The Sky is our Roof, the Earth our Floor

Orang Rimba Customs and Religion
in the Bukit Duabelas region of Jambi, Sumatra

Steven Sager

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The content of this thesis is the original work of the author from research conducted in Jambi, Sumatra from January 2003 to June 2004

Signature of Ph.D. Candidate

(Steven Sager)

Department of Archeology and Anthropology
Australian National University

Members of Doctoral Committee:

Patrick Guinness
James J. Fox
Andrew McWilliam
Christine Helliwell
Since the earth was as small as a track, 
and the sky was as wide as an umbrella, 
our adat customs and laws that were given to us by our ancestors, 
in life and death, 
are to be used by us all

Sejak dir'i bumi setumpang tijak 
langet solebor payung, 
adat nenek puyong kito, 
hidup, mati 
do posko posko jugo nang dopakos yah

The sky is our roof, 
the earth is our floor, 
this is our adat in the forest

Hatop, belangit 
lantoi, begebun 
Iyoi, kami adat Rimba

(Orang Rimba proverb)
If our forests are cut down, they destroy the world,  
If the government settles us in the village  
they kill our adat (customs, religion, and way of life),  
In the same way, they kill us

\begin{verbatim}
Kalu balok rimba kami, maju kiamat
Kalu pemer’ intoh tetap kami de dusun
bunuh adat nenek puyong kami,
bunuh hidup kami
Samo lah, bunuh hidup kami
\end{verbatim}

Our customs and ways of life are already different  
(and can not be mixed with those in the village)  
from the time of our ancestors, we have lived in the forest  
until they cut our throats, we do not want to join life in the village

\begin{verbatim}
Adat kini sodah bebeda
jedi, kami deri nenek puyong dulu duduk de rimba
sampoi putoi patah leher kami
piado endok ikut hidup de dusun
\end{verbatim}

(Orang Rimba man along Makekal River)
Abstract

This is an ethnographic study of the Orang Rimba ('people of the forest'), a Malay-speaking minority group who traditionally lived throughout the lowland rainforests of Jambi, Sumatra. The Orang Rimba have much in common with surrounding Malay peoples, including a similar local dialect and variants of regional Malay customs and beliefs. They are different from the Malay and other Austronesian peoples in that they have a unique, mobile, flexible economy that traditionally shifts in and out of periods of swidden gardening and a very nomadic life based on digging for wild yams, largely upon death. They have an egalitarian social system based on sharing and reciprocity, which occurs within the context of a system of relationships in which women have great rights over forest resources and extraordinary distribution rights. They are also unique for their traditional non-Islamic religious beliefs, which they believe are crucial towards maintaining their way of life in the forest based on maintaining separation with the outside world. While the Makekal Orang Rimba believe themselves to share common origins with the Malay/Melayu, the downstream world of the villagers is perceived as a source of danger and sickness, which holds the potential to disrupt the delicate relations with their gods and make life in the forest impossible.

Within the history of an unstable and assimilative upstream climate that was often hostile towards animist forest peoples, ethnic boundaries have served as a means to maintain their social identity, safety, and maintain a distinctive way of life in the forest. However, within the context of an egalitarian share society in which groupings of closely related women have a great deal of authority over the management and distribution of resources, including game, and the power of men is diminished through dispersed uxorilocal residence patterns, ethnic boundaries are also closely intertwined with internal power issues. The authority adult men is marked by their duty and obligation to protect and shield the rights of women from a dangerous outside world, and all outside males who are not immediate kin, through the manipulation of a convoluted system of law and fines paid in sheets of cloth. While females have great rights in their society, and the complete freedom to bully men through their passions and voice, their social mobility is limited by some of the most rigid gender divisions in all of Southeast Asia. Male authority is also marked within the domain of religion, through their duty to maintain the order and balance of their material and spiritual world (adat) in the forests by observing and enforcing religious prohibitions, which restrict
relations with the outside world. This serves to facilitate close relations with their gods in matters ranging from health and subsistence to maintaining the timely occurrence of the seasonal fruits, honey, and migrations of bearded pigs.

This thesis explores how the Orang Rimba maintain their distinct social identity as 'the people of the forest' through an examination of their customs, beliefs and religion (adat), and their belief and ritual surrounding fruits and the annual season of fruits, a primary season in the lowland dipterocarp forests of Sumatra. Throughout the thesis, I explore some of the key concepts, structural categories (forest-village, upstream-downstream, mobility-sedentism, hot-cold, and reason-passion), and metaphor that run through their system of beliefs and religion, and how some of these beliefs influence their social, moral and cosmological orders, relations amongst themselves, and with the outside world. A broader theme examines how religious beliefs are intertwined with social relations, which are largely based on issues of gender, adulthood, relations of affinity and male experience in the realms of law and religion, and how some of their beliefs are interrelated with maintaining ethnic boundaries with outsiders. Some of these topics are explored in their social relations, the structure of their origin stories, gender related food prohibitions, and the management of forest resources. These issues are examined in light of the great change that has taken place over the last 30 years, a result of large-scale logging, plantations and development projects.
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This thesis was a long time in the making, officially six years according to university timetables. It initially began during a trip to Indonesia in 1992 with my grandmother, and during subsequent backpacking trips throughout its islands in 2000 and 2001, studying the Indonesian language in Yogyakarta for seven months in 2001, and finally conducting research in Sumatra in 2003–04. I thank my parents and family for their support during my time in the university, in the field, and in innumerable other ways. I would like to thank my grandmother Audrey for her support, and for bringing me along on a trip to Sulawesi, Bali and Irian Jaya while in high school, which initially sparked my interest in the region and in anthropology. Classes with Douglas Hollan and Nancy Levine at UCLA, and Elliot Oring, Raquel Ackerman and Terry Kandal at California State University, Los Angeles provided inspiration.

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Photographs
Map c: Detailed Map of Jambi and South Sumatra

Map d: Bukit Duabelas and Orang Rimba Distribution throughout Jambi

(Source: Modified map from warsi.org)
A Note on the Orthography

Throughout the text, foreign words and Latin scientific names are in italics while English definitions are in single quotes. Unless indicated otherwise, local terms are in the Rimba dialect (beso rimba) of Bukit Duabelas, an isolect of the local Malay language spoken along the upstream Batanghari River in Jambi. Both are similar in phonology and grammar to the Indonesian language Bahasa Indonesia, however, the Rimba language is very glottal, which initially makes it very hard to understand. The letter r is often pronounced with a glottal stop, which in the text will be marked with the character: r’ (for instance, or’ang, war’is, mer’u). Initial h- and r- are hardly pronounced; while as a rule, final –s usually becomes a diphthong (for example, halus, becomes haluy, gedis-gediy, balas-beloî). As is the case in Malay, c is pronounces as ‘ch’. The Rimba language uses the following pronouns: akeh/awok (I/mine), mikai (you), mika (he/she), kito (we), mikai segalo (you guys), while internal reduplication is used much more commonly to denote a state of being (for example, akeh komamaluon, kobebingunon) or an event (membunuhbuhuhon). Some of the variations within ‘Kubu’ isolects throughout South Sumatra and Jambi are described in Dunggio’s, “Struktur Bahasa Kubu” (Dunggio 1995).