

Dragon (not) for Sale

Translations of Letters from Komodo People

Translated by Cypri Jehan Paju Dale



Center for Southeast
Asian Studies
**University of Wisconsin-
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AUTHOR'S/TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Cypri Jehan Paju Dale

In August 2019, together with colleagues from Sunspirit for Justice and Peace, a local NGO based in Flores, Eastern Indonesia, I was invited to join members of the groom's family side (Ana Rona) for a two-day wedding ceremony in Papagarang, an island in Komodo National Park. The groom was from Komodo, the island from which the name of the ancient living lizard, *Varanus komodoensis*, is derived. While we did not have a kinship tie to the groom to qualify us as members of Ana Rona in the marriage exchange of the Manggaraian peoples (Erb 1999, Allerton 2013), we considered the invitation as a sign that the Komodo community have accepted us as their "relatives." Being adopted as any sort of family member by the host community has long been celebrated as a sign of good practice in anthropology as well as advocacy work. Yet, it became apparent later that the community also had their own agenda for involving us in this ceremony. The wedding took place during a time of deep anxiety for both communities, as a few weeks earlier the governor of East Nusa Tenggara province (through which the Park is administered) had announced the government's plan to relocate the communities to other islands as part of larger conservation and new tourism policies. It turned out that the moment of the wedding—where a large number of community members from different islands inside and outside the park had gathered, and during which surveillance from the park authority could be slightly avoided—was used for consolidation.

Hence, during the wedding ceremony which combined *adat* (customary) and Islamic rites, we found ourselves listening to their concerns and discussing the possible collective

response to the eviction. For example, during the peak wedding party on the second night, we found ourselves being secretly escorted to a house at the edge of the village for a key leaders' assembly. In the meeting, we were asked to help the community develop strategies, including for an upcoming visit from a team from the central government to "socialize" the government's new plans for the park. As the only one who brought a laptop to the wedding ceremony, I was asked to draft a statement to be released the next day, based on the discussion that night. The assembly also asked us not to return to the town of Labuan Bajo (where we are based) after the ceremony; rather to continue our trip the next day to Komodo Island and to stay for several more days, "to be together with us in facing the delegate from the central government." We returned to the party shortly after the meeting, and Haji Akbar, one of the leaders, made a speech on behalf of the groom's side. Instead of making a regular wedding speech, he used the moment to call for support from other villages to their cause. The representative of the bride's side, in his speech, assented and expressed their support. Shortly after midnight, together with the groom's family, we took a two-hour boat trip to Komodo island.

The next morning, more than a thousand villagers, including children, gathered at the port of Komodo village to (un)welcome the delegation of around 40 officers from central and provincial government. Barred from entering the village, the delegation was forced to listen to the statement prepared the night before. "We, the people of Komodo, hereby reject the government's plan to relocate us out of our ancestral lands... and demand the government to recognize our agrarian rights... and our role in conservation and tourism" (Translation 1).

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Like other countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has been intensifying tourism development in recent years. The

government has designated Komodo National Park and nine other nature and cultural reserves across the archipelago as “super priority ecotourism destinations.” They are called “10 New Balis” as a new epicentrum for the tourism economy. Under this new scheme, several development plans inside Komodo National Park were instigated. First, the island of Komodo, one of the three big islands inside the park, was designated specifically as a premium or exclusive tourism zone with an entrance fee of US \$1,000 for four people). Secondly, the government granted concessions to a number of private companies and state enterprises. Those concessions cover an area up to 1,159.29 hectares inside the park under the so-called “eco-tourism business permit” (*izin perusahaan usaha pariwisata alam*). The shareholders of the companies are linked to political parties and business groups in the mining and palm oil business close to the president. Outside the park, in the main town of Labuan Bajo, 400 hectares of the natural protected forest of Bowosie have been converted to an exclusive tourism complex through Presidential Decree No 32/1018. The Wae Sano community, 36 kilometers east from the town, also resisted a geothermal project. Financed by the World Bank and New Zealand Government under the framework of transition to green energy, the project aimed to provide electricity for the tourism industry. Like in Komodo village, this plan stirred concerns of local communities and activist groups.

Deemed as wild settlers (*Penduduk liar*) and a threat to conservation, the people of Komodo—2000 people in total, who are only allowed to live in an enclave of 17 hectares—claim their indigenous identity against the government. Long before the designation of the area as a protected territory by the Dutch colonial administration in 1915 and as national park by the Indonesian government, local communities have been living side by side with the ancient Komodo Dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*) in what anthropologists call an interspecies companionship (Tsing 2012; Harraway 2003;

Verheijen 1982; Needham 1986; Forth 1988). Known in vernacular as *Sebae*, meaning “the other half,” the dragon is depicted in the indigenous fable as the twin [brothers/sisters] of the Komodo people. This belief system arguably ensures robust practices of co-existence and conviviality in the region and thus may have contributed to the survival of the dragons for millennia (Dale and Afioma 2020).

The conversion of the Bowosie forest in Labuan Bajo is also contested as it takes the forest from local communities to be offered to investors and other private entities. In Wae Sano, the geothermal project is resisted not because the community has refused the concept of alternative energy, but because the decision to place the drilling well pad too close to their settlement, a decision that puts the community and the environment at risk of pollution and technological failures. Although its proponents claim that it will protect nature and bring prosperity to local populations, the conservation and ecotourism projects paradoxically put local multi-species communities at risk, thus betraying the notion of sustainable development.

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In response to the new waves of dispossession and environmental injustice in the name of conservation, ecotourism, and green energy transition, local communities in eastern Indonesia have built strategic alliances with NGOs, scholars, artists, filmmakers, and journalists, among others. The role of engaged scholars is particularly beneficial due to the need to address the epistemic foundation of the dispossession and state violence and to offer alternative paradigms and schemes of actions. The role of engaged scholars also enables comparative analysis (of this case with similar cases in other places) and mobilization of new frameworks that aid in the movement developing better articulations of their goals and movement. As an anthropologist working (partly) in my home island as my research

site (my “anthropological village”), I find myself constantly being invited into a web of exchange and kinship relationships - kinship relation that extends not only to humans but also non-human others. In this web of exchange and kinship relation, one is expected to take a role, not only to be an activist, but also to be a scholar who does grounded research and is engaged in an epistemic confrontation of contemporary notions of social justice and development. In such a situation, engagement is not only a methodological strategy (Kirsch 2018) or political commitment. Rather, it is a form of responsibility in an alliance of exchange relationship.

Thanks to this robust alliance, local communities in Flores are capable of confronting the top down conservation and development policies from national governments and transnational agencies, and continue to work for better alternatives. Three translations included in this collection are a result of this alliance’s work. Translation 1 is a statement by Komodo People delivered to the Indonesian government during a tense confrontation when the government conveyed their plan to relocate the communities for conservation and ecotourism projects. In this statement they propose alternative schemes that ensure the fulfillment of their rights and the protection of the Komodo dragon’s habitat. Translation 2 is a letter from Komodo communities and civil society groups to UNESCO, calling the United Nations agency—who designated the area as World Heritage Site in 1991— to take appropriate actions in preventing the calamities caused by the Indonesian government’s policy and over tourism in Komodo National Park. “If UNESCO fails to take such actions, we—the local communities and civil society groups in Flores— will take over the protection of the park and carry out conservation and development efforts in our own ways”, says the statement. Translation 3 is a letter by Wae Sano Community to the World Bank who financed the geothermal project in their land, informing that local communities do not give consent to the project, and the Bank

need to respect its own principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as requirement for any projects it supports.

The other and most recent initiative out of this alliance is also the production of the serial documentary film, *Dragon for Sale* (2023). A result of six years of collaborative work of research, documentation, and community mobilization involving community members, activists, scholars, journalists and film-makers, this film series documents not only the tragic events of dispossession and violence in the name of conservation and tourism, but the ways communities consolidate their efforts to ensure the survival, wellbeing, and dignity of both human and non-human kin. The fourth serial titled "The Twins" highlights the indigenous practice of human-animal coexistence that have been exercised for centuries in Komodo island as a foundation of other ways of doing conservation and tourism development that ensure social and environmental justice.

This alliance – as many others across the globe– has proven to be productive and continues to expand. The presentation of this film through community screenings across the world, including among communities of scholars, is an invitation to expand these alliances. You are welcome to become the kin and good friends of the Komodo Dragon. It is not for sale.

Translation 1

STATEMENT BY KOMODO PEOPLE TO THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT OF INDONESIA AND PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT OF EAST NUSA TENGGARA, AUGUST 14, 2019

We, the people of Komodo, as citizens and the owners of sovereignty over the land and sea territory of Komodo Island, hereby reject the government's plan to relocate us out of our ancestral lands.

We demand the following points:

1. We demand the fulfillment of our agrarian rights; namely the recognition of our legal rights and land certificates of our land and houses on Komodo Island.
2. We demand recognition from the government of the Republic of Indonesia—both central and local governments—for the status of the Komodo territory as “Man and Biosphere Reserve” and “Cultural and Natural Reserve” as has been proclaimed and recognized by UNESCO.
3. We demand that the Ministry of Environment and Forestry returns parts of the land and sea areas for settlements and a decent living space for the Komodo people; as we only have 17 hectares for 2,000 members of our communities.
4. We urge the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and the Ministry of Tourism to acknowledge and facilitate our active role in conservation and tourism efforts; hence:
 - a. We demand recognition and accommodation of *adat* (customary) institutions in Komodo as an advisory board or steering committee in the management structure of Komodo National Park.
 - b. We demand the participation of Indigenous youth as conservation guards, not just partners for the Forestry

Police or Naturalist Guides.

c. We demand exclusive rights over community-based economic enterprises including the marketing of souvenirs and culinary delights at strategic points, including in Loh Liang.

d. We demand recognition and protection of collective patent rights for creative products that bear the Komodo label in the form of their name, model, and language.

5. We reject the construction of all forms of structures, for hotels, resorts, restaurants, rest areas and other tourist business facilities within Komodo National Park. We ask the government not to grant any permits to companies that wish to construct physical buildings within Komodo National Park because it threatens the natural living space of the Komodo Dragons and their habitat.
6. We demand the Governor of East Nusa Tenggara, Viktor Bungtilu Laiskodat, to withdraw and apologize for his statement that called us "wild squatters" and wanted to evict us from our homeland. We also demand that the Ministry of Environment and Forestry apologize for the delay in responding to Governor Laiskodat's statements.

Komodo, 14 August 2019
KOMODO PEOPLE

Translation 2
LETTER TO UNESCO,
BY COMMUNITY LEADERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP

Labuan Bajo, Flores, 10 August 2020

To
Her Excellency Audrey Azoulay
Director General of UNESCO

Subject:
Current Crisis in the Komodo National Park, Indonesia

Dear Madam,
We hope that this letter finds you well. We, the representatives of civil society groups in the Islands of Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province, would like to bring to your attention and kindly ask you to take urgent action concerning the current situation in the Komodo National Park, Indonesia. As the home for the Komodo Dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*), the Park is not only a valuable asset for local and global communities, but also a heritage with vital ecological and scientific values. Its status as a "World Heritage Site" and a "Man and Biosphere Reserve" granted by UNESCO in 1991 has for years helped constructive conservation efforts of a multi-species ecology in the region involving multiple stakeholders, including the local communities. At the same time, the status has allowed the sustainable benefits of the park to be shared for economic, scientific, and cultural values by the Komodo communities and beyond.

The recent development projects by the Indonesian government and its private counterparts, however, are undermining

such a valuable and strategic status of the park and will put the biosphere and local communities of the Komodo islands in danger. We would like to call your attention specifically to the following issues:

1. As part of the larger plan to boost the tourism industry, the Indonesian government has designated the Komodo National Park and its surrounding area as “a National Strategic Tourism Zone” (Kawasan Strategis Pariwisata Nasional) and made it “an exclusive or super-premium destination.”
2. Under that scheme, the government has been developing tourism-related infrastructure, establishing new institutions, enacting new regulations, and facilitating private and state investments in the region. Inside the Komodo National Park, the government has granted permits for at least three private corporations to build exclusive resorts in the park with a total area of concession of 470.7 hectares. The Komodo Island and its surrounding marine territory will also be enclosed for an exclusive safari type of destination.
3. The government has planned a construction of new compounds in Rinca and Padar Islands that will definitely affect the natural habitat of the Komodo and other species.
4. In Golo Mori, on the eastern border of the park, the government plans to develop in a Special Economic Zone (KEK), a new town of 300 hectares that will host the G-20 Summit and Asian Summit in 2023. As part of this project two small islets of the park—Pulau Muang and Bero—will be integrated, thus losing its status as part of the park.
5. All these projects are claimed to create jobs and bring local communities out of poverty. But a closer look uncovers a different reality.
6. In 2019, the central government announced that the local communities of Komodo Island (2,000 persons, 500 households) — who have been settled on the island for generations prior to the establishment of the park—

will be relocated to other islands and will not be allowed to continue their tourism-related economic activities on the island. This policy has created local discontent and resentment that will grow into conflict between conservation stakeholders. In Labuan Bajo, Flores, civil society groups have protested the investment inside the National Park. While putting the Komodo and its habitat in danger, we argue that this new wave of private investment is a form of business monopoly by corporations with connection to rent-seeking government officials. There is also a growing concern of land accumulation by the rich, together with concerns over the environmental hazards that will be created by a growing number of landless population, and declining land for agriculture and fishery in the islands.

Respecting the role of UNESCO in granting the region as a "World Heritage Site" and a "Man and Biosphere Reserve" and considering the United Nations' global missions for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), we, the civil society representatives of the Islands of Flores would like to ask UNESCO for the following actions:

1. To conduct a monitoring field visit to the Komodo National Park and the Islands of Flores to investigate the current situation of the Komodo in the Komodo National Parks and to evaluate the development policies by the Indonesian government in the park. During this field visit, we urge the UNESCO delegation to meet all stakeholders, including local communities and civil society groups;
2. To organize a constructive dialogue with the Indonesian government and to remind them of the status of the park and to prevent any development policies that will harm the ecosystem of the Komodo and local communities;
3. If UNESCO fails to take such actions, or even collaborates with the Indonesian government to continue the current policies, we urge UNESCO to renounce or cancel

the designation of the Komodo National Park as a “World Heritage Site” and a “Man and Biosphere Reserve”. Consequently, we—the local communities and civil society groups in Flores— will take over the protection of the park and carry out conservation and development efforts in our own ways. This, we believe, will ensure the safety and sustainability of the Komodo Dragon and its ecosystem as well as the communities that have sustained and live with the dragon for millennia.

We appreciate the immediate response by UNESCO and would be glad to have further communication with you. We will be happy to provide any supporting data when needed.

Thank you for your kind attention,

Sincerely,
Representatives of Community and Civil Society Group
Greg Afioma, Akbar Al Ayubi, Aloysius Karya

Translation 3
LETTER TO WORLD BANK (AND NEW ZEALAND AID),
BY WAE SANO COMMUNITY CONCERNING GEOTHER-
MAL PROJECT

Wae Sano, Flores, 17 February 2020

To: World Bank Country Director for Indonesia
Cc: President of World Bank Group in Washington DC

Subject: Report of the Indigenous People of Wae Sano
Regarding the Geothermal Project Funded by the World
Bank and New Zealand AID

Dear Sir/Madam,

We, the Indigenous People of Wae Sano, West Manggarai, Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province, who are directly affected by the plan for Geothermal exploration and exploitation carried out by PT Sarana Multi Infrastruktur (SMI Corporation, a state-owned enterprise under the Ministry of Finance) with funds from the World Bank and New Zealand Aid, would like to bring to your attention the following important matters:

1. We, the indigenous people of Wae Sano, reject the geothermal drilling project in our villages. The drilling points (well pads) determined by PT SMI are located in the middle of our living space in Kampung Nunang, Lempe, and Dasak (only 20 to 30 meters from the center of the village) and the "living space" in our conception of homes and home yards (golo lonto, mbaru kaeng, natas Labar), gardens (uma duat), water sources (wae tekku), sacred/

ritual sites (compang takung, mbaru adat), houses of worship (church), cemetery (lepah boak), forest and lake (puar agu sano). In other words, this project threatens the integrity of our social, cultural, economic, and spiritual life.

2. We have not so far received a complete explanation of the project, including the impacts and risks that we will bear if the project is implemented. In the socialization carried out by PT SMI facilitated by the Government, we only received an explanation that this project would bring benefits and not have any risks. We really don't believe that this geothermal project won't pose any risk to our survival.
3. We hereby notify the World Bank and New Zealand Aid as the funders for this project that we do not give approval or consent to the geothermal exploitation plan. We have also made every effort to notify the Central, Provincial and Regional Governments as well as the company about our decision.
4. We have heard from the company and the government, and read the documents, that this project is funded by the World Bank and New Zealand Aid. We know that the World Bank and New Zealand respect the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). We hope that the World Bank and New Zealand Aid will also respect this principle in our village.
5. PT SMI has been operating for three years (survey, sampling drilling, etc.) without our approval and currently intends to continue exploration/exploitation activities, also without our approval. For the sake of justice, human rights, and on the basis of the principles of Free, Prior and Informed Consent, we strongly request the World Bank and New Zealand Aid to re-evaluate your financial support for this project.

We hereby also extend an invitation to representatives of the World Bank and New Zealand Aid to come to Wae Sano

Village, to witness this issue up close. We hope that the World Bank and New Zealand Aid will come to Wae Sano and meet us.

Thank you for your attention!

On behalf of Wae Sano Community
Herman Hemat, Yosef Erwin Rahmat, Petrus Dulu, Valen Emang,
Stef Juma, Maximus Mon, Mateldis Felni, Emada Mawar, and
Maria Y Haul

CC:

1. Mr. David R. Malpass, World Bank Group President, in Washington DC, USA.
2. The Ambassador of New Zealand to Indonesia in Jakarta
3. Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia; c.q. Kasutbit Pengelolaan Resiko Aset dan Kewajiban Negara
4. Kementerian ESDM; c.q. Kasubdit Investasi dan Kerjasama Panas Bumi Dirjen Energi Terbarukan Kementerian ESDM dan Kasutbit Pelayanan dan Bimbingan Usaha Dirjen Panas Bumi
5. Badan Geologi; c.q. Kepala Bidang Panas Bumi Pusat Sumber Daya Mineral dan Panas Bumi
6. Anggota DPR-RI Daerah Pemilihan NTT
7. Direktur Utama PT SMI
8. Konsultan PT SMI –Jacobs New Zeland, Jim Randle
9. Gubernur NTT
10. DPRD Provinsi
11. Bupati Manggarai Barat
12. DPRD Manggarai Barat
13. Lembaga-lembaga Peduli Hak Masyarakat dan Lingkungan Hidup, Nasional dan Internasional
14. Pimpinan Media di Seluruh Indonesia

15. Jaringan Masyarakat Adat/Dewan Adat seluruh Indonesia
16. Jaringan Masyarakat Adat yang Terkena Dampak Buruk Proyek Investasi di Seluruh Indonesia

About the Translator

Cypri Jehan Paju Dale is a social anthropologist with ethnographic field work and social engagement in West Papua and Flores in Eastern Indonesia. He holds a PhD from the Institute of Social Anthropology at Bern University, Switzerland. After a postdoctoral fellowship at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at Kyoto University, Japan (2020-2022). He is currently an affiliated fellow at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While working on the book project on Indigenous Politics and Christianity in West Papua, he started a new research project on inter-species companionship in Komodo National Park. In collaboration with indigenous communities, NGOs, journalists, and filmmakers in Indonesia, he contributes to the production of the documentary film series, *Dragon for Sale* (2023).

Email: cypri.jp@gmail.com; cjdale2@wisc.edu