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Sago Hati as an Arena of Symbolic Power in Land Acquisition in Kuto Rajo

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A B S T R A C T

Land acquisition for industrial plantation forestry involves not only legal and economic arrangements but also cultural meanings that can shape community acceptance. This study examines how Sago Hati is understood, mobilized, and contested in land acquisition in Kuto Rajo Village, Riau Province. It also analyzes how this local moral language shapes unequal power relations and the social and ecological consequences of agrarian conflict. Using a critical ethnographic approach, the study was conducted from February 2024 to January 2026. Data were generated through repeated in-depth interviews with ten key informants, participant observation during conflict mediation and participatory mapping, and analysis of corporate and government documents. The findings show that Sago Hati, traditionally understood as an expression of care, respect, and social reconciliation, was recontextualized in land negotiations as a culturally resonant form of compensation. Its use occurred alongside warning letters, the threat of criminalization, and unequal access to information and bargaining power. Sago Hati therefore functioned as an instrument of symbolic power that framed land relinquishment as morally appropriate while obscuring coercion and socio-ecological inequality. The study demonstrates that agrarian conflict involves not only control over land but also struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and consent. It further highlights the importance of examining local symbols as active practices through which domination is normalized, negotiated, and resisted.

A. INTRODUCTION

Changes to the rural landscape in Indonesia over the past few decades have seen a growing expansion of natural resource-based industries, including Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs), which have significantly affected communities' relationships with the land, forests and their living spaces. This expansion has not only brought about economic and ecological transformations, but has also given rise to new social dynamics concerning access to, control over, and the legitimacy of agrarian resources. In many cases, the process of land acquisition takes place through mechanisms that appear formal and legal, yet is simultaneously accompanied by social and cultural practices that shape communities' acceptance of these changes. This situation demonstrates that contemporary agrarian conflicts cannot be understood merely as issuesof ownership or the distribution of resources, but also as social processes involving the production of meaning, legitimacy, and the negotiation of power in everyday life (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018).

In this context, cultural symbols and moral language play a vital role in bridging the relationship between corporations, the state and local communities. Practices such as gift-giving, traditional rituals and narratives of well-being are often employed to establish social legitimacy for development interventions and resource extraction. In this context, cultural symbols not only serve as expressions of local identity, but can also act as a medium that normalises unequal power relations through subtle mechanisms of social consent. Therefore, understanding how cultural symbols operate within agrarian conflicts is essential to explaining how

domination is produced and accepted, even whilst socio-ecological inequalities persist (Wolford et al., 2013).

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Land acquisition in the context of Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) is often accompanied by compensation practices framed through local cultural symbols. In the village of Kuto Rajo, this practice is known as *Sago Hati*, which is understood in emic terms as a form of gift-giving imbued with moral values such as care, respect and social recognition. Within the Malay cultural framework, this term carries strong legitimacy as it is closely linked to notions of honour, shame and social harmony. However, in practice (Karim, 2019), *Sago Hati* also emerges in interactions between companies and local communities during the land acquisition process, where compensation is provided whilst companies gain large-scale control over living spaces amidst unequal access to information, resources and power.

The existing literature suggests that land acquisition and compensation are not merely economic transactions, but are also embedded in development discourses, representations, and moral claims that help secure social legitimacy (Olatunji & Bature, 2019; Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014). Narratives of welfare, partnership, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility can obscure structural inequalities and divert attention from the unequal distribution of socio-ecological benefits and burdens (Gill et al., 2023; Wolford et al., 2013; Hall et al., 2017). Studies of agrarian conflicts in Indonesia similarly show that asymmetrical relations between corporations and communities are produced not only through legal and economic control, but also through mechanisms of legitimisation involving the state, the market, and local actors within complex power configurations (Wirdani et al., 2023; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Agrarian conflict, in this sense, cannot be understood solely as a dispute over land ownership, but must also be examined as an arena in which meanings, authority, and legitimacy are continuously produced and negotiated.

Although recent literature has begun to recognise the importance of discursive dimensions and everyday practices in the formation of legitimacy (Fairbairn et al., 2014), symbols and language are still generally treated as representations or reflections of existing power relations, rather than as operational practices that actively shape perceptions, constrain resistance, and influence the acceptance or contestation of inequality (Loftus, 2020). This limitation is particularly significant in agrarian conflicts, where land compensation involves not only material transactions but also symbolic framing through which communities interpret, negotiate, accept, or reject the transfer of their living spaces. Addressing this gap, the present study positions cultural symbols and moral language as an arena connecting the material and discursive dimensions of agrarian conflict. Through the case of *Sago Hati*, it examines how a local moral category can become actively involved in the production and negotiation of legitimacy within unequal power relations.

This article examines this gap by positioning *Sago Hati* as an arena of symbolic power. It aims to (1) examine how *Sago Hati* is understood by the community, (2) analyse how *Sago Hati* is constructed and mobilised by corporate and local actors in the land acquisition process, and (3) explore how these symbolic practices shape and stabilise power relations whilst obscuring socio-ecological inequalities. This research contributes to anthropological and socio-environmental scholarship by demonstrating that agrarian conflicts operate not only at the material level but also within the symbolic domain, where language and cultural meanings function as instruments of power. The significance of this research lies in revealing how cultural symbols are mobilised to legitimise land control, offering a new perspective on the intersection of culture, power, and socio-ecological transformation.

B. METHOD

Through a critical-interpretative ethnographic approach, this study seeks to understand *Sago Hati* as a symbolic practice embedded in the social experience of the community, whilst also serving as a medium for the production of legitimacy in land control by Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs). This approach not only positions culture as a system of meaning that must be understood from the perspective of social actors, but also as an arena where power relations are produced, negotiated and normalised through everyday practices, moral language and symbolic representations (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Madison, 2020). Consequently, this study combines an interpretative reading of local meanings with a critical analysis of the socio-political structures that shape and exploit those meanings in the context of contemporary agrarian conflict.

Methodologically, this study is grounded in the emic–etic perspective in ethnographic work as developed by El Amady (2015), which views the emic and etic perspectives not as a binary opposition, but as intertwined analytical dimensions in the process of knowledge production. In this study, *Sago Hati* is positioned as an emic category, namely a local term used by the community to understand land compensation practices within the framework of morality, social respect and kinship relations. This local meaning is then interpreted reflectively through an etic perspective to examine how cultural symbols are mobilized in the practice of legitimizing land tenure and how power relations operate through subtle mechanisms of social consent. This approach allows the research to remain rooted in the language and experiences of the local community, whilst avoiding cultural romanticisation through critical reflection on the historical, political, and economic contexts surrounding these symbolic practices (Francis, 2015).

This research was conducted in a village in Indragiri Hulu Regency, referred to in this article as Kuto Rajo

Village (a pseudonym). Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the community and informants, given the sensitivity of agrarian conflicts and the potential social, political and legal risks that may arise from unequal power relations between the community and the company. Field research took place from February 2024 to January 2026 through the researcher's intensive involvement in social accompaniment and the mapping of agrarian conflicts. This long-term engagement enabled the researcher to build a relationship of trust with the community whilst gaining a contextual understanding of the dynamics of land negotiations, compensation

practices, and the socio-ecological changes taking place gradually. It explicitly highlights the added value of a two-year engagement: the ability to observe changes in the attitudes of the same informants across different stages of mediation, the repetition of *Sago Hati* socialisation patterns at various events, and the chronological sequence between administrative pressure and symbolic offers the sort of process-oriented data that is difficult to capture in short-term research or single visits.

The researcher worked alongside an environmental non-governmental organisation, which in this study is referred to as the Yayasan Rimba Tropis and acted as a facilitator in the conflict between the community and the company. This position provided direct access to the interactions, negotiations and discursive practices that emerged during the land acquisition process. Within a framework of reflective ethnography, the researcher's involvement was not understood as an obstacle to objectivity, but rather as part of the process of knowledge production that requires critical awareness of the positions, affiliations and power relations inherent in fieldwork (Levien, 2017). Therefore, reflexivity was employed throughout the study to assess how the researcher's position influenced access to data, interpretation, and relationships with informants. All informants' names and details that could lead to personal identification have been anonymised to safeguard their security and confidentiality.

Data collection was carried out through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation. Participant observation was conducted on an ongoing basis to understand the contextual use of the term *Sago Hati*, compensation practices, social interactions between parties, and symbolic expressions that emerge in the community's daily life (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach with affected community members, traditional leaders, migrant groups, village officials and other stakeholders involved in the land acquisition process. This approach was used to explore people's life experiences, moral narratives, perceptions of compensation, and how communities interpret their relationship with the company and their living environment (Akram-Lodhi, 2012).

The key informants were initially selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience of land acquisition, knowledge of the meaning and practice of *Sago Hati*, involvement in negotiation or mediation processes, and social position within the conflict. Additional informants were subsequently identified through snowball sampling, using recommendations from the initial participants to include actors with differing experiences and perspectives. Each key informant was interviewed two to four times, with each session lasting approximately 45–90 minutes, allowing the researcher to clarify earlier accounts, examine changes in interpretation, and compare narratives across interviews. The ten key informants were considered adequate for this micro-case study because they represented the principal social positions involved affected farmers, customary and community leaders, village and hamlet authorities, and migrant residents while repeated interviews, long-term

participant observation, participatory mapping, and document analysis provided sufficient depth and opportunities for triangulation. Their adequacy therefore rested on the relevance, diversity, and depth of the information obtained rather than on statistical representativeness.

Table 1. List of Informant

No	Name	Age	Status
1	Iskandar	49	Community Leader
2	Syafrudin	61	Community Leader
3	Sabar	56	Community Leader
4	hapos	47	Community
5	Martoni	52	Community
6	Surman	51	Head of Village
7	Bayu Sasmanto	38	Head of Hamlet
8	Matrizal	58	Traditional Figure
9	Haposan	38	Community
10	Yanti	42	Community

The ten key informants in this micro-case study were sufficient to yield an in-depth understanding of how *Sago Hati* is experienced and interpreted at the individual and household levels, given the repeated, in-depth nature of the interviews, which were supported by two years of participatory observation. However, this article explicitly limits the scope of its claims: statements regarding the positions of the corporation and the state were reconstructed primarily from a review of documents (warning letters, mediation correspondence, tenure mapping reports and the company's outreach materials) as well as one outreach forum observed first-hand, rather than from interviews with company management or government officials; the author was unable to gain such access given their position and safety as a community facilitator.

In addition to primary data, this study also draws on field notes, organisational documents, conflict mediation records and monitoring reports as secondary data sources to provide

historical context and facilitate triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The data analysis was conducted using a thematic-interpretative approach, identifying patterns, categories and themes relating to the significance of *Sago Hati*, legitimisation practices, power relations, and the socio-ecological impacts of land tenure (Nichols, 2021). The analytical process was conducted iteratively through repeated readings, the writing of reflective memos, and an ongoing dialogue between empirical data, field experience and the theoretical framework. Through this approach, the research not only produced an ethnographic description of the community's symbolic practices, but also a critical analysis of how cultural symbols function as mechanisms for the normalisation and reproduction of power in contemporary agrarian conflicts.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Community Relations and Land, Forests and the Emergence of Agrarian Conflicts

Field findings indicate that the relationship between the community of Kuto Rajo Village and the land and forest cannot be understood merely as a matter of ownership or economic control, but rather as an existential relationship that shapes social identity, the sustainability of livelihoods, and collective memory. In the emic experience of the informants, land and forests are understood as living spaces inherited through intergenerational labour cleared by parents, managed by children, and intended to sustain the lives of future generations. This understanding does not operate within the logic of the state's formal law, but within the historical and moral framework of the community, where farming, rubber cultivation, or land clearing are not merely economic activities, but acts affirming existence and the right to live in a particular territory.

This finding is supported by the account of Iskandar (49), a rubber farmer and native resident of Kuto Rajo village, who reflects on the intergenerational relationship in land management as part of family continuity and dignity. In an in-depth interview, he stated:

> "*I didn't clear this land. My father cleared it. I'm simply carrying on his work. If I were to sell it or give it up, it would mean cutting off my children's future. We work here not because of any documents, but because this is where our lives are. It is from this rubber plantation that we have been able to go to school, get married and make a living. If this land is taken away, what will become of us?*"

This statement illustrates that, within the emic framework of the Kuto Rajo community, land is not viewed as an object that can be freely transferred within a transactional logic, but as a living space that binds the temporal relationship between the past, the present and the future. The term 'sustainable' does not merely denote economic activity, but also reflects moral and social continuity across generations. From this perspective, cultivating and maintaining the land becomes an existential practice through which the community affirms its existence, rights, and dignity within a specific territory.

This difference is clearly evident in the emic experience of Syafrudin (61), who rejects the company's categorisation of the land he has long managed:

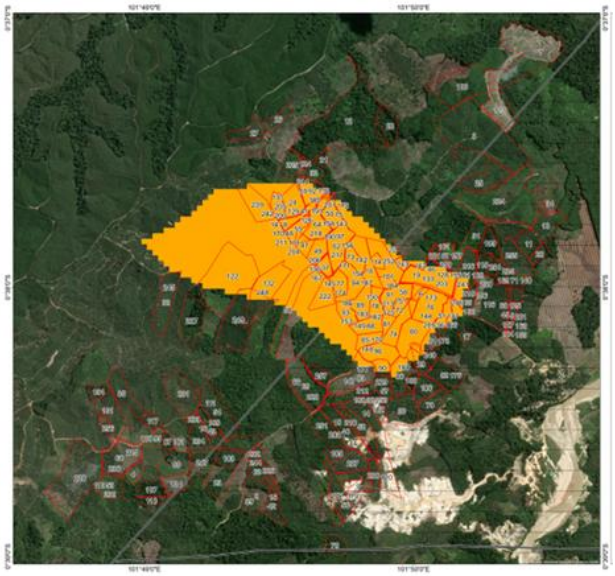
> "*We used to grow rice here, then rubber. The company calls it a forest, but this is our farmland. Because rubber isn't harvested every month, they call it a forest. When they say it's a forest, the value of Sago hati drops. But for us, this is a living farm, not an empty forest*"

This statement suggests that agrarian conflicts are not merely conflicts over physical space, but also over ways of understanding and naming that space. From a symbolic anthropological perspective, this indicates that the meaning of land and forests is not inherent in the landscape itself, but is produced through experience, labour and collective memory. When the state and corporations impose administrative classifications, what is at stake is not only legal status, but also the legitimacy of local knowledge as the basis for human-environment relations. In this sense, administrative language functions as an instrument of epistemic power that systematically marginalises local ways of understanding and inhabiting space.

The agrarian conflict in Kuto Rajo Village is also manifested spatially through the overlap between community-managed areas and areas classified within the framework of forestry administration and corporate control. The results of a participatory groundcheck conducted with the community show that areas understood by the state and corporations as forest areas or production concessions are, in the community's emic experience, actually living spaces that have long been managed for agriculture, rubber plantations, and other livelihood activities. The following overlay map illustrates how the community's claims to living space, reflected in the land parcels they control, intersect with the formal control areas of Industrial Plantation Forests. This map also illustrates the complexity of socio-ecological conflicts that relate not only to territorial boundaries, but also to differing ways of understanding, managing, and interpreting the landscape. For further clarification, please refer to Figure 1 below:

Figure 1. Results of the Community-Led Ground Check[1].

[1] The map was compiled by a participatory mapping team working with residents of Kuto Rajo in April 2025, combining field GPS measurements, focus group discussions and verification of plot boundaries by landowners. The red lines mark the boundaries of community gardens that have been validated directly in the field (groundcheck); the background colour and shading indicate the extent to which these plots overlap with



The arrival of the Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) company in this region has triggered a profound shift in the community's relationship with their local environment. From an emic perspective, the company's presence did not come about through a transparent or participatory process, but rather as a gradual yet relentless erosion of the community's control over the land and forests. Land surveying activities, initially regarded as routine, the gradual deforestation, and the emergence of agricultural restrictions and threats of criminalisation are perceived as confusing and intimidating. At this point, agrarian conflict no longer appears as a single event, but as a protracted process that permeates daily life.

2. Mechanism and Process of *Sago Hati*

Before the corporate era (before the 1980s). 'Sago Hati' was originally a moral code governing everyday relations between community members, long before the arrival of companies. Sabar (56), a community leader, explains its fundamental meaning:

> "'*Sago' or 'Sagho Hati' is an expression of affection given by one person to another. It may be given in return for something, or simply as a token of appreciation, as an expression of the good relationship that has been fostered over time*".

In everyday life, this practice arises, for example, when someone borrows a vehicle and then damages it the borrower will repair it first as an act of 'Sago Hati', before returning it to the owner, as a way of maintaining good relations. With regard to forest and land management, as Syafrudin explained, *Sago Hati* was once used to strengthen strained relationships between community members in the form of gifts given on specific occasions and took place on the basis of voluntary participation and close kinship ties, rather than coercion. These meanings were explored through repeated in-depth interviews with community leaders (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Researcher (Left, in White) Conducting an In-Depth Interview with a Community Leader on the Meaning of *Sago Hati*



Early 2000s: introduction of the scheme by the company. Field chronology indicates that Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) began introducing the 'Sago Hati' scheme in the early 2000s as part of its outreach to communities affected by the concession. In the field notes, the author attended an outreach forum in 2024 where a company public relations representative opened the event with a prayer and a recitation of a sacred verse on the virtues of sharing one's blessings, before explaining the "partnership" programme. A similar pattern recurred on various occasions: billboards and leaflets displayed the moral message of 'sharing from the heart', whilst compensation handover ceremonies included the distribution of basic food parcels, educational support, or assistance for places of worship to local leaders. The official narrative
emphasised that the company and the community are one 'big family' and that *Sago Hati* is an expression of care, not a transaction.

As regards who introduced this term into the land acquisition process and in what context, field findings indicate that the term was consistently used by the company's public relations (PR) staff during public awareness sessions and door-to-door visits to residents whose land fell within the concession area it was not a term that suddenly emerged from the community itself in the context of land acquisition.

forest areas or concession areas according to official maps. The process of mapping boundaries involved debates amongst residents regarding the boundaries between plots, the classification of disputed 'old rubber plantations' versus 'forest/scrubland', and collective memories of the history of land clearing from the 1970s to the 1990s so that this map is not merely an illustration of overlapping claims, but also a record of the competing spatial perspectives (spatial ontologies) between the community and the state-corporate classification regime.

However, this article refrains from claiming that there was a fully conscious strategic intent on the part of individual company staff, as such a claim would require interviews with company representatives, which the author was unable to secure (see Methodology). What can be demonstrated empirically is a pattern of repeated, consistent use of terminology, framed in religious and ceremonial terms by the company, which objectively serves to produce legitimacy regardless of the degree of strategic awareness behind it.

The content and mechanism of the agreement. Behind the ceremonial rhetoric, the *Sago Hati* agreement contains onerous clauses: residents were asked to sign over their land management rights to the company for the long term, in return for an advance payment whose value was determined unilaterally by the company based on land cover classification "the more forested it is in their view, the cheaper it is," as Syafrudin explained, with values varying significantly between farmers even where their plots were adjacent. Many residents admitted that they did not fully understand the legal language in the document, and the signing process took place quickly, often accompanied by subtle pressure from village officials and the company.

Sago Hati and administrative pressure: two paths running parallel. Residents emphasise that acceptance of *Sago Hati* is not a free choice, but takes place under the shadow of warning letters and threats of criminalisation. Martoni (52) recounted how land that had long been managed by his family was cleared and relinquished in exchange for compensation labelled 'Sago Hati', whilst at the same time residents were warned to stop farming and told to leave. Village Head Surman (51) described this pattern more explicitly:

> "*The community has been criminalised and served with formal notices first, second and, finally, reported to the police on the grounds that they refuse to leave their land. Every time their public relations team visits the village, they always offer us, the community, 'Sago hati'.*"

From this chronology, it is evident that 'Sago Hati' does not replace administrative and legal pressure, but rather runs alongside it and reinforces it: warning letters and the threat of criminal prosecution create a sense of urgency and powerlessness, whilst the offer of 'Sago Hati' presents itself as a morally framed 'way out' not as overt coercion, but as a compulsion cloaked in the language of consent. These two approaches operate sequentially and reinforce one another: legal pressure creates a sense of urgency, whilst the *Sago Hati* framework makes the decision to hand over land appear as the residents' own moral choice, rather than the result of external coercion this is what makes *Sago Hati* not merely a symbolic layer that softens structural violence, but part of a single mechanism of power that operates both materially and symbolically.

After the agreement: regret and reinterpretation. Field data shows that many residents regretted their decision once the compensation had been paid out; a recurring phrase in the focus group discussions (see Figure 3) was that "Sago is just a word; the money isn't much." A number of residents now even avoid using the term 'Sago Hati' in traditional ceremonies, weddings or festivals the term, which was once warmly regarded, now feels taboo to those who have had traumatic experiences with the company, and they replace it with other words such as 'gift' or 'token' in everyday social contexts. This linguistic shift itself is the clearest empirical evidence of how the meaning of a moral category has been usurped by the experience of land dispossession.

Figure 3. Focus Group Discussion with Affected Residents on Their Experiences after the *Sago Hati* Agreement



3. *Sago Hati* as an Arena: The Clash of Traditional Values, Corporate Logic and the State

Sago Hati cannot be understood as a cultural term with a static and homogeneous meaning for all residents of Kuto Rajo. As the chronology above demonstrates, it is a dynamic emic category open to reinterpretation, particularly when operating within agrarian conflicts involving actors with unequal interests and positions of power. Within the framework of 'friction' proposed by Anna Tsing (2024), this shift in meaning can be understood as the result of an encounter between value systems that are never neutral: customary values position *Sago Hati* as a relational moral language; corporate logic treats living spaces as commodities; whilst state law prioritises administrative classifications of land and forests. This encounter does not produce an equal synthesis of meaning, but rather a tension that reactivates cultural terms in new and problematic functions.

It is important to emphasise that the 'Malay cultural framework' inherent in *Sago Hati* is not something that is understood uniformly by all residents. Elderly farmers such as Iskandar and Syafrudin interpret it through their long-held memories of its original function as a means of mending relationships; traditional leaders such as Matrizal (58) associate it with the history of the Tiga Lorong customary union and a broader sense of honour (marwah); hamlet heads and village heads interpret it through their ambivalent position as intermediaries who must navigate pressure from two directions; Whilst newcomers such as Paben S. (47) and Haposan M. (38) viewed *Sago Hati* from a more

vulnerable position, Yanti (42), the wife of a migrant farmer, described it as a transaction that threatened her household's livelihood.

Yanti (42), the wife of a migrant farmer, expressed this concern when discussing her husband's decision to sign the *Sago Hati* agreement:

> "*I always tell my husband not to sign that Sago hati letter it's all nonsense about an equal share, because they're clearly the ones setting the price.*"

Younger generations and women, as illustrated by the interview data, also tend to be more critical and less bound by the language of traditional honour than older men, partly due to their exposure to discourses on human rights and ecological justice from outside the village. It is important to emphasise this differentiation so that the 'Malay framework' is not interpreted as a homogeneous cultural bloc an interpretation that risks reproducing the very assumption of cultural homogeneity that anthropology should be critiquing. Such differentiated positions were also observed in informal discussions with residents across generations and genders (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Informal Discussion with Residents, Including Women and Younger Villagers, in Kuto Rajo Village (Source: Authors' Field Documentation, Januari 2026)



It is this divergence in interpretation that makes *Sago Hati* a battleground, rather than merely a one-sided discourse imposed from above or a passive cultural idiom. The contest over its meaning plays out in a number of settings: in village mediation forums, where traditional leaders who reject the programme come face to face with village heads who emphasise the legality of the concession; within migrant households, when a wife forbids her husband from signing an agreement whilst economic pressures urge him otherwise; and in conflicts amongst traditional leaders themselves, with some accepting the role of intermediaries whilst others such as Matrizal insist that the land is an ancestral inheritance and that relinquishing it without traditional consultation amounts to betrayal. Sabar sums up this tension:

> "*In the past, Sago hati was more about maintaining relationships; now it feels like compensation for land. The language is gentler, but the consequences are severe*."

It is at this point that Pierre Bourdieu's (2003) concept of symbolic power becomes relevant. Symbolic power operates not through overt coercion, but through the ability to define social reality in such a way that domination appears acceptable. The effectiveness of symbolic power, within Bourdieu's framework, lies in 'misrecognition' a condition in which relations of domination are not recognised as such, but rather as something natural, appropriate, and even moral. Terms historically used to restore social relations are recontextualised as tools of legitimisation in the process of stripping away living spaces: domination is not expressed as direct coercion, but as an 'agreement', a 'gift', or 'the proper way of doing things', making it difficult to reject without incurring social risk. Several informants revealed that refusing *Sago Hati* risks being viewed as impolite, ungrateful, or disruptive to social harmony thus cultural language generates moral pressure that internalises domination into the subject's own consciousness.

Through this dual mechanism administrative, via regulations and official correspondence; and symbolic, via culturally legitimate cultural language *Sago Hati* is transformed from a communal moral practice into an instrument of symbolic power that bridges corporate interests with the local system of meaning, whilst simultaneously concealing the inequalities that accompany it.

4. Socio-ecological Aspects of Agrarian Conflict

The agrarian conflict in Kuto Rajo Village cannot be reduced to a mere overlap of land claims between the community and the company. Rather, this conflict has developed into a multi-actor socio-ecological conflict involving local communities, migrants, traditional leaders, village authorities and the Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) company, each with unequal positions, interests and capacities for power. Relationships between these actors are neither static nor binary; rather, they intersect, negotiate, and at times negate one another within an ever-evolving field of conflict.

Meanwhile, the migrants' emic experiences reveal another layer of conflict that is equally complex. The migrants view their presence as a legitimate means of survival, often based on arrangements with local residents and the belief that the land they have acquired is 'safe to cultivate'. However, in the context of conflict, they find themselves in a vulnerable position. One migrant informant stated that they were "*repeatedly approached, intimidated, and forced to sign documents whose contents we did not fully understand*" (Paben S., 47). This indicates that migrants are not merely external actors, but are also

subject to structural and symbolic pressures, whilst simultaneously facing suspicion from the local community. Thus, the conflict cannot be understood as a simple opposition between 'indigenous communities' and 'corporations', but rather as a layered and fragile social relationship.

Traditional leaders and village authorities occupy an ambiguous position in this conflict. Emically, they are expected to act as guardians of the land and forests; however, in practice, they are often perceived as passive or even complicit in the process of land release without collective consent. One informant cautiously stated that "*it is impossible for a company to enter without an insider*" (Martoni, 52), reflecting deep-seated suspicion as well as a fear of speaking openly. Village authorities, on the other hand, tend to adopt a defensive stance, attempting to distance themselves from the land acquisition process whilst still being perceived as facilitating corporate interests. This dynamic suggests that agrarian conflict is also a crisis of trust, in which the legitimacy of customary and local government institutions is increasingly eroded. This is further supported by recent studies showing that in many contexts of resource conflict, local elites often occupy the position of 'power brokers' who bridge external interests and the community, yet simultaneously become a source of legitimacy ambiguity at the local level (Lund & Rachman, 2018; Sikor et al., 2017).

Overall, this emic account reveals the agrarian conflict in Kuto Rajo as a socio-ecological conflict that operates simultaneously across material, symbolic and relational dimensions. It is not merely a question of who holds rights to the land, but also of who holds the authority to define the meaning of the land, the forest and the cultural practices associated with them. Relationships between actors are constantly renegotiated through language, implicit threats, tacit agreements, and everyday survival strategies. In this context, agrarian conflict must be understood as a dynamic social field in which emic experience is crucial to understanding how power inequalities are reproduced and experienced in everyday life. This underscores that agrarian conflict constitutes a complex relational arena, where power operates through the interplay between formal institutions, informal practices, and the production of social meaning (Suhardiman et al., 2025; Van Assche et al., 2020).

Local communities, in their emic understanding, view land and forests as living spaces that underpin social and ecological sustainability across generations. Land is not seen as a commodity that can be freely transferred, but as a historical legacy "cleared by our parents, managed by us, and preserved for our children and grandchildren." In contrast, migrants tend to understand land primarily as a means of livelihood acquired through transactions with local residents, which are considered morally legitimate even if legally tenuous. One migrant woman noted that she bought land "because it was promised to be safe for farming", yet in practice she experienced intimidation, fear, and pressure to sign documents she did not fully understand. This places migrants in a liminal position: not fully recognised as legitimate landowners by the state and companies, yet unable to withdraw due to their total dependence on the land. This liminal position reflects the conditions of legal uncertainty commonly found in global agrarian conflicts, where individuals are caught between formal recognition and conflicting social practices (Peluso, 1993; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001).

From the author's ethical perspective, this emic experience reveals a fundamental tension between the logic of the community's lived world and the legal-economic logic of the state and corporations. When the Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) company moved in with a land-grabbing scheme legitimised through formal permits and administrative language, the community's existential relationship with the land was reduced to issues of claims, boundaries and compensation. This process reflects how the state and corporations not only control space materially, but also define reality through administrative classifications and development discourses that marginalise local knowledge (Hall et al., 2017). In this context, the practice of *Sago Hati* emerges as a symbolic bridge that appears to be a cultural language, yet in substance operates within a framework of territorial control and the legitimisation of power. Recent literature suggests that such mechanisms of legitimisation often operate through symbolic framing and moral narratives that make domination appear natural and acceptable (Berenschot et al., 2023).

As a researcher directly involved as a conflict facilitator, I not only hear narratives such as those presented by Iskandar as 'data', but also witness how such narratives are often sidelined in mediation forums by legal and economic language that places communities on the defensive. This situation demonstrates that the mediation process is not a neutral space, but rather an arena where the dominant regime of knowledge determines the form of legitimacy and the limits of claims that can be recognised (Li, 2014). This experience has shaped my interpretation of *Sago Hati*: not as a neutral cultural remnant, but as an arena where language, morality and power intersect simultaneously. Thus, this emic data serves as a crucial entry point for understanding how the symbolic meanings experienced by the community are discredited when confronted with a modern regime of land control, where domination is not only imposed structurally but also reproduced through discursive mechanisms that limit the possibility of alternative articulations (Fairhead et al., 2012).

Within the framework of Geertz's symbolic anthropology, the land and forests here are not only symbolically significant, but are also experienced as part of a web of meanings that governs the relationship between humans, nature and society (Geertz, 1992). An

informant's statement that "what the company calls a forest is not necessarily a forest to us" reveals a fundamental difference in the regime of meaning. What the state and corporations classify as production forests or concession areas is understood by local communities as rubber plantations, former shifting cultivation fields, or actively managed livelihood spaces. This difference is not merely terminological, but reflects an epistemic conflict between local knowledge and the administrative knowledge of the state-corporate regime. Recent literature suggests that resource conflicts are often rooted in differences in 'ways of knowing', where local knowledge based on experience and daily practice is pitted against an abstract and standardised technocratic knowledge regime (Turnhout et al., 2020). In this context, categories such as 'forest' are not neutral terms, but rather the result of power structures that determine what is recognised as legitimate knowledge and what is disregarded.

In this configuration, traditional leaders and village authorities find themselves in an ambivalent and dilemma-ridden position. Although some community members still view traditional leaders as guardians of the land and honour (*marwah*), disappointment and suspicion arise when these roles are perceived as weakened or abused. Statements referring to "insiders" reflect the tension between normative expectations and the reality of power dynamics. Village authorities face a double bind: moral expectations to defend community interests and structural pressures from the state and corporations operating through the language of law, permits, and the threat of criminalisation. In this context, Industrial Plantation Forests (IPFs) companies, supported by the state's legal framework, operate through a logic of spatial certainty and economic efficiency, reducing the complex

socio-ecological landscape to technocratic categories. This logic systematically marginalises social relations, historical land management practices, and the emic meanings embedded within the landscape. This situation aligns with critical analyses of how the modern state simplifies complex socio-ecological realities into controllable administrative schemes (state simplification) (Scott, 1993).

In this multi-layered conflict, the practice of *Sago Hati* functions as a symbolic nexus that not only connects but also intensifies tensions amongst the actors. In emic experience, this cultural language does not emerge as a neutral space for agreement, but rather appears at critical moments when the community's bargaining power is at its weakest. Informants noted that *Sago Hati* is often introduced alongside the implicit threat of warning letters, repeated visits from company representatives, and the looming possibility of criminalisation, so that this morally familiar language emerges in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. Under such conditions, cultural language becomes not merely a medium of communication, but also an instrument that shapes power relations and defines legitimacy over the land.

As discussed earlier, *Sago Hati* has undergone a radical recontextualisation from the moral language of everyday life which aims to maintain relational balance into a mechanism that legitimises land control. This transformation is experienced emically as "not coercion, but compulsion", where acceptance of *Sago Hati* is not seen as a free choice, but as the only option to avoid greater consequences. Thus, agrarian conflict operates not only at the material level of who controls land and forests, but also at the symbolic level of who holds the power to define meaning, language, and legitimacy. At this point, cultural language becomes part of the conflict itself, functioning as an arena where domination is negotiated, obscured, and often accepted without open resistance.

The social implications of these practices are clearly evident in everyday life. Recent literature indicates that agrarian conflicts not only produce material impacts but also trigger the restructuring of social relations through mechanisms of mistrust, fragmentation, and polarisation within communities (Dell'Angelo et al., 2017). Social fragmentation emerged gradually, as unequal negotiation processes deepened the rift between those who accepted *Sago Hati* and those who rejected it, between local residents and migrants, and even within families across generations. One informant noted that "people have become cautious in what they say, afraid of saying the wrong thing and causing trouble," reflecting how structural tensions permeate intimate social relationships.

Trust, once rooted in communal solidarity, has been eroded by suspicion and mutual blame. Acceptance or rejection of *Sago Hati* serves as a marker of social position that has the potential to trigger divisions and horizontal conflict. Migrant informants described survival strategies such as closing the door, pretending not to be at home, or hiding when company representatives arrived practices that demonstrate how agrarian conflict produces a social climate characterised by fear, vigilance, and avoidance. In studies of resource conflicts, this situation is often understood as a form of the 'everyday politics of survival', in which individuals develop strategies of silence and avoidance in response to structural pressures (Bayat, 2010). This fear is not only linked to legal threats, but also to the social risk of being labelled a dissenter, an obstacle, or the cause of collective problems.

From this perspective, social fragmentation cannot be separated from the role of cultural language as a symbolic force. Framed as a language of politeness and harmony, *Sago Hati* restricts the articulation of resistance and criticism, whilst simultaneously shaping how conflict is perceived and responded to. The informants' reluctance to speak openly reflects how conflict not only results in material loss, but also shapes subjectivity through caution, anxiety, and self-silencing. Recent studies suggest that language and narratives in resource conflicts play a crucial role in shaping the boundaries of what can be said and questioned by the community (Forsyth, 2008).

Ecologically, these conflicts have equally significant consequences. The loss of living space resulting from the conversion of forests and agricultural land into industrial plantations is felt not in the abstract, but through concrete changes: declining soil productivity, deteriorating water quality, and reduced access to food and livelihood resources. In an emic narrative, these changes are described as the "loss of the foundations of life" because the land, forests and rivers are not merely economic resources but also spaces for learning, memory and intergenerational continuity. These findings align with studies in political ecology which emphasise that environmental degradation is always intertwined with social marginalisation and the loss of the capacity to sustain local communities (Temper & Shmelev, 2015).

From the perspective of ecological debt, these losses cannot be offset by short-term financial mechanisms such as *Sago Hati*. Environmental degradation and the loss of ecosystem functions create a long-term burden borne by local communities, whilst the economic benefits are reaped by corporations and the state. Thus, ecological debt manifests not only in environmental damage, but also in the erosion of communities' ability to sustain their socio-ecological livelihoods.

These findings indicate that the agrarian conflict in Kuto Rajo is multidimensional, operating simultaneously across material, social, and symbolic spheres. The struggle over physical space cannot be separated from shifts in social relations and contestations over meaning mediated through cultural language. *Sago Hati*, as an emic category, serves as a symbolic arena where control over land is legitimised and normalised. This conflict reveals that power operates not only through legal and economic instruments, but also through language and symbols that shape how communities understand, rationalise, accept, or silence injustice. Within this framework, agrarian conflict can be understood as a form of 'slow violence', that is, violence that unfolds gradually and is not always visible, yet has a profound impact on the social and ecological lives of communities (Francis, 2015).

D. CONCLUSIONS

Through the case of *Sago Hati*, this study concludes that agrarian dispossession is sustained not only by control over land, but also by control over the meaning of its loss. When a moral idiom of reciprocity is drawn into an asymmetrical land transaction, it ceases to describe a relationship between equals and begins to prescribe how those with less power should interpret their own surrender. Coercion and consent are therefore not alternative modes of domination but mutually constitutive moments within a single process, in which administrative pressure produces compliance and familiar cultural language renders that compliance as consent. Read through Bourdieu, misrecognition here is not merely inherited from established hierarchies; it is produced anew at points of friction between customary, corporate and state value systems through the recontextualisation of vernacular moral categories, regardless of the strategic intent of those who mobilise them.

The same logic explains why the harm of such conflicts is difficult to name. Compensation framed as a moral gift is settled within a single transaction, whereas socio-ecological loss is cumulative and intergenerational. Its full cost becomes visible only after consent has been given, which makes agrarian dispossession a form of slow violence in which ecological degradation and social marginalisation reinforce one another under the same regime of spatial control.

Two broader implications follow. First, the presence of local cultural forms in land negotiations cannot be taken as evidence of respect for community agency; the legitimacy of consent must be judged by the conditions under which it is produced rather than by its procedural or cultural appearance. Second, meaning should be treated as a contested resource in its own right, since the authority to name land, forests and compensation is inseparable from the power to use them. Local moral idioms such as *Sago Hati* are therefore better understood not as reflections of existing power relations, but as arenas in which consent is produced, negotiated and resisted. Their hold is uneven across social positions shaped by age, gender and origin, and they remain open to being contested or abandoned by those who bear their consequences. Capturing such shifts in meaning requires long-term ethnographic engagement that reads emic categories critically against the structures that mobilise them.

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