

# Kenduri Ladang in Aceh Singkil: Environmental Change and Economic Transformation

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## ABSTRACT

Kenduri *Ladang* is a tradition carried out by the Singkil community to express gratitude for the rice harvest and ward off bad luck, disasters, and pests. The growth of rice plants in Aceh Singkil is not only a source of income for the community but also a ritual that has become a tradition. The *Kenduri Ladang celebration* is held twice a year, bringing *opom cakes* which are then continued with prayers together, and the rest of the *opom cakes* are spread around the rice fields. However, as time goes by, the Singkil community, which initially planted rice, has now switched to planting oil palms, and indirectly eliminated *Kenduri Ladang*. This study explains why the Singkil community switched from rice to oil palms, and what impact it has on the disappearance of *Kenduri Ladang*. This study uses an ethnographic approach, directly observing the field situation in Aceh Singkil which is full of oil palm plants, conducting interviews with community leaders and local residents. This study shows that economic and environmental factors influence people to move from rice to oil palm, the texture of the Aceh Singkil soil which can no longer be planted with rice, and frequent crop failures, make people finally switch to oil palm, this is done after seeing oil palm plants growing well managed by the company. In turn, *Kenduri Ladang also disappears* because there are no more rice plants.

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## 1. Introduction

Rice has historically been dominant crop in Aceh, shaping the livelihoods of many residents as farmers. The presence of rice is not only responded to economically to meet income, but as a culture. When planting rice, communities in Aceh perform a ritual known as *Khanduri Blang*. The implementation of this ritual is believed to expel spirits that disturb the rice fields, the remaining food is scattered in the rice fields to feed the spirits (Arifin & Manan, 2018). In Aceh Singkil Regency, the rice ritual is called *Kenduri Ladang*. The *kenduri* event itself has existed since the time of the Aceh kingdom. *Kenduri Ladang* is held to give thanks for the rice that grows, this event is carried out by bringing *opom cakes* to the rice fields, then praying together, and the rest of the *opom cakes* are scattered in the rice fields, this is believed to ward off bad luck, ward off disaster, and pests.

Along with the development of the times, rice is no longer a commodity in Aceh Singkil, so Kenduri Ladang is no longer held. There are several factors why rice is no longer a commodity in Aceh Singkil, the land structure of Aceh Singkil when experiencing an earthquake changed suddenly, there was land subsidence, this then made the Aceh Singkil area vulnerable to flooding, this is what makes rice plants difficult to plant and even tends to fail to harvest.

In that situation, the Singkel community tried to switch to other crops. Rubber plants and cocoa plants were two crops that the community tried to plant, but both crops failed to develop. The rapid growth of oil palm plants by companies in Aceh Singkil, eventually led the community to also plant oil palm. Slowly, the land that was previously planted with rice, changed to oil palm plants.

Oil palm plants have become a community commodity in various regions of Indonesia, especially to provide equality and welfare for small farmers. Oil palm plants are easily developed because of the presence of small-scale investors. Oil palm strategically plays a role in the Indonesian economy. Oil palm plantation companies have become the top commodity in Indonesia. Oil palm has become a profitable export commodity, in 2018 alone reaching 393.4 trillion. Palm oil companies are mostly spread in Sumatra and Kalimantan. In developing oil palm plantations, there are three schemes, Plantation Companies, Large Plantations, and People's Plantations (Indrizal et al., 2024). However, in practice in the field, the presence of oil palm plantations has brought conflict between companies and communities, especially regarding land grabbing (Elmhirst et al. 2017). The existence of oil palm is inseparable from the New Order government project in the 1980s, which then increased in the early 2000s which was acquired by the private sector, permits that were previously managed by the center are now also managed by the regional and district governments. Regulating the benefits for the surrounding community of 20% which is called plasma (Elmhirst et al., 2017). There are 34 palm oil holding companies spread across Indonesia, but conflicts between communities and companies often occur, there were 212 conflicts recorded in 2022 and 241 conflicts throughout 2023, which each year shows an increase in conflict. There are 638,188 hectares of land and 135,608 heads of families in 346 villages/cities who have experienced conflict (Indrizal et al., 2024).

The existence of palm oil is what is felt by the people of Aceh Singkil, which is not only a business but also a part of everyday life. The existence of palm oil companies is utilized by local residents to receive benefits, as labor or local economic empowerment. However, the gap between the community and the plantation company is often unavoidable, the community's efforts to provide resistance to the company are to steal the results of palm oil fruit (Nazaruddin et al., 2023). The opportunity to work as oil palm laborers and oil palm plantation owners, made the Aceh Singkli community move from farming communities to oil palm plantations, one of the motives is that the economic benefits obtained are greater than agriculture.

Previous research on kenduri has analyzed more the meaning of the rituals that have been carried out, explaining the relationship between religion and culture in the *Khanduri Blang tradition* (Mughni, 2018). *Khanduri Blang* has become part of Islamic customs, because in its rituals there are Islamic elements in the form of prayers (Arifin & Manan, 2018). Existing studies have not explained the impact of modernity on *Khanduri Blang* or Kenduri Ladang, this study shows that the disappearance of the Kenduri Ladang ritual is due to the shift of society from rice plants to oil palm plants.

The importance of this study shows that the loss of a ritual, due to economic and environmental problems, rice plants that are no longer suitable in Aceh Singkil make people switch to palm oil commodities which ultimately causes Kenduri Ladang to no longer be held. Palm oil is different from rice, which grows permanently for up to 25 years, while rice can be planted twice a year, this is what causes there to be no kenduri event when palm oil grows, and the results of palm oil commodities are not for direct consumption as rice, palm oil is sold to companies.

Research on palm oil mostly looks at its impact on the environment and surrounding communities, as explained by Tani Muray Le and Bodino in *Living with Giants*. Environmental

losses are felt by the community when palm oil has an impact on the plans that befall residents, in addition, the control of palm oil by companies leaves people with no choice and often become palm oil laborers with low wages (Li & Semedi, 2022). Likewise, the consequences of the growth of oil palm between the Acehnese people and companies are often unavoidable, especially regarding the Right to Cultivate (HGU), various disputes often occur such as in the Aceh Tamiang, Nagan Raya, and Takengon regions. Even the issue of the conflict between the Aceh Tamiang community and PT. Rapala has become a daily conversation. The community is trying to realize income equality, poverty alleviation, and job creation, (Subhani et al., 2022). In Aceh Singkil, the community is in conflict with PT. Nafasindo over palm oil (Sahdin, 2020). This study shows that palm oil not only has an impact on the environment, but also on culture. In this case, palm oil has influenced the Singkel community to abandon rice and plant palm oil so that there are no more *field feasts*.

## 2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the disappearance of *Kenduri Ladang* in Aceh Singkil. The descriptive approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the socio-cultural and environmental factors underlying the decline of this tradition. Specifically, this study seeks to explain why *Kenduri Ladang* is no longer practiced by the local community and how changes in agricultural patterns have contributed to its disappearance. The study describes the traditional procession of *Kenduri Ladang* in Aceh Singkil as a means of contextualizing its cultural significance and examining the reasons for its decline. Particular attention is given to the shift in local livelihoods, especially the transition from rice cultivation to oil palm plantations, and how this transformation has reshaped economic practices, land use, and communal rituals.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with community leaders and two members of the Singkil community who possess knowledge of local traditions and agricultural changes. In addition, field observations were conducted in areas of Aceh Singkil that are now predominantly planted with oil palm in order to examine how the transition from rice fields to oil palm plantations has affected social relations, ritual practices, and everyday life.

Furthermore, this study incorporates a review of relevant literature to support the analysis and to situate the empirical findings within broader discussions on environmental change, cultural transformation, and rural economies. The combination of interviews, observations, and literature review enables a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the disappearance of *Kenduri Ladang* in Aceh Singkil.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Identity of the Singkel Community

Aceh Singkil is one of the districts of Aceh Province that since 1999 has expanded itself which was initially part of South Aceh. In 2007, Subulussalam which is part of Aceh Singkil expanded itself. The area of Aceh Singkil is 1,858 km<sup>2</sup> of 11 sub-districts, two sub-districts are on the island, namely Pulau Banyak Sub-district and West Pulau Banyak Sub-district, while nine sub-districts are on land, namely Danau Paris, Gunung Meriah, Kota Baharu, Kuala Baru, Simpang Kanan, Singkil, North Singkil, Singkohor, Suro Makmur. The people of Aceh Singkil consist of various tribes, namely the Singkel, Malay-Minang, Acehnese, and Javanese tribes. Geographically, the Singkel area is included in the administration of the province of Aceh, but in language it is closer to the Pakpak tribe in the North Sumatra region which borders Aceh. The Singkel people are called Pakpak Boang, namely the Pakpak tribe who converted to Islam and were circumcised. Regionally, the population of Singkel is divided into two, there are those who live on the coast and there are those who live in the center, the people on the coast use the Malay-Minang language ( *baapo* )

while those in the upstream region use the language ( *kade-kade* or *kalak kampung* ) (Al-Fairusy & Abdullah, 2020), but there are also those who argue that the Singkel community consists of various identities which are described as "*gado-gado*", the various tribes in Singkel came for the sake of economic fortunes that began in the 7th century (Pohan, 2021). The Singkel tribe, which was associated as a Pakpak sub-tribe, was later rejected by Singkel figures, because they argued that the Singkel were not part of the Pakpak tribe but stood alone as the Singkel tribe (Al-Fairusy & Abdullah, 2020).

According to local government data, the population of Singkel is 87.41 Muslims, which makes the Singkel area dominated by Muslims. The influence of Islam in Singkel has existed since the kingdom era, this was marked by the emergence of a famous Acehnese ulama named Abdur Rauf As-Singkili, which indicates his origin from Singkil. Then when Singkel officially became a region of Aceh during Indonesian independence, the influence of reformist Islam entered through Tgk. Daud Bereuh, however, did not last long, after that the influence of traditionalist Islam from Sheikh Abuya Muda Waly, which was marked by three of his students in Singkel, namely Abuya Zamzami, Abuya Batu Korong, and Abuya Tanah Merah, had embedded traditionalist Islam in the people of Singkel, which was marked by the establishment of three Islamic boarding schools, respectively led by Abuya Zamzami, Abuya Batu Korong, and Abuya Tanah Merah (Dahri et al., 2023) . It is this traditionalist Islamic influence that maintains the kenduri ritual, namely a banquet to commemorate an event, ask for blessings, and so on. There are various kinds of kenduri in Singkel, Kenduri Death, Kenduri Mulud, Kenduri Isra' Mi'raj, Kenduri Opom, Kenduri Laut, and Kenduri Ladang.

At the economic level, the Aceh Singkil region is classified as a disadvantaged and poorest region in the province of Aceh, as per the criteria of Presidential Regulation Number 131 of 2015, that disadvantaged regions are districts whose communities are less developed compared to other regions on a national scale. The criteria are accessibility and characteristics of the region, facilities and infrastructure, human resources, community economy, and regional financial capabilities. Although disadvantaged, in Aceh Singkil there have been dozens of palm oil companies that manage thousands of hectares of land. However, their existence does not support the community's economy and tends to damage peat swamp forests. As a result, the community is often affected by flooding. Before the large-scale expansion of palm oil by the company, flooding only occurred once every two years, but after many palm oil plantations were planted, flooding occurred once every five years. Every time the community disputes with the company, the community often loses, because the government sides with the company (Hanafiah, 2016) .

Aceh Singkil used to be a dense forest, but in 1969-1971, there was massive deforestation to exploit wood, until a Joint Decree (SKB) was issued by 3 ministers to stop wood exploitation. The absence of this forest was utilized to plant oil palm, initially only in the former Forest Concession Rights (HPH) area, then spreading to the mountain slopes and rice fields. Until it can be seen along the road from Aceh Singkil to Subulussalam City filled with oil palm plants (Hanafiah, 2016). The existence of oil palm has existed since 1932-1933, when the Dutch colonial determined that Gunung Meriah was suitable as land planted with oil palm, until the establishment of the Oil Palm Plantation Company PT. Socfindo. Until now, 36.65% of the Aceh Singkil area has been planted with oil palm (Hanafiah, 2016).

### 3.2. Kenduri Ladang

Kenduri *Ladang* is a ritual performed by the Singkel people twice a year when they plant rice and it grows well. *Opom* cake or Serabi cake is used in the Kenduri *Ladang* ritual. In the Kenduri *Ladang* procession , the *opom* cake is brought to the rice field location, then a prayer is read to

Allah, sprinkled with plain flour, and then the *opom cake is eaten* at the same time (Khairuddin 2019). According to Khairudin, the choice of *opom cake* as a food during kenduri, comes from the story of Abdullah Rajab, a poor Sufi, when he died Abdullah Rajab's family was unable to provide food for Kenduri, so the surrounding community took the initiative to make *opom cake* because it did not require many ingredients. Until finally, *opom cake* has survived until now as a ritual food during kenduri (Khairuddin, 2019).

*Opom* itself has become the name of the month in the calculations of the Singkel people, which is equated with the month of Rajab. As for the month in the Singkel community's name; Muharram, Safar, Mulud One, Mulud Two, Mulud Three, Mulud Four, Opom, Nasi, Fasting, Khekaya, Muhafidz, and Hajj (Khairuddin 2019). *Opom* cake is not only held at Kenduri Ladang, but also Kenduri *Opom* which is held in the month of *Opom* or the month of Rajab, especially in commemorating Isra' Mi'raj. *Opom cake* is served in the Musola, then continued with the reading of poetry and prose about the history of Isra Mi'raj. Then the *Opom cake* is enjoyed together (Khairuddin, 2019).

In the past, the Kenduri *Ladang ritual* was carried out by adjusting the full rice fruit, and at that time the kenduri was carried out with the hope of an abundant harvest, so that the pedi was full, and not disturbed by pests, after the prayer event was finished eating continued with eating together. Then eat the rest of the Kenduri, namely *opom cake*, sprinkled into the rice field with the hope that the rice grows on the texture like *opom cake*. The Kenduri *Ladang event* is usually carried out in the morning until noon, or after Dzuhur approaching Asr.

Kenduri *Ladang* is not unique to the Singkel community, in several areas of Aceh also held Kenduri *Ladang*, especially for people who use agriculture as a living income. However, in Aceh Singkil, in recent years, Kenduri *Ladang* is no longer held. This is because people no longer depend on agriculture. This is because the land in Aceh Singkil decreased during the earthquake and then the floods that hit every year, making it impossible to plant rice. In the end, many of the Singkel people switched to planting palm oil plantations or becoming workers in palm oil companies.

Palm oil plantations have become a commodity of income, where many people depend on palm oil companies. It was recorded in 2020 that there were 32,452 thousand hectares of palm oil plantations listed in the Central Statistics Agency of Aceh Province. There are at least 8 private palm oil companies in Aceh Singkil Regency consisting of PT. Delima Makmur (DM), PT. Perundingan Putra Persada (RPP), and PT. Socfindo (SCF), PT. Perkebunan Lembah Bhakti I (PLB I), PT. Perkebunan Lembah Bhakti II (PLB II), PT. Singkil Sejahtera Sejahtera (SSM), PT. Nafasindo (NFS), and PT. Ensem Lestari (ESM). This makes Aceh Singkil the second largest palm oil plantation in Aceh (Nurhayati, 2024).

Palm oil companies have existed since the Dutch colonial period colonized Indonesia, but they were not yet massive. The Singkel community still depended on agricultural products and camphor (bark lime) (Pohan, 2021). Entering the early 2000s, deforestation occurred on a large scale, forests in Aceh Singkil were cut down and then sold to various regions. This empty land that no longer has forests is then planted with palm oil plantations.

The reason people do not plant rice is because pests in oil palm plantations can damage rice. In addition, income from oil palm plantations is more profitable than rice. This then affects the Kenduri *Ladang* which is usually held every two years to give thanks for an abundant harvest, no longer exists. Oil palm plantations themselves are plants that can last for 25 years.

The impact of the loss of *kenduri ladang* in Singkel is to weaken the solidarity that had previously been built, when farmers were not just a job but part of the culture of the *Singkel community*. Palm oil plantations make people work individually, because in plantations, work has become commercial and structured. The existence of palm oil has changed *the habitus* of the Singkel community. How large a palm oil plantation someone owns determines their status, and it is not uncommon for someone to apply for a job, they will be asked how many hectares of palm oil they own.

### 3.3. The Disappearance of the *Kenduri Ladang* in Aceh Singkil

The extinction of the *Kenduri Ladang* ritual proves Max Weber's thesis, that modernity has eliminated sacred elements, rational explanations have replaced religious narratives. That planting rice can no longer be done continuously, because it does not provide significant income, in addition to the land construction that does not allow for planting rice, making people switch professions by planting oil palm and working as laborers. The transition from rice fields to oil palm, eliminates the *kenduri ladang*, this can be seen from the absence of *kenduri* when planting oil palm. The Singkel community focuses on individual autonomy, to obtain significant economic income by planting oil palm.

The disappearance of *kenduri ladang* can be understood as the impact of the shift in land use from traditional agriculture to oil palm plantations. *Kenduri ladang*, which is a tradition of thanksgiving and prayer for the rice harvest, has been an important part of the social and cultural life of agrarian communities. However, with the shift in agricultural land to oil palm plantations, this practice is increasingly marginalized.

The need for agricultural resources that are not easily attacked by pests, long-term and have high economic value makes people change agricultural land into oil palm plantations. More deeply, the change in livelihoods that occurs due to the shift to oil palm affects the social and cultural patterns of society. When people switch from rice farming to oil palm planting, they are no longer bound by the seasonal agricultural cycle that requires rituals and customs such as *kenduri padi*. Oil palm, which is a monoculture crop and oriented towards long-term profits, does not involve the same traditions or cultural values as rice farming.

In addition, oil palm changes people's relationships with nature and with each other. In agricultural communities, successful rice harvests are often celebrated in the form of *kenduri padi*, which is not only a thanksgiving event, but also an event to strengthen social relations between community members. However, with the presence of oil palm which prioritizes economic profit, these rituals are slowly disappearing because they are no longer relevant to a more capitalistic lifestyle based on mass production.

The Aceh Singkil community was forced to choose to plant oil palm because of economic motives, designed by companies and the government including plantation laws that guarantee a fair distribution for small farmers and plantation companies. After a prolonged conflict between Aceh and the Central Government marked by the Helsinki agreement, the empowerment of oil palm plantations began to be intensified, but experienced obstacles in the field with regulations that oppress small farmers who have no choice about the distribution of land ownership (Lund, 2017). Acehese politicians are mostly tempted to take advantage of the oil palm boom that is being targeted globally, plus the wet and low cloudy soil conditions and the humid, hot and rainy climate are suitable for oil palm plants. Regulations on land rights for small farmers are made so complicated that people are often criminalized by the government and businessmen working together, and deploying police and soldiers to secure company plantations. According to Christian

Lund, the existence of oil palm is in an extreme case that oppresses small farmers and silences them through political violence. Palm oil plantations are a priority for the Aceh government, especially the elite from the Aceh Party. The opening of oil palm plantations is no longer considered whether it is legal or illegal (Lund, 2017).

In short, the disappearance of the *kenduri sawah* tradition occurred along with the shift in land use from rice farming which is closely related to local traditions and culture to oil palm plantations which are more focused on economic profit. This shows how economic development can change social structures, cultures, and even traditional rituals that have existed for centuries.

Rice has long been a part of Indonesian society, in various regions, rice has become a staple crop, both in Java, Kalimantan, Sumatra, and Sulawesi. And each region has its own cultural traditions regarding rice. In Java there is the *Wiwitan Tradition* (Salsabila, 2022) rice was originally one of the commodities planted in Aceh Singkil, but environmental changes have marginalized rice. There are many factors that cause environmental changes, the first is the earthquake in 2005 which caused the land in Aceh Singkil to sink, so that several villages could no longer be inhabited such as Ambon Bay. On the other hand, massive deforestation in the early 2000s has damaged the environment, making the Aceh Singkil area prone to flooding. The forests that have been cut down are replaced with oil palms that do not absorb much water and tend to damage the diversity of animals and plants. This makes Aceh Singkil a regular flood victim every year, plus the land is increasingly sinking.

This situation forced the Singkel community to not be able to plant rice, because the flood that submerged it always caused crop failure. This incident also caused the income of the Singkel community to decrease because there was no more income from rice. The empty land was then converted to oil palm, because it was considered more resistant to flooding, and provided sufficient economic income. The loss of rice as a crop in the Singkel community, automatically eliminated the *Ladang kenduri*. However, rice plants did not completely disappear, according to data from the Aceh Singkil government, rice fields still exist, but are shrinking every year, because they are replaced by oil palm. There are only two sub-districts left that continue to plant rice, namely Danau Paris sub-district and Singkil sub-district, and Pulau Banyak Barat sub-district which is located in the archipelago.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explains that the loss of a culture is caused by changes in the environment and economy. In this case, *Kenduri Ladang* is no longer carried out because of the shift from the community to planting oil palm instead of rice, this is done because rice is no longer suitable for planting, due to frequent crop failures, due to changes in the soil due to earthquakes. Then on the other hand, the community sees the opportunity for oil palm in economic income as more possible. Until there was a shift from rice to oil palm. This explains that environmental changes affect the change or loss of culture, as well as the economic conditions of the community. The case of the loss of *Kenduri Ladang* in Aceh Singkil explains that the loss of a tradition can be influenced by the environment and economy

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