

Advancing ‘Natural Autonomy’ in the *Negeri* of Honitetu – Nudua Siwa, West Seram

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I. Introduction

Honitetu is a traditional village in the Kairatu subdistrict (Kecamatan) of West Seram. It is located 24 kilometers from the subdistrict seat, and consists of six hamlets, including Honitetu itself (the administrative centre of the village), also Rumatita, Imabatai, Sokawati, Urasana, and Uraur.

Another name for Honitetu is Nudua Siwa, meaning ‘nine mouths’. Originally, the village comprised nine hamlets or *kampung*, i.e., Rumatita, Imabatai, Honitetu, Sokawati (previously known as Solibatai), Ursana, Uraur, Nunaya, Nui and Lakubutui. Each hamlet consisted of several clans, bound into a single *soa*. A *soa* is headed by a chief, or *Kepala Soa*. The nine *Kepala Soa* all sit on the Saniri council of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa, as they have done for generations.

The livelihoods of villagers in Honitetu derive from farming and hunting. There are numerous traditional ceremonies closely related to forest areas surrounding the village. In addition, there are many sacred sites spread about the forest, where rituals are performed. These rituals usually involve consuming game and other products secured from the forest. Additionally, the forest is source of a variety of medicinal plants used by villagers to treat common ailments.

Clearly, the forest plays a very important role in the lives of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa villagers, in terms of meeting their day-to-day needs, and other important purposes as well.

II. Conflict over Forest

In 2000, as the conflict in Maluku worsened, the giant timber company PT Djayanti Group, using the politics of *divide et impera*, persuaded representatives of each *kampung* and *soa* to enter into *Ijin Pengusahaan Kayu* (IPK, Permission for Logging Operation) contracts. In this manner, Djayanti Group managed to secure permission to log around 2000 hectares of Honitetu /Nudua Siwa’s forests. This created considerable internal conflict among and between members of the Honitetu community. Some people – who have benefited financially – support the logging operation, whereas many others oppose. Tragically, these conflicts have expanded into inter-family conflicts in some *soa*. Conflicts have also erupted over compensation payments, as different clans receive different amounts. These conflicts are particularly acute among those families whose lands are within the logging area.

Following is a brief outline of the practices used by PT. Djayanti Group in carrying out their logging operations in Honittu village:

1. First, PT. Djayanti Group sent one its staff to the villagers of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa to identify *dati* (lands) which would be the target of the logging operation.
2. After that, the staff would identified men in the clans who were the owners of the *datis* whom he could easily persuaded to obtain IPK Licenses. Once these people had been identified, the company’s staff approached them and tried to persuade them to allow logging operation in their *datis*. When these people agreed – effectively surrendering their *dati* lands – the Djayanti Group then arranged the necessary permits with the district (*Kabupaten*) government of Central Maluku.

3. This was done with a great deal of secrecy. Indonesian forestry law requires that organisations of villagers themselves should be holders of IPK permits. The Djayanti Group representatives 'assisted' their unwitting victims in acquiring the necessary recommendations for IPK permits from the *Kabupaten* government.
4. Armed with these recommendations, these men then approached the Central Maluku District Forest Agency to obtain IPK licenses. The licenses were issued to individuals from PT Djayanti Group, not the villagers whom they had 'assisted'.
5. These individuals then sold their licenses to Djayanti Group.

Soon after logging operations commenced, many heads of *soa* became quite upset. They asserted that the company was conducting logging operations in their area without proper permission. These men approached the PT Djayanti Group and demanded an explanation. The company showed them the IPK letter for the logs in their *datis* that had been issued by the government of Central Maluku, based on proposals ostensibly put forward by someone in those *datis*. As well, they had an explanatory letter from the village administrator of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa.

Realising that they had been swindled, many villagers and clan leaders became quite upset. They quarreled, fought, and nearly killed one another. Often, these fights broke out between members of the same families. There were daily acts of intimidation and threats. The harmonious life based on the customs of the villagers of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa was quickly gone, as if swallowed by the earth. The problem was exacerbated when it became clear that the compensation money for the logs was being unevenly distributed among the clan. This condition persisted for four years, from 2000 to 2003.

The effects of the logging operation are not only the internal social conflicts described above, but also numerous other problems such as threats and violence from the military, economic hardship, reduced access on clean water, and depletion of wild animals needed for traditional rituals.

a. Violence

Soldiers from the 731st Kabaresi Infantry Battalion of the Indonesian Armed Forces tortured a local villager when he protested to the company over what he perceived as an unfair price for his wood.

b. Economic Hardship

Economic problems caused by the logging operation include the following::

- i) Villagers' access to the forest for hunting and gathering other forest produce for consumption and sale has been curtailed. They are prevented from entering the forest by company security guards, who are moonlighting TNI soldiers. As such, villagers are experiencing difficulty meeting their daily needs.
- ii) Villagers' gardens have been destroyed by the logging operations, particularly by construction of logging roads into the forest. The company has paid no compensation for the land used for road construction, nor for the crops and gardens destroyed.
- iii) There has been manipulations of the price of the cut logs. The company has been paying far less than the stipulated value for the timber they have taken. Since the villagers are not involved in monitoring of logging operation, they do not know the cubic calculation of trees taken.

iv) As conflicts flared up, the TNI Infantry Battalion increased its presence in the village. Soon, soldiers who had been brought in to ostensibly keep peace, were cornering the market for forest products, particularly damar gum, forcing villagers to sell their damar to them or their appointed vendors.

c. Water Supply

When it rains, the villagers find difficulties in getting clean water for bathing or washing. The rivers in Sokawati, Urasana, and Uraur villages, are getting dirty, with a yellowish colour. People have to wait for several days after a heavy rain before they can have a bath and wash again. Then, during the dry season, the water level in the streams of these three villages drops to almost nothing. Dug and tube wells also dry up during the dry season. It is quite clear to the people of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa that this condition is a direct consequence of PT Djayanti Group's logging operations, which have severely depleted forest cover in the catchment area of these streams.

d. Traditional Rituals

A traditional ritual known as '*Anak Keluar Walang*' ('child comes out of the hut') plays a very important role in Nudua Siwa culture. The ceremony must be carried out on the eighth day after the birth of a new child, and involves the slaughter of wild animals that used to abound in the local forests. Lately, it has been impossible to hold the ceremony on time on numerous occasions, due to the lack of animals. Clearly, the animals have left the area due to the noise and disturbance caused by the ongoing logging operations, and habitat destruction. This has alarmed families, who are fearful of the spiritual implications of the changes to their world.

The Kecamatan (sub-district) government of Kairatu has been supportive of PT Djayanti Group's logging operation in the territory of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa. They have not been supportive of villagers' attempts to report violations or otherwise redress the situation. So, the level of state government closest to the people of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa appears to have sided with the giant company's interests, rather than their local population who are suffering the consequences.

III. Attempts to Achieve a Settlement

Motivated by the many problems faced by the villagers of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa arising from the logging operations, a group of young men from the community took the initiatives to oppose it. Conditions continue to worsen, as logging operations now extend well beyond the area set out in the IPK permits.

These young men organised a series of informal discussions, to begin to distill villagers' awareness of the issues and problems they face. Most people in the village are quite aware of the problems, and have been supportive of this group of young men. The group have courageously entered the logging coups (that are guarded by 731st Infantry Battalion soldiers) to take pictures. One of the youth had his camera confiscated by a soldier, who has not returned it.

These young men felt that they were not able to handle the case alone. They began to seek allies to their cause, to help them fight the cause. They made contact with an NGO in Ambon, Yayasan Baileo Maluku (now known as HUMANUM – The Malukan Association for Humanity).

Preliminary discussions with Baileo Maluku/HUMANUM were attended by several customary elders, community leaders, religious leaders, as well as large numbers of village

men, women and young people. In these meetings, they talked about problems faced by six smaller villages of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa.

These discussions produced a consensus about the problems arising from the logging operations, as have been outlined above. In order to better empower the community to address these problems, community leaders and members felt that it was important to try to revive their system of customary village governance, which had fallen into decline during the years of central-government imposed village government administration, and the dire years of conflict since fighting broke out in Ambon in 1999. They felt that a return to the *saniri* system of representative government as practiced by their elders – which had allowed them to live in harmony in the past – would provide greater legitimacy for their struggle, while hopefully allowing them to act more coherently as a community.

The group then approached that acting Village Head of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa, to discuss a way forward. They decided to hold a village-level workshop to set out strategies and the beginnings of a work plan. The workshop was to include customary leaders such as existing *saniri* members, heads of soa, customary ‘landlords’ (a traditional religio-political office, not land private land owners as the term often implies in the English language), religious leaders, village women, youth leaders, etc. Facilitators from Baileo Maluku/HUMANUM were invited to guide the discussion through a process that would result in clear and cogent statements of problems and issues, and suggestions for addressing them.

The workshop was initially scheduled to be held on 3 September 2003, in the hamlet of Honitetu, the village’s administrative centre. Unfortunately, they could not go forward at that time, because of intervention by 731st Infantry Battalion soldiers in collusion with elements in the village who did not want to see the logging operations challenged. They persevered, and a week later, over the two day period of 11-12 September 2003, managed to hold a meeting in a meeting house (baileo) in Uraur hamlet.

This meeting produced a number of recommendations, as follow:

1. Restoration of the customary institutions, system and norms in the territory of Nudua Siwa.
2. Immediate cessation of logging in the territory of Nudua Siwa, until new license agreements can be drawn up involving the legitimate government of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa.

To implement these recommendaitons, they formed five working groups, one each for each of the hamlets that comprise the village of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa. These groups were charged with the following tasks:

1. To disseminate the vision and mission to all elements in Honitetu/Nudua Siwa, in order to build consensus around the plan to revitalise the customary system of governance.
2. To document the customs and customary law of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa.
3. To research and document customary natural resource management as it has been practiced in the village.
4. To identify customary rights that have pertained in the past.
5. To facilitate the estabishment of a new system of village government based on customary law and values.

Since that time, a number of interesting developments have taken place:

Firstly, nearly all of the *dati* owners who were originally duped or coerced into helping Djayanti Group procure the IPK permits have seen the error of their ways, and have now joined the campaign to have logging operations terminated.

There has been significant progress as well on the plan to restore customary forms of village government. Work is well underway on the construction of a new Baileo meeting house. All that remains are the wooden floors, and a traditional inauguration ceremony. In December 2004, the combined *saniri* of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa issued two decrees, the first on the Establishment and Legal Structure of the Combined *Saniri* of *Negeri* Honitetu/Nudua Siwa, and Decree No. II/Saniri/2005 on the Restoration of the Village Administrative System from the Village Government Law No. 5 of 1979 Model to the an Indigenous Administrative System based on Law No. 32 of 2004 on Regional Government.

Moving forward, the Combined *Saniri* then nominated two candidates for the office of *Raja* (literally, King, but in Maluku commonly refers to Village Head) who will compete in a free and open election. The candidates nominated were Pieter Latu and Eduard Latu.

There has been considerably controversy since then about the proposed election. One group argues that democratic elections should be held, so long as the candidates for *Raja* meet with traditional criteria for that position. Another group maintains that the Combined *Saniri* is beholden to re-nominate the existing *Raja*, who has the right to that office according to tradition. A third group suggests that the next *Raja* should be selected and appointed through the traditional means, a custom known as '*Mauwe*', or '*Jingkal Tangan dan Pecah Buah Kelapa*', which means 'Fingers span and break the coconut'.

According to custom, *Raja* is an hereditary office in Honitetu/Nudua Siwa, as it is in nearly all Malukan villages. When the ruling *Raja* becomes unable to carry out his duties, he then appoints one of his descendants from within the clan of Latu *Raja*. The new *Raja* is then ordained by the Combined *Saniri* of the five constituent hamlets making up Honitetu/Nudua Siwa village. Customarily, there is no set time limit on how long a *Raja* stays in office.

Traditional marriage ceremonies, which had not been held in Honitetu/Nudua Siwa for many years, have been reactivated. Since the reformulation of the Combined *Saniri*, there have been two traditional wedding ceremonies held in the village. This ceremony is held in addition to the civil ceremony and religious ceremonies that comprise modern wedding practice in the region. According to custom, the couple is allowed to commence cohabitation after completion of the traditional wedding of they so desire, even if they have not yet completed their civil or Christian ceremonies.

As mentioned above, villagers have worked together to build a new Baileo meeting house, as the venue for village ceremonies, gatherings, and the meeting hall for the Combined *Saniri* of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa.

The Acting Village Head has issued a new decree on village revenue, assessing retribution fees from the village market, and on trade in damar (resin from *Agathis* spp.), cloves, cempedak and durian. These fees are collected during harvest season of the different crops. They are currently looking into other possible sources of village revenue, by studying existing laws and looking at systems put in place in other villages.

Harmony has begun to return to the village of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa. The group of activists who initiated this process are still attempting to mediate any remaining disputes left over from the days when villagers were fighting one another over the PT Djayanti Group logging operations. They are resorting to customary adat dispute resolution methods, often involving

a process that moves in stages from the family and clan level, to the soa level, then up to the village level.

Since the cessation of logging operations, the Combined Saniri of Honitetu village has been approached by several cooperatives – mostly front organisations or local groups working in collaboration with PT Djayanti Group – who want to resume logging operation in the Agathis forests within Honitetu's territory. These have all been refused. Saniri members have agreed that no new contracts or licenses should be issued until the village has a new definitive Raja, and they have had the opportunity to develop new village regulations on the management of natural resources within the negeri territory. They are resolute that they do not want to repeat the mistakes of the recent past.

The process is still ongoing. The community and leaders of Honitetu/Nudua Siwa are united in their desire to carry out all the recommendations of the 2003 workshop.