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## **Orality as a Ground for Dialogue and Positive Encounter: A Case Study of the Orang Rimba in Jambi, Indonesia**

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### Abstract

This article discusses the role of oral tradition in the Orang Rimba community who inhabit the Makekal Ilir forest area, in Jambi Province. The author reads the orality in the frame of the relationship between the Orang Rimba and the residents of Tanah Garo Village. The latter are considered to have a brotherhood or kinship relationship with the former. The fundamental question is whether orality is the key word in building a positive encounter and dialogue on meaningful relations between the Orang Rimba and the residents of Tanah Garo, or on the contrary becomes a vehicle for exploitation? The author asserts that positive potential is possible if orality, which is the common thread of the relationship between the two communities, is properly disseminated to the descendants of the two communities. Without good transmission, the negative potential and exploitation will be more prominent.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Dialogue has been a part of people life in Indonesia for a long time. However, the reality is that dialogue is still unable to bridge differences and unravel potential conflicts that may occur, especially in the context of a multi-cultural Indonesian society. This is because the dialogue model that has developed is a formal dialogue initiated by the State. The problem is that formal dialogue sponsored or initiated by the state often does not produce maximum results. The formal dialogue model is not always able to respond to the needs of the socio-religious context of each religious community.

Many scholars have attempted to reconstruct dialogue in order to present a more positive and fruitful model of dialogue. For example, there has been a shift in understanding that dialogue is not only about differences, but also about learning to understand differences (Swidler 2013: 15; Pui Lan 2012: 25; Race 2003: 89). With this paradigm, dialogue partners can understand each other from their respective traditions and engage in a process of opening their minds. Thus, dialogue becomes a kind of encounter that underlines the commitment to understand others, a way to understand others, which leads to not only understanding but also engaging in action (Sidiqi, 1997). The end result of understanding and action is to find shared values and teachings or a common platform that enables a positive ground for dialogue.

The challenge then is how to present an alternative dialogue that can touch all levels of society and is in line with the context of each religious community. What kind of engagement model can be an option? Swidler (2014) and Phan (2003) emphasise the need for attention to social space in dialogue, so that dialogue does not only focus on the exchange of ideas and textual or canonical discussions. Izak Lattu (2019) offers orality as an alternative for developing dialogue models. The orality can be extracted from local communities and read in the context of their relations with other communities.

This article intends to see how orality in the context of the Orang Rimba community who inhabit Bukit Duabelas National Park in Jambi Province. Can oral tradition be a medium of dialogue and build positive encounters in the

Orang Rimba community, especially in regard to their relations with other communities. Or on the contrary, orality has become a vehicle to exploit and subordinate the Orang Rimba. The experience of the Orang Rimba's interaction with the people of Tanah Garo, Jambi, who have oral tradition relations with them will be the basis for the author's assumption that orality is indeed able to bridge a dialogue and encounter, but it still requires intense effort so that the bridge is not exploited and misused.

## **METHOD**

The sources of data for this article are derived from fieldwork conducted by the author in Sungkai, Makekal Ilir, and Tanah Garo Village, Tebo Regency, Jambi. The author lived for six months with Orang Rimba in the Makekal Ilir forest to observe and interact directly with them in their original environment. By conducting participant observation, the author was able to understand how the intertwining of meanings and relationships occurs in this community. In addition to accompanying the Orang Rimba in their settlement, the author also followed the community's journey when they travelled to Tanah Garo for trading purposes or to meet their Waris. It is on such occasions that the author can observe how the pattern of relations between the Orang Rimba and their Waris in Tanah Garo is developed.

In addition to engaging in participant observation, the author also interviewed several key informants in the Orang Rimba community as well as residents and elders in Tanah Garo village. The selection of key informant samples was based on the role of each individual in the community, such as traditional leaders, tribal chiefs or Tumenggung, and others. From these figures and key persons, the author obtained instructions and directions for interviewing other sources. Validation was done by comparing narratives from one informant to another and seeing firsthand whether the information provided was in accordance with reality. In addition, the author also traced articles and previous works related to the Orang Rimba to get an initial picture and track the consistency of the data obtained.

What the author writes in this article is principally based on what Orang Rimba has shown and allowed the author to publish. However, the author is solely responsible for what is represented in this article. It is very possible that the data that the author obtained in the field is conditioned data or data that Orang Rimba wants the author to describe, not real data from day-to-day life as lived by them. The limitations are certainly experienced by the author, especially considering that the research conducted was relatively short for ethnographic research. Nevertheless, the researcher tried to represent as accurately as possible what happened to the relations between the Orang Rimba and the people outside the forest.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Orality in the Orang Rimba tradition**

Orality is the verbal expression of a society that does not recognise literacy culture. The comparison with literacy culture is to emphasise the position of those who carry oral traditions as different from other communities in terms of how they build cognitive, knowledge and communication systems (Finnegan, 1992:6). The verbal narratives that are built can then become the basis of how a community identifies itself and defines what kind of relations they develop towards other communities.

In the context of cross-cultural dialogue, orality can be an alternative that bridges differences. For example, the similarity of oral narratives shared by one community with another can be a medium to build understanding and relationships. Indonesia itself is a country rich in cultural diversity of orality. The diversity of orality can be an estuary to bring together different communities in an effort to place shared meanings and values. By looking at similarities in the aspects of symbols, rituals, and the essence of oral narratives, two different communities can find common ground and build an understanding of each tradition. Orang Rimba is one of the communities that adopted oral culture and developed its oral tradition in the context of relations with other communities.

Orang Rimba is a tribal community that inhabits the Bukit Dua Belas National Park (TNBD)<sup>1</sup> area in Jambi province.<sup>2</sup> They are a community that depends on a culture of hunting and gathering forest products. In addition, they are communities that maintain the traditions of their ancestors and do not make modern civilisation changes an important part of the dynamics of life. With a simple lifestyle and placing the forest as an important part of their life line, the Orang Rimba can still maintain their existence in the middle of the national park wilderness.

However, even though the Orang Rimba live in the forest, it does not mean that they live a seclusive life and do not establish relationships with the surrounding community of Bukit Duabelas National Park. At least, such relations are needed, especially those related to the interests of economic and political transactions. One of the villages that has a close relationship with Orang Rimba is Tanah Garo Village, Muara Tabir District, Tebo Regency. With the people in this village, the Orang Rimba have a historical connection that they build through the tradition of storytelling or orality.

Oral tradition plays a substantial role in the lives of the Orang Rimba. This is because they are an illiterate society or one that does not recognise the tradition of reading and writing. It is the teachings of their ancestors that do not provide space for the tradition of reading and writing, because the identity of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bukit Duabelas National Park was declared by the President on January 26, 2001. The area of the national park covers 60,500 hectares according to the Minister of Forestry's decree No. 258/Kpts-II/2000 signed on June 23, 2000. Within this national park there are at least 2000 Orang Rimba populations scattered throughout the forest area. The author studies the population that inhabits the Sungkai area because the distance is not too far from Tanah Garo village so that involved observations can be made when Orang Rimba interact with residents in the village.

<sup>2</sup> There are several names given to the Orang Rimba community. In ethnographic studies this group of people is often referred to as Orang Kubu (see for example the writings of Van Dongen, 1913; Schebesta, 1927; Sandbukt, 1984; and Persoon, 1989). However, the term kubu has a negative meaning in the eyes of most people in the country. Therefore, the government in the Suharto era referred to this community as Suku Anak Dalam or SAD for short. The name was changed to the term Remote Indigenous Community during the reformation period (Depsos, 2002). The community themselves prefer to refer to their identity as Orang Rimba because their lives are close to the jungle.

Orang Rimba is built on simplicity and attachment to the forest. The ability to read and write is identical to the life of modern society and hence defies the very tradition of Orang Rimba. However, the Orang Rimba have a oral tradition that becomes the medium of their knowledge system and history system. The tradition is passed down from the elders to the various generations below them. This transmission is important as a medium to dialogue about their culture and differences and build an understanding of their own identity as tribal people.

The relationship between the Orang Rimba community and the Tanah Garo community begins with a historical narrative of the origins of the two communities. The historical narrative of the origin is described in the following oral narartive:

“There was a traveller from Pagaruyung, Minangkabau, West Sumatra, named Bujang Perantau. One day he found a fruit called *Gelumpang* when he was wandering in the Makekal forest. He accordingly brought the fruit home for his own consumption. When he was asleep at night, he received a dream telling him to wrap the fruit with a piece of white cloth. As he followed the instruction, the fruit miraculously turned into a pretty woman. She then asked Bujang Perantau to marry her. He however replied that there was no one else in the forest to marry them. The woman then came up with the idea of building a bridge, made of a skinned log called *Bayur*, over a river.<sup>3</sup> He should walk on to the bridge from one end of the bridge while the woman walked on to it from the other. If they could meet their foreheads together in the middle of the bridge, they would then officially be husband and wife. From this marriage four children were born, namely Bujang Malapangi, Dewo Tunggal, Putri Gading, and Putri Selaro Pinang Masak. Both Bujang Malapangi and Putri Selaro Pinang Masak later on left the forest and settled in a village as well as converting to Islam. In other words, they decided to be *Orang Terang*. Putri Selaro Pinang Masak accordingly resided in Serenggam, Tembesi. Bujang Melapangi, on the other hand, moved from one place to another around the Makekal River basin. At first, he settled in Kembang Bungo, then moved to Empang Tilan and relocated to Cempedak Emas. After that he changed his settlement to Perumahan Buruh and Limau Sundai until

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that when the author confirmed the validity of the oral narratives to elders in Tanah Garo Village, they did not know in detail what and how *gelumpang* fruit and *bayur* wood were. They had never seen or understood what these two objects looked like. Their knowledge is built on historical myths of origin as told by their ancestors orally.

finally stayed at Tanah Garo. Dewo Tunggal and Putri Gading decided to settle permanently in the Makekal forest” (Interview with the late haji Sayuti and Ngadap, the then Tumenggung of Makekal Ilir in 2004).

This oral narrative symbolically marks the blood relationship between the two communities. The descendants of Bujang Melapangi are those who now mostly reside in Tanah Garo village. Therefore, collectively, the villagers must always nurture and protect the Orang Rimba. This is because Bujang Melapangi is the eldest brother and in the original structure of their custom the eldest brother must help and support his younger siblings. In fact, the word melapangi is literally understood as a person who must protect and provide relief for his brother who is experiencing difficulties.<sup>4</sup> The collective memory contained in this oral narrative thus becomes the bridge that connects the two communities.

For Orang Rimba and the people of Tanah Garo, the oral story above underpins how their relationships should be built. Although the ways of life are different, the common ancestors bind their kinship patterns. It is this common kinship narrative that bridges potential differences. If the ancestors remain committed to maintaining their blood ties, then the descendants of these two communities should maintain the same pattern of relations, especially if the commitment is confirmed by the ancestors with an oath. The following oral narratives can illustrate how the commitment of the ancestors and the foundation of relations between Orang Rimba and Tanah Garo residents:

“Prior to their separation, both Bujang Melapangi and Dewo Tunggal made an agreement and vowed to each other that they would maintain their relationship. Accordingly, Bujang Melapangi, who chose to leave nomadic life and reside in a village, said to Dewo Tunggal that if the latter disobeyed the former, and if Bujang and his heirs who visited Dewo and his extended family in the forest were served with any food related to pig, tapir, snake, or any non domesticated animals, the action then would bring a curse and might cause a disaster for the whole society of Jambi (*kena kutuk ayam betuan, kena sumpah seluruh Jambi*). Dewo Tunggal

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<sup>4</sup> This literal interpretation was conveyed by Tumenggung Ngadap, the leader of the Orang Rimba in the Makekal watershed area within TNBD (see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=afZblCN9iGA>)

then replied *Huu*<sup>5</sup> and agreed with the above provisions. Conversely, Dewo Tunggal also addressed the following conditions to his brother; that Bujang Malapangi should not force Dewo Tunggal and his extended families to convert to any religion, ask to eat domesticated animals, and order to settle in a village. Dewo Tunggal also required his brother not to cheat and deceive him either in their day-to-day life or in trade relationships.<sup>6</sup> If the pact is broken the perpetrator then would be killed by an alligator if he is on a river or by a tiger if he is on midlands. He might also be hit by a falling tree if he travels in a forest. His life would be cursed as he disregarded *kalimah Allah*<sup>7</sup> expressed in the vow. Bujang Malapangi approved the conditions and responded with the word *Huu* as well” (Interview with the late haji Sayuti and Ngadap, the then Tumenggung of Makekal Ilir in 2004).

Following the agreement, Dewo Tunggal and Putri Gading chose to settle and live nomadically in the Makekal forest, which later became part of Bukit Duabelas National Park. The Orang Rimba people living in this forest are believed to be the descendants of these two people. On the contrary, their eldest siblings, Bujang Melapangi and Putri Selaro Pinang Masak, chose to leave the forest and settle in a nearby village and become Muslims. Bujang Melapangi himself eventually settled in Tanah Garo and was recognised by the Orang Rimba as the base of Waris. Meanwhile, Putri Selaro Pinang Masak chose to settle in

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<sup>5</sup> The word *Huu* in this narrative is very likely an adaptation of the Arabic *Huwa*, which literally means He. The word is commonly used in the context of an oath. In Islamic tradition, when the word *Huwa* refers to Allah and is connected to an oath, the agreement is elevated to the context of divine intervention. Thus, anyone involved in this agreement must maintain commitment to their oath. Violations committed will lead to an act of sin and potentially get punitive sanctions from God.

<sup>6</sup> In the language of the Orang Rimba, the terms used are: *Pepat luar rencong dalam, besuruk budi betanam akal* which means giving something in the hope of gaining a much greater benefit. In Orang Rimba tradition, the person who gives has planted a favor, therefore they are obliged to return the gift. Thus, the phrase can also mean trapping someone into a debt of gratitude, where one's gift will be asked for a return at a later time when it is needed. While related to the context of trade, they use the terms: *bedacing dua, becupak dua, begantang dua*. These phrases describe cheating in trade, either in the form of reducing the scales or buying Orang Rimba commodities at a price much cheaper or different from the market price.

<sup>7</sup> The *Kalimah Allah* in the context of this narrative refers to the word *Huu* as expressed by Bujang Malapangi and Dewo Tunggal.

Serenggam, Muaro Tembesi, and was later referred to by the Orang Rimba as the end of Waris.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of Waris,<sup>9</sup> in the context of Orang Rimba and Tanah Garo community relations, marks their kinship relationship. After the death of the father and mother, it is the responsibility of the eldest sibling to carry on the role of the parents. Therefore, the other siblings, even though they live in different locations, must still obey and respect their eldest brother. Conversely, the immediate needs of the younger siblings must be considered and fulfilled by the Waris (Sandbukt, 2000). Thus, the oral narratives above, not only act as a symbolic affirmation of kinship relations, but also demonstrate the equilibrium between the two communities. The oral narratives also mediate two different cultural contexts between the advanced and religious villagers and the Orang Rimba who maintain their ancestral teachings. Of course, dialogue will always occur, especially when the two interact in the kinship space. When one party is in need of a helping hand, the other party is there to provide assistance. Ideally, this reciprocal relationship allows both parties to develop various forms of positive encounters. However, a different reality can be seen in the pattern of relations between these two communities. The potential for deviation and abuse is very visible and often occurs.

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that in this oral narrative there are two female characters, Putri Gading and Putri Selaro Pinang Masak. However, both of them do not have a significant role in the narrative. Even in the agreements and commitments made, they do not appear in the narrative frame. Their presence seems to complement the narrative and does not have any contribution. This seems to emphasize the patriarchal condition where only men have the right to make decisions, while women only follow these decisions. However, this condition is inversely proportional to the author's findings during field observations. In reality, the Orang Rimba adopt a matrilineal culture where power is in the hands of women. In the practice that the author observed, no matter how busy a husband is with his work, when his wife asks him to do something, for example looking for side dishes by hunting or looking for other food, the husband must leave the activity and immediately carry out the wife's request. If this is not done, then the wife can denounce the husband to the elders as irresponsible and as such, customary sanctions can be imposed. Likewise in the context of inheritance, when the wife dies, the management of children and inheritance will be left to the wife's family.

<sup>9</sup> The term Waris is a concept borrowed from Islamic tradition. The word refers to the context of guardianship or someone who not only inherits the estate of a deceased parent, but takes over the responsibility of protecting and nurturing a living sibling or relative.

### **Orality as a Medium of Exploitation**

It is clearly revealed that in their oral narratives, Orang Rimba and Waris in Tanah Garo must underline the principle of trust in their relationships. Deception and exploitation must not occur. In fact, the relationship pattern shown is contrary to this principle. In the context of ritual practice, for example, when the Orang Rimba must perform the Melangun ritual due to the death of a relative in their settlement, they must leave their current residence and find a new location. In this period of grieving, they will walk as far as possible from the original location to find a new location that is considered better. Melangun is part of a tradition that must be carried out in order to heal the grief associated with the memory record of the deceased relative and at the same time avoid potential bad luck that may still be in the location where the death occurred. Therefore, all members of the settlement must move to a new location over a long period of time, usually between 3 to 5 years.

It is the task of the Waris in Tanah Garo to persuade groups of Orang Rimba who are in the midst of Melangun not to move to locations too far from the village. To this end, the Waris would usually provide the Orang Rimba with food and clothing during their period of grief. Included in this persuasion is the provision of plant seeds such as rubber and the tools needed to start a new life in a new settlement. But these gifts are not without a hidden purpose. If the planted seeds grow and can be harvested, the Orang Rimba are obliged to hand over part of the harvest to the Waris. In addition, the Orang Rimba for the Waris in Tanah Garo is an asset that can be utilised for their exploitation interests. So if they go to Melangun too far from the reach of Tanah Garo village, especially if the Waris do not pay much attention to them when they are in such a state of grief, there is a possibility that the Orang Rimba will reduce or even stop their economic interaction with the Waris and choose to sell their products to other villages closest to their location.

In the above context, the orality that has been established as the basis of relations between the two communities has shifted to become a vehicle of interest for the superior party. Ong (2002: 31) asserts that although orality is just a series

of words without writing, it can still be a source of power and action. Someone can certainly utilise orality narratives as a basis to strengthen their power over a subject. Waris in Tanah Garo, for example, with the capital they have, can exploit the Orang Rimba in accordance with their desired interests.

How this exploitation came about can be understood from the following narrative by Tumenggung Ngadap. When Ngadap explained to his Waris, named Hatim, his intention to open a new rubber plantation in the middle of the forest, Hatim provided Ngadap with the logistical supplies to start the venture. He gave Ngadap among other things: 20kg of rice, 4kg of white sugar, 2 large packs of cigarettes, 4 litres of kerosene, 2 litres of cooking oil, and two packs of tea. In total, these logistical needs amounted to no more than Rp. 400,000. This is certainly a smaller expense than hiring a labourer from Tanah Garo village itself. Another benefit that Hatim will gain with his minimum investment is sharing ownership of the plantation land opened by Ngadap and the potential rubber harvest at some point in the future. If the plantation becomes harvestable, Ngadap may not sell the crop to anyone else without Hatim's consent. As the Waris, Hatim in this case is clearly demonstrating the power he has over his subject. Ngadap is only allowed to sell his plantation to Hatim and if he refuses to do so, then Ngadap is in fact violating the rules of orality that require his submission to Waris. What Tumenggung Ngadap experienced was also experienced by several other Orang Rimba.

The potential for exploitation by Waris of the Orang Rimba is actually initiated by a shift in the pattern of responding to the needs of the Orang Rimba. Previously, this was a collective effort entrusted to the village head or Rio to coordinate the fulfilment of these needs. The village head could be entrusted with this responsibility because he was believed to be a descendant of Bujang Melapangi. However, since the late 1970s, the collective responsibility has been changed to personal responsibility to avoid jealousy. The pattern then changed to each direct descendant of Bujang Melapangi in Tanah Garo village being given the responsibility to take care of several Orang Rimba families. Thus, several Orang Rimba families would have inherited certain individuals in Tanah Garo.

Whenever they need help or bring commodities from the forest, the Orang Rimba must come to the individual who is their Waris.

The problem that then arises is that not all individuals who become Waris are capable and have the capital to fulfil the needs of the Orang Rimba. It is in this context that exploitation is prone to occur. For example, there are several cases where Orang Rimba were "sold" by their Waris to other capital owners in Tanah Garo (Amilda, 2003). This transfer of ownership includes the right to benefit from whatever the Orang Rimba have to offer from forest products, as well as the right to utilise them according to the interests of the capital owner. In this case, the term transfer of ownership seems to place the Orang Rimba as a commodity that can be traded, and indeed this is a form of modern slavery.

The above case is one example of the various inhumane treatments faced by the Orang Rimba. Orality, which should be a bonding force that strengthens the kinship between the Orang Rimba and their Waris, has turned the Orang Rimba into a subordinate position. The loss of the aspect of equality places them only as subjects who are vulnerable to exploitation. The shift in understanding of the context of orality in the later generations of the Waris opens up space for patterns of exploitation. Many of the younger generation of the Waris no longer understand the history of their relationship with the Orang Rimba. What they know is only the practical aspect that they have the right to manage and at the same time take products from "their" Orang Rimba.

In the author's observations, Waris' treatment when he met his Orang Rimbanya in Tanah Garo was far from humane, even far from the treatment that shows that they have a kinship relationship. What is visible is only the relationship between the master and his slave. The cessation of the dissemination of orality only to the elders has made the new generation of Waris fail to understand the essence of the oral tradition they once had. More intense efforts are clearly needed to rewrite the past in the frame of present conditions, that is - to create a collective past in the communal present. Positive dialogue and encounters will only occur if a change in mindset can be made. Orality, which was originally the basis of kinship and togetherness, should be translated

into the context of a more advanced world that is far from exploitation. However, efforts to understand each other will not arise if one party places itself superior to the other. Of course, in this case, education for the younger generation of Waris must be carried out regularly by the elders, so that good understanding can grow and they can interpret relationships in a more positive framework.

## **CONCLUSION**

Oral traditions whether in symbols, rituals or narratives can be a medium to bring together different communities. Oral traditions can even be an effective bridge when formal dialogue is deadlocked, because oral traditions touch all levels of society. Thus, all layers will be motivated to build bridges of dialogue, without having to wait for initiatives from the government. By exploring and bringing together what already exists in each tradition, communities can share shared experiences and values without having to prioritise differences.

However, in the experience of the Orang Rimba, oral tradition alone is not sufficient to guarantee the establishment of a positive encounter. If the oral tradition stops solely at the older generation, without any process of inheritance to the next generation, it is very possible that a shift will occur. The case of the Orang Rimba confirms this, and does not rule out the possibility of its replication also occurring in other local communities in Indonesia. Shared experiences and values will cease to exist if the two parties building the relationship do not start the process of disseminating the oral tradition from one generation to another. The challenge, of course, is how to deal with younger generations who are not interested in their own historical roots. For them, the appeal of the digital world and social media is far more challenging than pursuing their own oral history. But for the Orang Rimba, the challenge is irrelevant because they are not connected to the modern world. The simplicity of life in the jungle provides ample space for the transmission of oral traditions from the older generation to the next. This is because they live in togetherness and communality that is not distracted by the attraction of modern life such as digital devices and the hustle and bustle of cyberspace, as experienced by their counterpart generation in Tanah Garo.

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