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The Political Ecology of Salt: Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Rural Kupang, Indonesia

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SUMMARY

Over the past few decades, salt self-sufficiency (*swasembada garam*) has been a major concern in Indonesia. Under the strategy of salt's self-sufficiency, the central government has allocated land to the salt company in rural Kupang, specifically for salt production (solar salt evaporation field). However, the land granted to the company has been populated and tilled by thousands of villagers and their families for generations. This consequently led to contestation between the villagers, the government, and the company.

This study focuses on the 3,720 hectares of land in Kupang, where the central government of Indonesia has granted land use permit or *hak guna usaha* (HGU) to PT. Panggung Guna Ganda Semesta (hereafter referred to as PGGS) for a period of 35 years (1992–2027). This land includes five villages in Kupang, namely Oebelo, Merdeka, Babau, Nunkurus, and Bipolo. Nunkurus is chosen as a case study because it is the center of the resistance movement against PGGS and has captured the dynamics of agrarian change over the last two decades. Further, the problem of land acquisition in Kupang became more complicated since 2018, when the local government granted 596 hectares of PGGS-HGU land in Nunkurus to a new salt company, PT. Timor Livestock Lestari

(hereafter referred to as TLL), for salt's self-sufficiency.

Hence, this study critically examines the phenomena of large-scale land acquisition in rural Kupang in the last two decades (by PGGS) and are taking place now (by TLL), with the aim of achieving the government goals to be self-sufficient for the salt in Indonesia. Specifically, this study aims: (i) to describe the history of salt-land in rural Kupang; (ii) to critically examine how the discourse of salt self-sufficiency has been employed to release the land from customary tenure; (iii) to investigate who are the actors promoting or opposing the salt-land acquisition; and (iv) to explore community perception in two hamlet groups on how they perceive the impact of salt-land acquisitions.

To answer the research questions, several fieldworks has been conducted from March 2018 to August 2019. During the fieldwork, data and information were collected from key informant interviews, participatory observation, and focus group discussion (FGD) as well as secondary data from a range of sources at all levels (local and national level). Specifically, information was collected utilizing semi-structured questionnaires designed for a household survey to explore the community perception toward TLL in two hamlet groups in Kupang.

The results revealed that, *first*, the large-scale land acquisition process for achieving salt self-sufficiency in Indonesia represents an assemblage of actors, historical events, as well as political, socio-cultural and economic structures that work at sub-national, national and international levels across different periods of time. As shown in Chapter 4, during the authoritarian New Order regime, the government mainly contributed to the process of land dispossession in rural Kupang. Granting the land to PGGS through violent threats by authoritarian regime and without proper compensation have shaped the land as an arena of contestations, which involve government, military

officers, and salt business (PGGS) on one side and local community on the other.

Second, the process in which salt companies facilitate access to and control over the land in Kupang is *not simply a linear process* in which ‘predatory’ companies steal land from ‘vulnerable’ rural communities. Investors do not dispossess villagers of their land; the state does by transforming the status of land into ‘state land’ and, then, allocating it to investors for long-term use. Companies make use of the discourse of salt self-sufficiency to ‘wedge’ their way in. The state, particularly, the government officials, plays an important role in facilitating this. Despite the failure of large land schemes, as seen in the PGGS case, the government still continues to legitimize large-scale land acquisitions in the same landscapes in the name of salt self-sufficiency by granting the salt-land to TLL.

Third, each actor involved in the process of land acquisition for salt has a vested interest in salt expansion. This has resulted in a *land grab competition* between the state, the corporate actors, and the local elites’ actors within Nunkurus. The central government wants to ensure the country’s self-sufficiency for salt, the local government wants to generate more revenue for their region, the corporate actors want to make profit through land holding and salt development projects, and the local elites’ actors through cooperation (co-op) want to obtain higher profits for their land. Since the central government granted HGU to PGGS in 1992, the constellation of power relations among the actors is ‘bipolar’, entailing the local community against PGGS and the central government, which were viewed as participating as a single entity in the HGU land. However, the power relation might be more complicated since the local government of Kupang release 596 ha of land to TLL in 2018, previously seen as being bipolar, toward *a more multi-polar contestation* with the salt company on one side, the local government,

and the local community on another.

Fourth, the process of land acquisition in Nunkurus has resulted in *benefits and adverse effects* at the local level. A majority of the respondents from Uel hamlets were concerned regarding the negative impact on environmental and social relationships after the government had granted land-use right to TLL. However, in Padang Beringin hamlet, there seemed to exist a polarization in the community's perceptions toward the company. Some people were of the opinion that this would have a *very positive* economic and social impact, whereas others believed it to have a *very negative* economic and social impact. This polarization in the perception represented the formerly unheard voices. People who perceived this to have a very negative impact were basically the members of the Feto Mone Sonaf Oninama (FMSO), who seemed to disagree with the existence of the TLL.

In conclusion, regardless of whether the salt self-sufficiency project will be a failure or a success, the process of legalization through a set of regulations leading to spatial planning has changed the ways of accessing and claiming land, excluding the people of Kupang who benefit from corporations via the state.

Based on an understanding of the phenomena of large-scale land acquisition for salt in this study, several policy implications have sprung up that needed to be developed. To secure land tenure rights for the people of Kupang, the government should (i) recognize and formalize customary community land rights, including the clearly established rights to the 'salt land' currently in use, and verify the community-led rights, confirming the demarcation of external boundaries around ethnic areas; (ii) apply the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) principal and prioritize the resolution of acute, existing land disputes involving customary land rights; and finally, (iii) create a comprehensive village or adat community land database with clear planning regarding

the community's future that should not only address the social aspects but also economically viable and environmentally sound planning.

This study however has some limitations. Conducting research in villages with a recent history of conflict with the salt company came across as a challenge. The tension was still high, and a considerable mistrust was seen toward people who allegedly supported the company. In this context, it was difficult to explicitly look for “pro-salt company” informants. More specifically, in conflict cases as such, no clear boundaries were observed between “supporters” and “opponents,” as people often have ambiguous perceptions regarding the salt project and the company and may change their stance with time. Further, because this study is a case study, its findings cannot be generalized for broader communities; however, it can be taken into consideration in similar geographical settings for wider discussions of ‘agrarian dynamic’. Finally, further work is needed to investigate the relationship between social heterogeneity, tenure complexity, and the progress of large-scale land deals.

Key words: *Salt, Self-sufficiency, Land grab, Rural, Agrarian change, Kupang, Indonesia*