
Indonesia: The Baduy people of western Java – living tradition

In the Banten region of western Java, Indonesia, exists a small-scale indigenous community that has to a large extent been able to avoid the advancement of globalization, modern technology and other influences of the outside world, including environmental degradation. The Baduy people are a reclusive tribal group that has lived a relatively undisturbed, traditional lifestyle in a closed society for more than 400 years until the recent encroachment of economic and social pressures from the outside world. Although they live in an isolated area of mountainous rainforest only 100 kilometres southwest of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital city, the Baduy have in the past been able to effectively seal their community off from the rest of the world.

Inhabiting a special reserve of some 5,200 hectares set aside for the Baduy people by the Indonesian Government, the population of about 7,200 people live in two separate clans. The Inner Baduy (Baduy Dalam), numbering only 350 in three villages (kampung) in the core area, are the strictest adherents to Baduy spiritual belief, while the remaining population live in the Outer Baduy (Baduy Luar) area. The Baduy Dalam is the centre point of culture and religious following and the focus of rituals and sacred sites within the Baduy territory. Symbolically, the Baduy Dalam clan members may wear white with the black traditional clothing, while the Baduy Luar clan members are characteristically dressed in black or dark blue. The Baduy Luar serves as a buffer zone between the Baduy Dalam and the outside world with members of the outer clan acting as intermediaries for the more pure members of the inner clan.

Baduy houses are uniformly simple, constructed only of natural materials, such as bamboo and palm thatching, without windows, and are devoid of any furniture, chairs, tables or other furnishings. They use no modern utensils, mechanized equipment or manufactured materials, such as glass or plastic, and no modern device or even domestic animal is used in their traditional swidden rice farming techniques. Within the Baduy territory there is no electricity or other modern conveniences, and no electronic equipment, motor vehicles or other instruments of the outside world are permitted to enter. Thus, the Baduy community is perceived by many an anachronism in today's rapidly industrializing Indonesia, rejecting all forms of modernization and still following unique cultural and religious practices as defined by the Baduy adat law systems handed down by their ancestors more than four hundred years ago.

A most extraordinary aspect of Baduy society is the origin of this tribal group, which today still remains shrouded in mystery. According to one legend, when Muslim forces began to spread the Islamic religion through western Java and other parts of the archipelago in the early part of the 16th century, an ascetic group of people said to have originated within the ancient Hindu Kingdom of Pajajaran refused to embrace the new religion. Instead, these people fled to the upper regions of a nearby mountain range (Kendeng Mountains), forming their own religious clan based on strict adherence to unique religious beliefs; perhaps influenced in some ways by the Hindu religion of the Kingdom of Pajajaran before it fell to the Muslim invaders.

Although there has been scholarly literature about the Baduy way of life since the early days of Dutch colonialism, much of what has been written is second-hand information, often contradictory, and

perhaps intentionally misleading. The Baduy seem to have long ago realized that one of the strengths of survival for their culture is to remain hidden behind a cloak of mystique. They jealously guard the knowledge of spirituality and ritual within their community, permitting no outsider to enter the sacred places or view traditional rites within the Inner Baduy region.

The Baduy believe in one central deity, whom they call Batara Tunggal, and regard themselves as the descendents of seven minor deities sent to earth by Batara Tunggal at the beginning of human-kind on the planet. The Baduy hold as most sacred a remote place near the centre of Baduy territory, known as Sasaka Domasa, where this event is said to have occurred and where the spirits of their ancestors are protected and revered. However, all Baduy territory is regarded as protected and sacred, particularly the most significant forest areas which are not permitted to be disturbed or altered. Consequently, these forests comprise a valuable environmental reserve and a perpetual resource for sustainable use by the community.

Today, the Baduy people exist as an isolated, small-scale traditional community surrounded by mainstream Indonesian society, which in western Java alone is comprised of some 40 million followers of the Islamic faith. In spite of the external forces of modernization and the pressure for this small community to assimilate within modern Indonesian society, the Baduy tribe still controls its mountain stronghold where religious and cultural practices have remained largely unchanged until very recent times.

While they have been able to maintain a relatively traditional life-style until recently, the Baduy people are beginning to be influenced by developments in the world around them, including the forces of modernity, industrialization and globalization. Ironically, the Baduy way of life has until now been culturally and ecologically sustainable and they have lived in relative harmony with the environment. Embodied within the Baduy society is great wisdom and knowledge about the conservation and sustainability of eco-systems and the interconnectedness of all living things with the earth and the cosmos.

Today, a burgeoning Baduy population and increasing contacts with the outside world, have led to the development of a more market-based village economy dependent on cash crops and sale of handicrafts. In recent years, the Baduy have placed an increasing emphasis on agro-forestry production, such as the timber plantation Albizia tree, fruit, palm sugar and other products grown almost exclusively for sale on local markets, rather than the formerly self-sustaining cultivation of hill rice (ladang).

These changes have begun to cause some cultural, social and environmental impacts, which are most evident in the increasing use of non-traditional, western-style clothing, consumption of packaged fast-foods and use of other manufactured goods that are purchased with money obtained through growing cash crops. Although prohibited by Baduy adat law, some other modern articles imported from outside the Baduy territory, such as thermos bottles, radios and even the mobile phone, are becoming increasingly commonplace in Baduy homes.

Another important aspect of these recent developments may be seen in the impacts of a rapidly growing, local tourist industry catering to outsiders who are drawn to see and experience the uniquely spiritual Baduy way of life. Perhaps unwittingly, the Baduy people, who have generously opened their doors to visitors from outside the Baduy realm, and the tourists themselves, are participating in a gradual process which may degrade valuable cultural and environmental assets. In time, changes brought about by exposure to the steady stream of tourists may destroy the local resources that are now a prime attraction for tourists. Under such circumstances it is not necessarily tourism per se that

creates problems for local communities, but rather it is most often the lack of planning and management of tourist demand, access and activities. The impacts of unmanaged tourism may indeed pose the greatest threat of all to Baduy culture and the greatest challenge to maintaining their sacred traditions for the future.

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