

# The Sacred Places of The Talang Mamak Indigenous People, Indonesia

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## ■ Abstract

*The protection of cultural heritage in Indonesia is regulated by the Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage, while the protection of nature is regulated by the Environmental Law No. 32 of 2009. Therefore, this normative separation poses challenges in the protection of the cultural heritage in Indonesia, particularly for the inclusion of sacred places, where nature and landscape are integral elements. Furthermore, sacred places that are synonymous of the nature-cultural heritage are under the ownership and stewardship of indigenous people. These sacred places are generally located in remote forest landscapes or mountains which have not been specifically managed for conservation purposes, lacking access restrictions. This paper presents the preliminary findings of research based on observations and dialogues with the Talang Mamak people regarding the protection of their cultural heritage and sacred places as well as its challenges.*

**KEY WORDS:** Sacred places, Indigenous People, Talang Mamak, Cultural heritage protection

## ■ 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview of the heritage site

Indonesia is the largest archipelagic country in the world, consisting of 17,504 islands (Indonesian National Defense Council 2017), with a vast territory and a rich diversity of natural resources. Indonesia also has diverse ethnicities, beliefs, customs, and cultural heritage. Each region has its own culture and, in locations with limited access, some regions are also home to indigenous peoples who have maintained traditional cultural practices.

As defined, sacred natural sites are natural places that have a particular spiritual importance to people and society, including natural places deemed as sacred by indigenous people, as well as natural places recognized by institutionalized religions or faiths as places for worship and remembrance (Oviedo, Jeanrenaud & Gland 2005; 4). The main characteristics of indigenous peoples' sacred natural places may have their origins in Paleolithic times,

when the sacred places were often associated with a belief in the attached sacredness of nature. These sites are respected and guarded by the indigenous people, through traditional beliefs and practices (Oviedo, Jeanrenaud & Gland 2005; 5).

One of Indonesia's indigenous groups are the Talang Mamak people, who still maintain their cultural heritage and sacred places. They continue to practice ancestral traditions such as having long hair, wearing turbans, and having gnarled and black teeth due to eating areca nut. As part of their customs, they perform ceremonies, for example during birth they perform ceremonies with the help of baby witches, such as circumcisions and the batambak ceremony (which pays respect to the deceased spirit and repairs the grave of the dead in order to improve social status). This paper examines the protection of sacred places as part of the Talang Mamak's cultural heritage in the Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau Province Indonesia. This research was conducted in the Talang Kedabu Village, Indragiri Hulu, Riau between June 2016 and February 2017.

## ■ 2. Significance of the heritage place, including natural and cultural values

### 2.1 *Heritage Place of Talang Mamak People*

The cultural heritage and sacred places of the Talang Mamak people are located along the Indragiri River, in Rakit Kulim, which is part of the Indragiri Hulu Regency, in Riau, Indonesia. Their cultural heritage and sacred sites have existed for decades and are preserved by the indigenous Talang Mamak people themselves, independently from the government, because of their sense of belonging to their culture and sacred places.

### 2.2 *Nature-Culture Linkages*

For the Talang Mamak people, the land and forest are a part of life that cannot be separated. For hundreds of years they have lived peacefully and became one with nature. They live by collecting forest products and shifting cultivation. The Talang Mamak people preserve and protect their sacred places because they respect the beliefs of their ancestors. The traditions of protection are inherited and sometimes involve worshiping objects. Their local wisdom dictates that they are the stewards and care-takers of nature and natural resources; therefore, they take only what they deem to be necessary and do not greedily exploit nature.

The old relics of stone statues and the graves of their ancestral kings are scattered throughout their sacred forest, river, and the 15 plus hectares of ancestral land. The sacred forest is believed to be the shelter for and dwelling place of spirits. According to the Talang Mamak people, if the forest is not maintained then these spirits will commit evil and unwanted actions. Therefore, every year a ritual is held to contain these spirits within the forest.

There are three main sacred places for the Talang Mamak people. The first are three blocks of timbat stone, or sacred stone, that are hundreds of years old and located in the Jarinjing area. This is the place where traditional and meditation ceremonies are performed. The second is the sacred land, or the origin of the soil in the local language, which are areas of lush forests where they believe their ancestors, the first people in the Riau region, reside

[Fig. 1]. Their sacred forests must also be guarded and some trees are prohibited from cutting or collecting because of their sense of belonging. The third sacred place is the eternal waters, called Parigi Asal (lake of origin) [Fig. 2]. This lake is considered an ancestral place for the Talang Mamak people. Parigi Asal is a lake that never dries, even when the river and springs around the region have dried up during the summer or due to a long drought. The people believe that the source of Parigi Asal is something eternal. If the Talang Mamak people perform a ritual at the lake of origin, that involves burning incense along with saying a prayer asking for fish, it is believed that the fish will appear in this lake. However, the demand for the fish should be accompanied by good intentions. Therefore, the Talang Mamak people often hold traditional ceremonies at the lake, during which they give offerings. Parigi Asal is also where the Kuala Sungai Limau (the river of limes) is found.

According to the Talang Mamak people's story, Kuala Sungai Limau is where the remnants of their ancestors are. It is considered to be the place of the foundation of their nation's history and the origin of their great rituals. This location is still well preserved and a ritual is held there every year [Fig. 3]. Also, Kuala river tunu, located in the same area, is a sacred land and is believed to be a magical place. The Talang Mamak people hold a ritual there every month and hold custom rituals every two years.

These practices and their sense of protection show how the Talang Mamak people continuously respect their sacred sites and maintain their cultural practices.

## ■ 3. Current management arrangements

### 3.1 *Legislations, Institutions and Resources*

The law stipulates that "[c]ultural heritage is a heritage in the form of buildings, structure, sites, and areas on land or water that need to be preserved because it has important value for history, science, education, religion, or culture through the process of determination" (Article 1 Law No 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage). Therefore, cultural heritage can be either natural or human-made, movable or immovable, a unity or a group or parts of it, or even the remains of possessions that have a close

relationship with culture and the history of human development (Article 1 Law No 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage).

Furthermore, in order for an area to be designated as a cultural heritage site, it must meet a specific criterion: at least two heritage sites must be located adjacent. When designating the site as a cultural landscape, the land use pattern should show its past function and the historical influence of humans on the land use system for at least fifty years. It should contain evidence of the cultural landscape formation, and the soil layers should contain the evidence of human activity or fossil deposits (Article 10 Law No 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage).

The Cultural Heritage Law only regulates tangible cultural heritage and does not cover the protection of nature, landscapes, and the environment of cultural heritage. The Cultural Heritage and Museum Preservation Directorate only focuses on cultural heritage while the Environment and Forestry Ministry plays a role in regulating and protecting the nature, landscape, and environment, separately. As stipulated in article 1, Law No. 32 of 2009 on Environmental Management and Protection, "environment" is understood as a unity of space and all non-living and living things contained, including human beings. This also considers humans' behavior, which affects nature, and the survival of humans other living beings. Since 2003, Indonesia has ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and passed the Presidential Regulation No. 78 of 2007. As a follow up of the ratification, since September 2016, approximately 150 intangible cultural heritage elements were identified and their designation was endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Culture based on the recommendations of the Indonesian Cultural Heritage Expert Team.

Based on the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003), a community or group is entitled to register a form of traditional cultural expression which they have passed down from generation to generation and continue to preserve it in such a way that it is part of their identity. The emphasis is put on safeguarding efforts. As stated in Article 2, "safeguarding" is defined as "measures aimed

at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, and transmission, particularly through formal and informal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage" (2003 Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention).

Intangible cultural heritage in Indonesia is regulated at the Ministerial level through the Ministry of Education and Culture with the Regulation No. 106 of 2013 on Intangible Cultural Heritage of Indonesia, the Joint Regulations of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Culture and Tourism No. 42 of 2009 and No. 40 of 2009 concerning Guidelines for Cultural Preservation. Moreover, the Ministry of Home Affairs passed the Regulation No. 52 of 2007 on Guidelines for the Preservation and Development of Customs and Social Values of Cultural Society. However, in the Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage, there is no article that refers to intangible cultural heritage. Arrangements are mentioned in the General Elucidation of the same Law.

Currently, intangible cultural heritage receives little attention from the Government. Although Indonesia is a signatory to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, government officials argue that the concept of indigenous peoples is not applicable. As a consequence, the government has rejected all calls regarding the specific needs of groups that identify themselves as indigenous (IWGIA 2018).

Local governments have greater authority in the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage being practiced by the indigenous people in the rural areas where they reside. Based on Article 96 of Law No. 11 of 2010 on Cultural Heritage, the duties of local governments include establishing the ethics of preservation of cultural heritage, coordinating the preservation of cultural heritage, collecting cultural heritage data, establishing cultural heritage management rules, organizing cultural conservation preservation, establishing sites and areas, and saving cultural heritage for security and other interests. However, there is lack of coordination with the Technical Implementation Unit, which are institutions



Figure 1: A woman of talang mamak people prepares the offerings for ancestors in sacred places. Photo credit: Nukila & Gilung.



Figure 2: Parigi origin or lake of origin, a sacred lake, is hundreds of years old, has a miracle because it never dry in a long dry season. Talang Mamak people perform worship and seek blessings. Photo credit: Nukila & Gilung.

established by the Central Government, such as the Archaeological Heritage Removal Center (BP3), the Agency of Conservation History and Traditional Values, or Archeology Agency.

Therefore, an effective coordination between the previously mentioned institutions needs to be developed, including the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of indigenous groups, and synergies should be established with the Law that refers to tangible heritage, in order to protect sacred places from destruction.

#### ■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

External threats endanger the cultural heritage and sacred places of the Talang Mamak people. These include changes to the natural environment and the land belonging to the Talang Mamak people due to erosion caused by development projects run by the State or by the private sector, as well as land use change and urbanization, among others. In addition, there is an internal threat: the change of values in the community. Indigenous peoples such as Talang



Figure 3: Talang Mamak people preparing rituals for sacred places. Photo credit: Nukila & Gilung.

Mamak people are traditional groups that still depend closely from nature. Yet, modern society assumes that Talang Mamak rituals and sacred places are not important, they do not respect them because they represent values of animism, mysticism and ritual. Moreover, the local government has not provided significant assistance to archaeological research, such as sending expert teams for the registration of the cultural heritage belonging to the Talang Mamak people. Therefore, it would be necessary to develop programs that raise awareness on the importance to protect cultural heritage as well as sacred places.

#### ■ 5. Recommendations

It is important to involve all areas of the government and researchers, including interdisciplinary teams of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, as well as young generations, to support the protection of sacred places and cultural and natural heritage in Indonesia.

In the case of the Talang Mamak people's heritage, the local government needs to implement protection programs, involving the central government, such as the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Ministry of Environment, to protect nature, cultural heritage, and their sacred landscape. International institutions, such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Council on Monuments and

Sites (ICOMOS), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as academia, can play a role by advising the government in the preservation of the nature and cultural heritage as well as sacred places of indigenous peoples.

The cultural heritage and natural heritage owned by the Talang Mamak People are unique, mystical, rare, limited, and full of history. It is necessary to change the perception of the government so that the natural heritage and the cultural heritage are not only seen for their economic value, which is beneficial, but also for their historical and sacred values so that they can be enjoyed by future generations.

Finally, the protection of sacred places must respect the spiritual values that are indigenous people's heritage from their ancestors.

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