Sintang: The Kapuas at Its Lowest Ebb, a Cradle of Civilisation under Pressure



A Portrait: A Land Smiling between Hills and Rivers

In both the mystical and physical geography of Kalimantan, Sintang Regency is more than a name. It lies at the heart of the archipelago's longest lifeline, the Kapuas River. With rolling hills, dense forests and morning mist faithfully covering its valleys, Sintang reveals an older face of Borneo, not yet entirely disturbed. At the foot of Bukit Kelam, a granite monolith rising 900 metres above sea level, ancestral stories tell of the beginnings of land and humanity.

Life here does not shout; it flows. Dayak, Malay, Javanese and Chinese communities have long learned that harmony is not a concept but a daily practice. They greet one another in markets, share water during dry seasons and sit together in *bamagang*, customary deliberations. Yet their deepest harmony is with nature. Land is cared for, not exploited. Forests are engaged in conversation, not plundered.

The Economy, Food Politics, Land and Culture

1. **The Political Economy of Food: Customary Rice versus Capitalist Rice**

   In political economy, food is power. Sintang has extraordinary agricultural potential, yet imported rice and "premium" rice from capitalist companies have flooded village shops. This is structural food dependency, in which the logic of markets destroys local ways of organising life.

   Indigenous communities such as the Lebang Nado, part of the Ot Danum group, practise a food system without commodification. Rice is shared as a gift rather than sold. This creates a culturally grounded solidarity economy—what Karl Polanyi called an embedded economy, rooted in social and spiritual relationships rather than market prices. When Santo Serilius and his community grow local rice organically, they are resisting a global corporate food regime that separates people from the sources of their food.

2. **Land and Ecology: Traditional Fields as a Bastion of Sovereignty**

   From a critical agrarian perspective, the traditional cultivation practised by the Dayak Lebang Nado is not simply "slash and burn", but a sophisticated agroecological system. Santo's one-hectare plot produces 1.5–3 tonnes of dry unhusked rice. This is comparable to average yields from Indonesia's rain-fed rice fields, but without chemical fertilisers, pesticides or debt to agricultural-input companies.

   More importantly, the surrounding forest supplies natural fertiliser. It is a partner, not an obstacle. Fallen leaves, woody litter and wildlife droppings become high-quality nutrients. This is an Indigenous form of permaculture in the archipelago, regrettably absent from modern agronomy curricula.

   The real threat comes from government-issued permits for large oil palm plantations, industrial timber plantations and mining on customary territories. In agrarian political analysis, this is accumulation by dispossession, a concept introduced by David Harvey. The state grants corporations access in the name of development, while marginalising Indigenous communities that have demonstrated their ability to secure food supplies.

3. **Culture as a Framework for Resilience**

   In Sintang, culture is not an ornament. It is a system of resilience. Prayers before making planting holes, prohibitions concerning certain trees known as *kayu larangan*, and reverence for Jubata are forms of social and ecological regulation that have endured for centuries.

   When Santo's parents taught him as a child, "Never stop growing rice, because it will sustain your life", they were sharing more than farming advice: they were expressing a philosophy of existence. People are growers, not merely buyers. Customary norms

prohibit selling rice and require giving it to others. This builds community-based rather than market-based food security.

Today, these values clash with the logic of capitalist monoculture, which prioritises a single leading commodity—oil palm, rubber or one hybrid rice variety. Indigenous communities instead maintain diversity: white rice, black rice, white glutinous rice and black glutinous rice. This biodiversity-based food system is more resilient to pests and climate change.

4. **Structural Threats and Policy Failure**

   Santo and his community face the conversion of customary land to oil palm, acacia or eucalyptus plantations and mines. These do not provide food; they supply crude palm oil (CPO), pulp and minerals to global markets.

   A rubber-price crisis has driven other communities, in desperation, to sell or surrender land to companies in the hope of profit-sharing through plasma smallholder partnerships.

   Meanwhile, proposals for national food estates would clear millions of hectares of forest without learning from the success of Indigenous farmers like Santo. This is a tragedy of food policy: the government allows rice imports to destroy local markets, then proudly plans to clear new land for food estates, while simultaneously stripping customary land rights from communities already producing food sustainably.

Closing Reflections: Santo Serilius, an Oasis in an Industrial Desert

Santo Serilius, born 38 years ago in Kampung Mendang, Bukit Sebalo Village, Kayan Hilir District, Sintang Regency, is more than a farmer. He safeguards a civilisation's memory. Amid the influx of corporate rice from Wilmar, Sinar Mas and others, the allure of oil palm, acacia and mining, and policies blind to local knowledge, he continues to grow rice.

With his family and customary community, he shows that food sovereignty does not require giant food estates. It requires returning land to Indigenous peoples and farmers who care for it. His ancestors' message still resonates: land is not an inheritance from our forebears, but a loan from our children and grandchildren. And rice is a debt of gratitude repaid by planting it again.

While governments and corporations count tonnage and profits, Santo makes planting holes in the soil of his beautiful village. His feet are steady, his hands skilled and a prayer to Jubata rests on his lips. He knows threats surround him. But he also knows that as long as someone still grows local rice without chemicals, and as long as someone still respects and loves the forest, civilisation has not truly collapsed.

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