The Weaving Ladies Who Saved Mollo

By Adiyana Kase
The message from Mama Marcelina Anone is still ringing in Yati’s ears. At that time Marcelina, also called Mama Salin, was lying helplessly on a wooden bed at the corner of her lopo, or round house. She has been coughing and having breathing problems for over a week. Her health condition was getting worse.

"You must take care of the rock, otherwise you will become a stranger in a foreign land". In the month of November, two days after she gave the message, the woman whom she called her aunt passed away.

Mama Salin was sick for only two weeks. She fell ill right after she tried to stop the drilling machine used by PT. Teja Sekawan to split Faut Ob, or the Ob rock in Kuanoeel village.

She, along with her three female friends, Veronika Bay, Mareda Lapenangga and Yuliana Fuka tried to block the company from destroying the sacred rocky mountain in their traditional land.

The incident happened in the morning, when there was only about a dozen people keeping a watch around the Mount faut Ob. For five days the people of Kuanoeel and Fatumnasi villages, Fatumnasi District, South Central Timor (TTS) have been guarding Faut Ob and also Faut Lik which is located next to Faut Ob. Both are the rocky mountains that are not only considered sacred, but also the source of water for the people living in three villages, including the Bijapunu Village, North Molo District in North Central Timor Regency (TTU).

Actually the people wouldn’t be there in the first place guarding the two mountains if the Regent of TTS, Daniel Banunaek, had not issued the license to the mining company from Surabaya to take out the rocks. They say that the rocky mountains are composed of first class marble. Since then people became uneasy.
The mining company came in August 2005. Without prior notice and consent from the people, they suddenly came in with excavators, drilling machines, steel chains, tow trucks and other heavy equipments. Soon they began to clear up the plants and trees around Ob and Lik rocky mountains using machetes. They proceeded to drive a drill bit into the rock, and began to split the rock.

RAAAAARRR...RRROARRR...RAAARRRR...
The roaring drill machine sounded like a large motorcycle that is throttling its engine multiple times before starting a race. Yati could even hear the rumbling sound from her home which is located about 200 meters from the mine location.

A few weeks later, the company managed to cut a giant cube-shaped stone block from Faut Ob. The people living around the rock could only watch as their sacred rock was being destroyed, without being able to do anything about it. The company always stated that they were allowed by the government to take the stone. They also argued that the company provided new job opportunities for the people even though there were only about tens of locals who were accepted to work for the company.

However the people began to get anxious. The anxiety of Fatumnasi and Kuanoei people finally turned into anger because the company did not want to hear their protests. The people began to come, started arguing with the company, and ordered the company to stop the drilling and leave that location. But the company wouldn’t give in. They did not want to leave and chose to stop the drilling temporarily. They stayed at the house of Mama Yusina Balan which is located right under Faut Ob.

The people were actually disappointed with Yusina Balan for allowing the company to use her house as their headquarter. But Yusina Balan, also known as Mama Sina, had her own reason. "The company came with Mr. Lambertus Omatan. We thought they were good people, so we could not do anything". At the time Lambertus Omatan was the head of Fatumnasi District.
The mothers were the ones who were most upset, because the two rocky mountains are the source of their water. In Mollo, mothers are responsible for providing water in the family. Anger peaked again because the company also uses the water to wash their equipments and the marble stones. They were ready to evict the company.

Finally the people agreed to expel company by occupying the mine area. Hundreds of people from the two villages eventually occupied the rock, all day. Adult male, adult female, also parents and even children were involved. Day and night they stayed under the rock. They were cooking, eating, boiling corn, drinking, chewing betel nut, telling stories and even weaving under the rock.

Since that time the people have two residences, one their own houses and one under the rock. The mothers came with looms and they were weaving around the trees located on the drilled rocky mountain.

The mothers said that if they just sat around all day guarding the rock, they wouldn’t be able to do their work. However if they take the looms with them, they can continue working while guarding the rock.

If they left the rock and worked at home weaving, the rock would be mined and they would suffer. "Because the area around the rock is the source of their water and firewood", said Mama Salin.

At the time there were about 50 women who were weaving at the mining site. One of them was Mama Salin. Yati still remember Mama Salin’s answer to her son-in-law who asked why she was bringing a loom to the mining site. "Let me take this loom down, I’ll weave a scarf with ‘STOP MINING’ message on it." Mama Salin responded passionately.

That was how the people from the two villages guard Faut Ob and Faut Lik. They were weaving and occupying the mining site since September 2005. There were many extraordinary incidents that happened, one of which was experienced by Mama Salin.
It was the fifth day for the mothers weaving at the mining site. That morning, most people left to feed the cows and pigs in the houses before returning to the mining site later during the day. Mama Salin was still there along with some other women.

Suddenly, the sound of drilling machine was heard coming from the direction of the Faut Ob. At first the sound was muffled but it was getting louder and louder that eventually the roaring shook the earth.

Mama Salin quickly got up and screamed. "There is a thief, there is a thief!" She ran up while she was screaming and asked some of her friends to go with her. They saw four men standing holding a drill machine on a marble slab. A cloud of dust enveloped the area.

Mama Salin’s anger peaked. She and her friend started yelling at the company workers and ordered them to turn off the drill. But the workers were stubborn.

Mama Salin’s rage was so intense that she climbed up the rock, came to the drilling site and seized the drilling machine that was still spinning.

Meanwhile her three friends tried to stop the company workers who insisted on drilling. Finally the drill was released, the engine died. Up to now the drill bit is still stuck in the rock.

The shouting and fighting were heard by the others. Soon, the place was full of people, hundreds of them. Again they managed to stop the activity of the company.

Mama Salin managed to release the drilling machine. But her hands were blistered. She was also coughing because she inhaled the dust from the drilled rock. But she did not care.

Over the next two weeks Mama Salin was still guarding the rock, weaving together with her friends, before she fell ill.
When Mama Salin died, Yati was still in Soe with about fifty people from the two villages. They decided not only to occupy the stone, but also to come to Soe, the capital of TTS District to ask the Regent to revoke the company's mining license. They were mostly women and they came to Soe by two trucks.

Unfortunately, the Regent refused to meet them even though they stayed in front of the Regent's office for 8 days from November 7 to 15, 2005.

When Yati heard the death of Mama Salin, she decided to go home and attend the funeral of her aunt. "I still got to see the body of Mama Salin lying in the tin house. She was wearing a white kebaya and a red woven sarong with a colorful pauf motif," said Yati telling her last seconds before parting with Mama Salin. Traditionally, every person who dies in Mollo should wear woven fabric.

After the funeral, Yati went back to Soe joining her friends who was occupying the Regent's office. Meanwhile Mama Salin's friends were still weaving around the rock.

They occupied the mining area for 6 months. It was a difficult time for them because they need food and other supplies for the rock occupation.

They also need money to pay for the transport of people who went to meet the Regent. Initially everything was done independently. Every day each family donated food, such as bose corn, sweet potatoes, cassava and bananas for them to eat.

But the donations were insufficient to provide food during the occupation, not to mention the cash for transportation costs. If they do not sell their harvest it is not possible to get cash. But they didn't have time to do it because everybody reduced their working hours to guard the rock.

Finally the people in the two villages agreed to form working groups which would raise funds. There were three groups formed, with about 7 to 8 members each.

They tried to find work as a group and donated their earnings for the struggle. One of the groups tried to make money from working on farms.
Yati and her friends then worked on a land owned by Nicodemus Anin. The area of the land was about one hectare. Their group was paid Rp50,000 for their work from morning till noon.

The money was then used to buy food. Some of the money was also used to rent the truck that took the people to meet the Regent in Soe. They staged a protest in front of the Regent’s office.

The company did not sit still. They sent some thugs who constantly tried to disrupt them during their occupation at the Regent’s office. Almost every night, the people received verbal abuse. Some times they were stoned. Some even got violent attacks. But the people of Fatumnasi and Kuanole did not budge. “As long as Danial Banumaek won’t see us, we will continue to occupy his office,” said Yati.

But the regent still would not meet them. After the people blocked all access to the Regent’s office and sealed the door, he sent his vice regent to meet them.

The meeting itself was disappointing. Piet Lobo, the vice regent was not dependable. “We cannot promise, but we’ll try to revoke the permit,” he said unconvincingly.

The people finally had to go back to their homes with disappointment. Meanwhile during the night while they were still occupying the Regent’s office, there was a rumor that they will be attacked by thugs from the company. Eventually they were transported to the TTS police station and spent the night there, before returning to the villages the next day. In the village, after the drilling machine seizure incident of Mama Salin and her friends, the situation was peaceful again. The company stopped its activities.
However the peace did not last long. The company sensed the support from the regent which was shown by his refusal to meet the people who came to Soe. They began to act more boldly. This time they brought a 12-wheel Fuso truck to transport the marble stone that they managed to cut earlier. Finally, they managed to transport the giant marble cube.

The people tried to prevent it by throwing large stones into the road so that the company truck could not pass. But the thugs that were brought by the company was able to deter the people. On the same day, there were two trucks that carried the thugs into the village.

Since then, people showed no mercy. They did not give the company any room to move. They took turns to occupy and guard the rock. They lived there, even celebrated Christmas on the rock.

On Christmas Eve they went to the church. After praying in the church, they walked slowly in line toward the mining site. Everybody was holding a candle because there was a power outage.

A representative leader from the people and the priest were giving their speeches on a stone. The stone was as big as a house. It was cut previously by the company using a drilling machine. Although December is a rainy season, the people kept guarding the rock. They finally returned their own houses when the last heavy equipment was hauled out of the mining location in February 2007.

The safety of the rock and water is the reason for the Mollos to expel mining companies because most of them are dry land farmers. Water is precious there. Corn can only be cultivated once every year, while vegetables, such as carrots, leeks and beans can be cultivated twice a year if water is available.

However in the last two years water availability is becoming more limited due to lack of rain. "There has been no rain for this year from January to November, just like last year. The leeks are dried in the field. We have not been able to plant again," said Mama Elizabeth Oematan who lives in Koanoel Village.
The experience of struggle to keep the rock apparently provided an important lesson for the Mollo people. Not only they have managed to keep Faut Ob and Faut Lik, but also years earlier 22 villages on the slope and foot of Mount Mutis united to drive away another mining company that was destroying faut Nausus and Anjaf in 1999.

Faut Nausus is known as the mother of rock, the most sacred rocky mountain there. It was once the gathering place for the whole tribes in Timor Island.

Learning from this struggle, the people formed an organization called OAT, or Atoe Mamus Organization in 2002. At the village level, they also formed farming or weaving groups.

"We have a group garden with an area of about one-half hectare," added Elizabeth. The name of their group is Rindu Sejahtera and it was formed in August 2011. The members are 12 women from Koanoel village. The group garden became a demonstration garden to create a terrace and plant vegetables. Unfortunately, in recent months many plants died due to lack of water.

During the planting season, all members of the group worked in the field from 9 am to 2 pm. They bring crowbars, hoes, spades, and machetes to clear up and work the soil together. After the soil is upturned and the rain came, enough water is available and it's time for them to start planting carrots, leeks, beans and kumbang. Kumbang is a type of Chinese cabbage.

The group garden does not only play a role as a demonstration garden, but it also provides a revenue and cash to the group. Since Rindu Sejahtera group was formed last year, the group has collected a fund of Rp. 940,000. In last July, the group decided to use half of the funds to purchase two sacks of rice and divided the rice evenly to the members. Each person received about 7 kilograms of rice.

In addition to farming, the working group also does weaving to develop economic empowerment. "We usually roll the threads together and then the rolls are taken by each member of the group for weaving in their own houses," said Mama Elizabeth, the head of the Rindu Sejahtera group. The finished cloths are collected by Mama Elizabeth. Most of the proceeds from the sale of the cloths are deposited into the group's treasury.
Right now, Rindu Sejahtera group is trying to process the local food crops such as white taro, bananas, carrots and cassava into snacks such as chips and crackers. Currently they only dare to sell snacks to the local community.

Actually what brings together the members of Rindu Sejahtera women’s group is weaving. This is because weaving is the work of Mollo women. At one time, every Mollo woman must be able to weave. A Mollo woman was allowed to marry only after she was able to weave her own wedding dress.

Almost all daily activities of the women in Mollo are connected to nature, such as the farming activities that require water which is stored by the land under the forest. Weaving is also related to the forest, because the materials and the looms are obtained from forests.

Before weaving the loom must be prepared. Looms are usually made from wood, bamboo, cow leather, and rope from gewang tree, a type of palm tree that has broad leaves. However today cow leather is rarely used. People replace it with a plastic bag. The ropes are now also plastic. The loom consists of parts such as a pole, nekan, sial, puat, senu, panaf and paosniun.

Nekan, sial and puat are usually made of old Obyang bamboo in the garden or forest. Nekan is a part of loom where yarns are placed while sial and puat are used to adjust the motif of the cloth.

Pole, panaf and senu are made of timber, such as an old cassowary tree, natbona and ampuru wood which are usually planted in the garden or found in the forest.

Pole and Paosniun – which are made of cow leather, are used to hold the loom. One section of the loom is fastened to the pole, while the other section is hooked to the body of the weaver. Paosniun is usually attached to the waist of the weaver, making her always sit up straight during weaving.
On the other hand, the materials for weaving consist of yarns and dyes. The yarns were formerly obtained from the cotton plant, grown in the yards of the houses and gardens. Usually cotton can be harvested after one a year in warmer areas, or after up to two years in colder regions.

Cotton must be spun through several processes using several tools, including Bninis, Sifo, ike Suti and none.

The cotton that has been harvested must be cleaned and dried. The seeds should be discarded, which can be done manually, but usually done using a tool called Bninis. This tool comes from forest wood, and looks like a noodle machine. If cotton is inserted and the crank is turned, the wheels will crush and separate the cotton from the seeds.

After the cotton is clean, the cotton fibers must be stretched before being spun. This time sifo is used. It is shaped like a bow. It is made of bamboo and rope. After the cotton fibers are stretched, then they are rolled into a shape resembling a cocoon. These rolls are called Nasun. The number of Nasun can be tens, or even hundreds depending on the size of the cloth to be made.

The Nasun is now ready to be spun. The tool used is called ike Suti. ike comes from forest wood. It is a place to tie the yarn during the spinning process. ike looks like a yarn spindle with a long slender shape. ike spins above Suti which is a type of bowl that comes from coconut shell, sometimes also from a large shell or wooden bowl. One hand is holding nasun, while the other hand is spinning the ike. After the yarn fills up the whole body of ike, it must be transferred to the yarn spindles before being sorted by a tool called None.

Spinning the yarn takes a great deal of time. That's probably the reason why many Molo women prefer buying the yarn at the store to spinning it. It is not difficult to get the yarn from the store. All they have to do is go to the market and buy the yarn with the color that they like. The price is cheap, about Rp 1,250 - Rp 2,500 per spool.

Not only that it is becoming harder to find cotton trees, spinning also requires skill and patience. Although most Molo women can weave, not all of them are able to spin. That is why the weaver’s group in Molo began to cultivate the cotton plant in order to revive this natural material which is used in the weaving according to the tradition passed down from their ancestors.
The efforts to cultivate cotton just began in several areas such as the Hatsampaot group in Tuna which is now growing cotton in an area of about one hectare. The cotton trees are only about one-half years old. The Mandiri Noenoewaver’s group also planted cotton trees in an area of one-half hectare. Unfortunately, the long dry season made some of the cotton trees unable to thrive. "But we will keep on growing them. This rainy season we are going to plant more cotton seeds," said Mama Maria from Noeno.

Just like the loom, the dyes are also obtained from the forests and gardens such as the wild arbila leaf for green dye, turmeric for yellow dye, and the bark of Casuarina and noni for red dye, matoj bark, indigo, tarum leaves and meko roots for black dye. Some of these dyes are used without cooking, and others require cooking. Of course cooking needs firewood gathered either from the garden or from the forest. After the dye is prepared, the spun yarn is dyed and ready to be woven.

It is evident that the tools and materials used in weaving come from the forest and gardens. If the forests and gardens are not maintained and cared for, weaving will become a rare activity. Weaving is women’s work. "If the forest is damaged the women will suffer because there won’t be any materials to weave," said Mama Maria.

Weaving is the identity of the Mollo people, the identity of the traditional community. "From birth the Mollo people are tied to the strong adat. The adat is a very precious thing that cannot be separated from the body," said Metu Salak, one of the traditional leaders of Kuanoe village.

They are required to wear the woven fabrics at wedding ceremonies, adat events and meetings. The Mollo people also wear them when they go to church, or other formal meetings. The woven fabric is also a form of honor and respect. For example, people give a woven fabric when they receive guests, invite people to come, or to express gratitude for someone’s help.

However the woven fabrics are also a medium for conflict resolution. During a conflict resolution, the woven fabrics are used to pay traditional fines. For example, in the case of out of wedlock pregnancy, both families of the man and the woman, in addition to paying the adat fine, must also give blankets or sarongs to cover the shame of the families being involved. Similarly, in case of a livestock dispute, a woven fabric is a sign that both sides have reconciled. In addition to paying adat fines, blankets are also used for wedding gifts and to give thank to the invited guests.
However, nowadays, many young generations of Mollo people who no longer knows adat. They prefer using clothes such as pants, short pants and usual sarong. Probably it is due to economical and practical reasons.

Later, since the establishmen of OAT, the Mollo people agreed to reaffirm the Mollo tradition that has been eroded and almost lost in the changing age.

In 2011, when they held the traditional festival of Ningkam Haumeni, they produced adat rule on the use of woven fabrics. When attending a traditional event in any village, including wedding ceremonies, or going to the church, the people are required to wear the woven fabrics, especially when attending wedding receptions and other traditional meetings.

They also pledged to strengthen food security and save their water sources. This is an effort to strengthen their previous pledge to live independently.

“Haimi sosa salehaimo, et mihine, Haikami sosafa sa lehaikamo e fa”. This means that we only sell what we can make such as woven fabrics and locally processed materials and we cannot sell what we cannot make such as rocks, water, soil and the forests.
Adryana Kase

“The Luminaries of OAT Institute”
Adryani as known as Yați is a 32-year-old activist of the A Taimamus organization (OAT) in Kuannoer village, South Central Timor regency. Her involvement began when there is a penetration plan of marble mining in her area. If the investment is carried out, there will be environmental damage such as landslides, given the topography of the hilly area with a quite high slope and there are many scattered residential.

To strengthen the capacity of communities around the mining site, Yati and her friends from OAT institution carried out facilitation on strengthening of Business Activities in Productive Economic (KUEP) in form of processing woven fabric and households-scale farming. The purposes of this activity are so that people will not be easily get provoked and sell their land to investors, because people can fulfill the needs of their families through their regular income. Yati currently facilitates 120 communities group in 32 villages in South Central Timor (TTS) regency, East Nusa Tenggara.