

Indonesia's Orang Rimba: Forced to renounce their faith

By Rebecca Henschke

BBC News (17.11.2017) – <http://bbc.in/2iojzLG> – The Sumatran rainforests of Indonesia are home to the Orang Rimba – the people of the jungle. Their faith and nomadic way of life are not recognised by the state and, as their forests are destroyed to make way for palm oil plantations, many are being forced to convert to Islam to survive.

In a wooden hut on stilts, a group of children dressed in white sit on the floor. They sing “I will protect Islam till I die” and shout “There is no god but Allah”, in unison.

Three months ago, the 58 families that make up the Celitai tribe of Orang Rimba converted to Islam.

They were picked up and bussed into Jambi, the nearest city, and given clothes and prayer mats.

The Islamic Defenders Front – a vigilante group whose leader is facing charges of inciting religious violence – helped facilitate the conversion.

Ustad Reyhan, from the Islamic missionary group Hidayatullah, has stayed to make sure the new faith is practised.

“For now we are focusing on the children. It’s easier to convert them – their mind isn’t filled with other things. With the older ones it’s harder,” he says.

“Before Islam they just believed in spirits, gods and

goddesses, not the supreme god Allah.

“When someone died, they didn’t even bury the dead, they just would leave the body in the forest. Now their life has meaning and direction.

“[Before] they lived in the forest. They just lived for each day, each moment. When they died, they died. But now they have a religion, they know there is an afterlife.”

‘No choice’

But village leader Muhammad Yusuf – Yuguk, to use his Orang Rimba name – was thinking about surviving in this life when he converted.

“It was a very heavy and difficult decision, but we feel like we have no choice, if we want to move forward,” he says quietly.

“So that our children can have the same opportunities as the outsiders, the people of the light, we had no other choice. We had to all convert to Islam.”

Outsiders are the “people of the light”, because they live in open areas and are often in the sun, unlike the people of the jungle.

The surrounding majority Muslim population calls the Orang Rimba “Kubu”.

“It means that they are very dirty, they are garbage, you can’t even look because it is so disgusting,” explains anthropologist Butet Manurung, who has lived with the Orang Rimba for many years.

“It also means primitive, stupid, bad smelling – basically pre-human. People say their evolution is not complete.”

It’s thought there are about 3,000 Orang Rimba living in

central Sumatra.

“If you came before, you would have seen our forest. It was pristine, with huge trees,” says Yusuf.

Now there are seemly endless ghostly white burnt-out sticks in one direction, and palm oil trees in neat rows in the other.

The absence of any natural sounds is eerie.

“It’s all gone. It happened just in the last few years. The palm plantations came in, and then the forest started to burn,” adds Yusuf, referring to 2015’s devastating fires, which burnt more than 21,000 sq km of forest and peat land.

Every year, landowners start fires to clear land with devastating effects, but those fires were catastrophic because of a longer dry season.

Half a million people were affected by the toxic haze from the fires and dozens died from breathing problems.

“I was terrified. We were so scared of the flames and smoke all around us,” Yusuf tells me.

His tribe ran to the nearest village to escape and this was where the conversion process started.

Endangered population

“After a while, we wanted to send our children to school, but the teacher wanted to see their birth certificates, and for that you have to have a state religion that the government recognises.

“So we had a tribal meeting, and discussed what religion we would choose, and decided to choose Islam,” says Yusuf.

Indonesia – the world’s largest Muslim country – officially recognises six religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism,

Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

Indigenous rights bodies are fighting to get recognition for the hundreds of other faiths practised across Indonesia.

The country's constitutional court recently ruled in their favour, finding that it was against the constitution to force people to state a religion.

Rukka Sombolinggi, head of the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago, has been a key figure in this fight.

"We have been around before the new religions arrived, but now it's like they rule us, and want to clean us from this country. We have to fight back," she says.

She says the Orang Rimba are one of the most endangered indigenous tribes in Indonesia.

"They reached the point of complete hopelessness and saw that embracing one of the official religions would probably help them come out of this very bad situation. It is a matter of survival."

'No space to live'

I experienced a sense of the discrimination towards Orang Rimba, when I met a remote tribe still practising this nomadic, polytheistic way of life.

We were eating with them in the jungle when a police officer and local government officials arrived and asked what we were doing and if we had permits.

Our Orang Rimba guide Miyak was visibly upset, and asked why such documents would be necessary on his own land.

"We have no space to live. We are always told we are nomadic people with no religion, no culture," he told me.

"Our religion is not respected. The government is always

insisting that we convert and live in houses in one place. We can't do that. Our way of life is not like that."

"Why you are making our lives so difficult?" he asked the officials.

The officer, Budi Jayapura, took me aside to check my documents and said: "We need to watch over them.

"They don't understand the concept of stealing. They say the fruit grew by itself on the tree so it can be taken, but it was planted by someone. Maybe in their belief system it is OK, but not in our society."

The pig problem

The fact that they hunt and eat wild pigs also creates social tensions, he added.

"This is a Muslim community. If they see the pig's blood and the leftover bits, they are disturbed," the officer explained.

What is taboo, or haram, for the Orang Rimba directly contrasts with what Muslims eat, explains Mr Manurung.

"Orang Rimba will not eat domesticated animals such as chickens, cows or sheep. They think it's a form of betrayal. You feed the animal, and when it gets fat you eat it. The fair thing to do is to fight. Whoever wins can eat the loser."

This clash of cultures began in the 1980s, when then-President Suharto gave land and incentives to migrants from overcrowded Java to move and open up the jungles of Sumatra.

Since then, vast areas of forests, traditionally home to the Orang Rimba, have been handed out to palm oil, rubber and pulp and paper companies without compensation to the indigenous tribes.

Zulkarnai, a Ministry of Forestry official, who helped

facilitate the mass conversion of the Celitai tribe, admits that as a child, he thought the Orang Rimba weren't human.

"One day a 'Kubu' child stole fruit from one of my neighbours, and he shot him. We went over to the body, and I realised it wasn't a kind of animal, it was a human, just like us.

"I realised that we have to help them. I feel sorry for them. They will starve if they don't change."

In the last decades, millions of hectares of rainforest have been cleared in Indonesia, in what some studies call the world's fastest rate of deforestation.

Polluted land

New palm oil plantations have been increasing at a rate of between 300,000 and 500,000 hectares per year for the past 10 years.

In the last 30-odd years, more than half of Sumatra's forests have disappeared, replaced by monoculture palm oil plantations.

Sigungang's family lives on a palm oil plantation. He tries to hunt wild pigs when they come.

"But if we can't find anything, we are forced to eat palm oil fruit. It makes your head spin," he says.

The streams in the plantation are polluted with pesticide and his family is getting stomach problems drinking from it.

"There is no forest for them to hunt in, the water they fished in and drank from is polluted, and so is the air," says social affairs minister Khofifah Parawansa, matter-of-factly. "So we are giving them houses, villages to live in."

The government – working with plantation companies – has built a number of housing estates for the Orang Rimba.

Last year, President Joko Widodo announced more new housing and some land for them, following a meeting with tribal leaders – the first organised by an Indonesian head of state.

Minister Khofifah says faith is part of this process.

“On the identity card, they have to state what religion they have. There are those that have become Muslims, some who have become Christians. So now they are getting to know God.”

But many of the housing estates have failed and are effectively ghost towns.

Without work or a way to feed their family, many Orang Rimba who lived in them briefly went back to the traces of jungle that are left.

“What we want is for them to stop taking away our forest. We don’t want houses like the outsiders,” says Ngantap, one of the elders of an Orang Rimba tribe.

“I am at peace and happy in the forest, I am a person of the jungle.”

Ngantap wears the traditional loincloth of the Rimba people, with a bag of cigarettes hanging from the side.

Unmarried women traditionally wear simple sarongs covering the breasts. Once married, the sarong is tied around the waist leaving breasts open for feeding babies. Many now wear clothes from the outside.

But Ngantap insists they are holding on to their faith.

“It’s wrong to say we don’t have a faith. Religion is a personal right of every person. It’s very wrong to discredit someone’s faith.

“If our belief system is lost, and the gods and goddess have no forest home, disaster will reign.”

Ngantap's wife Ngerung tell me they are connected to the trees from birth.

"After a baby is born, three trees must be planted, one for the placenta, one for the baby, one for the name. They can never be cut down or hurt. When we walk through our forest we remind people of this."

Mr Manurung explains: "Orang Rimba worship many gods, the tiger [being] one of the most powerful.

"They have a god of bees, a god of hornbill birds, gods and goddesses of many trees. They also worship a god of water springs. They will never go to the toilet or put soap in the river, so you can drink it directly."

Sacrifice

Miyak, my guide, converted to Islam so he can travel and fight to try and protect his family's forest.

They are trying to register the forest as their ancestral land, following a landmark 2013 court ruling which said indigenous people have rights over forests they have lived in for centuries.

He can take part in meetings but not in religious ceremonies or rituals. As he now uses soap to wash himself and eats chicken and cows, he can't enter his family home.

"When I got educated in the outsiders' ways, there were many things that I had to sacrifice.

"But I accept that, because I am a messenger and bridge for many people here with the outside world and the government, about our forest and rights."

He still fears the gods and goddesses of the old religion.

"It's the sacred people – our women shamans – [that] I fear.

They can communicate and see the gods and goddesses.

“The shaman can become a tiger, can become an elephant if the gods are very angry, and attack people. I am scared of that. I worry about breaking the rules.”

But Miyak’s greatest fear is that is his people’s way of life will disappear forever.

.....

If you want to be regularly informed about different violations of human rights in the world, [click here](#) for a free subscription to our newsletters!

Also:

HRWF database of news and information on over 70 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/newsletters/forb/>

List of hundreds of documented cases of believers of various faiths in 20 countries: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>