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THESIS/DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Power, Meaning, and Forest Conservation in the Gunung Halimun National Park, West Java, Indonesia No. of Pages 189

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Statement of the Problem

Main Problem: Conscious of the rapid rate of deforestation, the Indonesian government has transformed much of its remaining forest into protected areas such as national parks. One of these parks is Gunung Halimun National Park (GHNP) of West Java, covering an area of 40,000 hectares. Setting aside such a huge tract of land has many implications for the livelihood opportunities of the local people in the area, the Kasepuhan community. It is not surprising then that the people resist to or contest the penetration of this change.

Subproblems: Seen through the lens of cultural politics, the study asserts that cultural forms and expressions in relation to forest management are socially contested. In this sense, the forests are seen as a "contested resource," that is, a social arena where meanings and values are constructed and fought over through processes of interaction. The study thus focuses on the contestations between the Kasepuhan and the state, i.e., the Park authority, by asking three questions:

1. Why is it that different social groups define forest management in terms of "protection" or "conservation" while others do not?
2. How does the idea of forest management address the issue of power relations within society?
3. How are such relationships between and among different social groups regarding forest management assembled?

Procedure

This research is a descriptive study of the dynamics of power relations found in the utilization and conservation of the forest and its resources. Qualitative data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interview, and secondary data collection, and were employed to describe the what, who, when, where, and how of the conditions, events, and processes encountered and experienced by the Kasepuhan in dealing with the forest agencies regarding forest management.

Treatment of Data

The collected data were analyzed relative to the analytical framework, and the results are presented descriptively. The process of analysis started during data collection. This process is grounded on the analytical framework which includes: (1) the meaning and notion of forest for both the Kasepuhan and the state and its apparatuses; and (2) the dynamics of power relations in the conservation campaign, which involve the process of contestation--domination, marginalization, negotiation, and resistance--as the different notions about the forest are encountered in the day-to-day life.

Findings

The state's environmental discourse and practice in advancing the conservation agenda is based on a utilitarian value, as mandated by the 1945 Constitution: "The resources should be managed for the greatest good and for the greatest number of people." A national park system is employed as the operational framework for the Gunung Halimun area. A series of conservation strategies and programs, ranging from regular law enforcement to campaigns and prosperity approaches, has been implemented to achieve the mission. These strategies and programs bear an ambiguous stance toward the local

people: the local people are a (potential) partner to work with, yet they are a (potential) threat to the Park preservation.

The Kasepuhan, in turn, see the Gunung Halimun forest as their "homeland" which possesses symbolic and historical meaning as well as serves as their source of livelihood. This is embodied in the notions of mandala (sacred place) and uga lebak cawene (fertile land), in which the Kasepuhan seek to attain rasa manunggal: condition of oneness and harmony with the whole universe. In this view, the forest is not regarded as an object of exploitation but rather as a subject or partner in adaptation (survival). These beliefs are further expressed in their patterns of resource utilization which consist of huma (swidden agriculture), sawah (wet agriculture), kebon and talun (agroforest), and collection of forest products.

Through their (the Kasepuhan and the state) encounters, each party advances its assertions, contentment, and discontentment through discursive practices, ranging from domination to negotiation and resistance. These interactions signify the forest as a contested resource and an arena where dynamics of power relations are sustained in the day-to-day life.

Conclusions

The conservation discourses in GHNP provide an arena where power is exercised and power relations are sustained through discursive practices: actions may reinforce and strengthen one another but may also engender conflict and resistance. The potential to exercise power is perceived as available to the parties involved rather than belonging solely to one party. Each party engaged in the interactions is seen as an active agent in advancing its assertions, contentment, and discontentment. With this view, the study departs from the dichotomous framework, e.g., traditional-modern approach, that views culture as static and is, therefore, insufficient for explaining the dynamics of power relations within society. By being involved and employed in such meaningful communication, culture can no longer be regarded as something constraining but also enabling for it also serves to be reproduced, through the creativity of human agency, in the day-to-day life.

Recommendations

Given these opposing conservation discourses and practices, two general recommendations can be made:

1. Empowering the local indigenous people. There is a need to recognize the existence and the right of the local (indigenous) people with regard to resource management. Empowerment can be done through a variety of channels: sociocultural, political, and economic. This, in the end, will lead to a full involvement of the local people in the decision-making processes regarding their management of life circumstances.
2. Reorienting the state's roles in resource management. There is an urgency to conduct a comprehensive reform that covers the economic, social, and political spheres to give way to a full and genuine participation of people in managing their life circumstances. This can take the form of decentralizing or devolving state authority and control over the management of resources.

These two general recommendations imply adherence to a new conservation paradigm that bears a balancing act: strong point of devolution--empowering the local people and reducing bureaucratic control--combined with strong state involvement--promoting the common good and bridging the gap among the stakeholders.