

# Reconnecting the rural periphery and indigenous sago culture through tourism

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**Abstract.** Appreciation of cultural practices related to sago by indigenous peoples in the framework of rural development in Indonesia is still very limited. Rural development is currently based more on a modernization approach that focuses on economic growth with outsider control that results in massive industrial development without considering the conditions of the region, socio-culture, and the environment, including the neglect of indigenous peoples. This paper aims to critique the sago-based rural development approach and provide perspective on how indigenous tourism can be an alternative in supporting rural development by focusing on sustainable pillars and, at the same time, restoring lost connections through indigenous ways.

## 1 Introduction

Globalization is a complex phenomenon that involves shifts in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions that reinforce capitalist markets, commodities, technologies, and cultural forms and ideas to cause places to become increasingly intertwined in transnational networks of interdependence [1-3]. The process of globalization has become an important factor in accelerating rural development. However, at the same time, it also brings forth new trends as a major driver of change in rural areas, impacting economic activities, the composition of rural populations, cultural traditions, and values of natural resources [3], which sometimes indigenous peoples become victims of such progress. Rural areas in Indonesia are no exception, which are changing due to the impact of globalization.

In Indonesia, the sago tree (*Metroxylon Sagu Rottb.*) has been important to indigenous peoples for ages. It is claimed to be one of the oldest crops [4], and was a staple food in most parts of Southeast Asia and Oceania, along with taro and yam, before rice largely replaced these crops. Sago palm is a tropical crop containing a large amount of starch in the trunk and grows well in the tropical rain forests of Southeast Asia between latitudes 10° N and 10° S [5-7]. Indonesia has more than 90% of the world's sago forests, mainly in Papua, West Papua and Maluku [8]. In the eastern part of Indonesia, sago palm culturally has been identified

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with the concept of a symbolic link between the germination of the plant and human generation and its role in generating life and growth [9]. Waropen indigenous people in Papua, for example, perform sacrificial ceremonies by making sago porridge and sago cakes modelled in the form of mythical snakes, the moon, and other figures for life crisis ceremonies for children [10] and among the people of the Tor river valley, sago has the highest position in social and religious contexts [11] and is even used for wedding ceremonies. In another area, Ambon, sago is used as an exceptional food for babies in exclusive rituals as their first food [10], while in Toraja, South Sulawesi, the community prepares small offerings of sago on the path to the sago-washing place to divert evil influences from work [9]. Meanwhile in the western part of Indonesia, the people of Meranti Islands in Riau promote sago as part of their cultural heritage through sago tree trunk race [12]. Indeed, sago palm is considered an important staple food and holds the highest position in cultural and social contexts, underpinning the foundation of indigenous culture in rural areas that serves the coexistence between humans and nature. However, its sustainability is still questionable, especially in this era of globalization [12].

For many policymakers, rural areas are associated with backwardness, inflexible traditions, and unfavourable attitudes toward innovation, ultimately leading to poverty. Thus, rural development approaches need to recognize that landscapes are social-ecological systems and lead to unsustainable use of natural resources. This is compounded by the forces of globalization. Rainforests, including sago forests, attract multinational timber, mining and palm oil companies [13, 14], which are thought to boost the economy by internationalizing production, but on the other hand, contribute to the decline of sago forests and damage the environment. In addition, the lack of government attention to the potential of sago palm as a local food source has significantly impacted the reduction of sago forests. Several top-bottom programs have been attempted to revive sago palm, such as food diversification and management programs [15]. However, those actions are lack of clarity, lack of political will, and difficulty in coordinating interested stakeholders [12]. If this continues, the appreciation of local food and cultural practices associated with sago will gradually become unfamiliar, especially to the younger generation.

This research aims to provide a critique of rural development approaches that focus on modernization without considering regional conditions and local culture. It also includes how appreciation of cultural practices related to sago is still a rare approach in rural development. Then, we present our perspective on how tourism can support rural development and, at the same time, restore lost connections through their ancestral ways. Finally, a conclusion is drawn at the end.

## **2 Rural development: Modernization, globalization and marginalization of local communities**

The rural space is often perceived as nature, tradition, and an isolated place, which is both physically and socially disconnected from the process of globalization [16, 17]. Meanwhile, development, according to United Nations, is a process that aims to constantly improve the well-being of the entire population and all individuals in terms of economic, social, cultural, and political aspects in a comprehensive manner [18]. Thus, rural development theories and approaches have focused on improving the living standards of the poor and ending hunger since the 1960s [19]. However, many scholars argue that rural areas are disadvantaged due to policies biased towards urban areas, which then reflect deeper socio-political relations and sustain the privileges of certain classes, thus becoming a major obstacle to significant change in rural areas [20, 21]. Rural becomes a powerful signifier of identity as it is continually in process, significantly accelerated by globalization [22]. At the same time, however, many failed developments have occurred and have been widely recognized

by academics, politicians, and practitioners; therefore, many have begun to design new development strategies [23]. This is due to the discrepancy between rural development theories and approaches and the reality on the ground [24].

So far, the current approach to development, particularly in Indonesia, is an economic policy and implementation that focuses on modernization. This modernization theory is an approach that assumes that underdevelopment is caused by traditionalism and modernization is considered the solution [25]. Thus, to ensure that modernization is successful, policy planners advocate strong intervention in a country's development to modernize the economy. Although, modernization theories promote economic growth, some scholars argue that the definition and dichotomy of traditional and modern are so simplistic that the methodological procedures used to define traditional in relation to modern negatively ignore other positive sides of traditional cultures, norms or values [26-28]. Moreover, the universalism of what is modern, which is synonymous with Westernization, destroys the alternative conception that promotes openness, flexibility, and sensitivity to different cultures [29]. As a result, modernization created a dual economic base of a modern capitalist (urban) sector that is efficient and committed to growth against an underdeveloped rural sector that is stagnant and unchanging [30], which ultimately boasted an urban economy, but failed to understand the distribution of development to rural areas.

Modernization theories suggest that internal factors are the cause of underdevelopment and that outside intervention would be useful to promote development [28]. This is exacerbated by globalization which alludes to the increasing interdependence of the world economy aided by international financial institutions, which has resulted in considerable convergence in government approaches to economic policy in the direction of liberalized and market-driven development [31]. Tandon (1991) even points out how globalization increases the control of the economy by outside players [32], which happens a lot in the agricultural sector by putting large multinational corporations in charge of controlling and delivering modern technology when their main interest is to generate profits for themselves, not for the welfare of society, or something socially oriented like food security. This has been seen as a common solution for rural development in Indonesia, for example, the persistence of a top-down approach that focuses on a massive production orientation, which assumes that the best solutions only come from outside. In the end, introducing external inputs and technologies became common in rural development in Indonesia, which were disseminated directly in rural areas without looking at the realities on the ground. At the same time, this marginalizes local communities and ignores local knowledge and indigenous knowledge that communities have developed for centuries.

### **3 Sago in Indonesia: From food politics to major industrial development**

Sago was first mentioned in the 13th century by Marco Polo while in West Sumatra and then mentioned again by Wallace in the 18th century as an important commodity [12]. In addition, more than 45 sago-based food products found in 21 out of 33 provinces in Indonesia, consumed in various forms such as sticky rice porridge, roasted sago, noodles, and snacks [33]. Although the values of sago forests as ecosystem services, livelihood sources and food culture are fully recognized by rural communities, in reality, there has been a shift in the socio-cultural aspects that is heavily influenced by political power. The implementation of food politics through the national rice program (agricultural revolution through rice in the 1960s-1980s and the national transmigration program in the 1990s, and the 'rice for the poor' program in the 2000s) ignored the importance of sago palm values as local food [12], which resulted in the shift of sago as the main food, especially in eastern

Indonesia. Gradually, sago is getting a negative image as a food for the poor and increasingly forgotten by rural communities.

Finally, the modernization viewpoint and high industrialization of agriculture allegedly has typically brought negative progress in Indonesia, including in the development of sago for rural development. Supyandi et al (2017) argues it can eliminate the diversity of superior local commodities and internal inputs in favor of external commodities and even imported products [28]. It also drowns local knowledge and weaken local civilization even though the role of local wisdom greatly supports local food security and ecosystem sustainability. This is evident from the desire of the government to massively increase sago production and sago-based industries by building large factories, especially in eastern Indonesia. According to Trisia et al (2021), the development of these large industries sometimes creates major problems for rural communities because the application of technology is not suitable for small-scale production and local conditions [34]. This can be seen in the case of Papua where the creation of factories with high technology led to overproduction and high demand for sago palm trees as raw materials. This resulted in local people stopping selling sago palm trees, as they wanted to secure sago palm trees in their customary land for their own needs and at the same time, the large factory failed to operate.

## **4 Indigenous tourism and revitalization of traditional culture**

It is well recognized that tourism and globalization reinforce each other where the development of tourism becomes more widespread as globalization removes barriers to travel and cultures [35]. However, it also shows that tourism has not necessarily contributed to poverty alleviation and the achievement of equality in development [36]. More specifically, the critics argue that it is not that globalization and tourism fail to provide proportional distribution of economic benefits that only benefit companies and not local communities, but the failure to establish distributive justice that should be the basis of development plans through the equitable sharing of resources [37]. Thus, it is important to achieve distributive justice and encourage a community-controlled planning process based on community values rather than simply providing benefits to large industries. Higgins-Desbiolles (2004) subsequently embraced this idea and explored indigenous initiatives in an effort to harness the capabilities of tourism to serve community needs through indigenous tourism [38]. Indigenous tourism is a tourism activity in which indigenous people are directly involved and control what the attraction is [39], which places indigenous peoples as active subjects who are able to shape, reject, or cooperate with other tourism stakeholders for their interests, and not as objects of tourism [38]. In addition, Scheyvens et al (2021) show how indigenous tourism can support the values of the SDGs by promoting the values, knowledge and ways of life of indigenous peoples [40]. Indeed, indigenous tourism is an important intersection between tourism, globalization and indigenous peoples [38], where indigenous peoples can use the opportunities presented by globalization and tourism to claim their rights and change the rules for their benefit and sustainable in the future.

Many researchers have noted an increase in research on indigenous tourism, recognizing that tourism and globalization can provide opportunities for indigenous peoples to provide cross-cultural understanding [41-43], provide understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples [39], encourage a transformation in awareness by bringing in indigenous values [44] and bring non-indigenous peoples into a more sustainable relationship with the natural environment [45]. It is expected that indigenous tourism encourages tourists to not only have a sense of customary places, but also a respect for them, thereby encouraging transformative changes to the image of places and the personal values of tourists [46].

Yeh et al. (2021) further explains the process of cultural heritagization through indigenous ecotourism where indigenous culture and local knowledge are repackaged as

intangible cultural heritage and then contributes to the revitalization of traditional culture and indigenous resilience [47]. For this reason, the capacity of indigenous peoples for tourism needs to be addressed, which can be observed from seven capital assets, namely: natural, physical and built, financial, political and institutional, social, cultural, and human capital [48]. Furthermore, cooperation between indigenous tourism operators and the broader tourism sector would maximize the potential to provide a substantial competitive advantage to indigenous peoples as well as the tourism industry [49], albeit with one caveat that a key consideration at all times should be how and what indigenous peoples want from tourism itself [50].

## **5 Preserving sago culture through tourism: Strategies for sustainability**

Indigenous tourism is capable of protecting sago culture rather than undermining it by considering the pillars of sustainability in its development. This is because sustainable development of indigenous peoples requires a vast amount of knowledge and involves multiple perspectives, contexts and strategies; community development by and for indigenous peoples. In addition, the development of indigenous tourism product and service designs should be done in a participatory manner, with a commitment to building mutual trust and protecting indigenous culture, the environment, and the welfare of indigenous peoples rather than for other interests [51]. Thus, the strategy for developing sago culture through indigenous tourism must refer to the shared spirit reflected in the four pillars of sustainability, namely economic, environmental, social and human. It means that achieving indigenous well-being requires an appropriate balance between economic growth, social capital, environmental protection, respect for customary rights, and a focus on indigenous people.

First, sago starch has economically become a source of livelihood for indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities in Papua, for example, can only access sago trees in their customary territories or hamlets, process them into starch and consume them as staple food and partly sell them to local markets. However, current rural development initiatives are more oriented towards the commercialization of starch utilization, by transforming traditional sago processing into a more mechanized and large-capacity industrial system. This, of course, does not consider the sustainability of the sago trees, especially now that is decreasing and can only be harvested at certain times. In addition, social conflicts can also occur between indigenous communities and companies over land tenure and the availability of sago tree supplies as raw material. For this reason, tourism can be one of the alternatives to provide income and employment opportunities for indigenous people, especially for young generations, helping to improve their economic conditions and independence. Strategies can be carried out by attracting tourists to participate in study tours and providing knowledge about how indigenous peoples coexist with sago and appreciate sago culture. Another thing is to create special events such as 'sago culture festivals' that promote traditional knowledge and values on sago as traditional food, culture and identity, thus that it can be known and respected by outsiders.

At the ecological level, indigenous peoples today, by nature, devote great efforts in environmental conservation to maintain their ancestral homes, as well as the sago culture. However, the efforts of indigenous peoples to protect the ecological environment are sometimes challenged and may even clash with the interests of people outside the community [45]. According to Chang et al (2021), a system of joint management by tribes can help to sustain the natural landscape and traditional culture of the tribes, which tribes jointly participate in contributing assets, collectively manage land resources, and cooperate with each other in operating an ecotourism industry with fairly distributed economic benefits [52].

We believe that environmental aspect is very important in tourism development because the essence of life of indigenous people is to coexist with nature. Thus, ultimately negative impacts on the environment can be minimized and the environment and natural resources are protected. It is also important to conduct environmental education about the sago palm ecosystem and its surrounding biodiversity for visitors and outsiders through guided interpretation and storytelling, making them realize the importance of the sago palm ecosystem for indigenous people and participate pro-actively in protecting it.

Social aspects of sustainability are among those that gain less attention [53]. The main elements of social sustainability are addressing basic needs such as human rights, ensuring equitable opportunities in development and poverty alleviation, as well as maintaining and strengthening community life support systems and preserving traditional cultures [54]. Cater (1993) argues since tourism allows visitors to interact directly with indigenous communities and local people, there must be no adverse alterations to the quality of life of indigenous people and they must be involved in the management of tourism resources, including direct contact with tourists [55]. Therefore, in the case of sago, we believe that appropriate strategies are needed to ensure the human rights of indigenous peoples can be respected at the socio-political level and in the tourism development process. A case study on indigenous tourism by the Kuna tribe in Panama, for example, shows how tourism operations guided by indigenous leaders are very successful in maintaining traditional customs while remaining open to tourists [56]. In addition, it is expected that indigenous communities can gain recognition of their rights and participate in political decision-making relating to sago development and redistribution of benefits to protect them from outside economic exploitation. Furthermore, setting an upper limit on the number of visitors entering indigenous territories and local lodges can be established to reduce the negative impacts of tourism.

Finally, tourism that pursues sustainability should have values that recognize and encourage human resource development. This includes the nurturing and development of individuals within an organization and the wider community and the importance of everyone directly or indirectly involved in the development of products or services [57]. The strategy for developing indigenous tourism based on sago culture is then to engage in the tourism business and encourage the transfer of skills and knowledge to increase the capacity of indigenous peoples to develop self-management capacity which will be useful in the organization and management of tourism activities as recommended by UNWTO. In addition, it is also very important to provide indigenous cultural awareness training for nonindigenous people and for tourists, self-awareness to behave responsibly during cultural tourism experiences is expected.

## **6 Conclusion**

Development should essentially emphasize a deep connection between human and non-human elements where the use and protection of natural resources is done responsibly for the coexistence [58] and mutual well-being of humans and sago palm ecosystem [14]. However, the opposite is happening, where rural development only sees sago palm as an object that must be developed massively through modern approaches such as major industrial development. Finally, what happens is the marginalization of indigenous people and the breakdown of coexistence between indigenous peoples and sago culture. Therefore, it is necessary to have an approach that can provide social economic and environmental benefits as well, one of which is through indigenous tourism.

According to Mika & Scheyvens (2022), a kinship-based approach, rather than one based on the number of customers and revenue, is more appropriate to operationalize in assisting tourism systems, sectors and operators in realizing sustainable indigenous tourism

and connecting future generations [59]. Also important is how indigenous tourism development should be carried out in the presence of good and transparent multi-stakeholder partnerships between indigenous communities, governments, tour operators and travel agencies, civil society, and academic institutions. Thus, the design of products related to sago culture can be ensured, the distribution of benefits to indigenous peoples can be truly guaranteed, and ultimately contribute to the empowerment and well-being of indigenous peoples.

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