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Contestation of the Young Group of Indigenous Forest Guardians in Manurung Village, East Luwu, South Sulawesi (A Political Ecology Review)

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Abstract. *This article reviews the role of political ecology of young people in Cerekang Village who are part of the Cerekang Indigenous people. The Cerekang Indigenous People are an area that lives around the Cerekang river and Pismiaoni Hill, Manurung Luwu Village, East South Sulawesi. The Cerekang youth group that joined the Pejuang Muda Wija To Cerekang (PMWTC) has been contesting in its role in protecting the environment and customary territories from the destruction of the mining industry and the conversion of land into ponds within the framework of political ecology. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with PMWTC youth informants, heads of customary institutions, and local communities selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis is carried out in three stages, namely data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. This article finds that the contestation of the Cerekang youth group is classified as a political ecological role that is consciously actively involved in organizing and maintaining customary forest areas in the form of spatial emancipation, transformative participation, and ecological schools. In terms of novelty, this research provides a framework for understanding the political role of indigenous youth based on environmental awareness. Thus, this research makes a theoretical contribution to the role of the PMWTC youth group in the framework of political ecology with a direct demonstration of traditional values that position themselves as the vanguard of the guardian of customary forest areas from the threat of massive and extractive environmental damage.*

Keywords: Customary Law Communities; Political Ecology; Spatial Emancipation; Transformative Participation

Abstrak. *Artikel ini mengulas mengenai peran ekologi politik kelompok muda di Desa Cerekang yang menjadi bagian dari masyarakat Adat Cerekang. Masyarakat Adat Cerekang merupakan wilayah yang bermukim di sekitar sungai Cerekang dan Bukit Pismiaoni Desa Manurung Luwu Timur Sulawesi Selatan. Kelompok muda Cerekang yang bergabung dalam Pejuang Muda Wija To Cerekang (PMWTC) selama ini berkontestasi dalam perannya menjaga lingkungan dan wilayah adat dari rongrongan industri pertambangan dan alih fungsi lahan menjadi tambak dalam kerangka ekologi politik. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif dengan informan pemuda PMWTC, ketua lembaga adat, dan masyarakat setempat yang dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Analisis data dilakukan dalam tiga tahap, yaitu reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Artikel ini menemukan kontestasi kelompok muda Cerekang tergolong menjadi peran ekologi politik yang secara sadar terlibat aktif secara organisasional dan adat dalam menjaga dan mempertahankan wilayah hutan adat berupa emansipasi ruang, partisipasi transformatif, dan sekolah ekologi. Dari sisi kebaruan penelitian ini memberikan suatu kerangka pemahaman mengenai peran politik pemuda adat berbasis kesadaran lingkungan. Dengan begitu penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoritis menyangkut peran kelompok muda PMWTC dalam kerangka ekologi politik dengan ejawantah langsung dari nilai tradisi yang*

memposisikan diri sebagai garda depan penjaga kawasan hutan adat dari ancaman kerusakan lingkungan industri pertambangan yang massif dan ekstraktif.

Kaca kunci: Masyarakat Hukum Adat; Ekologi Politik; Emansipasi Ruang; Partisipasi Transformatif

INTRODUCTION

Luckyto is a young man from the village of Manurung in East Luwu, South Sulawesi, who spends his days working as a mechanic. Occasionally, Lucky, as he is often called, helps villagers repair motorcycles or children's bicycles that come to the space under his house. Like typical Bugis traditional houses, Lucky's house is also a stilt house. The area underneath his house is used as a workshop. There are many tools there, including motor vehicle equipment. He does not charge a fee if the person is still a family member. Sometimes he has to deal with patching a flat tire or repairing a bicycle handlebar, or even turning metal plates from his father's workshop equipment. Occasionally, when he has free time, Lucky also flies a drone for village data collection purposes. As a graduate of computer engineering from a university in Makassar, the mechanical skills he possesses are rarely found in youths his age, who mostly spend time playing games or online gambling.

Credit is due to Lucky as one of the youths in his village who has a fairly high environmental sensitivity, especially towards the customary forest surrounding his village. In this village, there is the Cerekang customary forest area, which is forbidden to be touched because it is considered sacred and holy (Sulistianingsih, 2022). The customary law area of Manurung Village only received recognition through the East Luwu Regency Regional Regulation number 1 of 2022 concerning the Recognition and Protection of Customary Law Communities, dated February 8, 2022 (East Luwu Regency Government, 2022). As a child, Lucky often accompanied his father, the head of the customary institution, in hosting researchers or government officials. As an indigenous community member, Lucky's home became a kind of consolidation space for cultural observers, government officials, researchers, forestry experts, and environmental activists in exploring and preserving their customary forest, which has its own unique appeal.

As an active youth in his village, Lucky helped establish Pejuang Muda Wija To Cerekang (hereinafter abbreviated as PMWTC), a village-based youth organization that dedicates its activities to protecting the Cerekang customary forest area (Lokadaya.id, 2024). PMWTC has been established since 2015 to accommodate the concerns and worries of several youths and village leaders when seeing various ecological threats that could damage the environment and the existence of indigenous communities. While accompanying his father, Usman Siabeng, Lucky learned a lot about how, as a Cerekang person, he needs to revive the spirit and worldview based on the forest so that their village can survive the encroachment of the mining industry. PMWTC is currently led by a duo of leaders, Adnan and Arlin, serving as the chairman and secretary of the organization, who, together with Luckyto and the village youth, actively carry out various organizational activities under the guidance of traditional institutions and village officials. They are aware that activities such as land conversion, wood theft, or, closest to their village, mining activities by a company called PT. Prima Utama Lestari (PT PUL), will give rise to serious problems in the form of environmental issues.

PT. PUL is a nickel mining company established in 2017, holding a concession permit covering an area of 1,419.00 hectares until 2031 (Promining TM, 2025). Even though it has obtained permission, for the Cerekang indigenous people, PT. PUL's mining activities lack clarity in environmental impact assessment (AMDAL), pollute the river, and build a port by covering the river (Awhy, 2024) This activity is considered to have a serious impact on the environmental ecosystem, especially since its work area is directly adjacent to one of the customary forest sites, namely Bulu Pensimoni (Wahyu Chandra, 2020). PT. PUL received rejection from residents in the form of protests and has reached a mutual agreement to temporarily halt its mining activities (Admin, 2021).

Meanwhile, Manurung Village is a village located in East Luwu, South Sulawesi. In this village, there is a customary forest area covering 544.11 hectares that they have preserved across generations. (Djidar & Hendra, 2024). The customary forest area consists of 10 spots in the form of forests, rivers, and land that are prohibited from being managed for any purpose. The 10 points that make up the Cerekang customary forest area are *ujung tana'e, tomba, bulu pensimoni, padang anungge, bulu mangkulili, kasosoe, berue, anggantungeng ance'e, lengkong, dan turungeng apancangeng* (Badan Registrasi Wilayah Adat (BRWA), 2025). The Cerekang forest area has a historical value that is also mysterious due to its close connection with the cosmology of the creation of the first human by Manurung (Batara Guru) in Bulu Pensimoni (one of the forest areas in Cerekang) (Pelras, 2006).

It is the belief in To Manurung that tightly binds the Cerekang indigenous community in maintaining the balance of the ecosystem in the form of forests, land, and rivers (Hadrawi et al., 2025). The management of customary forests is not the same as the treatment of other forests due to the sacred and revered status held by customary forests (Samiyem, 2025). That is the reason why for the Cerekang indigenous people, their approach to the forest cannot be classified as a material treatment, let alone utilized for economic purposes. The Cerekang indigenous people, even though they live alongside modernist ideas, still maintain the ancestral messages as their way of life. One of the ancestral messages that has become the worldview of the Cerekang people states "*narekko mujamai panggale ade'mu makkasolang ri wanuammu*", which means that if your actions destroy the forest, they will also destroy your life (Interview, Usman 27/08/25). It is this worldview born from the messages of ancestors that provides a deep understanding for indigenous communities in maintaining the balance of nature and their lives (Hadrawi et al., 2025).

The Cerekang indigenous community positions the forest as a sacred and elevated area (Bulbeck, 2013). Therefore, their lives do not at all exploit the environment, let alone the forest, recklessly (Akhmar et al., 2023). Nature in this case is represented through the forest, which is considered like a mother who nurtures all aspects of their life. The personification of the forest as a mother here represents a sense of respect, obedience, and appreciation that cannot be rationalized within the framework of modern society's thinking. The Cerekang indigenous community is led by a Pua' who has a noble character and is respected (Akhmar et al., 2022). *Pua' is the "hidden center" and is the structural twin of the Luwu ancestor who resides in the "visible" center* (Caldwell & Bulbeck, n.d.). *Pua' Cerekang, because he was chosen through pamase or wangsit, is surrounded by an exclusive group of mystics that is difficult to penetrate* (Caldwell & Bulbeck, n.d.). In addition to being led through the customary council, the people of Manurung village also have customary institutions that mediate the daily needs of the community with the customary council. In addition, and which is the focus of this study, is the existence of a youth group in Manurung Village that is actively involved in a youth organization called Pejuang Muda Wija to Cerekang (PMWTC).

PMWTC has high attention and dedication to environmental conservation, including forest areas and the Cerekang River. They are actively managing youth resources, coordinated by customary institutions through environmental emancipation activities to protect customary forest areas. The youth contestation of PMWTC can be classified as environmental emancipation activities due to their ecological worldview based on forests and ancestral traditions. Environmental emancipation has so far been underestimated because it is not considered strategic in relation to the concept of development. This article will describe how the political-ecological contestation driven by PMWTC youth addresses environmental degradation, deforestation, and the challenges of extractive mining industries in the areas around the Cerekang customary forest, based on their role within the framework of political ecology, which provides theoretical contributions for further research.

METHODS

This article uses a qualitative descriptive method to reveal social phenomena or facts, related to the activities of the PMWTC youth group which is conceptualized into a political ecology that builds emancipatory and transformative relations over the Cerekang customary forest (Moleong,

2007). To understand and interpret a series of events and processes bounded by space, time, and activity, we use case study research, which provides focused and in-depth observation (Hadari, 2003). Case study of a bounded system, as defined by Stake (Stake, 1995), studying a case in relation to a series of operations within units in an integrated and patterned system. This article bases its analysis and data presentation on an emphasis on an explanatory narrative about the case being studied, particularly the contestation of young groups involved in PMWTC. Data collection in the field through direct observation, in-depth interviews with key informants who were deliberately selected (*purposive sampling*), (Amsal et al., 2024).

Political Ecology is a concept derived from the tradition of critical thought, namely Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, especially the connection of their views in seeing the structural relations of capitalist society and the genealogy of power. In the context of this article, political ecology is understood as an approach that examines the relationship between the environment and social practices of society from the political and economic realms. (Famelasari & Priantini, 2018.). Politics in this case refers to a critical understanding that points out issues such as the environment, which is a problem that needs to be continuously contested with all parties (Agusta, 2009). Mouffe states that the distinction between political and politics falls within the realm of intertwining the dimension of antagonism with the set of practices and institutions through which order is created (Batubara, 2017). In this case, Mouffe explains that nowadays in social interactions, there has been a shallowing of the meaning of political matters due to the hegemony of democracy in the style of neoliberal politics.

Further than the above, the understanding of political ecology means a model of understanding that states the process of changes experienced by nature cannot be separated from the context of certain interests (Heradiansyah, 2018). This means that in political ecology, environmental change is not a natural event, but is a form of politicized environment that involves the actors who have interests in it (Syatori, 2024.). Political Ecology therefore provides the consequence of the view that there is no separation of changes in the natural and cultural (social) areas, but rather it is a dialectical intertwining that occurs simultaneously, mutually influencing each other (Batubara, 2017). This means that through the understanding of political ecology, there is no longer a binary opposition between nature and humans in terms of the changes occurring within it (Rosyid, 2015).

In the tradition of critical thinking, emancipation is the main goal in freeing society from the influence of a capitalistic worldview. The capitalistic worldview risks erasing human values based on spirituality due to its empiricist epistemological basis. (Rahman et al., 2018). The empirical epistemological basis views all reality as merely the form of things that have no value whatsoever (Pamuji et al., 2025). In economic activities, objects are only positioned in terms of exchange value for the sake of humans themselves. Included in industrial activities, nature is only treated as an object of human actions to extract its economic value alone. (Dewi, 2018).

Based on the above description through a critical framework, political ecology is an emancipatory perspective that is transformative and participatory in confronting forms of marginalization, erasure, and oppression of nature, including the human communities within it (Satria, 2009). Many studies show that extractive mining activities impact environmental damage and the lives of indigenous communities. In Indonesia itself, PT Freeport is a bare example that shows how mining activities have a direct impact on community life and the environment (Putra Ramadhan et al., 2025). Mining activities also impact the emergence of social class gaps and economic disparities around the mining sites (Magdoff & Foster, 2018). In addition, land conversion also causes spatial conflicts between the community and the state (Santoso et al., 2022). In addition, what is often forgotten is that deforestation changes the landscape of an area, causing various fluctuations in unemployment, loss of local genius, and health disturbances for the local community (Jainuddin, 2023).

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

a. Space Emancipation

Political ecology played by the young PMWTC group can be expressed through the emancipation movement applied to the living spaces of indigenous communities. This is related to their cosmological view that positions nature as a sacred and holy entity. Positioning space in this way generates an understanding of place and time, especially regarding forests, land, and rivers, as areas that need to be kept away from practices that damage nature. Through the cosmological view of the upper world (sky; the place of the gods), the middle world (earth; the place of humans), and the lower world (water), the Cerekang indigenous community does not arbitrarily separate these three worlds. According to them, these three orders constitute a unity that cannot be separated from one another. Not only are they inseparable, but these three worlds are interconnected in a sacred bond so that if there are negative life practices in the middle world where humans reside, it will impact the overall disruption. That is why, according to tradition, the Cerekang community has many norms in the form of prohibitions and taboos so that if they are violated, it will result in disasters not only for the taboo violator but also for the entire Cerekang indigenous community.

On one occasion, Usman Siabeng (interview 29/08/25) described an incident in the 1990s when he was still a young man, in which a resident of Cerekang suffered a tragedy after being attacked by a crocodile and died. According to the beliefs of the Cerekang community, such an incident indicates that the victim had committed certain violations against customary land. Later, Usman stated, it was found that the victim had indeed made a mistake by taking timber from the customary land, with evidence in the form of the victim's belongings found on the outskirts of the customary forest area. According to Usman, this incident is unreasonable, but from the perspective of indigenous beliefs, the event is considered a part of what they believe. The depth of reverence for the sacred forest, in turn, shapes the uncompromising attitude of the Cerekang indigenous community. Amrun (interview 26/08/2025), who is the treasurer of PMWTC, said he often feels upset and angry at irresponsible parties who dare to enter and exploit the resources of customary forests. Amrun said that if there were no legal regulations, he might take violent action against those who violate customary areas. The attitude shown by Amrun illustrates how the indigenous community internalizes the sanctification and sacralization of all entities related to their customary forest areas.

The cosmological view of the Cerekang people through three worlds but in an integralistic manner is an ancient belief that provides them with an opportunity to emancipate indigenous communities from the process of desacralization of customary areas. One model of desacralizing customary forests is the widespread clearing of land around customary areas, which will gradually impact the threat of shrinking sacred spaces. In the context of indigenous communities, the spatial cosmology they believe in is an effective approach to facing threats and the destruction of space by modern approaches in responding to profit-oriented spaces.

b. Transformative Participation

Transformative Participation of the young PMWTC group has so far promoted three main activities in preserving their customary entities. Through these activities, PMWTC contests politically ecologically as an entity aware of the threats posed by mining companies and other parties seeking to exploit the forest and customary forest areas. This awareness began from their concern when they first established PMWTC in 2015. This concern is morally a consciousness that has long been ingrained through the inheritance of noble values received from their parents. This concern then results in a strong attitude actualized into forest patrols (Interview, Adnan 25/08/25). Forest patrol activities are routine activities conducted every three months by walking and riding boats along the edges of customary forests and the Cerekang River. In this activity, PMWTC together with traditional

institution leaders can spend two to three days traversing the forest. Since they will be staying overnight at certain points, they need to bring provisions similar to mountain climbing activities. According to Iqbal, a member of PMWTC, sometimes they have to be willing to get wet because it often rains once they reach certain heights. At night, they have to take care of themselves due to unpredictable situations caused by wild animals living in the sacred forest (interview with Iqbal, 27/08/25).

Forest patrol activities are transformative participation that places young groups at the forefront of environmental conservation. It is called transformative participation because if a report comes in, they must be ready to follow up on the report immediately. Adnan said that if a report comes in at night, they must respond immediately by dispatching members who are on standby. This activity is a logical implication of the relationship between awareness and space, which is that when a space experiences a certain threat, it will trigger an awareness response. At the very least, in the position of PMWTC, awareness of space shapes their attitudes and behaviors.

c. Ecology School

School can be conducted anywhere and at any time. This statement is truly implemented by PMWTC through the ecology school. The ecology school itself is a space of discourse that connects ancestral messages, environmental awareness, and education all in one dialectical activity. Usman stated that the implementation of the ecology school is often carried out during forest patrol activities. At that time, it is a forum for passing down ancestral teachings to the younger generation through problem-based education (Interview 27/08/2025). As mentioned, during patrol activities, the younger generation is taught about the names of locations, types of plants, tree names, and natural medicines around them. Even in between patrol activities, the younger generation can delve more deeply into understanding their position as young people when directly engaging as to Cerekang in preserving the customary forest (Interview, Arlin 30/08/25).

On one patrol occasion, the researcher also witnessed firsthand while participating in navigating the Cerekang River. At that time, Fadil, a teenager who had just entered junior high school, took part in installing information boards at several points along the river within the customary area. Fadil was not afraid to navigate the river while sitting and acted as a "student" on the bow of the speedboat. When some young people went down to the riverbank, he also joined, showing courage and the characteristic teenage eagerness to be involved and learn many things. Fadil, along with the PMWTC youth, seemed to demonstrate the deep awareness that lives within them in responding to forest patrol activities. Ecology school, from a political-ecology perspective, is a battleground against the confrontation of modern understanding that views the forest as an area to be extracted. All this time, children have been introduced to a profit-oriented understanding through the logic of capitalist economics. Children are educated to become job seekers who view the future without a deep sensitivity to the sustainability of environmental ecosystems. Through ecological schools, PMWTC has combined tradition and modern organizational work in preserving the ecological customs that have long been practiced by the Cerekang indigenous community.

Discussion

Based on the results of the research above, it can be affirmed that PMWTC is not an ordinary youth group, but rather a collective syndicate that initiates itself through environmental awareness in order to preserve the forest as the basis of indigenous communities. Beyond that, the ecological awareness they internalize comes from the teachings passed down from their ancestors. From this perspective, one political-ecological characteristic shown by PMWTC is historical in nature and does not forget the context of space and time of indigenous communities. Through activities such as, for example, ecological schools, PMWTC is consciously carrying out an emancipatory process that impacts changes in the way they respond to their environment. This character is shown through their awareness that the struggle to preserve the forest is not at all easy. According to political ecology

analysis, PMWT's position is that of an antagonist who directly or indirectly realizes having a number of challenges, especially extractive companies that gradually threaten the environmental sustainability of Cerekang.

The political ecological movement of PMWTC through forest patrol activities is not only a reflection of their duties and roles as part of the indigenous community, but also a direct emancipatory actor who realizes that environmental damage does not occur solely naturally. Because of environmental changes, including dangers that can affect the balance of sacred forests, not due to natural causes but due to underlying social situations, forest patrols by PMWTC are a preventive and active action in order to protect their forests. These patrol activities can be said to be one of the hallmarks of a socially-based political ecological movement, namely the agency position undertaken by young people as agents of change. This indicates that the awareness inherited from previous generations can be combined into a modern approach, namely youth organizations, especially through ecological political awareness.

Indeed, through a political-ecological perspective, the existence of PMWTC becomes a significant key in inheriting awareness about the importance of preserving the forest. This transmission is not only carried through mythological stories that have so far formed the basis of its sacredness, but has further transformed into concrete action in the field. It is clearly visible through PMWTC's political role that everything intersecting with interests involving the state, or even extractive companies, must be met with resistance. At this point, PMWTC not only becomes the heir of past generations in safeguarding the forest and its environment, but has also evolved into a progressive group that fuses mythology, customary beliefs, and political movements.

CONCLUSION

The political-ecological contestation of the PMWTC youth group is a conscious implementation of ecological and political values inherited through the roots of tradition and organizational work. As previously explained, the awareness of forest conservation, the appreciation of ancestral messages, and organizational activism constitute a unified contestation over their role in maintaining the existence of the forest and the Cerekang indigenous community. Through ancestral messages and organizational work, PMWTC becomes a political actor that engages in negotiation, advocacy, and education regarding the environmental threats faced by the village of Manurung. This position is an important signal concerning the antagonistic status they indirectly hold with parties conducting mining activities around the village and indigenous forest. It can be concluded that through activities such as forest patrols, ecology schools, and community political education, PMWTC has so far played a strategic role as a young group with the potential to confront deforestation efforts, wood theft, or mining activities carried out by mining companies and communities from outside their village.

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