is not unbalanced, there is also an element of control that was carried out without legal means. The natural resources and the resources that were previously abundant and used for the livelihood of the Sakai tribe are gradually being controlled by the companies and the residents outside the Sakai traditional community. This condition causes their sociocultural system to experience changes with fading collective values becoming individualistic in the context of the use of natural resources. The conditions experienced by the Sakai Tribe need to be a concern to the stakeholders. They need social policy intervention to fulfill and protect the rights of indigenous peoples as regulated by the constitution.

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has various ethnic groups that possess a diversity of local cultural traditions, each with unique characteristics. These ethnic groups live side by side, each with different backgrounds. These geographical conditions contribute to the diverse lifestyles of the people in Indonesia, influenced by their respective cultures as a legacy from previous generations (Upton, 2017).

Through its various ethnic cultures and tribes, an indigenous community has formed that inhabits areas throughout the archipelago, each with its own distinct characteristics. These indigenous communities have existed for hundreds of years. Different terms are used to refer to them, including indigenous legal communities, customary legal community units, traditional communities, and isolated indigenous communities. The existence of Indigenous communities is recognized by the state in Article 18B, paragraph (2), of the 1945 Constitution, which states, "The state recognizes and respects customary law community units and their traditional rights". Additionally, Article 67,

paragraph (1b), of Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry specifies that customary law communities have the right to conduct forest management activities in accordance with applicable customary law, provided these activities do not conflict with existing laws (Jayantiari et al., 2024).

In Indonesia, several well-known indigenous communities include the Badui Tribe, also known as the Kanekes People, in Banten; the Asmat Tribe in Papua; the Dayak Tribe in Kalimantan; the Sakai Tribe in Riau; the Anak Dalam Tribe; and the Rimba People in Jambi, among others. Based on their livelihood systems, indigenous communities can be categorized into hunting and gathering, farming, and settled farming (Wangmo et al., 2024). Each livelihood system has distinct characteristics. Customary law communities existed before the formation of the Republic of Indonesia. From the beginning, these communities have controlled the land for their livelihoods, customs, and religious rituals (Handayani & Suparno, 2023).

The land they control is regarded as their own. They develop rules governing its use, control, and release. Therefore, experts assert that the rights of customary law communities to land are inherent rights essential to their identity and existence (Sahari, 2021). However, many indigenous legal communities in Indonesia currently face a loss of access to natural resources and land, threatening both their survival and the recognition of their rights by the state.

The Sakai tribe is one of the seven indigenous tribes that inhabit the Riau region, especially in the areas around the Bengkalis and Siak Regencies (Pawennari Hijang, 2023). The Sakai people are one of the seven indigenous tribes living in Riau. Their lives are closely related to nature, especially land which is the main source of livelihood. The land for the Sakai tribe is not just land for farming or hunting, but also an important part of their cultural and spiritual identity. Land is considered an ancestral heritage that must be protected and maintained for the continuity of life for the next generation (Munandar & Mikail, 2022).

In the Sakai tribe's custom system, the land is open to every indigenous citizen. However, in its use and management, every indigenous resident is obliged to negotiate with Bathin or his assistants, especially if what is to be managed is abandoned land. Meanwhile, in terms of the boundaries, the claim on the ownership of a plot of land is based on the particular trees that they plant.

In daily life, the Sakai tribe uses the land for various economic activities such as agriculture, hunting, and gathering (Mardani, 2019). They plant food crops such as rice, sweet potatoes, and vegetables for daily needs. Besides that, they also rely on forest products such as rattan, resin, and wood to fulfill their economic and traditional needs. Hunting and gathering activities are still an important part of their lives, although the pressures of modernization and environmental changes are increasingly reducing their space for carrying out these traditional activities (Fina Musta'ina, 2017).

However, the life of the Sakai tribe is experiencing major challenges with the expansion of the plantation and forestry industry. Many lands that were previously their traditional territories have been converted into oil palm plantations or industrial forest plantations now. It doesn't only reduce their access to natural resources but also

threatens the sustainability of traditions and culture that really depend on land and forests.

This condition almost occurs and is experienced in the villages where the Sakai tribe live. In Bumbung Village, there are currently around 81 heads of families with more than 300 family members who are also facing the same problem. The conflicts of land ownership and management often occur between the Sakai tribe and the big companies. In many cases, the Sakai tribe feels marginalized because they do not have formal legality over the land that they have inhabited and managed for generations to generations. This uncertainty law makes them vulnerable to eviction and losing access to their main source of livelihood. On the other hand, the government and the companies often use formal legal arguments to claim the rights to the land which is a source of livelihood for the Sakai tribe.

The efforts to defend traditional lands and protect the Sakai tribe's livelihood sources are often carried out through social movements and advocacy (Muhammad Deckaryan Lexa Justicio, 2021). The Sakai tribe with the non-governmental organizations and the civil society groups have attempted to demand the recognition of their customary land rights. Although there has been some progress, this struggle is far from over (Entah, 2017). The formal recognition of the Sakai tribe's traditional lands is considered an important step to protect their rights and ensure the sustainability of their livelihoods.

The climate change and environmental degradation also increase the burden on the Sakai tribe. The changes in rainfall patterns, deforestation, and the destruction of the forest ecosystems have affected their ability to farm, hunt, and gather. The once fertile land is now experiencing degradation, reducing the productivity and the crop yields. This situation forces them to look for other alternatives, which are often not in line with the traditional values they adhere to (Putra & Effendi, 2017). Based on the description above, this research aims to describe the existing life of the Sakai Tribe in the context of dynamics of the use of land and natural resources.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This research was carried out in Bumbung Village, Bathin Solapan District, Bengkalis Regency. The approach used is descriptive qualitative by determining subjects using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2018). The selected subjects came from the elements of the village government, the traditional leaders of the Sakai tribe, the youth leaders, the women's leaders, and the religious scholars with a total of around 15 people. The data collection methods that are used namely observation, in-depth interviews, documentation, and focused discussions.

In the end, the collected data will be analyzed using a qualitative framework including data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Matthew B. Miles, 2014). The data analysis technique employs qualitative descriptive analysis inductively, focusing on the formation of abstractions based on the collected components (Robert Bogdan, 2009). Data obtained from interviews and observations regarding the livelihood sources of the Sakai tribe in Bengkalis Regency were gathered, with irrelevant parts that did not align with the research objectives removed. Through inductive analysis, a pattern emerged that could serve as a conclusion. Data validation utilized triangulation techniques, involving interviews and results gathered from various sources, along with diverse documentation and observations. Data triangulation is a method for verifying data from multiple sources in different ways and at various times. This approach includes source triangulation, data collection technique triangulation, and time triangulation (Helaluddin, 2019).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Meaning of Land for the Life of the Sakai Tribe**

The meaning of land for the Sakai tribe cannot be separated from their social and cultural identity. For the Sakai tribe, the land is not only the land that can be used economically, but it is an integral part of their lives. The land becomes a space that connects them to their ancestors and traditional heritage, and it is a place where values, traditions, and beliefs are passed down from generation to generation. In their view, the land is a symbol of continuity and community existence.

From a social perspective, the land for the Sakai tribe is the glue that holds their community together. The collective ownership and use of land strengthens social ties between community members (Fernanda et al., 2021). The existence of customary land also strengthens their social system, where the custom rules and norms that govern land use are obeyed and maintained by all members of the community. Through the land, the Sakai tribe practices mutual cooperation, helping each other in agricultural activities, cultivation, and traditional rituals (Saputra et al., 2021).

Culturally, the land has deep spiritual meaning. The land is believed to be the abode of ancestral spirits, who guard and bless the community. Therefore, the land should not be neglected or exploited carelessly (Marfuah & Amady, 2021). Every step in land management must pay attention to environmental sustainability and the natural balance. The traditional practices that are related to land management, such as offering rituals to ancestral spirits, are the Sakai tribe's way of maintaining a harmonious relationship with nature.

The land is also a silent witness to the long history of the Sakai tribe's struggle to defend their rights. For centuries, they have faced various challenges, including external pressures that threaten the existence of their traditional lands. For the Sakai tribe, land is tangible evidence of their struggle to maintain identity and sovereignty over their territory. Every inch of land has a story that is passed down from ancestors, which reflects the resilience and strength of the community (Mirad et al., 2021).

In daily life, the land is the main source of livelihood for the Sakai tribe. Through agriculture, cultivation, and the use of other natural resources, they obtain the life needs. Land management is carried out in ways that are in harmony with nature, where they understand the importance of maintaining soil fertility and the sustainability of natural resources (Ningsih & Jalil, 2017). Their local knowledge of land management is passed down from generation to generation, maintaining a balance between the use and the conservation.

The land for the Sakai is more than just a physical asset; it is a symbol of the community's existence, identity, and sovereignty. In every step they take, the land is always at the center of their social and cultural life. Understanding the meaning

of the land for the Sakai tribe means understanding the essence of who they are, and how they maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, their ancestors, and each other (Maharani & Aselina, 2023).

For this reason, they always manage with the local wisdom. The existence of the local wisdom regarding land for the Sakai tribe is a manifestation of the deep relationship between the community and nature, which has been passed down from generation to generation. For the Sakai tribe, the land is not only a piece of land that has economic value, but it is also a sacred and integral element in their social and cultural life. The land is a symbol of survival, identity, and sustainability of the Sakai community. Every inch of land is considered to have a spirit, which requires respect and care so that natural balance is maintained (Allen Abramson, 2000).

In everyday life, the Sakai tribe treats the land with great respect (Faradina et al., 2023). They have various traditional rituals and ceremonies which are carried out as a form of respect for the land and surrounding nature. For example, before clearing land for agriculture, the Sakai people will hold a traditional ceremony to ask permission from the spirits who protect the land. This shows that they understand the importance of maintaining harmony with nature and the spirits that are believed to inhabit the land (Rizki et al., 2022).

Apart from that, the Sakai tribe has in-depth knowledge of farming methods that are in harmony with nature. They use a shifting cultivation system, which allows the land to recover after a period of use. In this practice, the land that has been used for growing crops is allowed to “rest” for several years before being reused. In this way, the Sakai ensures that the land remains fertile and does not have its depleted resources. The concept of land ownership in Sakai society is also different from modern society. The land is not seen as a personal asset that can be bought and sold, but rather as a common property that must be looked after for the welfare of the entire community. Land ownership is communal, where the land rights are determined by kinship relationships and customary traditions. The control of the land by one family is usually passed down from generation to generation, but with the responsibility to safeguard and take care of it for the sustainability of the community (Haryanto, 2019).

### **The Chronology of Social Changes Related to The Land and The Sources of Livelihood for the Sakai Tribe**

The changes in the lives of the Sakai Tribe began at the end of the 19th century. At that time, the petroleum potential was discovered in Siak Regency which was first opened by PT. Pan American Petroleum in 1918 (Colchester et al., 2023). Since this first drilling, the company has expanded into most of the traditional territory of the Sakai Tribe indigenous people. The symbols of land control in the form of oil drilling can be seen from the existence of a network of pipes installed on the highway connecting the drilled well and the production factory. What was the response of the Sakai Tribe at that time? There was no rejection or negative response from Indigenous community groups to the company. Because at that time their forest was still very large so they were free to use it as a source of livelihood. As long as the forest conditions are still there and large for the Sakai tribe, this is not a problem and it means that their lives are not threatened (Muur, 2018).

However, the turmoil of protests occurred in the 1970s-1980s. Many central strategic projects were built in the Sakai traditional territory. The central government, in this case the Ministry of Home Affairs, designated Sakai as a remote traditional community united in one settlement area called Remote Community Settlement (PKMT). The indigenous communities that were previously separated and spread out were united to form a village.

As compensation at that time, each household was given around 2 hectares of land to manage and utilize. Because they felt that permanent settlements forced and limited the movement of the Sakai people, many of them returned to the forest. Because they are not used to farming permanently/intensively, their farming culture is nomadic.

The effect of the many strategic projects that were built encouraged the road access to the forest to open increasingly. Many irresponsible individuals cut down the forests and take the wood. This also includes the hunting animals which causes the forest conditions to be disturbed. In 1981, the logging began to occur on a quite large scale in the Kesumbo Ampai area. Not long after, the company of PT. Indah Kiat. The wood that was processed by

the company was supplied from the forests that have been logged. The people who were contra could not refuse because they were guarded by the security elements. Then around the 1990s, the land was cleared for the acacia and the eucalyptus plantations.

Meanwhile in Mandi Angin Village in 1986, PT. Caltex started clearing the land, then continued with PT. APP with a time around 1980-1990s. The cultivated industrial plants are still the same, namely acacia and eucalyptus. The actions of resistance against adverse conditions involving the forest confiscation and destruction of Sakai's livelihood sources only began after the reform in 2000. In the period from 2000 until around 2013, the community fought in various ways, from the demonstrations to the hearings. In 2013, the intensity of the conflict increased because according to residents, they were evicted and had to leave the agricultural land which turned out to have been included in the company's concession area.

The life pressure on the Sakai tribe is actually not only caused by the companies operating in their territory. Another aspect that makes the Sakai tribe seem to have been marginalized is because of the immigrants, especially the transmigration program which was implemented around 1970-1990. The spontaneous migration to the Saka tribe's territory caused land control to decline. The arrival of these immigrants then created new problems. Many of them were trying to buy Sakai land. On the other hand, many of the Sakai tribe are interested in selling land to the immigrants. Then, there were also the residents' lands which at that time were taken over without legal means. These conditions slowly caused the land control by the immigrants to increase, while the land control of indigenous communities decreased (unbalanced). The impact of this situation is that the existence of Sakai's tribe didn't have sovereignty over the land and forest resources. Even though it has been recognized by the state as a customary forest of around 200 hectares, the community has not fully managed it yet. In Bumbung Village, this is also the case, in fact, they generally still live on the poverty line. As a fragmented area of the Sakai's Tribe, the impacts of this expansion are also being felt at a disadvantage.

### **The Strategy to Guarantee the Life of the Sakai's Tribe**

The custom community in Indonesia has long been an integral part of the archipelago's cultural diversity and natural wealth (Hidayat & Apriani, 2022). As community groups that have unique traditions, customs, legal systems, and land ownership, the customs people play an important role in maintaining the biodiversity and the ecosystems (Lestari, 2022). However, in the context of national law, the recognition and the protection of their rights still face various challenges. (Cahyaningrum, 2022) Article 18B paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution explicitly states that the state recognizes and respects the custom law community units and their rights, as long as they are still alive and in accordance with the development of society and the principles of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Silalahi, 2021). This statement becomes the constitutional basis for protecting the rights of the customs people (Bachtiar, 2017).

Further, the recognition of the rights of customs people is regulated in various laws and other statutory regulations. For example, Law Number 5 of 1960 concerning Basic Agrarian Principles (UUPA) regulates that the customs rights of customs people must be recognized as long as these rights do not conflict with national interests (Maria, 2018). However, the interpretation and implementation of these provisions often become a source of conflict between indigenous communities and the government and companies, especially regarding natural resource management (Prakoso, 2020). More specifically, Law Number 41 of 1999 concerning Forestry states that the recognition of the rights of custom people is carried out through the establishment of custom forests. However, in practice, the process of establishing custom forests is often slow and bureaucratic. Constitutional Court Decision Number 35/PUU-X/2012 confirms that the customs forests are not the state forests that provide the fresh air for the struggle for the rights of customs people, although the implementation of this decision at the local level still faces many obstacles (Kaunang et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the recognition of custom community is also reflected in Law Number 32 of 2009 concerning Environmental Protection and Management which recognizes the role of custom

community in environmental conservation. The customs people are often the primary custodians of the forest, the water, and the land conservation through sustainable traditional practices. However, this recognition has not been accompanied by an effective mechanism to protect their rights from the threat of land extensification and exploitation of natural resources by third parties (Lestari & Sukisno, 2021). Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages provides more space for the traditional community to manage their own traditional villages through the recognition of traditional villages as the government entity. Through this regulation, custom people have the opportunity to regulate and manage their own interests, including in terms of natural resource management and space utilization (Sulistiyo & Rinaldi, 2023).

However, the implementation of the Village Law is often hampered by a lack of understanding and support from the local governments. In addition, the Draft Law on Indigenous Peoples, which has long been fought for by various parties, including civil society organizations, is a concrete effort to provide further protection for the rights of indigenous peoples. However, to date, the bill has not yet been passed, and its fate depends on political dynamics in Indonesia. Despite this, custom people continue to struggle to gain full recognition of their rights, including rights to the land, natural resources, and culture (Sridiani, 2020).

In terms of the basic legal norms, the protection of the rights of custom people is well established. However, the problem is with the implementation. It cannot be denied that at the implementation level, there is still a lack of support for the rights of indigenous peoples which are clearly protected by the state. The position of customs people who are oppressed and do not have sovereignty over the land and the natural resources for their livelihoods proves that the laws have not been implemented optimally. Starting from the existence of a legal basis and the state protection framework, it must be implemented and obeyed by all elements, the government, the society, and the companies (Setiawan, 2019). This is to ensure proper survival for the Sakai's Tribe and the state or any party is obliged to guarantee this survival.

## CONCLUSION

The source of the problems that are faced by the Sakai tribe comes from the unequal control of land and natural resources. Besides it is unbalanced, there is also an element of control carried out without legal means. The natural resources and resources that were previously abundant and used for the livelihood of the Sakai tribe are gradually being controlled by the companies and the residents outside the Sakai traditional community. This condition causes their socio-cultural system to experience changes with fading collective values to become individualistic. People who at the beginning sought sources of livelihood from the forest are now mostly engaged in permanent farming. Meanwhile, the recognition of customary forests as belonging to the Sakai Tribe by the state has not been able to guarantee a decent livelihood for the Sakai Tribe in the study location and generally in the Bengkalis-Siak Regency.

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