

4.5 SUPPORTING ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT OF THE ATONI

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On the island of West-Timor (Indonesia), threats to traditional land rights have triggered the development of peasant movements and the revival of indigenous cosmovisions. The experience of TIRD-p (Timor Integrated Rural Development programme) with the Atoni population over the past 5 years shows that working on the basis of indigenous cosmovisions make communities aware of their own strengths, limitations and potentials.

The Atoni are the original inhabitants of the western part of the island of Timor in Indonesia. They are mainly subsistence farmers and have some livestock kept under free-range conditions. Compared to the other Indonesian islands, Timor is dry. The average rainfall depends on the topography and the mountains receive significantly more, over 2,000 mm, than the surrounding flat lands (between 1,000-1,400 mm). Under Dutch colonial rule, and the early days of the Indonesian Republic in the 1950s, the 'self-ruling kingdoms' reigned on the island. Most Atoni practised traditional religions, but this changed after a leftist coup in Djakarta in 1965. Traditional religions were banned and the people were forced to become either protestant or catholic. Many *adat houses*, the ceremonial places of the Atoni, were burnt. The new political line also implied that the Atoni were no longer allowed to hold their ceremonies and sacrifice animals.

In the mid-seventies, the government formally abolished all indigenous self-governing structures. This led to a further destruction of indigenous institutions at village level. Everything related to *adat*, the traditional customs and the cosmovision, was looked upon as backward. Ceremonies, crucial for social coherence, declined in importance. People performing rituals were stigmatised as being uninterested in 'development', despite the specific function of rituals in strengthening the unity of the community, essential in surviving in the harsh climate of West-Timor. Many young people took up modern technologies, chemical pesticides and fertilizers, rather than sticking to age-old beliefs and practices. In spite of these developments, the Atoni traditional belief system could not be erased completely; some of the practices, traditional leadership structures and related cosmovision continued to exist 'underground'.

Atoni cosmovision

Traditionally, the Atoni lived in clans within their communities. The Adat elders and the *tobe*, the traditional clan leader with administrative and spiritual responsibility, decided on the timing of agricultural activities. *Dukuns*, or shamans, were consulted when people or animals were ill, or when pests attacked their crops. The tobes performed rituals to find solutions to these problems. The adat house was the place where elders met, a circular wooden structure with a thatched roof of a particular design. Sacred objects like swords, ceremonial maize and bones of ancestors were kept under this roof. Next to the adat

house was the place where ceremonial sacrifices were performed. Some of these structures and traditions are still found today.

An important concept in the traditional cosmology of the Atoni is *le'u* which means holy, sacred, something that provokes awe. It is a force that can be either dangerous or beneficial. Anything might become *le'u* as a result of a ceremonial act, or even a dream. The Atoni believe in three powers: *Uis Neno* - Lord of the sky, *Uis Pah* - Lord of the earth, and *Apinat Aklahat* - God Almighty, with their ancestors as go-betweens. The Atoni had, and to a certain extent still have, a harmonious relationship with nature, which is seen as a kind of extended family. Soil is considered the mother of life; food plants are thought to originate from one of the ancestors, hence crops are supposedly an incarnation of their



A feeling of pride of being Atoni was restored among the elders due to the revitalisation of indigenous knowledge.

ancestors. Therefore, a ritual ceremony to consult ancestors was undertaken before cultivating a piece of land. This is still done by some farmers today. On every garden plot the farmers build a small temple of stones, where they offer to the spirits, their ancestors and *Uis Neno*. The reasons for the ceremonies are multiple: to put the relationship with the Highest Being on a solid footing, to strengthen the social unity, to intensify the relationship with nature, and to assert shared commitment.

TIRD-p

TIRD-p is a consortium of four small NGOs working on rural development. One of the NGOs is called *Justitia*, a legal aid organization working on land ownership, human rights, and violence against women. The other three are *Yayasan Timor Membangun*, *Yayasan Tafen Pah* and *Yayasan Haumeni*, involved in activities related to agriculture, animal husbandry, traditional medicine and weaving. They are exchanging their learning experiences and joining forces to reach their main mission: realising a more just and democratic society in which there is a place for people to express their culture.

In 1998, TIRD started with an integrated crop management approach with farmer experimentation. All TIRD members are engaged in various activities related to endogenous development. Promoting organic and sustainable agricultural practices, such as intercropping, developing bio pesticides, conserving traditional seed varieties, and improving traditional storage facilities are a few examples. Another innovative activity is the process

of strengthening traditional weaving practices with women's groups, and marketing their products through Fair Trade. Box 4d summarises these activities and their results so far.

The new adat house. The NGO Yayasan Haumeni works in the community of Laob, in the former Bijoba kingdom. When an industrial forestry project had succeeded in claiming 2,400 hectares of their land, the community acted upon their feeling of being treated unjustly. Their unity gave them a measure of success: 340 hectares were left out of the government concession to the company. One of the main claims of the community was their indigenous right to the land. During one of the meetings the farmers made a resource-flow diagram. The drawings showed the link between rain, sacred forests and rituals in ensuring sustainable livelihoods. In this process the village leaders gradually recognised the importance of adat. A general feeling that revitalisation of adat was needed to succeed in their struggle against the industrial forestry project grew. As a result, they decided to rebuild their adat house, or *Ume Le'U*, where rituals could be performed.

The adat house they had in mind would not only have a ritual function: it would also become a place to teach their children about indigenous knowledge, the cosmovision and their ancestors. A group of young adults strongly influenced this decision, because, unlike their parents, they had never experienced any of these rituals. They felt it was now their turn. Luckily there were some old people who were still practising rituals. Gradually their reluctance to talk about their *mantras*, or ritual prayers, and to perform them in public, changed. During the meetings the elders presented their experience with rituals related to agricultural practices. The Laob people also decided to experiment with spiritual practices in pest management. For this purpose the area around the adat house was planted with

medicinal plants, as well as plants that produce natural pesticides and dyes. Part of the area was also used for experiments with different cropping methods.



Weaving is developed and maintained by women and has high symbolic meaning. Yayasan Tafañ Pah, one of the NGOs in TIRD, facilitates fair trade marketing to Australia.

Revitalising ceremonies.

Taekas is one of the villages where the NGO Yayasan Timor Membangun, or YTM, works. During a participatory rural appraisal activity in 1997, YTM became aware of a conflict in relation to a sacred forest and its natural cave, Popnam, from which the village got its drinking water. Trees had been cut, plants harvested, and birds' nests

Box 4d Results of the Kompas related TIRD activities

Elements of endogenous development	Activities carried out in 9 villages	Results
Building on local initiatives to use resources	Regreening of Holy places Revitalising traditional rice and wheat varieties. Organic agriculture and biopesticides. Banul - revitalising traditional banning ceremony to protect Popnam cave.	Mutual co-operation achieved. Trees, the drinking water well and wild animals at Popnam cave are protected.
Building on local needs	Promoting sustainable agriculture through intercropping practices in maize, groundnuts and legumes.	Poorer community members have access to food in hungry season.
Improving local knowledge and practices	Laying out pilot vegetable garden in Oinlasi; value of traditional medicine; effectiveness of biopesticides; organic wheat cultivation.	Vegetable gardens have increased farmers' income and improved nutritional status; 12,000 litres of biopesticides produced (in 2000).
Local control of development options	Discussing conflict of adat land ownership between parties; Developing a critical attitude of farmers on legal and political rights for ancestral lands.	Adat houses restored in 3 villages; traditional ceremonies performed in greater number; farmers regained their pride in being Atoni instead of feeling backward.
Identification of development niches	Marketing of traditional weaving to empower women. Developing Fair Trade co-operative for trading bio pesticides within traditional adat context Exploring eco-tourism potential of the natural caves of Popnam.	Income generated for 300 women in 12 villages. Farmers sold 5000 litres of biopesticides . Government interest for eco-tourism mobilised.
Selective use of external resources	Enhancing knowledge on bio pesticides; introducing hand tractors and hand sprayers according to adat regulations.	When purified and cooled through adat, equipment becomes part of the community; better land preparation, higher yields, more co-operation and more sensitivity to adat.
Retention of benefits in the local area	Revitalising dry season granaries for seed storage of maize and paddy for food security in 3 villages.	Stronger linkages between community members established; women's role recognised (because they are only allowed to collect food).
Exchange and learning between local cultures	Exchanging traditional varieties of seeds between villages.	Genetic erosion reverted and stronger linkages between communities established.
Networking and strategic partnerships	Publishing on traditional varieties; Making calendar about Atoni adapt. Doing campaign (with stickers) to bring back the traditional name of the area: Biinmalo.	Other NGOs are positive about the results and co-operate with TIRD; local politicians lobbied for Biinmalo; schools give attention to Atoni culture.
Understanding systems of knowing and learning	Meetings and workshops to reflect and agree on the value of adat rites and ceremonies; restoring adat house and elders' authority.	Ceremonies revived in agriculture; altars established in vegetable gardens; rites performed to restore the relationship with the ancestors; more unity between clans.
Other activities: Adat and state law	Reflecting on land rights and traditional rights.	Farmers are more informed about their rights; self-confidence is raised; outside agencies are more careful in claiming resources from the people.

had been stolen from the cave, as people no longer respected the traditional adat rules and taboos, known as *banul*. Different clans claimed ownership of the sacred forest. YTM and the village representatives decided to explore the meaning of *banul* and see if it could be used to resolve the conflict.

Within adat, a *banul* or taboo can be put on soil, water, animals, plants, forests, and even humans. A symbol, for example an animal bone or head with specific leaves, is put in a strategic place so that everybody can see it. Violation of the *banul* can lead to a sanction, such as a fine, or misfortune befalling the violator. There was clarity on the fines (50 kg of rice and 1 pig) and YTM helped to establish a code of conduct on dealing with the fines. The first *banul* ceremony in Taekas was held in 1998, establishing the Popnam cave and its immediate vicinity of some 10 hectares, as a sacred area. This was the basis for resolving the conflict. The area, now protected through adat, provides clean drinking water for the villagers, who need permission from the adat elders to enter it. There have, however, been violations of *banul*. In such cases the violators have experienced illnesses that could not be cured by medical means, and which required honest confession of their violation to the traditional elders and a ceremony of making amends. To the villagers these examples demonstrated that the power of traditional rites is still strong and reliable. The role of YTM was not only to settle the conflict, but also to involve the community in a discussion on the sustainable use of natural resources.

Discussion

Activities like rebuilding the new adat house symbolises the pride of the Atoni people in their culture - a culture that had nearly disappeared. It is interesting that farmers could regain awareness on the importance of their traditional knowledge after a long period of suppression. In a way, the pressure put on them by the government made the people more aware of the potential of the knowledge that resided with their elders. This included elements of both natural resources management and spirituality. Through this re-encounter with their cosmovision and spiritual resources, the farmers working with TIRD were encouraged to experiment with it.

Constraints encountered by TIRD in implementing the programme were threefold. Firstly, in the initial phases, the field staff lacked skills to work with and analyse the still existing adat institutions. Secondly, not all adat groups found the courage to hold their adat activities openly, still entrenched by the fear of suppression of these institutions after 1965. And finally, engaging young people on a larger scale was difficult as many of them consider adat customs ancient and lacking potential for the future. The work of TIRD shows, however, that cosmovisions can make communities aware of their own strength. This creates a path towards endogenous development that includes advocacy, nature conservation and agricultural development.