

Indigenous Peoples and Culture: Orang Rimba's Education

Butet Manurung

THE SURVIVAL of many indigenous peoples around the globe depends on the preservation of their cultures. Their cultures teach them three main relationships in life: maintaining harmony with nature, other human beings and the Creator. Therefore, culture plays a very significant role in the way they educate themselves. I apply this principle in my work with the Orang Rimba community in Sumatra and indigenous peoples in other parts of Indonesia during the past twenty years. My team and I believe that culture should be the DNA in the educational program for indigenous peoples.

The Orang Rimba

The estimated 5,700 Orang Rimba are nomadic hunter-gatherers living in the central part of Sumatra island.¹ Majority of them live in two national parks in Jambi and Riau provinces – Bukit Duabelas (Twelve Hills) with approximately 2,500 Orang Rimba, Bukit Tigapuluh (Thirty Hills) with four hundred people and along the Trans-Sumatran Highway with 1,200 people.

The Orang Rimba communities have a clan-based structure, with each clan headed by a chief (*tumenggung*), who is assisted by various intermediate-level leaders including an advisor (*tengganai*), *depati*, *mangku*, *menti*, and *anak dalam*, all of whom have specific tasks within the clan (known as *rombong*).

The communities are not in regular contact with each other, and marriage usually occurs within the clan. The Orang Rimba family is matrilineal with husbands usually residing with the wife's extended family and parents preferring daughters rather than sons.

The Orang Rimba classify the forest area into several types of use: living, birthing, farming, burial, religious rituals, and place for good and bad spirits. Each clan has a specific territory; in some cases, if members of other clans want to use a clan's area, permission has to be sought. But due to the

pressure of encroachment by mining and agricultural industries, some clans are forcedly displaced and wander around mainly along the Sumatran highway or become dwellers at palm-oil plantations.

The Orang Rimba believe that the forest has many gods who exert a powerful influence in their lives. Gods can be benign or malevolent but many Orang Rimba regard their gods with fearful respect, believing that most misfortune is due to behavior that angered the gods. Particular areas are designated as the preserve of gods and Orang Rimba do not live or cultivate such areas. They also believe that gods move about the forest through rivers and creeks and they thus place great emphasis on the cleanliness of waterways. Only shamans (*dukun godong*) have the power to intercede with gods and dispense natural remedies and mantras to cure illness or to counteract evil spirits.

The Orang Rimba hunt and eat almost all forest animals, including snakes, bears, wild boars, bats, lizards and birds. They domesticate animals only as pets and do not hunt animals regarded as belonging to the gods, such as tigers and Hornbill birds.

Though they want little contact, outsiders increasingly come to them as government officials, doctors and nurses, teachers or non-governmental organization (NGO) activists, miners, loggers, surveyors and illegal hunters.

Community-Orang Rimba Relationship

The mainstream community in Jambi in Sumatra island tends to view the Orang Rimba with prejudice, often using denigrating language to describe them and perpetuating unflattering stereotypes about their culture, intelligence and intentions. The Orang Rimba are called *kubu* to mean primitive, lacking good hygiene, ignorant, immoral and lacking any religion. Local communities have popular sayings that express their dislike for the Orang Rimba such as having black magic powers to lure business clients, seduce potential lovers and cause or heal sickness.

In recent years, indigent Orang Rimba have been traveling to the cities and towns around Jambi and the Trans-Sumatran Highway to beg for money or food, or sell forest goods such as animal skin. People in the cities and towns do not see these activities in positive light.

However, many Indonesians want the Orang Rimba (and other indigenous peoples for that matter) to have a greater role in the country by giving them education, housing, employment and even religious enlightenment.

State Policies

The Dutch colonial government did not pay much attention to the indigenous peoples of Indonesia; but its transmigration programs in the 1920s² adversely affected them. Under these programs, many people from Java cleared the forests of Sumatra and settled there. Agricultural plantation and extractive industries started to spread in the island.

After independence, the Indonesian government classified the indigenous peoples as isolated and undeveloped communities (or *masyarakat tertinggal* which literally means “left-behind communities”) and thus sought to bring socio-economic development to them. But the state development programs were imposed on the indigenous peoples, which marginalized rather than helped them. Laws during the Soeharto period treated the indigenous peoples as incapable of developing their lands and displaced them by promoting investments in forestry, agricultural and mining industries in their (indigenous peoples) areas.³

The government also imposed new political structures that disregarded *adat* (traditional) structures and installed new administrative systems at the village level headed by people who needed to have certain level of literacy and formal educational attainment.⁴ These structures and systems effectively excluded the indigenous communities including the Orang Rimba from participating in decision-making processes. In other words, the Orang Rimba communities were systematically disempowered in governing their own areas.

The post-1998 Reformasi period (post-Soeharto government reform process) has mixed results for indigenous communities. Some laws and government regulations allowing exploitation of forest areas and permitting state intervention in *adat* areas continued the New Order policies. In recent years, there has been increasing awareness of Orang Rimba rights and cultural richness, accompanied by government attempts to better protect their communities. However, the devolution of state power to the local level (under Law number 22/1999 and Law number 25/1999) had not brought relief to the Orang Rimba and the other indigenous communities because it allowed local businesspeople and political elites much freer access to natural resources with little or no scrutiny from national authorities. More income from the exploitation of the local natural resources meant more funds sent back from the national government to the local administrations. Thus there

was reason to exploit the forest and other natural resources in the areas of the Orang Rimba and other indigenous communities. For the Orang Rimba, devolution left them much more vulnerable to the economic predations of the so-called “lesser kings” (*raja kecil*), local powerful figures who used the new decentralized system for their own wealth accumulation.

Changes to forestry management laws during Reformasi also had significant consequences for the Orang Rimba. In 2000, after concerted advocacy by conservation groups, the area of Bukit Duabelas was converted into National Park. Since 2002, the Natural Resources Conservation Institute (Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam, BKSDA), under the Ministry of Forestry, has advised the government on regulating the National Park. BKSDA meetings involve various stakeholders, including local governments, national park experts hired from the US and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work with the Orang Rimba. Although BKSDA was welcomed as means of pooling information and discussing policies, its glaring failure was the refusal to invite Orang Rimba leaders to meetings, seemingly because officials were worried that the Orang Rimba might not understand Bahasa Indonesia. The largest NGO working with the Orang Rimba, Sokola Institute, of which I am a co-founder, initially participated in the meetings, but was later excluded after querying about the absence of Orang Rimba representatives.⁵

The national park regulations were introduced progressively from 2004 and immediately caused problems for the Orang Rimba, particularly relating to the park zoning system that heavily restricted human movement and activities in specific areas. Although the management regulations did recognize areas for sacred trees and plants such as Sialang honey trees and Sentubung and Songoris⁶ plants, in general, they did not correspond to the Orang Rimba’s own customary zoning. These competing zoning practices soon led to clashes between the Orang Rimba and forest rangers. For example, rangers cut down all the trees planted by the Orang Rimba in a core zone where humans were prohibited and also shot and injured an Orang Rimba man who planted trees in the same zone. The rangers’ actions triggered large and angry protests from the Orang Rimba community especially from young, literate students.

Since 2010, the Orang Rimba in Makekal Hulu (one of the twelve clans in Bukit Duabelas), have tried different strategies to counter the forest regulations. In 2016, they independently mapped their own traditional territory

in Jambi under the supervision of a NGO, the Ecological Justice for People Foundation (CAPP Foundation). For several months, every family contributed Rp 50,000 (about three and a half US dollars) per month to support the costs of the mapping. In 2017, the mapping project was completed and submitted for registration with the Board for Customary Land Registration (Badan Registrasi Wilayah Adat). This map has become an important resource for BKSDA in revising its management regulations.

First Contact

I started visiting the Orang Rimba villages in October 1999 as staff of the Indonesian Conservation Community, more known as WARSİ. I was tasked to continue the education program started by WARSİ several years before. WARSİ is an environmental NGO that operates in Jambi province, whose primary programs consist of advocating the living space for Orang Rimba, facilitating their education by teaching them basic reading and math, and supporting the Orang Rimba's children in getting formal education.

My first attempts at giving literacy to the Orang Rimba were met with resistance. I was confronted with their thinking about outsiders giving education to them. One mother told me “Sokola hopi ado dalam adat kami, kalu kami keno bala, yoya ketinye kamu nang bekin kedulat!” – School is not in our tradition, if calamity befalls us, you are the one who caused our damnation.⁷

How does one react to such thinking that honestly expresses the fear of the unknown, the literacy program? How does one assure the Orang Rimba that literacy is not evil, but has value for their future?



I did not want to impose on the Orang Rimba my literacy work. I had to slow down, and waited for the right moment to get them to feel safe in learning reading and writing.

I decided that I should start with the children, instead of the adults. I identified potential students among the Orang Rimba children. But while I was able to initially talk to the boys (aged four to sixteen), I had a hard time communicating with the girls.

I had the impression that women and girls have been taught to be cautious of outsiders, making them more difficult to reach. I had to behave like the Orang Rimba women to follow their culture. I felt, for example, that



Orang Rimba students.

there was a traditional rule that prohibited women from teaching anyone – male or female. I learned at least that it was considered *hopi beik* (out of place) for women to teach men. At the same time, women were probably disinterested, or a little fearful.

Perhaps the Orang Rimba did not need education after all. But the fact that they had been cheated (through land agreements for example), there was a basis for saying that they were treated unfairly for not knowing how to read and write in Bahasa Indonesia.

Initial Learnings

My short experience of giving literacy classes to the Orang Rimba children gave me the chance to rethink my concept of education. I drew up an education program that I believed would be relevant to them.

I believed that any educational program for the Orang Rimba should be guided by the following basic requirements:⁸

Lessons need to be tailored to the Orang Rimba's daily activities.

The education materials should be relevant to the needs and way of life of the Orang Rimba. These materials should also be designed appropriately to take into account the comprehension levels of the Orang Rimba.

For example, in undertaking an education program for nomadic people, the school needs to be mobile. During *melangun*, when the Orang Rimba leave the place where a person died and stay far away, I walk with them bringing all the school materials in my big backpack. I teach them during their rest period and only when they ask, because *melangun* is a painful and exhausting moment for the Orang Rimba.

The materials and subjects should also be only on things that are relevant to their life. I did not know this before, and learned it from them. When I taught multiplication for example, they asked why was that relevant to their life, when will they use it? They refused to learn about the planets and the solar system thinking that they were not interesting, and irrelevant to their situation.

The Orang Rimba need to receive some benefit from any education program.

The recognition of the benefits of education by the Orang Rimba themselves is very important. I recall the advice of the then Dean of Anthropology, Parsudi Suparlan, whose book I read when I was a student in the Padjadjaran University. Known to some as headstrong but also as a very pragmatic person, he said that any program seeking to re-direct a certain community outlook would not succeed if the people it is seeking to help do not share the belief that change is beneficial to them. Program benefits must far exceed the negative spillover resulting from the acceptance of the change. It is also necessary that the benefits of change are sustainable for a long time, while also subject to improvements whenever necessary.

The education process needs to be locally organized.

The involvement of local people, bringing their language, local perceptions and culture into the mix, is likely to aid learning. Total integration by the teacher into the life of the Orang Rimba, with intermittent time outside the community, would contribute profound insights into any perception gaps between the two worlds.

The education program needs to facilitate critical analytical skills and provide skills to assist the community in coping with the development challenges ahead.

The Orang Rimba have to develop critical analytical skills to deal effectively with development and environmental changes that are threatening the existence of their communities. Development plans need to be explained in a transparent and honest way to each decision-maker and the inherent risks, which might affect their lives, need to be made apparent.



The basic goal of any education program includes facilitating the Orang Rimba's capacity for self-realization, providing a vision for the future and developing self-integrity within the Rimba community.

Education programs should aim at preparing the Orang Rimba to fend off external pressure, thus enabling them to determine their own future.

The Orang Rimba must represent themselves, voice their own needs and have their own point of view. Self-representation avoids an over-reliance on intermediaries to communicate with the outside



Classroom in the forest.

world. In their own words, the Rimba can articulate in greater detail and with force their own views and identity, their own rights and needs.

My dream is to have one of my students speak up with humility and confidence in a public forum. Building confidence is important. Whenever possible I include in my lessons various topics which can nurture their self-respect and pride. Hopefully, this addresses the erosive influences of the outside world, like the use of the derogatory term “Kubu”, which has been used for years as a substitute word for Orang Rimba.

As I see it, as soon as the Orang Rimba have a clear perspective about where they stand and their predicament, they will be able to think independently. I am confident that they will find a way out, as the Orang Rimba would likely do. Another wish is for the Orang Rimba, when faced with outside pressures, to take a stand and decide freely for themselves what to do.

I cannot bear to see the Orang Rimba put in a position where they have no room to maneuver. Once cornered they will have no capacity to objectively assess the problems coming their way. On a more pro-active note, I would like the Orang Rimba to have a say in their future destiny, and to do so they need to be empowered.

For me, therefore, this is not just about rainforest conservation. It is also about the survival of the Orang Rimba.

I come to the conclusion that reading and writing alone are not adequate preparation for the Orang Rimba to chart their future.

The need for critical analytical skills was demonstrated, partly at least, when an Orang Rimba boy told the elders not to sign the written agreement between them and the villagers in settling a dispute on the boundary of a land until after reading the document. He then proceeded to read the document out loud that not only made the elders know the contents of the document but also showed how literacy could be properly used for their benefit.

Provision of educational services has proven to be one of the most vexed issues for both the Orang Rimba and national government. For many years, government officials prefer to provide standard schooling using the national curriculum to Orang Rimba children. The focus has been on literacy, numeracy, and education on national history and principles. But most Orang Rimba are sceptical about the benefits of formal schooling and seek an education that is more closely tailored to their community needs and traditions of learning. A good example of their view of education comes from a class that I was teaching in the forest in 2000. Our class was interrupted by the growl of distant chainsaws and the eerie sound of falling trees. A child stared at me and asked: *'Ibu, once we master reading and writing, we can then stop the logging, right?'* In effect, the child was asking what was the use of education if it would not prevent the destruction of the forest which is so precious to the Orang Rimba. It was indeed a difficult question to answer as it raises issues about the purpose of education.

Among indigenous peoples, state schooling has been somewhat ruefully labeled as *'Sekolah Untuk Pergi'* (School for Leaving), capturing the apprehension that going to formal schools prises students away from their traditional lands and community. Indeed, the experience of the Orang Rimba over many years is that their children who study in formal schools are far more likely to leave their homelands. The higher their education, the greater the chance of them departing. Orang Rimba contend that the national curriculum is created in the capital Jakarta for students who will live and work in cities and towns; it is not intended for jungle dwellers. It does not teach them the things they need to know to live in the forest, such as how to climb honey trees, to hunt for wild boar, to treat scorpion bites, to look after rivers and their gods, and to stop deforestation and forest fires. These are the skills the Orang Rimba regard as important.

Effects of Educational Activities?

Several years of interacting with the children made me realize the initial limitation of literacy program. Instead of empowering the children, the little knowledge I have given them burdened their hearts. Once they were able to read, they became aware of their issues. Then they became depressed when they realized that they were unable to defend their own rights.

Once they learned to read, the Orang Rimba became avid readers. From magazines, they learned about the law, and came to know that illegal logging was a punishable offense.

However, there are still important lessons to learn from the attempts of the children to act on the problems faced by their community.

In 2002, the children proposed to organize a battalion of rainforest wardens. The idea was to have a group that could prevent theft in the rainforest. They could write the names of the thieves along with the kind of wood being stolen and where were they being sold. They wanted to call this group *Pasukan Rimba Bungaron Rayo* (Strong and Mighty Rainforest Battalion) or PBPR. With money they collected, uniforms like the green military outfits were bought in the town. They observed that people in uniform (defense personnel, police, doctors) in the outside world were treated with respect.

However, the battalion idea failed to get support from WARSI, the NGO working with them. Nevertheless, they went around the rainforest watching out for thieves. But they could not be wardens all the time because they had to look for food for themselves and their families.

They then changed the name of the group from PBPR to Bramatala, "*BR*Ani, *MA*Ti, *TA*kut *LA*par – ready to die but afraid to starve!"⁹

Some Orang Rimba expressed the desire to share their knowledge of the rainforest with the outside world. Others would like to write about rainforests for newspapers, although their writing skills are not yet up to the standard required for publication.

Developing a New Educational Program

Orang Rimba youth are concerned about issues of income diversification as well as maintaining their local traditions. To ensure a source of income, we thought that the students who reach adolescence should become role models for the younger students. This idea was modeled on the practice

used by Orang Rimba parents to pass down rainforest responsibilities to the next generation. Our older students would like to have cultivation plots and learn to plant and harvest them. At the same time, these plots would deter the thrust of land clearance by the village people.

The students said, “This is the real school, learning how to live and have a good life.” This saying became the basis for SOKOLA. SOKOLA contributes to matters related to daily living and prepares people to deal with the onslaught of new experiences brought on by changing times. The rainforest is diminishing and the Orang Rimba are already becoming integrated with the market system. If there are well-protected rainforests and the Orang Rimba are able to become completely self-sufficient within them, without any market exchange with the outside world, we might assume that they would not need schooling. However, all the evidence point to the contrary.

We came up with the idea of a boarding school where children stay at school and away from their parents (though still within the territory of the group). The school would provide everything and all activities would be done there. Every day would be school day and daily life would center on the school. And so, school would no longer be just books and pencils. Naturally, the children would be allowed to visit their parents, especially those children beginning to shoulder family responsibilities.

We focused on the concept of school centers to cater to the dispersed and changing pattern of Orang Rimba *rombong* (clan) locations. Each center focused on a different program, depending on the needs of the surrounding Orang Rimba. Some placed environmental study, agriculture and forestry at their core, while others concentrated on reading and writing. But we found this idea difficult to sustain due to the need for more people, funding as well as monitoring. We decided to establish one school site where all programs were done for one *rombong*, and which moved whenever the Orang Rimba transferred to another place. We established such schools in other *rombongs*.

We began to expand our curriculum to include knowledge of flora and fauna. We dissected a frog to show its respiratory and digestive systems. We stressed however that only frogs could be subjected to this exercise, not humans.

We also took the children to attend Orang Rimba’s *adat* meetings. All of us, the children, my colleagues and I took notes during the proceedings. We learned how the elders subtly created rhymes to convey their messages or to share their feelings.

We encouraged the children to speak up and express themselves in open forums. If a government official was present, the children tended to whisper among themselves, too timid to stand up. Here we would encourage them saying, "Pak, this is Pengendum and he has something to say." We set them up to talk, which otherwise would not have happened. If Pengendum sulked, we would deal with it later.

We often invite the Orang Rimba elders to chat with us at SOKOLA. Through casual chatting, the children picked up knowledge and guidance from the elders' life experiences. The children asked about legends, spells, traditional medicine, ghosts, mythology, and a myriad of other things.

Apart from running the school, we also made the rounds visiting each of the Orang Rimba homes spread out in the forest. Occasionally, we would have sessions with the wider *rombong* group, depending on their issues. Usually this was done upon the request of the Orang Rimba. If the request is during the *melangun*, then we traveled with them.

In the context of the Orang Rimba, a school curriculum must be designed according to the needs of its pupils, not a form of template that has been approved by others. Even the best of intentions can flounder when we do not comprehend the needs of the intended recipients. The Orang Rimba would feel humiliated and hurt receiving what would be termed by the outside world as "donations" or "aid". People might find it idealistic or heroic in giving things such as cloths because they see the Orang Rimba as not clothed enough, but this aid can be perceived as an insult.

These activities started the formal establishment in 2003 of the Sokola, a not-for-profit organization which provides educational opportunities and advocacy skills for indigenous people. Its vision is for indigenous peoples "to have the ability to determine their own destiny and be sovereign over their territory and natural resources through learning processes." It specializes in providing schooling to the Orang Rimba which is sensitive to their culture and tailored to their specific needs.

In 2005, SOKOLA became a legal entity and spread its activities to other provinces: Makassar, Aceh, Flores and the Moluccas. Some of the schools were closed due to either financial limitations or the fact that the indigenous community could run their education or advocacy programs by themselves (they are at the stage where they are able to identify their problems and seek support to resolve them through their network). When schools close down because of financial problems, we seek donation and reopen again.

Impact of SOKOLA

At various forums, Orang Rimba youth have been campaigning on the significance of their forest - the forest being their life, their home, their identity and source of food. Destroying the forest means ending their world. They share stories of their wisdom about ecology or their tradition in the jungle. Also, they want to raise awareness on their values about life, meaning of happiness, view on what is meant by being civilized or having wealth. They basically want to be left alone in the jungle and to be free to choose the changes or the way they would adopt modern things/life. This is in response to the many programs provided by the government and other institutions to “modernize” them (by introducing a new religion, housing, clothes, state school, etc.).

Their attempts at communicating to the outside world are meant to prove that they are just fine without the meddling by those from the outside world about their life in the jungle. And while they need support, such help must be sensitive to their ways of life. They often mention indigenous rights especially in relation to making informed decision in communicating to the outside world.

During the 2004-2018 period, the young Orang Rimba teacher trainees went many times to the National Park Board office and the Forestry Department to request for the protection of the Bukit Duabelas National Park where they live; gave two presentations at the Constitutional Court of Indonesia in 2007 and 2010 about customary law, community and recognition of their/indigenous peoples belief; joined the forum organized by the National Commission on Violence Against Women and spoke about indigenous life especially the women’s important role in the Orang Rimba tradition; shared the 1999-2017 experience of the Jungle School/SOKOLA RIMBA and its impact at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) held in Toronto in 2017; discussed the topic of children and biodiversity at the Terre Des Hommes South East Asia Forum in Jakarta and Yogyakarta; fundraised at the Asia-Pacific philanthropy events of the Rotary club in Bali, and attended several meetings with officials of the Education Ministry to discuss the proposed curriculum for indigenous people.

They also gave presentations at other occasions such as the forums organized by the different Ministries (such as those of Social Welfare, Education, National Development Planning Board) to discuss child rights in relation

to the rights of indigenous children to hunt or help parents in the farm or in fishing though they were below eighteen years old. Rather than see these activities as against the international conception of child rights, these activities of the indigenous children should be understood as “education” and not “work/labor.” Their activities should be seen in their context, not from city people’s mindset. They also attended seminars at several universities in Indonesia; taught at student nature lovers’ clubs in universities; gave interviews for TV and radio programs, and newspaper; spoke occasionally at the



Introducing forest materials to visitors.

celebration of the National Education Day; and shared their experiences in sessions during NGO/civil society group events.

The young Orang Rimba teacher trainees formed an organization called *Kelompok Makekal Bersatu* (Makekal Group United).

Changing Situation of the Orang Rimba

The Orang Rimba’s life is directly being challenged by the changing times. The forest kept on disappearing, while government programs try to modernize them (by offering housing, clothing, religion, state schools, etc.). Where

will these changes lead to? Should we re-focus our education objectives? Can changes brought by the outside world be avoided? Do we fight these changes or just go along with them? Given the rate of change, I realize that we are racing against time. We must push to continue studying and striving so that we can cope with this new future. It is like developing anti-viruses for computers, forever chasing one's tail.

Sokola continues to examine its role in the life of the Orang Rimba. Its program has to fit the changing situation. To do so, two cases of education for Orang Rimba¹⁰ are important considerations.

Besudut

Besudut was one of my first students when I started teaching in 2000. I gave him intensive tuition for about four months until he mastered basic literacy and numeracy. I then lost contact with him as I moved to other parts of the jungle to teach new students. He and his Bedinding Besi clan had a high level interaction with the outside world, including selling permits to loggers to fell trees. Besudut always longed to have a modern schooling of a type he could not obtain in the forest. He gained his wish when a rattan merchant from the village of Tanagaro, Raman Kayak, adopted him and sent him to elementary school starting at grade 3. Besudut converted to Islam and changed his name into Irman Jalil.

People in the village and at school enthusiastically assisted Besudut, so keen were they to prove to the world that an Orang Rimba can be “successful.” They wanted him to go to university, then become a public servant – a model for what other Orang Rimba might achieve. At primary and secondary school, his teachers, the principal and other education authorities gave him special attention, perhaps more than what was wisely needed. He was assisted to pass his examinations, even though he did not always attend and perform well at school.

When Besudut graduated from high school, the government enrolled him in a primary school teaching degree at the University of Jambi, the first Orang Rimba to attend university. Metro TV interviewed him on the high-rating talk show “Kick Andy,” during which Ministry of Education officials appeared to present him with his scholarship and commend his example to others. The local regent also gave him scholarship and WARSI provided him with additional financial support. Thus, he became a “poster boy.” Unfortunately, despite the generous funding, Besudut did not complete his

studies. He dropped out in the second year of his course and turned up at a SOKOLA basecamp saying: "I can't do this [university] anymore (*Akeh hopi endok lagi*)."

Soon after he was offered an honorary public servant position in the Social Affairs Ministry. He remained there for about two years doing little more than preparing coffee for guests, doing photo-copying and other menial tasks. After this, another honorary administrative position was given to him, this time in the local sub-district head's office, performing similar work. He soon left that job after becoming bored. Now in his mid-30s, Besudut recently accepted nomination by a political party for the local Jambi legislature (DPRD). If elected, he will be the first Orang Rimba to be a legislator.

Besudut was viewed as a success by the mainstream media,¹⁰ and by many in the general public who followed his career. Many people personally congratulate me for assisting with Besudut's achievements, even though I try to tell them that the case is more complex and less positive than they realize. For the Orang Rimba community, Besudut was a failure. To them, his story proved that formal schooling takes Orang Rimba away from their land and alienates them from their traditions. The Besudut case shows the marked contrast in aspirations between the Orang Rimba and Indonesian society in general. The things that many Indonesians think are important and would like indigenous people to achieve are not those that most Orang Rimba value. Formal education, salaried government jobs, recognition in the media are all matters of little moment to the Orang Rimba, though Besudut's case illustrates that these are markers of success for the wider society and officialdom. Besudut sees himself, in some ways, as a failure too because he cannot be himself and is tired of trying to meet the expectations of others, particularly those outside his Orang Rimba community. He may yet become a successful politician or official, but it is unlikely that his community will praise his achievement.

Pengendum Tampung

Pengendum, who is now in his late 20s, began his schooling at Sokola Rimba in 2001. He did so against the wishes of his parents, who believed that reading and writing would make him evil as they involved the use of pencils, which they regarded as wicked. He was the only one among his siblings to join the school and complete his education (this means having enough capacity to become a "teacher" for other Orang Rimba and to be an "advocate"

who can represent the Orang Rimba community). Although he intensely disliked math and science subjects, he was drawn to studying words and the law, saying that he wanted his literacy to be of use to him and his people. He would often ask about legal matters and rights, particularly when there was a difference between *adat* and Indonesian civil law. As he got older and gained a better command of Indonesian, he began studying legal texts and travelling to the Legal Aid Office (Lembaga Bantuan Hukum, LBH) in Padang, Jambi and even Jakarta to learn more about human rights, especially relating to *adat*. He was also a gifted public speaker and debater and quickly developed a reputation in indigenous circles for his articulate advocacy on behalf of the Orang Rimba. Over the last decade, he has appeared several times on local and national television, speaking on indigenous issues, has given expert evidence to parliamentary committees and the Constitutional Court on the *adat* and rights of the Orang Rimba, and has also spoken at an international conference for indigenous peoples in Canada in 2017. All of this was achieved without any formal schooling.

Pengendum also went against his parents' advice and married an outsider, a Jambi woman of Javanese descent, with whom he now has a family. He lives in, and moves easily between, both the worlds of the Orang Rimba and mainstream society. He and his family have a house in the district capital of Bangko, about two hours from his clan's traditional land, but he di-



Pengendum speaking at an international conference for indigenous peoples in Canada, 2017.

vides his time evenly between living in the city and the forest. He has been involved in producing and appearing in documentary films on *adat* communities, for which he and Mijak, one of his friends, won an award from the Melbourne Film Festival. In addition to his cultural activities, Pengendum has been successful in business as well. Like many Orang Rimba, when the forestry management guidelines were announced, he claimed an area of land as a plantation lot. He now has a sizeable number of rubber trees – a common practice for the Orang Rimba as rubber trees can be planted within the forest causing minimal harm to the existing flora and fauna – and has also developed rattan farming which has proven lucrative.

Pengendum represents a different kind of “success” to Besudut. He remains an integral part of his clan and is equally at home living its culture as he is residing in mainstream Indonesian society. He has been able to engage with the outside world and advocate on behalf of his community without abandoning his identity as an Orang Rimba. Indeed, at every point in his career, he has made decisions on his own terms and not succumbed to pressure to become something other than what he wanted to be. He is much admired in Orang Rimba communities as someone who has not “lost his soul” or his dignity, despite partly living in the city and being feted by state institutions and the media. Interestingly, he and Besudut are good friends and the latter often expresses admiration for how Pengendum has managed his life.

What then is the future for the educational program of Sokola for the Orang Rimba? SOKOLA has become the largest NGO provider of educational services to the Orang Rimba.

Future Plans

In 2018, after fifteen years of existence, we renamed SOKOLA as Sokola Institute to become a professional organization not only doing education work for indigenous peoples but also advocacy and consultancy on indigenous peoples’ issues. In order to cover these activities, we added a new department in the Institute: research and development division.

For the advocacy work, the Institute mainly undertakes activities to 1) influence policy and programs toward indigenous people and 2) raise awareness among the public on how indigenous/local wisdoms and their survival have to be supported. The Institute, for example, has been an advisor to the

Ministry of Education for the past three years in developing a curriculum for indigenous peoples.

For consultancy, the Institute provides experts and trainers to anyone who wants to develop educational programs for indigenous peoples. It has programs being undertaken as part of corporate social responsibility, or those of the government, NGOs/civil society, teachers or the public.

The Institute has been campaigning to present the great value of local knowledge through public events, social media such as the introduction of the hashtag #pendidikanlokaluntukdunia (this means local knowledge for the world), and publication such as my book the *Jungle School* and its award-winning film with the same title. The film has been screened around the world including Japan.¹²

And to fulfill this, the Institute is committed to developing a module/guide book for people who want to do educational activities in indigenous communities and within their organizations/institutions.

Apart from that, the Institute is still continuing its educational programs. It manages an average of four programs (one program for one indigenous community) at a time in different parts of Indonesia. The schools run with varied duration, depending on the complexity of the situations faced by the local communities. There was one program that ran for two years, others for eight years. The program in Orang Rimba Sumatra has been running for fifteen years and will perhaps run for another five years or more. In this program, we in the Institute are actually the learners rather than the teachers. We always believe that we have to learn first from the indigenous people before we can teach them, and the indigenous students are our best teachers.

Endnotes

1 Central Sumatra has four provinces: South Sumatra, West Sumatra, Jambi and Riau.

2 The Dutch colonial government launched programs that brought people from the highly populated Java to other islands in Indonesia to make them clear land and start agricultural activities. See Hilda Masniarita Pohan and Yodi Izharivan, "Inside The Indonesian Migration: A Historical Perspective," *Jurnal Manajemen Maranatha*, Volume 16, Number 2, May 2017, 133-212, available at <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/2910/991758515478aa4cf75e7322eced74109686.pdf>.

3 The 1967 Law on Foreign Investment is a prime example of laws that displaced the indigenous peoples.

4 See Law no. 5/1974 on Village Government and Law no. 5/1979 on Regional Governance.

5 Sokola Institute was established in 2003, is a not-for-profit organization which provides educational opportunities and advocacy skills to indigenous people.

6 Every Orang Rimba has her/his own Sentubung and Songoris. Sentubung is a tree under which the umbilical cord of someone is buried under, while Songoris is a tree whose part is used for a ceremony by the shaman for a newborn baby. Orang Rimba prohibit cutting down both trees, believing that any harm to these trees would also hurt their "owner."

7 From my book, *The Jungle School*, SOKOLA (Jakarta, 2012), page 82

8 This list is from *The Jungle School*, pages 100-101.

9 *The Jungle School*, page 178.

10 Excerpt from Butet Manurung, 'Normalising' the Orang Rimba: Between Mainstreaming, Marginalisation and Respecting Indigenous Culture, undated.

11 For an article about Besudut as a success story, see <http://thejakartapost.com/news/2013/05/28/first-orang-rimba-graduates-senior-high-school.html>

12 See Focus on Asia Fukuoka International Film Festival, www.focus-on-asia.com/2014/entry/5131.

Bahasa Indonesia words

Adat – (traditional) structures

Kubu – primitive, lacking good hygiene, ignorant, immoral and lacking any religion

Melangun – time when the Orang Rimba leave the place where a person died and stay far away

Rombong – clan

Acronyms

BKSDA – Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam (Natural Resources Conservation Institute)

WARSI – Indonesian Conservation Community