

Pluralizing justice: Indigenous perspectives from the West Papuan oil palm frontier



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Pluralizing justice

Over the last decade, Indigenous Marind communities inhabiting the West Papuan regency of Merauke have seen vast swaths of their lands and forests targeted for conversion to monocrop oil palm plantations.⁽¹⁾ This expansion is driven by national food security imperatives and by growing global demand for palm oil as a source of both food and fuel. On the ground, however, oil palm developments are increasingly jeopardizing the natural environments from which Indigenous Marind derive their traditional forest foods – sago, cassowary, pigs, cuscus, and more. Environmental transformations in Merauke accrue heightened significance in light of Marind’s intimate and ancestral relations with forest animals and plants, whom they consider as kin and with whom they share common descent from ancestral spirits, or *dema*.

Drawing from long-term ethnographic fieldwork among Marind, this brief ethnographic foray asks: how do Marind cosmologies shape the ways in which they conceptualize and enact food justice? How does food justice in turn intersect with other modalities of (in)justice – social, environmental, intergenerational, and multispecies? And in what ways do Marind understandings of justice invite a pluralization of justice itself as situated practice and cultural construct?

As in many other parts of Indonesia and the tropics more generally, monocrop oil palm expansion in Merauke is a major driver of deforestation and biodiversity loss. These environmental disruptions in turn undermine the nutritional wellbeing of Marind, who derive their subsistence primarily from hunting, fishing, and gathering in native forests, savannah, and swamps. Indeed, rates of

malnutrition, stunting, and wasting in the area have soared as forests increasingly make way for plantations, with particularly dire effects on babies, infants, toddlers, and young children. In lieu of culturally valued foodstuffs – in particular sago starch obtained from the sago palm (2) – Marind increasingly consume imported, processed commodities such as rice, instant noodles, and biscuits, which are distributed by agribusiness corporations as part of their social welfare packages, or purchased by community members at local kiosks with compensation received for lands ceded to oil palm developments.(3) Yet, imported commodities are often said by Marind to be devoid of taste, flavour, and nourishment. These foods, my interlocutors told me, come from unknown, faraway places and are produced by alien people whom Marind do not know. And unlike forest foods, these commodities do not derive from plants and animals with whom Marind entertain relations of kinship and care. As one of my friends, Mina, put it, “These foods do not taste of the land.”

The loss of traditional forest foods and their substitution with commodified foods is widely associated by Marind with the growing prevalence of hunger within their communities.(4) Importantly, particular ways in which Marind describe their hunger speaks to more than just a physical desire for food defined in generic terms. Rather, hunger speaks to the devastating effects of environmental destruction on Marind’s affective and material relations to the forest and its diverse sentient organisms. Forgetting the taste of forest foods means forgetting the many myths, events, and encounters that historically connected the world of humans to that of kindred plants and animals. In bodily ways, hunger manifests the obliteration of the landscape in which multispecies pasts and relations are inscribed.(5) Going hungry epitomizes the severance of these more-than-human socialities and the erosion of identities once achieved and affirmed through the consumption and exchange of forest-derived foodstuffs.(6) As Pius, an elder from Bayau village told me, “When I feel hungry, I remember the forest that has gone. I remember the animals that have died. I remember the trees that have been felled. My hunger makes me sad and lonely. When my family and friend see my hunger, they, too, become sad and lonely.”

But it is not only Marind who are negatively impacted by monocrop developments. Their forest kin, too, suffer from the loss of their habitats and ecosystems in ways that threaten their collective capacity to survive and thrive. Monocrops put pressure on native flora and fauna by creating impervious barriers to species migration across land and water. Few species can thrive in oil palm ecologies that are characterized by low canopies, sparse undergrowth, unstable microclimates, high temperatures, and a toxic mélange of chemical fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Wild pigs and cassowaries that venture into the plantation to feed on oil palm fruit are hunted down by company workers for consumption or trade. Bamboo clusters and sago groves collapse as the soil is depleted of its minerals and nutrients. Many villagers in Merauke lamented the decline in collective hunting and foraging activities that had once sustained the relations of humans to non-humans within the sentient ecology of the forest. Women in particular mourned the decimation of sago groves where they had once celebrated their role as mothers in the company of a plant whose fertile flesh and fluids, much like their own, had provided Marind children with nourishing sustenance.

The deleterious impacts of deforestation and monocrop expansion on non-human organisms must be understood in the context of Marind cosmology, wherein plants and animals are considered to be sentient, agentive beings, and active participants within a more-than-human society of beings. The interactions of human and non-human beings in this cosmology are anchored in principles of exchange and care. Plants and animals grow to support their human kin by providing them with food and other resources. In return, humans must exercise respect and perform rituals as they encounter plants and animals in the forest, recall their stories, hunt, gather, and consume them.(7) These reciprocal acts of nurture enable humans and non-humans to partake in a shared community of life within the forest environment.(8) For Marind, it is these cherished interspecies relations that imbue forest foods with their nourishing, flavoursome, and meaningful qualities. It is also these same interspecies relations from which Marind derive their sense and source of identity, belonging, and

dignity as Indigenous people. As Geraldus, one of my friends described, “The forest is not just a resource for us. The forest is our family. The forest is our future. If you take away the forest, you destroy the future of Marind generations to come. But you also destroy the future of forest generations to come. Humans – nonhumans, we are all victims to the destruction.”

Just as forest plants and animals provide nourishment to their human kin, so too Marind see themselves as responsible for feeding the forest beings around them. For instance, the sweat of villagers sustains the growth of vegetation when it comes into contact with branches, leaves, and twigs. Human blood becomes fodder for hematophagous critters such as leeches and mosquitoes. Hunters intentionally scatter fruit, nuts, and sago at the site where they capture their game, in exchange for the life of the animal taken. A portion equivalent to an adult male’s intake is always left behind for animals, usually left atop a mound of soil or wrapped in banana leaves. Marind continue to nourish their other-than-human kin after their death when their bodies are buried in the forest and decompose to feed the soil, its plants, fungi, lichen, and insects, as well as the mammals, reptiles, and birds that prey upon these organisms. Far from a human prerogative alone, nourishment arises from the ability of every single being within the forest ecology to inhabit and shift across multiple and interlinked subjectivities – as feeder, fed, and food.

Marind philosophies of food point to the irreducible oneness of nature and culture, and human and non-human in Indigenous cosmologies. This oneness in turn foregrounds the unity of the social and environmental when it comes to matters of (in)justice, or what might be termed “multispecies justice.”(9) As Geraldus put it; Marind and their other-than-human kin form shared communities of fate in the midst of rampant deforestation and monocrop expansion that threaten their collective, more-than-human futures. In this regard, (in)justice also operates intergenerationally, in that ecological transformations in the present will have significant impacts on human and non-human generations to come. These various facets of the changing Marind lifeworld highlight the profound intersections of human and non-human interests in the ruin and rubble of technocapitalist expansion. They must also be considered in the broader context of the unjust processes through which this expansion is taking place, namely, without the free, prior, or informed consent of Indigenous landowners, or based on tokenistic forms of consultation often carried out under duress or intimidation.(10)

Amidst entrenched and emergent capitalist regimes, what possibilities of justice exist for Marind and their other-than-human kin? For some Marind, justice takes the form of tangible goods and services that they are owed yet denied. For instance, communities should receive from the corporations profiting from their lands adequate monetary compensation, decent salaries, education opportunities, and health facilities. For others, justice is about due process. Companies should seek the free, prior, and informed consent of landowners before designing and implementing their projects. Communities should be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the proposed development; their customary and collective land tenure systems should be acknowledged, and they should be free to choose their own representatives in land-related negotiations. Most importantly, the right of communities to say ‘no’ to oil palm should at all times be respected. Other Marind call for justice in restorative and retributive terms. Lands lost under duress or deception should be returned to their owners, along with the crops and structures established upon them. Forest-based modes of subsistence undermined by monocrop conversion should be remedied in the form of alternative livelihoods and access to local and urban markets. Fines should be imposed on corporations that fail to implement social welfare projects, undermine communities’ food and water security, and illegally burn forest to plant oil palm.

Yet different forms of justice come with different conundrums.(11) For some, material goods and restorative measures cannot adequately compensate for environments that have already become radically degraded, vegetation decimated, bodies contaminated, and species driven to the brink of

extinction. For others, rejecting oil palm projects makes little sense when few alternative opportunities for economic advancement exist in rural Merauke. The return of lands to local hands comes with the risk of conflict and competition among clans because the plants, natural markers, and structures that once demarcated the boundaries of their respective territories have disappeared. These and other dilemmas over the form and possibility of justice give rise to tensions between Marind who are attracted by the opportunities offered by the oil palm sector and those who are staunchly opposed to it. These factions are referred to locally as *pro* and *kontra*, but they are neither stable nor bounded. As people struggle to navigate their presents into more liveable futures, they shift from one standpoint to another and back. As Marind elder Pius put it, “No one knows for certain what justice might be. No one has the key. Everyone is looking for the right path.”

Marind’s complex understandings of justice invite a pluralization of the concept of justice itself as situated practice and cultural construct. In particular, these understandings invite us to take seriously the possibility of non-human beings as subjects of justice *alongside* their human counterparts – the sago palms razed to make way for oil palm, the cassowaries poached and killed for the illegal wildlife trade, the rivers and soils polluted and eroded by agro-industrial extraction, and the skies and atmospheres contaminated by toxic pesticides, smoke, and haze. What, then, might it mean in practical terms to expand justice beyond the human? What would it take for plants and animals to be considered holders of rights before the law? And how can the law itself be informed by Indigenous philosophies and protocols of interspecies care and respect?

In an age of planetary-wide environmental destruction, laws and policies anchored in assumptions of anthropocentrism and individualism will not do. Instead, we need to develop relational concepts of justice that take as their subjects the whole spectrum of lifeforms that survive and thrive through their mutual dependencies and connections. To adopt such a relational notion of justice would be to decolonize multispecies relations from the prevalent framing of the ‘non-human’ as meaningful only to the extent that is useful to and for humans. It would also be to decolonize justice from destructive assumptions of human exceptionalism that are driving the mass extraction and extinction of planetary life in an age of self-devouring capitalist growth.(12)

Marind in Merauke continue to struggle to achieve social and environmental justice in the face of large-scale agribusiness expansion. Some do this through national and international advocacy, and others through grassroots protests and demonstrations.(13) Some struggle for justice through storytelling and collective *noken* weaving. Others struggle for justice by remembering and passing on precious traditional ecological knowledge to their children and grandchildren, so they do not forget who they are and where they came from.(14) Meanwhile, some Marind have turned to song and poetry as ways of remembering and mourning the many beings obliterated by the proliferation of monocrops. One of them is Kosmas, a Marind youth and close friend. On a haze-choked day in June 2019, Kosmas came upon the remains of his clan’s sibling, the snake, who had been pulverized beyond recognition by passing oil palm trucks on a private plantation dirt road. Kneeling beside the mangled corpse of his kin, Kosmas wept, and then he began to sing. In homage to Kosmas and his other-than-human kin, I end this narrative with Kosmas’ song – a song that is as much about injustice, grief, and anger, as it is about interspecies love, care, and nurture (translated from Marind):

Sami, Sami, you slip, you slide

Sister of the forest, sister of the grove

Sami, Sami, you weave, you glide

Sister of the river, sister of the swamp
Sami, Sami, you are born of clay and tide
Your skin is sleek and shiny, patterned by the land
Silent and shy, you slither across the land
Moving soil and leaf, patterning the land

Here you lie, Sami, snake sister
Your body crushed, your wetness gone
I cannot bear to look at you
I cannot bear to leave
The trucks and cars, they took away your life
Without caring, without seeing, without knowing
They left you here to die
Robbed you of your wetness, robbed you of your pride

Here you lie, Sami, sister snake
Your blood so dark, your eyes so pale
Sami, Sami, I was not here to save you
I could not spare you death
Sami, Sami,
How long have you been dying here alone?
How many trucks upon your skin have gone?

But Sami, Sami,
I will not turn away
I will not leave you
In leaves and fronds, I'll wrap you
With my arms and my legs, I'll take you

To a quiet, green place, I'll carry you
To that place where your fathers and forefathers were born
And there, you will find rest
In the cool shade of the forest, you can sleep
There, no pain or dust will haunt you
The rain and soil will hold you
This nightmare will release you

Sister of the forest, sister of the grove
Sami, Sami, born of clay and tide
You and I are kin and skin since days long gone
Today, I beseech you, accept from me this song
Through it you will live on

***N.B.** Pseudonyms have been used for all places and persons, except for major cities, regions, and provinces.*

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Links to relevant organizations:

Yayasan PUSAKA: <https://pusaka.or.id/en/pusaka-or-id-english/>

WALHI Papua (Indonesia): <https://walhipapua.org/>

Secretariat of Justice and Peace of the Archdiocese of Merauke (SKP KAME), Jl. Kimaam No. 2
Merauke Merauke, Papua

Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara: <https://www.aman.or.id/>

Further related writing by Sophie Chao:

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