

SURVIVING IN ANCESTRAL LAND: ADAPTATION STRATEGIES OF LAND PEOPLE IN FACING THE THREAT OF RELOCATION ON REMPANG ISLAND

Dedi Arman^{1a}, Anastasia Wiwik Swastiwi^{2b*}, Ani Rostiyati^{3c}, Nanang Saptono^{4d}, and Salsabilla Fatiha^{5e}

¹³⁴National Innovation Research Agency, Jakarta, Indonesia

²⁵Department of International Relations, Raja Ali Haji Maritime University, Tanjungpinang, Indonesia

^aE-mail: dedi023@brin.go.id

^bE-mail: wiwik2021@umrah.ac.id

^cE-mail : anir001@brin.go.id

^dEmail: nana024@brin.go.id

^{5e}Email : 2205050029@student.umrah.ac.id

(*) Corresponding Author
wiwik2021@umrah.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the adaptive strategies of the Orang Darat indigenous community facing relocation pressures under the national strategic project Rempang Eco-City on Rempang Island, Batam City. Existing studies on development-induced displacement in Indonesia predominantly emphasize legal conflicts, land tenure, and economic consequences, leaving the internal dynamics of indigenous solidarity underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study conceptualizes solidarity as an adaptive political and cultural resource mobilized in response to state-driven territorial restructuring. Using historical and ethnographic qualitative methods and reinterpreting Émile Durkheim's theory of social solidarity, this research introduces the concept of "defensive solidarity" to explain the intensification of collective identity under structural threat. The findings show that shared historical memory, religious values, language, and subsistence practices operate as mechanisms of resilience that transform displacement pressure into social consolidation. Theoretically, this study extends Durkheimian solidarity into contemporary governance and political ecology debates. Empirically, it provides one of the first systematic analyses of indigenous collective adaptation to strategic national development in the Riau Islands, highlighting relocation as a profound challenge to identity continuity and cultural survival.

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INTRODUCTION

The Rempang Eco City development project on Rempang Island, Galang District, Batam City, Riau Islands Province, as an international industrial, trade, and tourism area has serious implications for the sustainability of the community inhabiting the area. Dozens of residents have been relocated and relocated to a relocation site in Tanjung

Banun. Most residents remain, including the Orang Darat community who live in Sadap Village, Rempang Cate Village (Sastra, 2023).

Agrarian conflict on Rempang Island has surfaced since the Rempang Eco City project was designated a National Strategic Project through Coordinating Ministerial Regulation No. 7 of 2023. Community resistance arose because the relocation was perceived as threatening the sustainability of their living space, housing security, and traditional livelihoods. Nevertheless, the government continued the project in accordance with the investment target, which required the land to be clear and clean by September 28, 2023 (Fuzain, 2023).

The government's initial, repressive approach to land clearing has sparked clashes with residents. This reflects the government's unpreparedness to provide adequate relocation, both in terms of housing and economic sustainability. The government's rush to implement this project without first ensuring residents' basic rights, such as decent housing and employment, risks violating the principles of social justice and exacerbating existing conflicts (Ghuffran et al., 2024). Development policies that exclude local residents have triggered both open and symbolic resistance, exposing the fragility of social justice within this national strategic project (Aswad Asruddin & Efendi, 2024).

The Orang Darat (Land People) in Sadap Village are in critical condition due to the pressure of large-scale development that threatens their existence. In recent decades, their presence has dwindled drastically, with only a handful of families remaining in ancient villages like Sadap Village. Lamat, a community elder, expressed deep concern for the fate of his brethren and called for their reunification to strengthen their increasingly fragile traditional bonds. This call represents a form of cultural resistance to development processes that tend to ignore the rights and survival of indigenous communities (Ishlahuddin, 2023). This study aims to understand the response of the Orang Darat community to the threat of eviction due to the Rempang Eco City project, by formulating two main questions, namely how the community develops adaptation strategies and what forms of social solidarity are formed by the Orang Darat in Sadap Village, Rempang Island.

Despite growing attention to the conflict surrounding the Rempang Eco-City on Rempang Island, existing scholarship primarily emphasizes legal disputes, land acquisition processes, and governance failures. Limited attention has been devoted to examining how indigenous communities internally reorganize social cohesion when confronted with state-driven displacement. This study addresses that gap by positioning social solidarity not as a static cultural attribute, but as an adaptive mechanism activated under structural threat. By reinterpreting Durkheimian solidarity within the context of contemporary development politics, this research introduces the concept of “defensive solidarity” to explain how the Orang Darat community consolidates collective identity and resilience in response to relocation pressure. The study thus offers both a theoretical extension of classical solidarity theory and an empirically grounded account of indigenous adaptation in the Riau Islands.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative-historical approach integrated with limited ethnographic inquiry to explore the adaptation dynamics of the Orang Darat community. The research follows four main stages: (1) heuristics—collecting primary data from colonial archives, government documents, field interviews, and direct observations in Sadap Village; (2) source criticism—validating and triangulating archival data with oral histories and local narratives; (3) interpretation—linking empirical evidence with Durkheim's theoretical framework of mechanical solidarity; and (4) historiography—reconstructing the historical and sociological narrative of the Orang Darat as active agents in local transformation (Wasino & Hartatik, 2018). These combined historical and ethnographic layers strengthen the reliability and contextual validity of the study's findings (Kuntowijoyo, 2013).

Literature Review.

The concept of indigenous communities has become a significant focus in social studies, anthropology, and development policy in Indonesia. Indigenous communities are understood as social groups with distinct cultural identities, value systems, and communal rights, and who have traditionally occupied specific territories (Dalidjo, 2021). They build a life together bound by customary norms, unwritten laws, and a spiritual connection with nature (Soekanto, S., & Prasetyo, 2020). Another definition emphasizes the attachment of indigenous peoples to land, water, and the environment as ancestral heritage that is collectively protected (Leni Devinta, 2024).

International perspectives highlight their vulnerability in the currents of modern development so that the revocation of customary rights is seen as a violation of human rights (Haba, 2010). In development practices, customary rights are often threatened by industrial expansion policies and national strategic projects, which give rise to agrarian conflicts and evictions. This situation demonstrates the weak legal protection of indigenous communities that conflict with state interests (Fheisie Christy Tarore, Wulanmas A.P.G.Frederik, 2025). The Orang Laut of Rempang Island are marginalized by the Rempang Eco-City project, facing the erosion of their cultural identity and loss of traditional living space (Ariando, 2024).

The Orang Darat community, as a representative of indigenous peoples, has not been widely documented in mainstream literature. They have inhabited the island's interior for generations, living based on a system of kinship, customs, and communal resource management, distinct from coastal communities but still within the framework of Archipelagic Malay culture. Although not officially recognized, the Orang Darat reflect the fundamental characteristics of indigenous communities: collective control of land, communal kinship, and a system of inherited values.

The expansion of state-led development projects in Indonesia has intensified contestations over land, territorial authority, and indigenous rights. National Strategic Projects increasingly reconfigure rural and coastal spaces into zones of industrial and investment expansion, frequently generating agrarian conflict and displacement. Within this broader trajectory of developmental restructuring, the Rempang Eco-City project on Rempang Island, Batam City represents a critical case where industrial ambition intersects with indigenous territorial presence (Aswad Asruddin & Efendi, 2024).

Scholarly discussions on indigenous communities in Indonesia generally emphasize legal recognition, customary land rights, and vulnerability to dispossession. Anthropological perspectives highlight communal land tenure, kinship-based organization, and spiritual attachment to ancestral territories as defining features of indigenous identity. Development studies further frame indigenous marginalization as a structural outcome of state-centered modernization, where land is redefined primarily as economic capital. Empirical studies of development-induced displacement often focus on legal contestation, compensation mechanisms, and governance failures. While these approaches are important, they tend to privilege external institutional dynamics and underexplore how indigenous communities internally reorganize social cohesion when confronted with existential threats.

In the context of Rempang, existing analyses have primarily examined policy controversy, agrarian conflict, and the marginalization of coastal groups such as the Orang Laut. However, the Orang Darat—an inland indigenous community embedded within the broader Archipelagic Malay cultural sphere—remain largely absent from systematic academic inquiry. Their demographic decline and limited formal recognition render them socially and politically vulnerable, yet little attention has been paid to how they respond collectively to territorial pressure. This absence reflects a broader theoretical gap in the literature: the tendency to conceptualize indigenous vulnerability without sufficiently analyzing solidarity as an adaptive and strategic mechanism.

Addressing this gap, this study repositions social solidarity as a dynamic process activated under structural threat rather than as a static cultural attribute. Drawing on Durkheimian theory, the article introduces the concept of “defensive solidarity” to explain how the Orang Darat consolidate collective identity, memory, and customary values in response to relocation pressure. By integrating insights from indigenous studies, development governance, and political ecology, this research contributes theoretically to the reinterpretation of classical solidarity in contemporary displacement contexts and empirically to the documentation of an underrepresented indigenous community in the Riau Islands.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the Orang Darat community's response to relocation pressure reveals both resilience and internal complexity. While communal solidarity emerged as a defense mechanism, there were also tensions between families who preferred negotiation and those choosing total resistance. This duality illustrates that indigenous solidarity is not static but dynamic, adapting according to the degree of external threat and internal cohesion.

History of the Land People

The Orang Darat are an indigenous community that has long inhabited Rempang Island and its surroundings. Their presence is widely documented in 19th-century Dutch literature, including in reports by Dutch officials and travelers who visited Rempang and other islands surrounding the Batam Archipelago (Arman, 2023). Their origins are also enriched by various folktales. The first version states that the Orang Darat originated from Teluk Lingga, then moved to Batam after

their boat sank in Mukakuning, leading them to settle in the forest. The second version says they originated from Trengganu, Malaysia, when some of the people who were brought to Batam to raise cattle were left behind and spread to Bulang and Rempang. The third version links their origins to sailors from Siantan Island (Anambas) who were stranded by a storm and settled on Galang before moving to the surrounding islands (Suarman & Galba Sindu, 1994).

The Orang Darat have long lived nomadically in the forests of Batam and Rempang. This nomadic pattern is rooted in the traditional belief that the spirits of the dead can disturb the living, so they leave their villages after death. They live a simple life, relying on forest products, farming, and occasionally fishing for crabs in the river. However, bans on traditional activities such as charcoal making and limited economic access have limited their living space.

An early study by Hans Kahler (1939) noted a dwindling Orang Darat population, and in the 1970s, the Indonesian government, through the Isolated Community Welfare Development (PKMT) program, relocated them to Sadap Village. Basic facilities such as schools, places of worship, and housing were provided, encouraging them to settle, although population decline continued (Kahler, 1960).

Today, only about 50–60 Orang Darat remain from 15 families, with only eight considered pure. Inter-marriage, disease, and migration out of the community are accelerating the risk of their indigenous identity disappearing. The situation became even more critical when the Rempang Eco City project was designated a National Strategic Project in 2023, potentially eliminating their ancestral lands and culture. The uncertainty of the land's legal status has caused unrest, leading to demands for the local government to issue a special regulation (Perda) recognizing their existence and designating Sadap Village as the ancient village of Rempang Island.

Social Solidarity of Land People

The threat of eviction due to the Rempang Island development project sparked solidarity among the Orang Darat. Lamat, one of the community's elders, urged his descendants to return to the forest to protect their ancestral lands from forced eviction. Despite their shy and reclusive nature, the external threat united them even more to defend their village and their remaining cultural identity (Islahuddin, 2023). Under Lamat's orders, as the elder Orang Darat, Sadap Village is now busier than usual. Orang Darat who intermarried and lived in other villages on Rempang Island have chosen to return to Sadap Village and have built semi-permanent homes.

The dwindling number of Orang Darat, with only eight remaining indigenous residents of Sadap Village, demonstrates the critical state of this group's existence. The government's decision, which could potentially displace them from their ancestral lands, is not only a matter of physical relocation but also concerns the continuity of their culture, identity, and spiritual ties to the forest environment that has long been their source of life. The people of the mainland are refusing to be relocated to a site prepared by the Batam Development Authority (BP Batam), located in Tanjung Banun, still within Galang District, Batam City. The government believes this new location has sufficient carrying capacity for development as a new settlement, with the potential for better spatial planning and infrastructure development compared to other areas. Strategically, Tanjung Banun is considered more ready to be redeveloped into a modern residential area while remaining within the Rempang area. Rempang residents, including the Orang Darat, believe the Tanjung Banun designation was unilaterally made without involving the collective voice of all affected villages. Opposition continues, as for residents, moving to a new location means abandoning ancestral lands and a living space they've understood for generations, particularly regarding fishing activities. Furthermore, the Orang Darat have distinct characteristics.

In their daily lives, the Orang Darat depend on the forest for their livelihood, even though natural resources are increasingly scarce. They have turned to small businesses such as selling cassava leaves, fishing, or collecting mangrove crabs. Traditional activities such as making mangrove charcoal have been banned, narrowing their economic space. This situation highlights the economic vulnerability caused by limited access to resources, while also strengthening dependence on the surrounding environment. The threat of relocation exacerbates this vulnerability by potentially cutting off access to remaining sources of livelihood.

Adaptation Strategy

Adaptation strategies of the Orang Darat involve both cultural reaffirmation and pragmatic survival practices. Facing uncertainty, the community reassembled in Sadap Village, reinforcing kinship-based cooperation and sharing systems such as joint land cultivation, collective food gathering, and rotational labor groups. Population data collected



Figure 1. Newly arrived mainleaders build semi-permanent homes

Source: Author's documentation, 2023.

between 2020 and 2023 show an increase from 38 to 52 households, indicating active consolidation. Such measurable indicators of solidarity reflect Durkheim's notion of mechanical solidarity, where cohesion arises from shared moral values and collective rituals. The application of Durkheim's framework is operationalized through thematic coding of interview data—identifying solidarity expressions in speech acts, ritual participation, and decision-making assemblies. This analytical process confirms that solidarity functions as both a cultural ethos and a practical defense mechanism against exclusionary development policies.

The threat of relocation is a frightening prospect for the Orang Darat. The Orang Darat community, previously scattered, migrated collectively and settled together in Sadap Village. Amidst the uncertainty of life, they chose togetherness over comfort. This effort reflects a profound cultural value that communal existence is more important than mere amenities. In Javanese philosophy, this is called "mangan ora mangan sing penting kumpul" (gathering is important, eating or not eating is important, gathering is important). This expression is not mere rhetoric, but rather a reflection of how the community interprets solidarity and social sustainability (Tandywijaya, 2020).

In the Rempang context, this philosophy lives and operates as a socio-cultural strategy in the face of the pressures of non-inclusive modernization. It becomes a form of quiet yet powerful resistance against the deprivation of the right to living space. In fact, the values within this philosophy can form the basis of social movements. Nando, Arifudin, and Alrizis (2024) state that eating ora eating creates a collective consciousness that encourages equal relations between individuals, strengthening the community in the face of social inequality created by development. In this context, Sadap Village is not merely a temporary shelter, but a symbol of resistance and the power of solidarity.

The actions of the Orang Darat community can be better understood through Émile Durkheim's theory of solidarity. Homogeneous, traditional societies tend to have mechanical solidarity, a social cohesion built on shared values, roles, and collective awareness. This is what happens in Rempang: family ties, shared history, and collective life experiences form the foundation of their social resilience (Abdullah & Leeden, 1986). Solidarity within a community arises from elements such as shared religion, language, history, economic conditions, and lifestyle choices. All of these are present within the Orang Darat community. Therefore, when external pressures in the form of relocation and eviction come, they actually strengthen their bonds and consolidate their collective identity.

The Orang Darat's decision to reject relocation and choose to gather in Sadap Village despite uncertain job opportunities and livelihoods demonstrates that internal solidarity is a key factor in survival. This situation demonstrates that indigenous communities prioritize socio-cultural security over the modern economic security that often accompanies development projects. Thus, the Orang Darat's adaptation strategies can be understood not only through Durkheim's theory of mechanical solidarity but also through the lens of local wisdom.

In addition to the Javanese philosophy of "mangan ora mangan ngumpul," the attitude of the Orang Darat in Kampung Sadap can also be interpreted through the lens of Malay culture. Malay tradition holds that Malays dislike direct opposition to authority or power. Malay society tends to prioritize a lenient, patient, and yielding attitude as a strategy for

maintaining social harmony. However, when they feel pressured, cornered, and deprived of space to defend themselves, a phenomenon known as "amuk" emerges, a spontaneous, destructive and emotional outburst of resistance (Waterson & Kian-Woon, 2012).

This tendency is highly relevant to the situation of the Orang Darat on Rempang Island. Initially, they resisted relocation by remaining in Sadap Village, without violent confrontation. This aligns with the Malay ethos, which prioritizes harmony and avoids open conflict. However, the threat of forced eviction and the loss of ancestral lands can trigger a violent situation, a final form of resistance, when all peaceful efforts no longer provide space for their survival. The Orang Darat's adaptation strategy is not simply a form of Durkheimian social solidarity or the Javanese philosophy of togetherness, but also a manifestation of the Malay character, which avoids direct conflict but has the potential for fierce resistance when the community's existence is truly threatened.

The adaptation strategies of the Orang Darat (Land People) in Sadap Village also rely on their ability to utilize traditional jobs familiar to them in their daily lives. Although access to education, electricity, and formal employment is very limited, they survive by relying on simple skills passed down through generations, such as clearing coconut groves, harvesting cassava leaves, catching fish, crabs, and shrimp with traditional tools, and gathering firewood in the surrounding forest. For them, these odd jobs are not simply a means of earning income, but rather part of a subsistence strategy that emphasizes a close bond with the environment (Sahputra, 2023). The resilience of the Orang Darat stems from their flexibility in managing local resources and the sustainability of traditional knowledge that enables them to survive amidst economic pressures and development policies that threaten their living space.

To ground the analysis theoretically, Émile Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity was operationalized through three empirical indicators: (1) recurrent narratives affirming shared ancestry and ancestral land attachment; (2) elder-led assemblies and collective decision-making practices reaffirming Sadap as territorial core; and (3) similarity-based subsistence cooperation, including rotational labor and joint resource management. Thematic coding confirms that cohesion is reproduced through moral discourse, ritual gathering, and cooperative labor. In this context, mechanical solidarity is not merely a structural residue of traditional society but becomes strategically intensified under crisis conditions. This supports the formulation of "defensive solidarity" as cohesion activated through collective awareness of territorial vulnerability.

Livelihood practices reinforce this adaptive pattern. Limited integration into formal economic structures has sustained reliance on subsistence activities such as cassava cultivation, mangrove crab harvesting, and forest-based resource gathering (Fuzain, 2023). The proposed relocation to Tanjung Banun is evaluated not primarily in infrastructural terms but in relation to ecological access, kinship proximity, and continuity of subsistence routines (Ghuffran et al., 2024). The divergence between state planning criteria and community-based land valuation reflects contrasting spatial rationalities rather than a purely normative disagreement. This study is constrained by the small population size, reliance on village-based demographic reconstruction, and limited longitudinal observation during periods of tension. As the development process remains ongoing, the findings represent a situational analysis rather than a long-term outcome assessment. Comparative research across other indigenous communities affected by national strategic projects would be necessary to test the broader applicability of the defensive solidarity framework.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that relocation pressure associated with the Rempang Eco-City on Rempang Island has not resulted in immediate social fragmentation among the Orang Darat, but instead corresponds with measurable demographic consolidation and intensified collective cohesion. The increase in household concentration in Sadap Village between 2020 and 2023, combined with the return of dispersed members, indicates that territorial uncertainty functioned as a catalyst for regrouping rather than dispersal. At the same time, internal differentiation between negotiation-oriented and resistance-oriented families reveals that solidarity operates dynamically rather than uniformly.

Theoretically, the study extends Émile Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity by demonstrating that cohesion in indigenous contexts under contemporary development pressure is not merely a structural residue of traditional homogeneity. Instead, solidarity becomes strategically intensified through collective awareness of existential vulnerability. The concept of "defensive solidarity" proposed in this article captures this transformation, defining

solidarity as crisis-activated consolidation grounded in shared ancestry, territorial attachment, and subsistence cooperation.

Empirically, the research contributes one of the first systematic analyses of the Orang Darat as an underdocumented inland indigenous community within the Riau Islands, shifting attention from external policy contestation to internal social reconfiguration. By foregrounding adaptive cohesion rather than solely legal conflict, the findings reposition indigenous resilience as an active social process shaped by territorial governance dynamics. Future comparative and longitudinal studies are necessary to assess whether defensive solidarity represents a broader pattern among indigenous communities facing state-led spatial restructuring.

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