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The emergence of female forest guardians in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract

Aceh Province is one of the most significant contributors to forest land in Indonesia at the same time as the area with the highest percentage of deforestation. Forest areas in Aceh experienced illegal logging, thereby threatening the ecological function of the forest. One of the impacts of forest destruction is the high potential for natural disasters, such as flooding, due to the loss of water catchment areas. The flood disaster that hit one of the villages in Aceh, namely Damaran Baru, in 2015 was finally able to encourage public awareness to care for nature. The public has the initiative to protect the forest by forming a community whose members are dominated by village women in Damaran Baru. The community is named Mpu Uteun. Their activity is to patrol the forest to stop illegal logging. With the historical method, this study is structured to know about forest deforestation in Aceh, the role of the Mpu Uteun community, and the government's response to the emergence of environmental communities.

Keywords: Forest, protection, women, *Mpu uteun*, Aceh

Introduction

Indonesia is a country with a rich and extensive forest coverage. Based on data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry in 2023, the area Forests in Indonesia amount to 125,795,306 hectares which are spread almost all over a region in Indonesia. Some areas contributing the largest forest area are Sumatra Island, Sulawesi Island, Kalimantan Island, Maluku Island, and Papua Island. To be precise, the western region of Indonesia on the island of Sumatra has an area of forest of around 20,830,000 hectares based on data from the Central Statistics Agency for 2021. Several of the forest areas in Sumatra is Aceh Province, which still has coverage of natural forest with an area of 2.57 million hectares, according to data from the Central Agency Statistics for 2020. Ecologically, forests have many benefits, such as producing oxygen, water regulator, a place for animal preservation, and being capable of preventing potential natural disasters (Kamilia & Nawiyanto, 2015:1) ^[11]. In addition to its natural functions, forests also provide other benefits, such as forests in Aceh that are used as life support, the economy of the surrounding community, and forest conservation with local wisdom. Aceh become one area that still maintains cultural values and local wisdom in managing forests. This is proven by the existence of the institutional arrangement of forest area management by *Panglima Uteun*, the formation of regulations in the utilization of customary forests, and forest conservation efforts embedded in customary law (Sekretariat MAA, 2022) ^[19]. Local wisdom in forest conservation in Aceh is only carried out by some people in certain areas. However, the large forest potential also does not rule out the possibility of many people who use the forest arbitrarily.

In recent years, many deforestation practices such as logging, forest burning, and illegal mining in forest areas which in the end can threaten forest sustainability. This practice not only causes damage to forests, but gradually it will shrink the green area because the forest area is increasing. Based on data from the Aceh Natural Forest and Environment Foundation, in 2022 forest areas in Aceh will experience deforestation of up to 9,383 hectares. Referring to the monitoring results, there are three areas in donors the largest deforestation, including Central Aceh District (3,342 hectares), District North Aceh (1,507 hectares), and Gayo Lues District (1,368 hectares) (Jamilah & Rahmi, 2023:6075) ^[10].

Many of the activity that drives the rate of deforestation in Aceh is forest clearing for agricultural land, illegal logging, illegal mining, and plantation expansion of palm oil and rubber. To be precise, one of these deforestation activities occurred in the Aceh forest area in Damaran Baru Village, Timang Gajah District Bener Meriah District. Excessive use of nature activities will tend to destroy nature so that the balance of the environment is lost and vulnerable when a natural disaster occurs.

In 2015, Damaran Baru Village in Aceh experienced a large-scale flood disaster. It damaged many settlements. The floods that hit Damaran Baru Village were caused by high rainfall and the loss of catchment areas. The event became a lesson for the people of Damaran Baru Village. Reflecting on the events of the flood disaster, the people of Damaran Baru Village took the initiative to start caring about their environment (Najmuddin, 2022:757) ^[13]. This action was also driven by the condition of the forest in the village Damaran Baru that continues to shrink due to the cultivation of land for palm oil plantations and illegal loggings. To respond to these problems, the government has issued various policies to protect forests, such as Government Regulation No. 23 of 2021 concerning the implementation of forest protection and management. However, there are still challenges in implementing this policy, so the problem of forest destruction in Damaran Baru Village has not been fully resolved yet. Efforts must be made to prevent and control deforestation in one area and others. This study examines: 1) How did the female forest guard community (*Mpu Uteun*) emerge? 2) What was the role of the female forest guard in protecting the forest environment?, 3) How was the government's response to the *Mpu Uteun* community?.

Materials and Methods

The study used historical method. The historical method is a reconstruction of the past, an analysis of moments of historical importance, and an analysis based on historical sources. The historical method investigates a problem or event from a historical point of view, by analyzing the evidence found and determining whether it related to the problems under consideration, and bringing a new reconstruction (Ismaun, 2005:34) ^[9]. There are four main stages of historical method: heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography. The first stage is heuristics, an activity to obtain suitable historical data. Sources include journal articles, books, newspaper reports, other information related to the research (Sjamsuddin, 2012:67) ^[19]. The second stage is source criticism. Source criticism is divided into two, namely, internal and external criticism. The purpose of making this source criticism is to obtain reliable information as facts. The third stage is historical analysis carried out to synthesize facts from historical sources, and when combined with theory, facts are given a holistic interpretation (Kuntowijoyo, 2013:77-79) ^[12]. At this stage, researchers try to establish explanations of the deforestation and the emergence of the female forest guards community (*Mpu Uteun*). This reconstruction is made to answer the formulated problems.

The Formation of *Mpu Uteun*

Nature and the environment have the primary function as a support for life because it involves complex relationships between organisms in it. The environment significantly

influences and benefits humans, so it should be protected and preserved. Environmental preservation efforts are not only carried out with technical activities and involving law but instead require non-technical aspects such as guarding forest areas relying on local wisdom. Community response to environmental problems and damage to natural resources can be the background of forming community and environmental organizations. Their role is also as an actor has a goal to spread environmental awareness by forming environmental movements (Hidayat, 2017:56) ^[7]. Community response to save the environment too demonstrated by residents in Aceh, to be precise in Damaran Baru Village, Timang District Bener Meriah District Elephants. At first, the prime action performed was several women from Damaran Baru village patrolling the forest to supervise the forest from illegal loggers. Homemakers with a limited number dominate members of the forest patrol. Over time, members of Forest patrols began to increase due to encouragement from the women to participate in spreading the word about the importance of protecting the forest. Forest protection women Aceh is increasingly driven to protect their environment from loggers' forests.

Departing from the support of the environmental communities in Aceh, the Damaran Baru Village women's movement as protector of Aceh's forests was given the name "Mpu Uteun" which comes from the Gayo language means Guardian of the Forest. With the background of anxiety due to the natural disaster that hit Damaran Baru Village in 2015, Mpu Uteun has officially become a community-oriented to the sustainability of Aceh's forests. In addition to overcoming forest encroachment, Mpu Uteun routinely conducts patrols to stop logging and poaching, as well as starting to actively document animals and plants in Aceh's forests. Another program owned by the Mpu Uteun community is the tree planting movement, especially around the Gile River. Mpu Uteun can be used as a pioneer in forming an environmental movement in other areas to save the environment to remain sustainable.

Aside from being a community forest guard, Mpu Uteun can also be used as an example of an ecofeminism movement that patriarchal traditions have defeated. The ecofeminism movement has made an immense contribution to the preservation of nature because of the role of women to be equal with men in matters of protecting the environment (Astuti, 2012:50) ^[3]. The early formation of the forest guard community in Damaran Baru Village received much rejection and negative response from the community because the activity was only aimed at the man. As time goes by, the Mpu Uteun community, with the number of members which is still limited, does not despair. They continued to patrol the forest and campaign for environmental awareness activities in the community regularly. Their hard work finally paid off because, over time, the community became aware, and some joined the Mpu community Uteun. Not infrequently, the men also accompany the women when patrolling the forest. The movement of women forest guards in Damaran Baru Village, Aceh, apart from being a response to environmental damage as well as a community that can move in the search for solutions to problems in the environment while remaining principled local wisdom.

The Mpu Uteun community as forest rangers in the Damaran area was recently chaired by a woman named Sumini (46 years). Sumini was appointed chairman of the

Mpu Uteun Village Forest Protection Agency because of her high enthusiasm in accompanying and campaigning for the movement environment of the community in Damaran Baru Village. The environmental movement, too, is an interpretation of historical values and ancestral teachings to maintain sustainability so that future generations can benefit from it (Dalupe, 2020:32) ^[5]. Hope from the formation of Mpu Uteun or the Damaran forest guard ranger in Aceh could be the initial milestone that was the birth of awareness for other tough women to be able to participate in protecting the forest and its natural resources. The birth of the forest guard community is inseparable from the role of the HAKA foundation (Natural Forest and Aceh Environment) in providing assistance and direction to the Mpu Uteun community in Damaran Baru Village. The HAKA foundation too gives full support to the Mpu Uteun team because, as a community the first female forest guard in Aceh.

The Role of Mpu Uteun as Forest Guardians

Forests are an integral and inseparable part of the life humans live around them. Interaction relations between forest village humans with the surrounding natural environment have been going on for centuries across generations on the cosmic balance frame. Utilization and Forest resource management in Indonesia has their characteristics-each community around the forest with its characteristics and culture (Azwir, 2016:51) ^[4]. The potential of natural resources in Indonesia is highly vulnerable and damaged.

The decline in environmental quality due to the impact of forest destruction is a worldwide problem (Rijal & Noer, 2013:21) ^[17]. The worsening condition of the forest, among other things, is also not matched by the ability to make excellent and adequate plantation forests that align with industrial needs. The leading cause is the politics of logging without a permit or illegal logging by irresponsible elements. As a result of illegal logging, there is a reduction in forest area, a high potential for hydrometeorological disasters, loss of various types of flora and fauna, and damage to water resource systems (Putra, 2019:192) ^[15]. When increasingly widespread forest destruction occurs in Indonesian regions, the role of the community and environmentalists is vital in maintaining and saving environmental sustainability (Anggraini, 2022) ^[1].

Women's involvement in environmental management can be seen through the activities of a group of women who are members of the Mpu Uteun group (a Gayo term meaning forest rangers) in Damaran Baru Village, Bener Meriah District, Aceh Province. Mpu Uteun is a term for a group of women who serve as forest rangers. This group was founded in 2015 with the background of the flash flood disaster, which damaged dozens of damaged houses that occurred in 2015 in the village (Dewi, 2023) ^[6]. This group is aware that forest destruction will directly impact people's lives. In 2018, 2,418 cases of illegal logging were found in Aceh (Ramadhan, 2021) ^[16]. Observations made by residents around the forest and loggers who caught almost all men. Complaints about felling trees and hunting of wild animals carried out by local communities to local authorities also nearly reached a dead end.

In this case, the Mpu Uteun ranger team protects the forest from illegal activities. Patrol is done as a form of responsibility to protect the sources of biodiversity. The area

of the Damaran Baru village forest area of 251 hectares is the responsibility of Mpu Uteun is on patrol, so if the patrols are carried out for days, then the rangers will camp in the forest (Sabrina, 2022) ^[18]. The terrain is steep and steep hills in the forest have become what they usually go through when on night patrols daily. Their actions were originally just a form of concern for the forest as a natural resource that should be protected without compensation from regular rangers. Has been carrying out patrolling activities since 2015. However, the bravery of Mpu Uteun got the spotlight from the government until 2019, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry granted forest management rights to Damaran Baru Village, Bener Meriah Regency, Aceh Province.

Since then, the ranger on duty will receive a reward of 100 thousand rupiahs per person every time they patrol. They also do not hesitate to use things their personalities, like raincoats and even motorbikes, when doing their job as a ranger. To join this community, you only need permission received by husband and parents. In carrying out patrol duty, ranger Mpu Uteun is divided into two teams. One squad consists of 8 people consisting of 5 men and 3 women (Hidayatullah, 2020) ^[8]. The presence of these female rangers is assessed to make it easier for the forest guards to give instructions to the perpetrators of logging and wild encroachment. In other words, if the woman speaks to the perpetrators of illegal logging, they are heard more than their fellow men. It once happened in the field when a ranger warned the perpetrator of the opening of coffee land not to continue the action, but the next day the perpetrator remained insisted on doing his action in clearing the land, Mpu Uteun did not give emotional treatment or high pitch they actually give appeal by explaining what kind of punishment will befall the offender if the actions continued to be carried out, as a result, the perpetrators stopped clearing the land said. It is considered adequate because the nature of women in giving quiet education is also integrated as a form of prevention. Regarding the ranger patrolling, the perpetrators of logging and illegal logging that they encountered are residents from surrounding villages. In addition to regular patrolling, this ranger team began to prohibit forest propagation, putting up border markers and notice boards.

Through the command of Sumini, head of the Village Forest Management Institute (LPHK) Damaran Baru, the woman there started trying to restore land use. They plant trees while on patrol around. Some of the men in the village also began to wake up and started to follow involved. However, at the beginning of the formation of the Mpu Uteun group, this group received rejection from many people who knew less about Mpu Uteun. However, the Mpu Uteun group did not discourage and slowly changed people's perceptions. Moreover, starting one by one, the residents were embraced and involved in the activities of Mpu Uteun and the institution LPHK Damaran. That perception then vanished after the residents knew what was happening carried out by Mpu Uteun and the benefits for Damaran Baru residents. They have then succeeded in embracing residents to protect the forest by planting trees (Asmunda, 2021) ^[13].

After successfully planting trees, LPHK started to think about its economic impact on the surrounding community by taking the initiative to Damaran Baru to become a nature-based tourism village or eco-village, permanently upholding local wisdom in Damaran Baru Village. Society socializes

about the tourism potential in Damaran Baru, which can be managed to bring in tourists. People are starting to realize their potential usable village. The surrounding community began to sympathize with the movement initiated by the woman. One by one, tourists from outside the area interested in climbing Burni Telong via the Damaran Baru village route have started arriving. The surrounding community began to feel the beneficial economic impact. They are starting from the introduction to climbing Burni Telong up to the homestay provider. The success of the eco-conscious movement and tourism by the women in Damaran Baru is bearing fruit. Village in 2020 was awarded first place as the most popular ecotourism village in Anugerah Pesona Indonesia (API) event (Asmunda, 2021) ^[13].

The responses of the government and social institutions

The movement of women forest guards (Mpu Uteun) has received a positive response from Aceh's government and social institutions. This movement has had a positive impact on forest conservation in Aceh. As a result, the government and social institutions have begun to support the Mpu Uteun movement. This support can be seen through granting of rights to the Mpu Uteun movement by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) in 2019. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry has started issuing permits for Mpu Uteun to manage the forest through a village forest scheme of 251 hectares in the village of Damaran Baru. This scheme is based on the Letter Decree Number: SK.9343/MENLHK-PSKL/PKPS/PSL.0/11/2019 (Najmuddin, 2022:758) ^[14]. With this decree, the Mpu Uteun community has been allowed to carry out various programs related to forest management. One of the programs implemented by this community is socialization in Damaran Baru Village. The Mpu Uteun activities related to forest management include disaster mitigation socialization in Damaran Baru village. This socialization involves introducing disaster detection tools and functions, conducting evacuation rehearsals, and building a commitment within the community. However, this disaster mitigation activity has encountered obstacles in terms of funding. Despite this, the female forest rangers voluntarily carry out patrol activities and participate in reforestation efforts.

Apart from the government, the Mpu Uteun environmental movement has received support from social institutions in Acehese society. One example is the Haka Foundation. According to the head of the HAKA Foundation, Farwisa, the formation of Mpu Uteun itself is very new and represents the first ranger team in Aceh. The presence of Mpu Uteun can inspire, especially the people of Aceh, to protect forests and the environment. The foundation's chairman is also committed to enhancing public understanding and making various efforts to preserve the forest area. The Mpu Uteun community's impact extends beyond the preservation of the forest environment in Aceh. With the emergence of this community, new movements have arisen to support environmental sustainability outside of Aceh. For instance, the KPPL Maju Bersama women's community in Bengkulu maintains forest sustainability and engages in fern planting in prohibited forests. These new movements have positively impacted increasing public awareness of forest preservation.

Furthermore, the Mpu Uteun community's existence has influenced the people's economy in Damaran Baru Village.

The establishment of nature-based tourism villages has created new job opportunities for local residents. Additionally, tourism villages are an excellent implementation of forest sustainability. The Damaran Baru community has developed micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) such as coffee agroforestry, crop cultivation, and orchid farming. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (Kemenparekraf) recognizes the hard work of the Damaran Baru community in developing tourism villages and supporting MSMEs.

Despite receiving support from the government and community institutions, the Mpu Uteun community still faces a negative stigma. This community is viewed as deviating from the traditional social norms of the Acehese people, where men rather than women traditionally carry out forest guarding activities. Women are expected to focus on domestic work and other roles, excluding their involvement in forest protection. Initially, the Mpu Uteun community received partial support from the local communities. However, as public awareness regarding the importance of forest sustainability gradually emerged, this community began to grow.

Conclusions

The Mpu Uteun forest guard community is vital in sustainable forest management. This community promotes environmental awareness among local communities through various activities and programs to empower the forest. Despite facing rejection within Acehese society initially, the government and social institutions have started to pay more attention to the Mpu Uteun movement due to their efforts. Support, ranging from granting rights to providing moral support, has positively impacted the development of the Mpu Uteun Forest Guard movement or community. The dedicated women of the Mpu Uteun community are committed to preserving the forest environment and educating the local community on the importance of protecting and sustainably utilizing the forest. Voluntarily, the members of Mpu Uteun actively monitor illegal logging, forest fires, and other illicit activities in the Aceh region. These activities hold significant moral and ecological value and are expected to catalyze the emergence of other environmental movements in Indonesia.

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