

# Forest, Field and Sea: Cultural Diversity in the Indonesian Archipelago

Richard Kennedy

On the Indonesian national emblem the 14th century Hindu-Javanese phrase, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, "Unity in Diversity," appears on a banner clutched in the talons of an eagle. The phrase honors these sometimes contradictory national goals, which seek to unify a complex nation and at the same time to respect the enormous cultural diversity of its 300 distinct ethnic groups living on more than 1,000 islands distributed across 3,000 miles of ocean. Indonesia is the fifth most populous country in the world with a population of over 180 million.

Unity is an old concept in Indonesia and the motto, "Unity in Diversity," was taken from texts written under much earlier rulers. In the 9th century and later in the 14th, royal kingdoms secured varying degrees of political control over many of the western islands. And even before this dominion was achieved, established commercial routes linked the peoples of Borneo and the Moluccas with Java, China and India.

Today, examples of successful programs of national unification are evident throughout the archipelago. A vast majority of the people now speak Bahasa Indonesia, the lingua franca of the nation, and schools, newspapers and TV are found in even the most remote corners of the country. As a result, however, some of the diverse cultural traditions of Indonesia have a fragile existence.

Modern mass communication and extensive air travel have greatly increased the islands' internal unity and external participation in international trade, information exchange and politics. In fact, the classic Indonesian description of their country, *tanah air kita*, "our land and sea," perhaps

now should be reformulated. This phrase, used to underscore the major role that water and the seas have played in traditional Indonesian life, has lost some of its authority in the face of the overwhelming influence of air waves, airplanes and air mail. However, if the skies have helped to unite the country, its distinctive lands and waters still encourage its diversity.

Examples of cultural adaptations by people from three Indonesian provinces to vastly different environments can provide an introduction to Indonesia's great diversity — Kenyah and Moudang people living in the lowland and upland forests of East Kalimantan, Bugis and Makassar maritime people living in coastal South Sulawesi, and rural Javanese and Madurese agriculturalists living in coastal and inland East Java. These communities also display some of the indigenous skills and traditional knowledge that have developed in environments outside the urban centers and fertile river valleys of the Indonesian heartland.

## Forest: Upriver People of East Kalimantan

Indonesia has one of the largest areas of tropical rainforest in the world. From Sumatra to Kalimantan to Irian Jaya the dense, biologically diverse environment of the rainforest contains one of the most varied populations of flora species in the world. In one small five-acre area in Kalimantan, the Indonesian area of Borneo, for example, 250 species of lowland trees have recently been identified. People who live in the Indonesian rainforests have a complex, systematic understanding of this rich environment.

The human population of Indonesia's rainforests represents some of the archipelago's earliest inhabitants. Descendants of the earliest Austronesian peoples who arrived from the Asian mainland tens of thousands of years ago still live in the upland forests of Sumatra, Kalimantan and Sulawesi. Many of these people moved inland

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*Field: Terraced fields such as these are found throughout Sumatra, Java and Bali. Elaborate irrigation systems were introduced into Java over 1,000 years ago enabling the island to support large populations. Photo by Hermine Dreyfuss*



*Forest: (above) Dayak farmers clear and burn plots in the forest to plant swidden fields for dry (unirrigated) rice cultivation. Farmers plant these fields for several seasons and then move to a nearby plot. The swidden fields are usually left fallow for several years until they are fertile enough to be planted again. Photo by Cynthia Mackie*

*Sea: (right) This Mandar fisherman works on a rampong platform off the coast of South Sulawesi. Fishermen sail to these platforms in the evening and sleep there to start work the next morning. This platform floats in 6,000 foot waters. Photo by Charles Zerner*







after the subsequent migrations of other Austronesian people from China and Southeast Asia, Hindus from the Indian subcontinent and Muslim traders from the Middle East. These relative newcomers settled in the coastal regions of the islands and established extensive trade networks. They maintained commercial contact with other Indonesian islands, India and China for over 1,500 years. The earlier settlers retreated inland to the forests where they continued many of their beliefs and social practices well into the 20th century. Resisting both Hindu and Muslim conversion, many were later converted to Christianity by missionaries.

Kalimantan has the largest population of descendants of these early Indonesian settlers. This island and especially its upland peoples have been a target of adventurous fantasy in the Western world in the 19th and 20th centuries. Often characterized as isolated, remote and even foreboding, Kalimantan is, in fact, a complex society of settled traders and farmers, with remnants of a royal courtly life as well as numerous semi-nomadic tribes.

Dayaks, the inland people of Kalimantan, have been relatively isolated from most of the major currents of regional history and the societies of coastal peoples. Furthermore, as semi-nomads the Dayak tribes have for centuries remained separated from each other by language and local

tradition. In fact, the term "Dayak" is used, sometimes pejoratively, by coastal people to refer to all upriver people and has limited currency. Reference to individual ethnic groups such as Kenyah, Modang and Iban is more appropriate, but Dayak is the only common term for the groups as a whole.

Most aspects of Dayak social life are closely associated with the forest. Previously, these upriver people were primarily hunters and swidden agriculturalists (preparing fields by clearing and burning) who established only temporary villages. This nomadic lifestyle is changing rapidly. A vast majority of Dayak people are now settled farmers, and some have migrated to cities for work with logging and oil interests that have boomed in the past decade. However, even today, when more and more communities have established permanent homes in villages, their culture remains rooted in the forest environment.

Many Dayaks maintain a sharply honed knowledge of the fragile forest environment. Although they are dwindling in number, some remember nomadic life and carry with them a sophisticated knowledge of the flora and fauna in the vast tracts of uninhabited forest land through which they used to travel and hunt. The forest provided them with edible and medicinal plants as well as potent poisons for their arrows.

Even within settled communities Dayaks re-

*Schooners from throughout Indonesia line up at Sunda Kelapa, the port for Jakarta. Some of these ships, especially the mighty pinissi, are still being built by South Sulawesi boatbuilders for trade throughout the archipelago.*  
Photo by Owen Franken



main minimally dependent on outside resources. Rice, pigs and chickens are raised locally; and timber for individual dwellings or longhouses, rattan and other fibers for weaving, bamboo for containers and — in the recent past — bark for cloth and feathers for decoration have usually been available near the village.

The Dayak economy, however, has always required some contact with coastal and maritime people. Mainstays of the inland tribal culture such as salt, pottery containers and decorative beads were traded with Muslim and Chinese merchants for rattan, birds' nests and medicinal supplies. These commercial contacts have widened in the past decades, and national education and medical systems have reduced some of the isolation.

### **Field: Rural Tradition in East Java**

*Religion comes from the sea, adat (custom) comes from the hills.*

The coastal regions (*pasisir*) of the major Indonesian islands have historically been the meeting ground for indigenous and migrant peoples. Here traders and conquerors from China, India, Europe and Arab lands arrived and established local centers of activity and power. Some of these immigrants brought sophisticated methods of irrigation and elaborate systems of dams and water catchments with which they annually produced two and three crops of rice in the rich volcanic earth of Sumatra, Java and Bali. These yields provided resources to support an increasing population

and a succession of powerful empires.

In the 10th century the eastern part of Java was settled by Hindus. One center of state power in Java remained in the eastern part of the island for the next 500 years, but it moved to central Java during the rise of Islam in the 15th century and continued there under the subsequent colonial rule of the Dutch. Since 1500, East Java — especially outside the northern port cities — has been less influenced by outside forces and the rise of the Islamic states to the west such as Surakarta, Jogjakarta and Cirebon. East Java is “deep Java,” or quintessential Java, inheritor of some of the island’s oldest traditions.

Not all of the land on Java has benefitted from the elaborate irrigation systems built over the past 1,000 years in the fertile river valleys of the island. On much of the land, subsistence crops have provided little surplus income for farmers. On these lands outside the fertile river valleys, life has been less affected by the social, economic and cultural changes brought by empire, commercial trade and outside cultural values. In these marginal lands local custom is strong, even though Islam is the faith of 90% of all Indonesians. Pre-Islamic traditions, Hindu and pre-Hindu, remain powerful.

Many older traditions can still be found in communities throughout East Java and rural Madura. For example, women in the village of Kerek still weave their own cloth, which they dye with natural colors. Worn as sarongs, these everyday cloths are sturdy enough for work in the fields. And across the strait in Sumanep on





*Lumber provides income for workers in some upriver villages as well as in sawmills in larger cities of East Kalimantan. But the rapid rate of deforestation of the land is altering the fragile ecology of the region and destroying hundreds of plant species that have potential benefit to mankind. Photo by Owen Franken*

Madura Island, Indian epic tales are still performed by the local *topeng* (mask) dance troupes. Kerek batik artists experiment with new dyes and storytellers in Sumanep include tales of contemporary life in their repertoire, yet at the same time, both retain traditions that embody local values and tastes.

### **Sea: Coastal People of South Sulawesi**

*The sea unites and the land divides.*

Maritime people from China, Southeast Asia and India settled Indonesia in waves. Many brought navigational skills and knowledge, with which they maintained commercial and social relationships with mainland Asia. Their skills not only tied island with island and the archipelago with the mainland but also enabled further exploration of Melanesia and Polynesia. Navigators who sailed from Indonesia settled most of the islands in the Pacific more than 3,000 years ago.

The navigators and boatbuilders of South Sulawesi still maintain some of these skills. Bugis, Makassarese and Mandar peoples of the Province of South Sulawesi continue to draw their income from the sea as fishermen, navigators and mer-

chants. For nearly 300 years Bugis and Makassarese controlled much of the trade in Sulawesi and established commercial and even political power in ports throughout the archipelago and on the mainland of Southeast Asia. During most of the Dutch colonial presence in the country, the Bugis ruled a vast commercial and political empire from their capital at Bone, and the profits of this maritime trade supported an elaborate court life. At one time, the royal rulers of the East Kalimantan kingdom of Kutei were merchant Bugis. In fact, coastal (*pasisir*) peoples throughout the archipelago often have closer social ties with one another than they have with neighboring lowland farmers or upland tribal groups.

The tie between Kalimantan and Sulawesi continues into the 20th century as Sulawesi merchants and sailors maintain the trade in lumber, spices and grains. Twentieth century technology, however, has radically changed the boats which ply the sea routes between Indonesian islands. Motors have now supplanted sails, while compasses and electronic monitoring have replaced navigation by seasonal winds, wave patterns and stars. Nevertheless, the mighty 200-ton *pinissi* sailing ship or the delicate *sandeq* outrigger can

still occasionally be seen in harbors throughout the archipelago, and the courtly dances of the royal cities of Gowa and Bone are still performed in a few villages of South Sulawesi. Like a Kenyah farmer's intimate knowledge of East Kalimantan's rainforest or the tales of valor told by a Javanese storyteller, the Bugis' deep understanding of Indonesian seas is an important link to the country's past and may provide critical cultural knowledge for its future identity.

Encouraging the diverse cultural traditions of peoples of the forests, fields and seas of Indonesia is an important component of Indonesian national unity. This diversity is a source of strength and stability.

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