

Small Palm Oil Plantation as Political Arena: Environmental Narratives Among Workers and NGOs in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract

This contribution examines the different environmental visions surrounding small palm oil plantations in the province of Aceh, Sumatra, Indonesia. How are natural resources conceptualized by small-scale owners, workers and local environmentalists? How is the small palm oil plantation a political space? Which narratives take place in/on small palm oil plantations? From one point of view, workers and small owners tend to read the small palm oil plantation as a place of possibilities for the future, and it is configured as a place in which individual and collective agencies are negotiated continuously. From another point of view, environmentalists and NGO activists describe workers through the stereotyped lens of ignorance, rebellion and project appropriation. In Aceh, environmental awareness is strongly shaped by class, age, residency and educational background. Starting from an analysis of Italian public discourses about palm oil in 2015/2016, the author spent 4 months, from August to November 2016 getting rid of an ethnographic research in the province of Aceh. Through observations, data collection, questionnaires, and structured and semi-structured interviews, the author was able to explore and illustrate the characteristics of small oil plantations as a political arena and the daily life of small-scale owners, workers and environmentalists.

Keywords: Aceh, environmentalism, rural Indonesia, small palm oil plantations workers

The Italian Background: Environmentalist and Health Narratives

Between 2015 and 2016¹ in Italy, public discourses were imbued with two main narratives about palm oil. If the environmental narrative focused its campaigns on deforestation caused by the increase of palm oil plantations, the health-conscious narrative focused on the alleged harmfulness of this oil for our organisms (La Pira, 2014). The debate was supported by a very large number of articles (Balboni, 2016; Moncalero, 2015), publications, scientific papers and mass-media inquiries. In Italy in the last months of 2015 and early 2016, that information moved towards a specific conclusion: palm oil is dangerous. It has been constructed narratively as a “public enemy” through the rhetoric of the market invasion which would eventually damage the traditional Mediterranean diet (Dongo, La Pira, 2015). Several NGOs involved in environmental protection continue to build awareness campaigns focused on a sense of individual responsibility. Images of a single isolated animal are addressed directly to the reader (as observed by Milton 2002), which emotionally affects the individual who feels responsible for the animal’s protection. These campaigns appeal to a sense of abandonment, of loneliness, of an inability to defend themselves, of fear transmitted by the iconic images chosen to represent the campaign to the vast audience of readers, which acts to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

In the campaigns focused on palm oil plantations, such icons are used that can represent the real ecological situation in the plantations, while at the same time involving the reader in environmental protection actions. For example, in 2016, the NGO “The orangutan project” used the mechanism of the long-distance adoption of orangutans to continue to protect the areas of Indonesian forest where they are most at risk of extinction. The protection of biodiversity was the essential component of the environmental discourse of this NGO. This combined the adoption of orangutans with the protection of plants. One way that the supporter could contribute to the work of “The orangutan project” was to adopt some indigenous plants to the territories where the NGO was active, in order to protect the forest. In the palm oil plantations sector, environmental NGOs also intertwined another interesting theme: social justice. There were numerous articles reflecting on social exclusion, land exploitation, beatings and violent actions against local populations². The NGO “Survival International” has long been working with the indigenous peoples involved in the palm oil industry. There have been numerous investigations carried out by this organization. In 2016 “Survival International” exposed several human rights violations by PT Bahana Karya Semestra (BKS) against the Orang Rimba, on the island of Sumatra. In 2013, Bloomberg Business week published a report on a nine-month survey of palm oil plantation workers in Indonesia. From the words of several workers interviewed emerged a reality of labor exploitation and seizure of identification documents by the Malaysian company Kuala Lumpur Kepong Berhad³. The health discourse was intertwined with a strong criticism focused on the lack of transparency of large multinationals (Altevista 2016; Dongo, La Pira, 2016). It was argued that these companies sacrificed not only the rain forests, but lied to the citizen-consumer about the product, endangering their health. In Italy, the discussion about palm oil has also involved the Mediterranean diet and especially its use

¹ I did my research from August to November 2016 and decided to work on this theme starting from an analysis of environmental narratives.

² Amnesty International. (2016). Il grande scandalo dell’olio di palma: violazione dei diritti umani dietro i marchi più noti. Index: ASA. 21/5184/2016. <https://d21zrvtkxt6ae.cloudfront.net/public/uploads/2016/11/29140605/The-great-palm-oil-scandal.pdf>

³ Survival International, <https://www.survival.it/>

of olive oil, or other vegetable fats not originating with the palm tree. These have become synonymous with health and tradition. The blog “Qui da noi, cooperative agricole”⁴ published several articles that criticized palm oil and would save the “Bel Paese” (Grimaldi, 2016) and its Mediterranean/traditional diet from the invasion of this unhealthy fat. It is important to underline that although the food choices are the results of millennia of adjustments, opportunities and personal tastes, the Mediterranean diet was invented by Ancel Keys in the 1950s and since then the so-called traditional recipes have undergone enormous changes (Moro, 2014). The above are some of the recent main narratives against palm oil in Italian mass media discourses along with a focus on global deforestation caused in different parts of the world by palm oil plantations, including Indonesia⁵.

Local Historical Insight: The Province of Aceh



Figure 1: Aceh province (<http://bitly.ws/9s2Q> Australian National University)

Since the time of the Dutch colonization, the territory of Aceh has been connected more with the Malaysian peninsula than with the island of Java and its capital Jakarta. The strategic position of this province, located between the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, had made it an important port for trade and commercial transitions, and also for cultural and religious meetings. Aceh, the gateway through which Islam expanded into Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia, is still defined today as the “Veranda of Mecca” (Reid, 1995; Reid & He, 2004). The rebellion against the Dutch settlers, which lasted from 1873 until 1914,

⁴ This blog was just one of the thousands that published articles against palm oil and the importance of the Mediterranean diet. I chose this one because it was one of the most active in sharing those articles.

⁵ For many months this kind of information dissemination with its reports, images, and environmental protection campaigns occupied the public discussion on social media and Italian national television.

undeniably marked the Acehnese identity. The theme of rebellion became a constant theme in Aceh, which, after resisting the Dutch colonists, faced a Japanese presence in the area. Between the 1950s and 1960s the rebellion expressed itself no longer through an internal-external dialectic, but through an internal-internal one; the control exerted by the capital, Jakarta, was no longer accepted in this remote area of Indonesia (Reid, 1979). In the second half of the 1970s, discontent, disappointment and distrust broke out in an armed conflict between the GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or Aceh Freedom Movement) and the Indonesian army. The armed conflict lasted 30 years, affecting more than 15,000 people and creating severe social unease. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding, which took place in Helsinki in 2005, led to a relaxation in political and social relations (Ross, 2003). The key role played by Islam in defining identity in Aceh became more evident with the severe application of the Shari'a, the Koranic law, since 2005. According to Feener (2013), the adoption of the Shari'a in Aceh, was deeply connected with the historical events of this district, during which the religious establishment developed an instrumental vision of Islamic law, also taking advantage of the local desire to rebuild Aceh after the 2004 tsunami. In Aceh the palm oil industry involved many workers, although in this province there were few large plantations owned by corporations or multinationals. The intensive plantations were located in the territories bordering the province of North Sumatra, in particular in Aceh Tamiang, Aceh Singkil and Subulussalam. However, the palm oil plantations in other districts, such as Aceh Jaya, Aceh Besar or Lhokseumawe had a more domestic, family and smaller economic dimension. In Aceh, small palm oil plantations connect shopkeepers, who sell seeds and pesticides to the small farms, local workers involved in the planting and harvesting oil palms, agents from the cities where the product would then be processed, lorry drivers transporting the cargo for several kilometers to the mills, women cleaning the yards where sales would take place, workers in the companies where the oil is produced, housewives in the kitchens and many others. My research focused mainly on three districts of Aceh: Aceh Jaya, Aceh Besar, and Lhokseumawe. Over the months, however, I moved several times with shorter stays in different districts of Aceh, such as Sabang and Benar Meriah.

Research Among Small Palm Oil Plantations in Aceh: Recent Literature

From the 1970s the vast Indonesian archipelago has seen an increase of foreign and national investments related to the exploitation of various natural resources: precious wood, natural gas, oil and ample forests were replaced with oil palm plantations (McCarthy, 2006, 2010). In Indonesia there are traces of small agricultural areas cultivated with palm oil since 1400, however the sector boomed in the 20th century. Beginning with the 1970s, the palm oil sector became an important global market and this led to an increase of production that kept on rising even during the Asian economic crisis of 1997 (McCarthy, 2012).

During the months of research, I investigated how small palm oil plantations were socially and politically constructed by my interlocutors; I analyzed the differences that characterized the different areas of Aceh province. I worked on the hypothesis that although in Aceh there were no situations of extreme deforestation, some observers had a critical view of palm oil plantations.

Small palm oil plantations are highly performative places where hopes for the future, ambitions and personal concerns were combined with more collective interests. A small palm oil plantation is still relatively large as it can reach up to 50 ha.⁶ These are typically family-run

⁶ Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. www.rspo.org

and the family is dependent on this agriculture for their livelihoods. They are usually less productive than commercial plantations, but they are active parts of the global supply chain (Vermeulen, Goad, 2006).

As pointed out by Escobar (2001), places are constructed by social, political and cultural structures and all of them together shape individuals, beings and environments. Places are characterized by openness and fluidity which connect them with other places as well with the rest of the world. These plantations were configured as arenas (Olivier De Sardan, 1995) of power in which local and global powers met and clashed. The individual careers and environmental visions that shaped this landscape were due to the interactions between these continuous flows. The social and political reality that was continuously produced within these places arose precisely from the friction (Tsing, 2004) between cultural (small palm oil plantation as an overall recognized status quo), economic (partial disengagement from petty trades, local and national investments), political (national rhetoric about *pembangunan*⁷ based mostly on natural resources exploitation and particularly on palm oil plantation sector), social (small palm oil plantation as an investment for local economy and territorial control) and ideal flows (small palm oil plantation work as an option to become more independent from the family and be able to realize dreams and hopes): a small palm oil plantation, therefore, was not a simple economic production place, but became a social, political and cultural focal point (Casson, 2000; Li, 2014, 1999). It was a place where the friction produced by different policies, complex landscape readings, personal skills and disparate intentions of workers and owners clashed with a city-minded environmentalism which was focused more on the protection of already existing parks in Aceh.

In February 2017, the provincial elections were held in the Acehnese territory and traveling from one village to another to meet my interlocutors and friends, I continually saw large billboards with the candidates' faces and a brief summary of their programs. Many candidates' programs involved the implementation of palm oil plantation areas as part of the wider developmental narrative (Balandier, 1970). This implementation was additionally embraced by the national government which described the palm oil industry as the only valid tool for fighting poverty, illiteracy and social marginalization.

Environmental NGOs and Nature Lovers' Groups in Aceh

The interlocutors I met were many but they were divided into two main groups: the first was composed of daily laborers and small-scale owners, while the second consisted of environmental NGOs and *nature lovers' groups* (according to Tsing's, (2004) nomenclature). In particular, with the second group I used the method of participant observation, collaborating in the activities that were carried out, while with the first group I carried out formal and informal interviews. The activities performed within the plantations were highly defined by gender ideologies and I found it difficult to spend time in the *kebun*⁸; mainly men worked inside small palm oil plantations while women often helped workers by collecting the orange-red small fruits scattered on the ground of warehouses.

The main environmental NGOs in the Acehnese territory had their office in the city of Banda Aceh, usually far from the villages where their projects took place or where environmental education projects were proposed. Banda Aceh also housed the headquarters of the main

⁷ "Development".

⁸ "Agricultural space/Small garden"

universities in the province and the university population varied widely geographically. In this environment with young educated citizens, some associations of students passionate about the environment and nature were born. They were groups of *nature lovers* (Tsing, 2004) who, through their education, passion, residential situation and financial disposition, supported NGOs in their environmental educational activities. Both, environmental NGOs and these groups of *nature lovers*, behaved in a typical way towards the rural population, and especially towards farmers and small-scale owners involved in the palm oil plantation sector, doing so on the basis of descriptive negative stereotypes (Olivier De Sardan, 1995).

The use of stereotypes referring to small-scale owners as ignorant, backwards, rebellious characters and profiteers was common practice. The epistemological distance between NGOs/*nature lovers' groups*, workers and small-scale owners could be better understood if the notion of environmentalism as a cultural product (Milton, 2002) is taken into consideration; in this specific case, the NGOs activists and *nature lovers' groups' members* were an active part of the local city culture, they studied at university (BA, MA, PhD), they had access to cultural technologies, they could move easily between districts, among islands and sometimes even abroad and they saw themselves (and they were seen by the others, especially in rural villages) as “successful persons” who had been able to build their careers on their passion for the environment protection practices which seldom affected them directly.

Milton (1996) also recalls that environmentalism can be understood as a type of cultural perspective, that is, a characteristic way of seeing the world and acting in it. Environmental awareness takes on meaning within the society to which one belongs; at times problematic relationship is thus established between the distinction of environmentalism as a cultural product and the actions through which one relates to the world as an environmentalist. The personal interpretation of what should be protected and how to place the protection of these resources is what makes the environmental movement interesting. As a cultural product, it makes use of the multiple visions of the world that individuals bring into play.

During a day-trip in September 2016 with the Barracuda group, a group of *nature lovers* (Tsing, 2004) that shared common scientific interests (biology and zoology mainly), a friend of mine, Noni, and I found ourselves surrounded by a fire set inside the natural park where we spent the day. Noni, who is a member of Barracuda, said to me, “I had heard of fires to make room for oil palm plantations, but until you're there, one meter from a tree on fire, you don't realize it. I am very angry, and sad. But above all, I feel angry, because I understand that the villagers are poor, but they shouldn't be like that, it's not fair”⁹. Noni's difficulty with the global comprehension of what was happening in that place had its roots inside the fixed, immovable and immutable substrate of the stereotypes widely used in the contemporary environmental narrative (Li, 2014). Some activists or *nature lovers' groups' members* used to describe the workers of small palm oil plantations with the stereotype of the “ignorant peasant” (Olivier De Sardan, 1995) who could not study (much) and who ignored the best way to cultivate one's own field and who needed somebody to teach him/her how to do it. Another stereotype is the one used by a friend of mine, Razi, who described small-scale owners as people who are “dishonest to their real aim in being involved in NGOs' projects”¹⁰. This point to a strong possibility that a small-scale owner would appropriate the NGOs' investments for different purposes unrelated to the vision or aim of the NGO.

⁹ Personal communication. September 2016. Aceh Besar.

¹⁰ Personal communication, September 2016, Aceh Tamiang.

Despite the repeated use of narrative stereotypes, the people I met in Barracuda and other NGOs claimed that their actions were aimed at protecting nature, but also at improving the economic, social and cultural conditions of the villages (Tsing, 2004). Although some of them did not act sustainably or in an environmentally conscious manner during their daily lives, for example throwing waste on the street or burning it behind the house, due to the lack of an effective and efficient collection system, they defined themselves as convinced environmentalists, supporting recycling campaigns and aligning with the general lines of mainstream environmentalism (fight against plastic and microplastics, incentives to use public transport, abandonment of fossil fuels and more), highlighting in this way the complexity of facets present in this self-definition (Milton, 1996, 2002).

Mapala, Barracuda, Walhi and Haka better represented the phenomenon of environmentalism on the territory, and they were the groups with which I had many discussions, cited from memory in my field notes. While the first two, Mapala and Barracuda, were university student groups of which the members had scientific backgrounds (biology, zoology, economics, statistics), Walhi and Haka were local environmental NGOs who created the most impact in the regions. These organizations' members felt the need to protect the natural resources in the area. This made them feel proud as they saw these resources as being in danger because of a "lack of environmental consciousness"¹¹. These environmental NGOs/*nature lovers' groups* were perceived by workers and small-scale owners as not having enough awareness of the villages' situations. Both Walhi and Haka explained the lack of a strong environmental awareness in Aceh through the idea that the people of Banda Aceh are more environmentally friendly due to the fact that the city was the place of technical progress par excellence, where there were industries, laboratories, universities, meeting places and so on. Instead, outside the city there were only rural villages, field crops and forest where technical progress seemed to be delayed. It was in the village that these NGOs interwove the environmental paradigm with that of education. It was necessary to educate people to respect the territory and natural resources. The rural world was described by these NGOs as having been built on traditionalism, submission to the dynamics of the global market, and rebellion and resistance (Scott, 1987) against top-down development projects which did not always meet the local necessities. McCarthy (2006) pointed out that environmental NGOs used the term '*adat*'¹² to refer to customary arrangements, which also included the management of natural resources. The mechanism of *adat* regulated the social, cultural, political, economic and territorial dynamics of a community. A single individual could act following his own interests, but always moving within the collective-frame defined by *adat*.

The people from NGOs or *nature lover groups* I met used to adapt the word "*adat*" in a very ambiguous way: on the one hand they used it to better explain the difficulties they had in meeting, talking and negotiating with the local population because of "their *adat*"¹³. On the other hand, they framed this concept according to the kind of campaign they wanted to carry out. It was also used as a budgetary discourse, so even if *adat* could be an obstacle in the field, at the same time it could be a catchphrase to attract funds from large investors. Local natural resources were also managed through the *adat* mechanism, though this did not imply that the real extension of agricultural places was clear, especially regarding very small *kebun*.

¹¹ Personal communication, August 2016, Banda Aceh

¹² The "*adat*" is the consuetudinary law that regulates the relations among the villagers as well as the use of natural resources.

¹³ Personal communication, August 2016, Aceh Besar.

As outlined during an interview with the NGO Haka¹⁴ in the early days of October 2016 the total palm oil plantation areas managed by national companies in the territory of Aceh corresponded to about 165,000 hectares. In the rest of the Acehnese territory the oil palms were present to a lesser extent, distributed in small *kebun*. If the area of the agricultural place was less than 5 hectares, it was not necessary to make an official statement to the public administration. This meant that it was very difficult to map the total number of hectares involved in palm oil plantation cultivation systems. In fact, Pak Emnur, from Haka, pointed out that the small-scale owners of palm oil plantations were estimated to number around 800,000 in the province of Aceh¹⁵.

Cultivating Small Palm Oil Plantations, Cultivating *Harapan* (hope) in Aceh

For small-scale owners and local workers, the plantation became a place where social roles in the community were (re)negotiated. The small-scale owner was recognized by local villagers. I met an individual who had invested his money well by following the strategy of the global markets. According to Pye (2012), palm oil was produced in the “friction” existing between different policies, complex landscape readings, personal skills and multiple intentions of workers and small-scale owners: this friction process also involved NGO members, political parties and university students.

The point of view of environmental NGOs and small-scale owners and workers converged on the idea of “feel special being Acehnese” and, in virtue of this vision, they believed that Aceh was excluded from those dynamics of intensive deforestation that were occurring in other parts of Sumatra. The interlocutors I met had shown that the management of local resources had not been eroded by alternative environmental awareness proposed by environmental NGOs, but rather had been strengthened by the abundance of such resources, considered to be limitless, inexhaustible and inalienable.

For many interlocutors, both the workers of the plantations, businesspeople and small farmers, Aceh Province was not developing its human resources in the best way. The main criticism was that school and university preparation did not train young people to invest in the local territories and that they were not able to develop a project through which they could apply for international funding or gain future job opportunities. In fact, many young people I met and interviewed had previously worked in other sectors or were looking for another job while they were harvesting oil palms or being agents. In Aceh the relationship between worker and small-scale owner was not so easy to define. There was a very complex set of dynamic of mutual dependence (Sinaga, 2013). Just as the worker needed a job, the owner needed the worker: the common goal being to earn, or to gain money fast.

¹⁴ Personal communication. October 2016. Banda Aceh

¹⁵ Personal communication. October 2016. Banda Aceh



Figure 2: Mulia working on Pak Iqbal's small oil palm plantation. Aceh Jaya. 2016.
Photo by the author.

My first interview was with a 30-year-old man, Mulia, who worked for Pak Iqbal, a small-scale palm oil plantation owner in Aceh Jaya. Pak Iqbal taught for several years in a primary school; the salary was low and constantly late, so in 2010 he decided to quit, when the palm oil boom allowed many people to enter this promising sector. Mulia and his 60-year-old father worked temporarily in Iqbal's plantation in order to earn enough money, and they were not involved in other economic enterprises. The work on the plantation represented the best economic chance for them at that particular time of their lives.

In the same month I met Zahrid, a young professional sales agent living closer to Pak Iqbal's plantation, who described his work as "temporary". Zahrid hoped to use his English degree to enter the palm oil processing industry in the city of Meulaboh. For Mulia and Zahrid, working in the small palm oil plantation was perceived as a temporary scenario in their lives. They had ambitions and aspirations bigger than the small palm oil plantations where they were working. At the same time, these ambitions and aspirations seemed to be very distant and difficult, if not impossible to reach. They remained a dream that had to be delayed in order to supply more immediate needs. In the "here and now" dimension, the place for the future is limited.

Another point of view about small palm oil plantations was given by Pak Hanafiah, the owner of a small palm plantation in the district of Lhokseumawe. He was not forced by the logic of the global market to invest in his plantations. This owner saw the possibility of increasing his economic income in a relatively simple and inexpensive way. The presence of small palm oil plantations in this district is barely visible; first of all, because these *kebun* were usually located close to the dwellings, and secondly, because they did not constitute the main income. In Lhokseumawe there were many job opportunities due to the presence of several industries and commercial activities such as oil and gas implants harbors, small-scale activities and petty

traders besides the important highway connecting Banda Aceh to Medan.

Ultimately, the small-scale owners and workers who lived close to local natural resources were not excluded from the dynamics of the global market (Hamilton-Hart, 2015; Sunderlin, 2000). This could be seen, for example, from the strategic differentiation that took place after the collapse of the price of rubber on the international market, which led many owners, who are often involved in many activities and petty trades, to quit their jobs and to invest or to convert their land into small palm oil plantations. Moreover, the farmers with whom I talked, both in Aceh Jaya and in Lhokseumawe, were very well aware of the price of palm oil on the international market.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed the multiple social reading and power complexities that shaped small palm oil plantations co-structured by local and global politics, narratives, personal ambitions, hopes and dreams. These small plantations intertwined daily workers, owners, imams, village leaders, the police, the military and politicians into continuous negotiations of their social status. The plantations were inscribed with numerous fundamental meanings by farmers, workers, owners, and by environmental NGOs: a temporary solution for escaping economic difficulties, the investment of a lifetime, the only way for local economic development, a place for local political struggle or the inevitable loss of biodiversity and forest destruction. It is therefore not possible to refer to palm oil plantations exclusively as places of agricultural production: they were imbued with a “special territory with special people”¹⁶ rational, which sufficiently explained the lack of concern for natural resource exploitation. Reality was more complex than the typically disseminated stereotypes of small-scale owners and workers by environmental NGOs who worked in the districts. The small palm oil plantation as a political arena was found to be decidedly constructed by environmental, developmental and economic narrative strategies which intertwined *adat*, international conservation/preservation concepts and a specific historical identity.

¹⁶ “In Aceh people think they are a little special because we have *sharia* and Islam spread through Indonesia from Aceh. People think they are more blessed and the territory is special because of history and resources”. Fachrur Razi. September 2016. Lhokseumawe.

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