Fighting, Armed by The Map of Customary Territory

By Nifron Baun



Onme - Onme Hai Pah Ma Hai Nifu
Tpao Mat Panat Pah Ma Nifu Neo Sufa-Ka'uf
"Whatever happens, this land will remain to be our customary territory. And, we are determined to keep it for our future generations"

The words above must have some magical power for the members Atoin Meto Tribe in the District of North Mollo, South Central Timor/Timor Tengah Selatan (TTS) Regency. During customary meetings discussing the future of the tribe, uttering these words enable them to cast away any doubts and pessimism that sometimes engulf members of the indigenous group. Just like the flames that ignite and burn their spirit.

These words are not an empty slogan, they have gone through a historic process and it will continue to be remembered by the members of the Atoin Meto Indigenous People which is commonly referred to as The Mollos. It was a triumph for them when they managed to expel a marble mining company which had seized and tore apart their customary land.

It was a long and arduous process which took their lives and liberty, and they seems to gain new strength each time their customary leaders utter, *"This is our customary land and we are determined to keep it for our future generations."*

These words were kept alive after the victory of the fight for their ancestral land. However, the Mollos realize that they cannot solely depend on these words. Based on learning from past experiences, they are aware that they cannot fight for customary land just by using a slogan, but they should obtain acknowledgement so that the squatters who own the permit issued by the local government cannot grab their land as they like. And, the first step is to create a map of their customary territory.





The History and Richness of the Mollos Traditions

Before the establishment of the current TTS Regency, there were three kingdoms or autonomous regions in the area, namely Mollo (Oenam) Autononous Region, Amanuban (Banam) Autonomous Region,and Amanatun (Onam) Autonomous Region.

In the past, the MolloKingdom was part of the oldest kingdom in Timor Island, theNetpala Kingdom. Its areacovered theVillages of Lelobatan, Fatukkoto, Bose, Sebab Leloboko, Nefukoko, Anjabaki, Eyondasi, andObefi. The Netpala Kingdom then gave birth to Numbena Kingdom whose territory covered the area of Nifu,Lilana, Tune, Bonleu, Fatumnasi, Kuonel and Tunua Villages. Those villages still exist today and the people are mainly farmers who work with their farm, land, livestock, and use the forest by wisdom (Siti Maimunah, 2009).

The Mollos live around the foot of Mount Mutis which is the highest mountain in the western part of Timor Island. Nausus and Anjaf Rocky Mountains are located in this area. It is from this point that all waterflow comes from and all chains of life connects together.

For the Mollos, Nausus and Anjaf are the universe of their lives and the center of their life cosmos. For the Mollos, water, forest, soil and rocks are part of their identity. *Oel nam nes on na, nasi nam nes on nak nafu, naijan nam nes on sisi, fatu nam nes on nuif.* (The water is the blood, the forest is the hair, the soil is the meat, the rocks are the bones).

Nausus and Anjaf are not only a cultural identity of the Mollos, but they also have a strategic function as a water catchment area. There are several upstream of big rivers such as the Noelmina, Benanain, and Oebesi Rivers there, and they provide the fresh water for most of the people in Timor

In addition, since the time of their ancestors, the Mollos have used the area for herding their livestock and farming.

According to CO Sakeng in his writing titled *Cagar Alam Mutis yang Terusik* (The Disturbed Mutis Natural Reserve), the Mutis Mountain area has a homogeneous high land forest type of vegetation. This area is also dominated by various kinds of important crops, such as *ampupu (Eucalyptus urophylla), sandalwood (Santalum album), Timor white gum (Eucalyptus alba), bijaema (Elacocarpus petiolata), Native Olive (Olea paniculata),* kakau or mountain pine *(Casuarina equisetifolia), manuk molo (Decaspermum fruticosum),* and *oben (Eugenia littorale).*

Beside its rich flora, Mutis' tourism area also has a variety of fauna that is typical of Timor. Here visitors can see the Sunda sambar *(Cervus timorensis),* gray cuscus *(Phalanger orientalis),* wild boar *(Sus Vitatus),* water monitor lizard *(Varanus salvator),* Timor monitor lizard *(Varanus timorensis).* There are also Timor python *(Python timorensis),* junglefowl *(Gallus gallus),* Timor pigeon *(Treon psittacea),* Timor parakeet (*Apromictus jonguilaceus),* Timor Imperial-pigeon *(Ducula cineracea),* rainbow lorikeet *(Trichoglosus haematodus).*



In the customary system, the King controls the territory but he does not own the land. The landowners are chiefs of indigenous people or *Atoin Amafs*. Using this existing local wisdom, all the *Atoin Amafs* of Netpala namely Toto, Tanesib, Tafui, Sumbanu, Seko, Ba'un, Bnani, and Lasa, divided the Netpala customary territory into two parts: pasture with trees and settlement area with shifting cultivation (swidden agricultural practice).

The Losing Access and Resistance

The living territory of the Mollos that complies with the inherited customary rules faced some challenges from the outside world when Dutch government colonized the Timor Island. Also after the independence of the Republic of Indonesia, the transition from the autonomous region system into a regency (from 1958 to 1960), which was then consolidated into the local government system (1960 to 1998), and finally in the decentralization era (1999 to present) has systematically weakened the power of Mollos over their customary territory. According to one of the customary leaders from Lelobatan Village, Peter Almet (63), the weakening of their power becomes evident in the 1980s when a reforestation project entered the pasture area. It was then followed by different forestry projects such as timber estates (HTI), Community Forest (HKM), Forest and Land Rehabilitation Movement, National Parks and Nature Reserves. All of these projects take away the access and flexibility of the Mollos in using their customary territory. For example, the livestock are no longer allowed to be released in the pasture, they should be leashed, because they can damage the young trees planted by the government.

The forestry projects are not the only problems that reduce the power of the Mollos over their customary territory. During 1997 to 2001 the government issued a marble mining permit on the sacred area of the Mollos; the rocky mountains of Nausus, Anjaf, Nanjaf, and Naetapan. Before the exploitation started, the people was never even consulted let alone involved in the process. All they know and feel is that since the introduction of the marble mining company in the area, their lives are affected.



The workers of the company supported by the security forces, prohibited people to have activities around the mining area. They were not allowed to farm, garden, or tending their livestock there. The area was fenced and guarded. These ritual sites inherited from their ancestors which had existed for hundreds of years were destroyed. What's even more painful was the rocky mountains which are the center of their life cosmos were torn and destroyed using dynamites. Since then, the identity of the Mollos was robbed.

"Similar to a human being, this area was once perfect. It had its hair which was the forest and all the trees growing there. It had its life-giving blood, which was the waters stored in the ground. It had its skin and meat which was the soils and rocks that became the backbones of the region. Such was the beauty that was once here. When the marble mining company came, everything was destroyed. Imagine if it's a human being who has no eyebrows, hair, how will he look like? "said Peter Almet

A resistance was launched. Under the leadership of a mother of two children, Aleta Ba'un (46), the Mollos, together with the members of Amanatun and Amanuban indigenous people, which were supported by a network of non-governmental organizations, were able to expel the mining company. Actions such as the land occupation by weaving at the mine location, protests at the regent's office, and other social movements have enabled them to regain their ancestral land.

However, the face of Anjaf and Nausus have already been scrubed and scraped. Also, there is no guarantee the problem will not be repeated in the future.

The struggle for customary rights requires clear evidences. One of the evidences is a map of Netpala customary territory. This matter was discussed by the Mollos in March 2011 at the Nausus House of Learning. This map is important as a tool for lobbying and negotiation and also a learning tool for the future generations of the Mollos.





Initially, not all customary leaders were optimistic. *"Hai mis hem lul makan Peta ije onme, es fun hitahin ok oke hai ka misskola fa, sa anteni het paek alat GPS,"* said Oshias Oematan, one of the customary leaders in a loud voice which made everyone silent at once. It means, how can we draw a map of our customary territory if none of us ever go to school let alone use a GPS (Global Positioning System) device?

This opinion was addressed wisely by Aleta Ba'un. "It's not a matter of going school or not going to school. It's about our unity in our fight for our land. We can share our tasks and burdens, "she said quietly, but firmly. Aleta statement was immediately followed by shouts of agreement in unison and also, *"Onme-onme Hai Pah Ma Hai Nifu!"*. Whatever happens, this land will remain to be our customary land.

The process of making map then began. The tasks and duties were distributed. The first step was information digging. It was done by dividing the people into two groups, the young and the old. The young people's tasks were to write historical stories related to the Mollo-Netpala's customary territory, determine the coordinates, and draw them into a map. Meanwhile the old people's duties was to tell the history of Atoin Meto Indigenous people, lead traditional rituals, and provide local food logistics. The information gathering process went non-stop for two full weeks.

The second step was the training in the map-making of customary territory. Fortunately, the Participatory Mapping Service Node (Simpul Layanan Pemetaan Partisipatif) assisted them by sending two reliable facilitators. The facilitators taught the Mollo young people some skill in making maps. The subject materials and testing on the use of GPS were given for three days, which took place in the never ending, pouring rain.

The third step was surveying the coordinate points. This was actually a difficult step. Not only did the mapping team have to go through forests, rivers, cliffs and canyons, but theyalso had to deal with bad weather. Some suggested to postpone the step, but Aleta dismissed the idea. "I don't care what happens, the team must go. Delays will only burden the group that provides the logistics."

A traditional ritual to stop the rain was conducted. Mantra was spoken by a traditional rain master (pawang hujan). The author who was the survey team leader was presented with a glass of traditional wine (arak). Also, a small sacred stone was held while a message on the trip was read, "Go ye to trace through the valley and the river, in and out of the woods, up and down the mountains. After that, go home safely and bring the game to me and others who are waiting in this lopo." Unbelievable! Just after ritual ended, the sky was bright and the rain gradually subsided leaving a distinctive smell of the soil. It was time to move, carry out the mandate of hunting the coordinate points.

It took three weeks for us to do the survey. The difficulties faced on the trip became insignificant compared to the spirit that lies in the hearts of every member of the team. Thank God, no serious problems were encountered during the trip. A traditional ritual was held to welcome us. It was exciting and thrilling at the same time because the work was not complete yet. Those coordinate points must be interpreted and connected together to form a map.

The fourth step was the declaration of customary territory map. The map drawing process was completed at the time which coincides with the 2nd Ningkam Haumeni Festival, held on May 29, 2012,the World Anti-Mining Day.

All the customary leaders of Netpala and other indigenous people groups bordering the territory signed the map. This is the instrument of the Mollos for acknowledgement of their rights on land, water, forests and rocks, according to historical evidence.

Unfortunately the people were not given the chance to declare their map in the presence of TTS local government and Ministry of Rural Development officials. I do not know why. Nevertheless, this did not discourage the Mollos to continue their mapping process in the Numbena Kingdom customary territory. It also did not eliminate their conviction in the validity of their map in the future. Aleta Ba'un, other leaders and the people of Mollo, believe they do not face their struggle alone. There are many community networks and non-governmental organizations that have agreed to keep helping them and accompany to the next process.

Indeed, it is not an easy way to go forward. They need support from many stakeholders so that the future of the Mollos are brighter and more defined. This article was written for that purpose, to disseminate the information so that more people will support them. Moreover, the Mollos have promised, *"Whatever happens, this land will remain to be our customary territory. And, we are determined to keep it for our future generations"*



Nifron Baun

The young man who often wear typical sarong of East Nusa Tenggara is a community facilitator in Tiga batu Tungku (Molo, Amanatun, and Amanuban), South Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara.

Nifron life's motto in every movement is "Never Surrender, Keep on Trying" which means to not afraid of failure, if persist on trying, someday it will be succeed, both in program and action wise.

