

The Enggano

An island people of Indonesia
in search of recognition



Coastal view of Enggano Island. Credit: Eleanor Fithen

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AKAR
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 Forest
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Programme

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Summary

Enggano Island off the west coast of Sumatra is inhabited by the Enggano people who are seeking to reassert control of their island and their own destiny. This report on their situation and aspirations results from two years of support work with the Enggano by the Bengkulu-based Akar Foundation and the UK-based international human rights organisation, the Forest Peoples Programme, and derives from the direct testimony of the Enggano and a desk survey of the available literature.²

The island appears to have never been physically linked to the Sumatran mainland and has a high level of ecological diversity, species endemism of plants and animals, and a rich marine environment. Due to the island's relative isolation, the Enggano people themselves are notably distinct from other Sumatran societies. Genetically they show closer affinity to South East Asian mainland peoples than Sumatrans while the Enggano language is also puzzlingly different from other Austronesian languages, although it is now increasingly influenced by Indonesian and other Sumatran dialects. 19th century visitors also noted the similarity of traditional Enggano house-styles to those of the Nicobar islanders. As for the Enggano themselves, their own legends place them on the island since time immemorial. Although archaeological investigations on the island have barely started, it is plausible that ancestors of the Enggano have inhabited the island for as long as 10,000 years.



Early drawing of colonial encounter with the Enggano people. Source: Wikipedia³

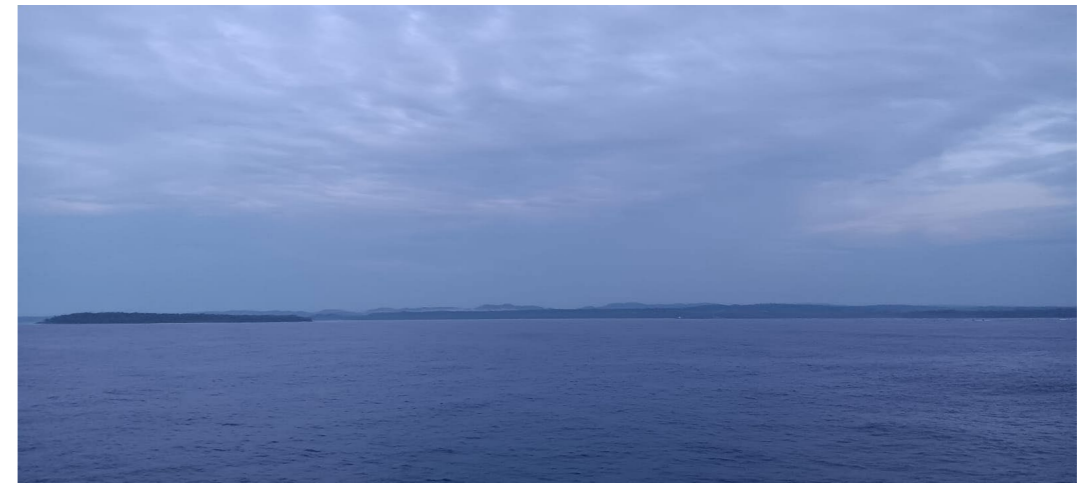
The island is said to have got its name from Portuguese traders in search of the prized spices of the Indies who felt deceived by the absence of such resources when they first came on the island (engano in Portuguese means a disappointment or deception). The sparse early Dutch records of their contacts with the island suggest that the island was left relatively untouched by the Dutch East Indies Company and by the succeeding colonial administration until the mid-19th century. From the 1850s onwards, however, the Dutch made efforts to pacify and resettle the islanders, establish coconut plantations for the copra trade and extract an unpopular head-tax payable by every adult islander.



Traditional Enggano. Source: Blench 2014.⁴

The Enggano themselves have developed a highly distinctive way of life dependant on the abundant marine and terrestrial resources of the island and its surrounding waters. While occasional trading links with the Sumatran mainland were sustained from early times, their economy was mainly subsistence-oriented, based on swidden-farming, hunting, fishing and gathering.

The Enggano have a highly developed social order based on matrilineal clans and extended families, with traditional male and female elders in defined roles who govern the society and its relations to their lands and waters through customary law. Rights in land are held collectively by local matrilineages and establish deep connections of the people, through belief, language and rituals, with their natural environment and the ancestral spirits who act as the island's guardians. Lands and clan membership pass down through the female line, giving Enggano women elders a strong status in the society. Remarkably, this customary system of governance has evolved to accommodate settlers on the island even though most islanders and settlers profess world religions.



Dawn view of Enggano Island from the East

Since the establishment of the independent Republic of Indonesia in 1945, Enggano has been gradually integrated into the national administration and society, meaning that a parallel system of governance and new social norms have been superimposed on Enggano ways. Today the island enjoys a thrice-weekly ferry service connecting it to the mainland and a sporadic air service. New markets in marine and agricultural products are taking advantage of the ferry service and cash-cropping has started by both islanders and outsiders. A new, semi-formal land market is rapidly developing which is overriding customary land tenure norms, while offshore trawlers are degrading local fish- and shellfish-stocks.

Outsider investors and government officials have variously proposed that the island be developed for natural resource extraction, as an off-shore casino, a space port, an oil palm plantation and a tourism destination. However, other government departments have recognised the distinctive culture of the Enggano, are promoting a more bottom-up model of development and have started to encourage the use of the Enggano language in schools. An interdisciplinary team of academics from Indonesian, Australian and British universities is also promoting a language revival through documentation and the provision of teaching materials in the Enggano language.

The Enggano themselves recognise that their language, identity, culture, customary law and livelihoods are subject to change – some of which is imposed, some self-generated – and are now seeking to establish a fairer process of engagement with the national society, more consistent with their own way of life. They have registered a claim to their customary lands and seas, are reviving their customary decision-making system and are evolving a protocol for mutually agreed decision making, in line with their rights under international and national laws. The provincial government and legislature is now being asked to recognise the Enggano as an indigenous people and secure their territory including marine resources, assist them to protect their culture and right to self-governance, within the framework of the national laws.

Methods

This short report is based on the Akar Foundation's first two-years of engagement with the Enggano people and on a short field visit made by Forest Peoples Programme staff, Marcus Colchester and Patrick Anderson, along with colleagues from the Akar Foundation, Pramasty Ayu Koesdinar and Warman Kudus, and volunteer, Eleanor Fithen, in July 2024. As part of its work in support of the Enggano, the Akar Foundation has recruited 3 local residents, Adam Kurniawan Kauno, Hariman Kauno and Adul Jalil, as Community Organisers (CO). These CO facilitated all the meetings we held with local spokespersons and shared the information they have consolidated over the previous months. The collaborative report also draws on all the available sources we have been able to identify through web-based and library research which reference the Enggano and which are listed in the endnotes.



Enggano Pabbuki, Milson Kaitora, with Marcus Colchester and Patrick Anderson, showing the island's location



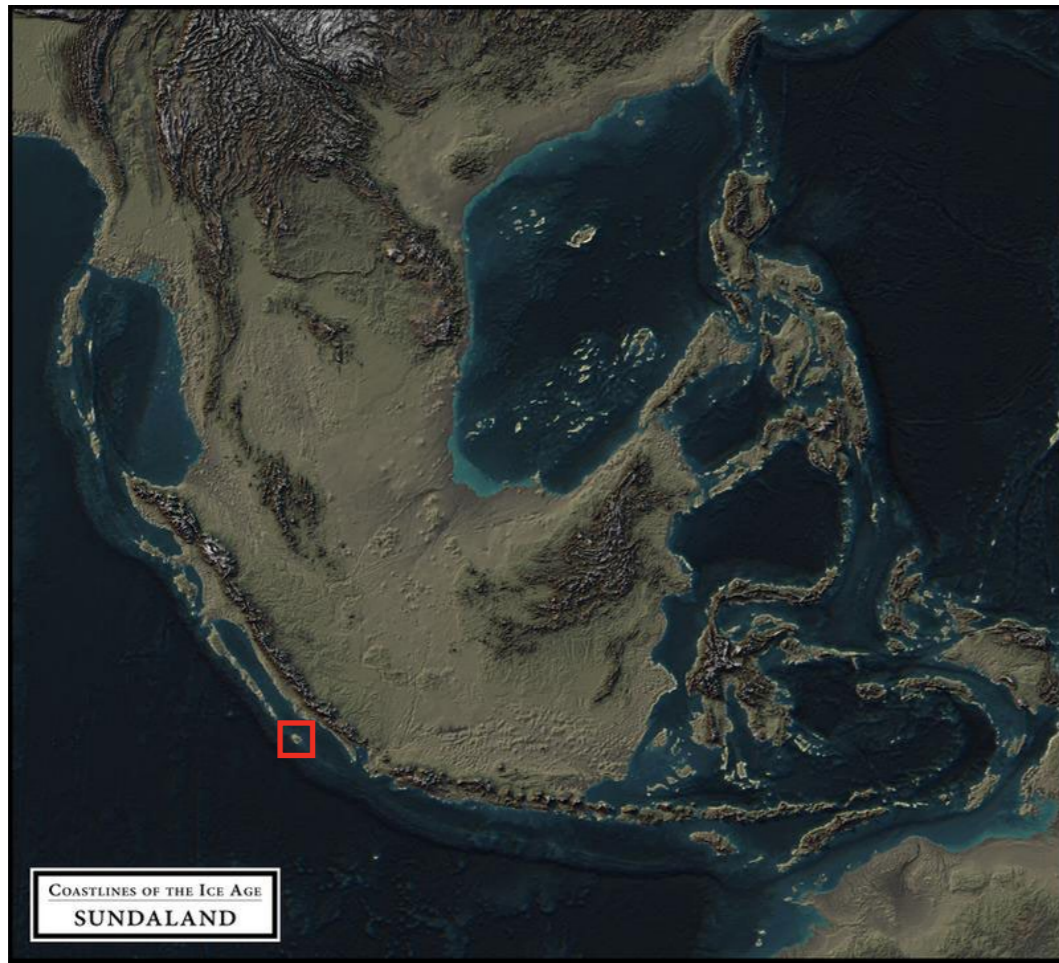
Discussing Enggano history and land tenure systems. Credit: Eleanor Fithen

Information was collected during three days of 'focus group discussions' and a one-day long, larger community workshop. The result is no more than an initial snapshot of the Enggano, their current situation and their aspirations for the future. However, the text has been checked by the Enggano and the CO for accuracy and so represents an attempt to present a consultation-based summary of the Enggano's situation.

Physical geography

The Indonesian island of Enggano, with its four surrounding islets, lies deep in the Indian Ocean some 100 kilometres off the west coast of Sumatra. The main island is about 40 kilometres long and 17 km wide and has a low coastal plain around its margins with a more hilly interior rising to only 150 metres above sea level. Although much of the island is forested, it has a very mixed ecology, including mangroves, brackish swamps, savannah grasslands and areas of secondary vegetation and swidden, attesting to a long history of human occupation and use.

While geographers include it as one of the Barrier Chain Islands that lie west of Sumatra, and which include the islands of Nias and the Mentawai islands, unlike these others Enggano was never physically linked to Sumatra. During the ice ages when sea levels were lower, these other islands of the Barrier Chain formed part of 'Sundaland', the name given by geographers to the land mass which included Java, Sumatra, Borneo and Peninsula Malaysia. In this sense, Enggano shares more in common with the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the north, which were and are also isolated isles in the eastern Indian Ocean.



Estimated extent of Sundaland 21,000 MYA showing location of Enggano. Source: Wowshack⁵

Because of this geographical separation, the fauna, especially the mammifera – like tigers, deer, monkeys and apes, tapirs, elephants and rhinoceros - shared by the remnants of Sundaland, are not found on Enggano. The island's unique ecology has thus led to the evolution of a wide range of endemic species including a number of endemic plants,⁶ and endemic birds such as the Enggano Thrush,⁷ Enggano Scops Owl and species of white-eye and myna. Also rare elsewhere is the Enggano Imperial-Pigeon.⁸ The island's long sandy beaches are important as a breeding site for marine turtles.

The ecological isolation of the island has of course been breached by visiting boats for a very long time. It is thought that the pigs, which now roam wild in the interior, were brought in during the Portuguese colonial period. Feral cattle and water buffalo came later, while wild deer (*rusa*) were purposefully introduced into the savannahs by Tommy Winata in the 1990s for sport-hunting by the Jakarta elite.

Origins

Most likely because of this same isolation, the eponymous people of Enggano are also unique to the island. For example, a genetic study of Enggano mitochondrial DNA suggests that the Enggano are descendants of pre-Austronesian populations from the South East Asian mainland and are not closely related to the other peoples of Sumatra and the Barrier Chain Islands.⁹ This is not implausible as archaeologists have noted human occupation of Nias, another Barrier Chain Island, from as long as 12,000 years ago, which is long before Austronesian language-speakers are thought to have migrated out of Taiwan and settled in Sumatra.¹⁰ Recent compilations of archaeological, linguistic and cultural studies in Mainland and Insular South East Asia, conclude that there have been repeated migrations and wide exchanges of artefacts and knowledge across the area, including by sea, ever since the palaeolithic and repeatedly once agricultural methods developed, even before the Austronesian expansion, which was itself far more complex than originally surmised.¹¹ However, whether or how much these early interactions affected Enggano is yet to be investigated.

The Enggano language has also posed a puzzle to linguists. The relative dearth of Enggano words that are obviously cognate with the languages of Sumatra initially led some to suppose they spoke a language 'isolate', in the same way that the languages on the Nicobar Islands show no obvious relationships to other Asian language families. Other linguists conjectured that the language was related to the Austro-Asiatic languages of mainland southeast Asia, a language family that includes, Mon, Khmer and Vietnamese but also includes the so-called Aslian languages spoken by the Aboriginal Peoples (*Orang Asli*) of the Malayan Peninsula.¹²

Further studies have confirmed the uniqueness of the Enggano language in terms of its grammar, vocabulary and phonology, all of which show notable differences from the many Austronesian languages spoken by most Indonesians.¹³ A speculative summary in 2014 of then existing knowledge concluded that Enggano is either a language isolate that now includes borrowings from Sumatran languages and the Indonesian national language, or is a mixed language that combines Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian elements, or else is an Austronesian language that has incorporated words and structures from whatever prior language was spoken on the island.¹⁴ In 2015, a survey of all the languages of Sumatra and surroundings listed Enggano as 'unclassified'.¹⁵

More recent studies carried out by academics from the Universities of Udayana, Bengkulu and Oxford, with long-term contributions from the Enggano themselves, concludes that Enggano is an unusual variant of Austronesian, with unique elements (possibly including loan words from a prior island language). Their painstaking studies of recent and past vocabularies and other records, has allowed these researchers to trace a continued process of language change, and borrowing from Indonesian and other Sumatran languages, which is still underway.¹⁶

Today, from an island population of about 4,189 people in 2024, self-identified Enggano make up over half of the population but predominate in only 3 of the six administrative villages now present along the northeast side of the island.¹⁷ There remain about 1,500 active speakers of Enggano.¹⁸

Ethnohistory

The Enggano recount various stories of their origins.¹⁹ According to a version told to us during our field visit:

There was a woman who was stranded on Enggano Island (at that time, Enggano Island did not have a name). The woman survived on the Island by looking for food from the sea and forest. She survived in this way for quite a long time, but the poor conditions impaired her vision. She saw a stone like a shell on the edge of the beach, which she prized open with a stick while reciting 'Kimanipe Manipah', and a man came out of the shell-like stone. After that they had children from whom all the Enggano's clans are descended.

The myth explains the matrilineal basis for Enggano society and, like many Austronesian origin stories vests authority in a founder settler and ties their descendants' identity to their use of both the land and the marine resources on which their livelihoods depend. Such stories are in effect a charter underpinning the social order and the people's connections with, and rights to, their territory.²⁰

A much earlier Dutch compilation of Enggano legends was published by the Dutch State Museum,²¹ while an official project to record and archive Enggano myths is now being attempted.²²



The Enggano recall an era when they lived in isolated and widely separated villages in the uplands because there was war between the different settlements. Traditional houses were protected by fences or palisades, and the round, thatched dwellings were raised off the ground and were only accessible by laddered posts, which could be drawn up into the house in case of threats of attack.²³ According to researchers, in the past, settlements would relocate after the death of a leader. Ancestral spirits were, and still are, at once revered and feared for their powers and so deference to customary law is reinforced by this respect for ancestors who continue to play a role in daily life.²⁴

Traditional house. Source: Blench 2014 from Modigliani 1894²⁵

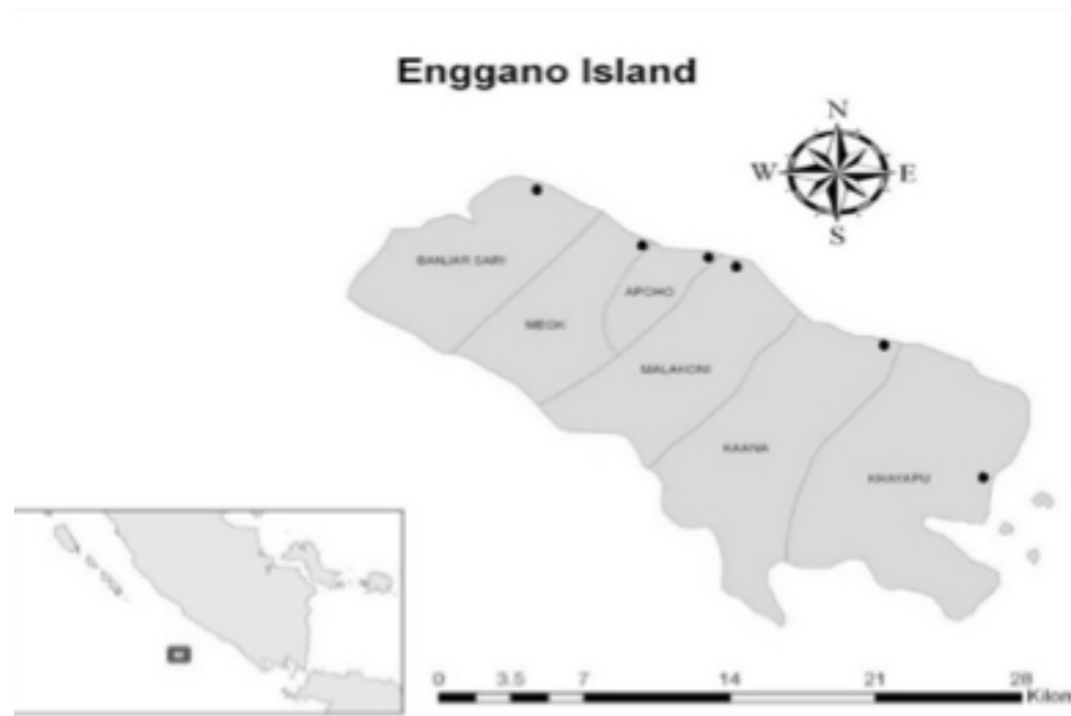
The available sources suggest that from about 1500 onwards the Portuguese undertook occasional trading visits to the island but as their dominance in the archipelago was superseded by the Dutch, these visits of colonials became more predatory. The Dutch archives record instances when they enslaved islanders,²⁶ but no Enggano whom we talked to recall any such events. There are however stories of Enggano who were taken off island for unexplained reasons and then came back to the island after a long time to re-establish their membership of the community.²⁷



Dutch ship SS Enggano: merchants ships for inter-island trade were vital to the colonial economy

Once the Dutch established an administration on the islands in the mid-19th century, they prohibited the fighting and encouraged the islanders to move down to the west coast. There they promoted coconut plantations with the aim of developing a cash income based on copra. However, reportedly, the Dutch had a problem recruiting farmers willing to make this transition so, in order to encourage the development of a cash economy, a head tax was imposed. This was resented by the Enggano and led many who had been lured down to the coast to return to their upland villages.

In the early 20th century, European missionaries established the first churches on the islands and began a process of converting the Enggano to Protestant Christianity, although the extent to which this religion overlay rather than replaced the Enggano's traditional belief system is unclear and seems to vary depending on who one talks to. Most of these churches were later run by Batak priests from North Sumatra. It seems that the influence of Islam has come later, mainly after independence, so that today while the majority of settlers are Muslim and also some Enggano, the majority of Enggano profess to be Protestant.



Map of Enggano administrative villages. Source: Blench 2014

The Dutch plantation economy on the island was further challenged during the Japanese era when the island was heavily fortified by the building of bunkers on the land and forts on the coastal reefs, remnants of which are still visible today.²⁸ The Enggano recall that during this period of occupation conditions were harsh as they were forced to grow vegetables to supply the Japanese garrison.

After the end of World War II, the Dutch returned to the island but the coconut plantations were not further developed and they fell into abeyance with the transition to independence. As one interviewee recalled: 'No one knew who they belonged to'. Then in the 1950s, once an independent Indonesian administration was established, and after a serious earthquake, the islanders moved their settlements from the southwest coast to the northeast coast, where they remain today.

Archaeological investigations in Enggano have barely scratched the surface in tracing these changes in human occupation of the island and have yet to yield evidence pre-dating the colonial era.²⁹

Society

As explained to us by the Enggano representatives, Enggano society is organised on a matrilineal basis and is currently composed of 6 large descent groups (what we might call clans in English), five of which comprise the original lineages of the Enggano people³⁰ and the sixth being a construct of all the settlers who have come onto the island since the 1960s and who are considered under customary law to also be rightsholders, there with the permission of the Enggano people.

Within each of the five clans, they are smaller matrilineages called *kaudara*. Traditionally, marriages are by preferences contracted with spouses from different clans but when marriages are within a descent group then it is stipulated this must be with a person from a different *kaudara*. In the past, the rule was that on marriage a man moved to live with the *kaudara* of his wife, who was the one to inherit lands. It is said that this rule is not so strictly followed today. A study of Enggano marriage traditions has revealed complex ritual and customary law practices, which include symbolic processions welcoming the newly married couple into the Enggano social world and then the performance of a traditional 'ant dance' in the evening, which emphasise the new couple's mutual obligations and ties to the wider society.³¹

An academic study published in 2022 records that:

Enggano customary law community is still guided by the Enggano cultural values system in the form of customary settlement patterns, communal customary forests, customary marriage systems, customary inheritance systems, customary hereditary principles, which are related to the kinship system of the Enggano people, namely there are five indigenous tribal groups consisting of the *Kauno* tribe, the *Kaahoao* tribe, the *Kaarubi* tribe, the *Kaharuba* tribe, and the *Kaitora* tribe. Each tribal group has at least four tribal branch groups. A tribe is a kinship group consisting of all the descendants of an ancestor that is calculated through maternal (*matrilineal*) ancestry. To distinguish the indigenous people of Enggano from the immigrant population, there is a special designation, namely the *Kamaik* tribe.³²

The clans and *kaudara* all have their traditional leaders who meet to resolve any internal disputes and maintain peaceable relations within and between the lineages and villages. When matters cannot be resolve locally they are escalated to the higher level. A paramount leader, *pabbuki*, with his assistants, provides the final decision-making authority on the island. With some exceptions, noted later, incomers who are classed as members of the *Kamay* clan, accept this decision-making system and thus have a stake in the customary law and customary governance system of the island.³³

According to the same wide-ranging academic study of the Enggano kinship and governance system:

Paabuki's position was not by election, but by appointment by previous paabuki through a tribal meeting attended by all tribal chiefs (*ekap'u*), a traditional secretary (*orai*), and a true mother (*kahuae*). This method of appointment was considered the best, because previously the paabuki were the people who best knew which of the tribe members was most appropriate to replace the paabuki position. In addition, a person who will be appointed to become a paabuki is recognized by the tribal members as someone who truly masters customs, traditions and customary law rules, so that later becoming a paabuki is able to pay attention to and take care of the interests of the tribe, both in words or deed.³⁴

In line with their matrilineal kinship system, women also hold important roles in the Enggano's traditional governance system. Each *kaudara* has an *orai* who is the oldest woman of the local matrilineage and is charged with administering heirlooms, fines and finances. Each family also has a 'true mother', *ka'hue*, who is the respected holder of the family's land.³⁵

Relations to the land

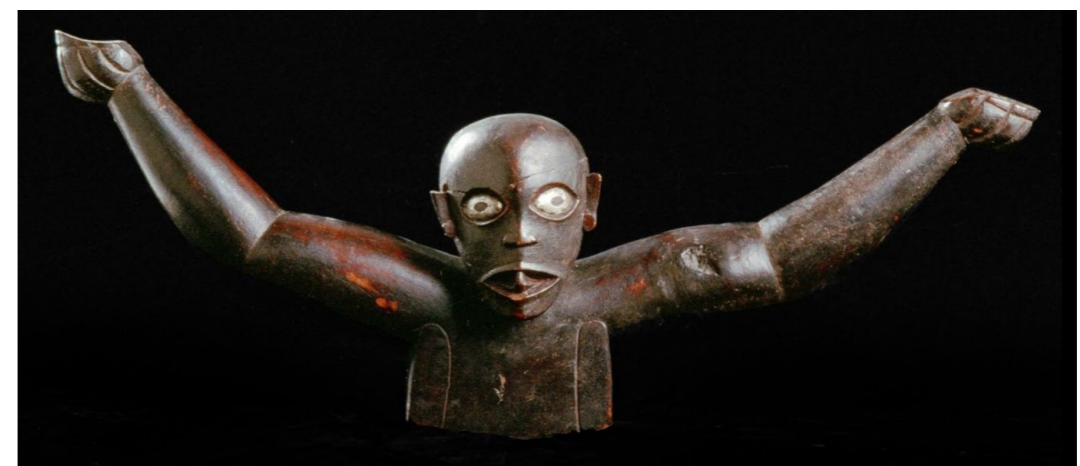
Traditional Enggano society depended on a mixed and mobile economy of hunting, fishing in rivers, streams, lakes and in the seas surrounding the island, and subsistence farming, mainly of vegetables, bananas and root crops, of which cassava was a staple, as well as fruit trees like durian. Apparently, rice was adopted more recently. Whereas hunting and fishing areas were open to all islanders without a sense of exclusive ownership, farmlands were considered to be the property of specific settlements and were divided up between clans.

Although land was not in short supply and so finding enough farmland to fulfil family needs was not that challenging, access was defined by your membership of your matrilineal descent group. Within the descent group's land, members could open up farms with the knowledge, rather than strict permission, of the clan or *kaudara* heads. Under Enggano customary law, the lands immediately adjoining a swidden plot were also held by the same family for their future use. Farmlands were also inherited matrilineally within the lands of your mother's clan or *kaudara* and directly from your mother. The Enggano relate that when new swiddens are planted it is customary to invite neighbours to share in the task as an expression of the collective nature of their enterprise. It is considered a slight not to be invited.



Clan leaders with their traditional cloth crowns explaining their relations the land. Credit: Eleanor Fithen

Enggano do not only use their natural environment for food. Almost all of their traditional material culture makes use of cultigens and wild species for numerous other purposes such as house-construction, roofing, canoes, hunting weapons, basketry, tools and furniture, pounded fig tree-bark for clothing, as well as different woods for their highly artistic carvings.³⁶ Many plants are also used as medicines, mostly applied in combination with chants by ritual specialists. A study of the complex suite of plants used by the Enggano to aid childbirth shows that many of them contain phyto-chemicals with known therapeutic properties.³⁷ Enggano elders also recount that in the past each village had a sacred space at its edge. In this piece of sacred land, all spoils of the hunt had to be presented, butchered, cooked and then shared among the community.



Enggano carving. Source: <https://www.artoftheancestors.com/enggano>

Administration and development

Until the end of the 19th century, the Enggano were little connected to the regional trading economy, although limited trade was important to gain access to metal tools. As noted, most resource use was for subsistence and the islanders governed themselves according to their own laws and institutions. Even during the later Dutch colonial administration and short-lived Japanese occupation, apart from the coconut plantations established by the Dutch on the west coast, the use of lands and marine resources was locally controlled. Even after independence, the capacity of the new national government to administer and develop the island was initially limited and it is only since the 1980s that this has begun to change with increasing tempo. Yet even as late as 2012, much exchange was said to be carried out through barter rather than cash, and a subsistence focus was still notable.³⁸ Today, Enggano is served by a thrice-weekly ferry service and a twice-weekly airplane connection. Recently the island was linked to the national telephone network and wifi system. The pace of change has speeded up.

Like all other parts of Indonesia, the island was gradually subsumed into the national administrative system being classed as a subdistrict of the North Bengkulu regency and divided into 6 administrative villages (*desa*), with their respective hamlets (*dusun*). Villagers are thus subject to the authority of the provincial governor, the provincial legislature, the district regent (*bupati*), the regency legislature (DPRD), the sub-district head (*camat*) and the administrative village heads (*kepala desa*), whose positions are elected once every eight years. In addition, a number of line ministries now have full time officials on the island. A small island police force has been established, while units of the armed forces have been stationed on the island to ensure security and rule of law.³⁹ These arrangements rub up against the traditional governance system of the island.

In the 1990s, during the New Order government of President Suharto, the island faced a bigger threat after a concession to extract resources was granted by the government to a company calling itself PT Enggano Duipa Persada. In 1999, after the fall of the Suharto regime and during the honeymoon of the reform period (*reformasi*) and with the help of the national environmental forum (WALHI - *Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*), the Enggano were able to challenge this unilateral allocation in court and got the concession rescinded.

Since then there have been other schemes to develop the Enggano. In 2008, it was rumoured that the Jakarta playboy Tommy Winata was planning to develop the island as an offshore casino, but luckily for the Enggano this plan never materialised. Then there was a plan to develop the island as a space-port for launching rockets into space, a plan rejected by the regional administration. Another proposal was to use the island as a prison for convicted criminals.⁴⁰ None of these plans was developed in consultation with the Enggano themselves and luckily, so far, none have yet come to fruition.



A ferry service now connects the island to the mainland, allowing islanders to ship produce to regional markets

The Enggano report a number of recent and new challenges to their island's resources and lands. The biggest threat they note now comes from trawlers harvesting marine life from the seabed near to the island. Until recently, uncontrolled turtle fishing by both outsiders and islanders also became a problem. Traditionally, turtle fishing was carried out from the Enggano's small boats using resin-lit lanterns to attract night-swimming turtles. The turtles were only consumed on major ritual occasions.⁴¹ However, the combination of electric lamps, outboard engines and access to regional markets on the mainland, has resulted in serious over-fishing and only recently is an effort being made to curb this practice by seeking to reaffirm the customary law rule that turtles should only be consumed for major rituals and not for any kind of ceremony.⁴² Conservationists accept that turtle fishing is a culturally important practice and so seek agreement with the local clan leaders to regulate fishing through customary law.⁴³ Likewise, there was for a time a thriving trade in captured songbirds, which are widely sold in Indonesian regional markets.

In recent years, Enggano, like other coastal sites facing out into the Indian Ocean, has begun to attract increasing numbers of adventurous tourists such as birdwatchers, beachcombers and especially surfers. Much of this tourism has been welcomed by the Enggano as providing them with an opportunity to act as local guides, to provide food and housing and other services. Since at least 2016, the provincial government has also identified Enggano as having great tourism potential,⁴⁴ and this is now being encouraged though President Jokowi's one-stop-shop for investors.⁴⁵ There is a risk that these investors will ignore the Enggano's rights, values and interests, if adequate procedures are not in place.

The Enggano are alert to exactly such threats and point to the fact that parts of their island have since 1985 been unilaterally designated by the provincial government as Protected Areas. . In Enggano, there are six Conservation Areas covering a total of 8,736.57 ha which is about 22% of the island, being the Sungai Baheuwo Nature Reserve (496.06 ha), the Klowe Bay Nature Reserve (331.23 ha), the Tanjung Laksaha Nature Reserve (333.28 Ha), the Kioyo I & Kioyo II Nature Reserve (305.00 ha), and the Gunung Nanua Hunting Park (7,271.00 Ha).

The Enggano claim these designations were imposed without any consultation.

We have always looked after this area, but despite it being well managed by the people, the government came in and made a decision to create a Nature Reserve (*Cagar Alam*) without any kind of appreciation of the role of the people.⁴⁶

The other major threat that they face today comes from a growing land market whereby the customary lands held collectively by the matrilineal clans are being transferred to outsiders or local entrepreneurs who are converting traditional subsistence farms into banana plantations. Coffee and cacao cultivation has also expanded in recent years.

It is alleged that a 'land mafia' has emerged which facilitates this process of land alienation. In this process, village headmen (*kepala desa*), who are the elected leaders of the six administrative village and act as the local representatives of the government, issue SKT (land transfer letters) to mapped parcels of land to named individuals, who can then sell these lands to interested parties.

The islanders date this change back to 1977, when new norms for land transfers were introduced. It is now considered acceptable, even for someone who has lived on the island for as little as six months, to ask the hamlet head (*kepala dusun*) for permission to farm in an unused area and they can then get an SKT from the village headman, with which lands can then be sold.



Twice-weekly flights to Enggano have speeded up the integration of the island with national society.

Islanders complain that many Enggano are no longer following custom in the way they engage in this market. They should be getting permission to own and transfer lands from the leaders of their matrilineal clans and *kaudara*, and not just from the newly established village headmen, they argue. As one islander reported:

In the past, inherited lands, even those with land titles (SHM), could only be sold if the extended family of the person wanting to sell was brought together and agreed to the sale. If a person sold land when there was no agreement from their extended family, they could be kicked out of their community. [Also] today assets are passed down to all children, not just to females as in the past.⁴⁷

One recent enterprise that took over lands on the island came from a Bengkulu-based Indonesian Chinese company that developed a coastal area for shrimp ponds, a process that has slowed since 2023 with a downturn in the market. There has also been a proposal from the government to develop the island lands as oil palm plantations, which is unlikely to be viable until and unless a company establishes a palm oil mill on the island to process harvested fruits. In 2023, the Enggano issued a joint statement calling for a ban on oil palm development on the island. The military has also developed 800 hectares of land in the southern part of the island as a food estate, so far of rice fields (*padi*).

While there is a general appreciation of the government's efforts to provide medical, educational and transportation services, there is widespread concern among the islanders that the government's well intentioned impositions are not all being implemented in ways that benefit the islanders due to a lack of understanding of the Enggano's priorities, their way of life and their close connections to their lands and marine resources. They feel marginalised in the governance of their island.

A major challenge for the survival of the Enggano as a distinct people comes from the fact that, currently, they lack any formal recognition that they are an 'indigenous people' (*masyarakat adat* or *masyarakat hukum adat*) nor have they been offered any formal titling of their lands. Almost all the island is thus classed by the current administration as State land, except for areas specifically classed as State Forest Areas or, as noted, designated as a Nature Reserve. This leaves the Enggano very vulnerable to unilateral allocation of their island's lands and resources to outside investors.

Culture change and cultural revival

Under the quietly determined and inspiring leadership of their current leader (*pabbuki*), Milson Kaitora, the Enggano are now in an active process of trying to reassert their language, their identity, their governance system and their rights.

The gradual loss of the Enggano language is remarked on by the Enggano themselves and well attested by linguistic studies. This is most marked among the youth and in the three villages on the island where outsiders now constitute the majority. Nevertheless, in the other three villages Enggano is still commonly in use especially among adults.⁴⁸ UNESCO has also reported with concern the declining use of Enggano by the island youth especially after attending school on the mainland.⁴⁹ A study by linguists from Oxford, Australian National, Udayana and Bengkulu Universities enumerates about 1,500 active speakers of Enggano. The project, which is partly funded by the Endangered Languages Fund and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, has the aim to document the Enggano language, make the findings publicly available and also to develop a grammar. An ancillary aim of this work is to:

empower the Enggano community to document and preserve their own language. A central component of this effort is our plan to develop educational materials for teaching the Enggano language in local schools, targeting Years 7-9 (ages 13-15). We will work with local educators and community leaders to develop these materials and to raise awareness of language and cultural endangerment, and with local government institutions to ensure that our educational materials meet local government standards.⁵⁰

Since its initiation in 2019, this project has published numerous academic articles elucidating the details of the Enggano language and these show that it is rapidly evolving through contact with Austronesian language speakers from other parts of Indonesia, not only in terms of vocabulary but also in phonology and syntax.⁵¹ Yet, at the same time, fluency in the language is increasingly restricted to the older generations with younger Enggano now opting to speak Bahasa Indonesia in daily life including in a family context.⁵² In part this is because of widespread prejudice against the Enggano as a less modern people.

In an effort to counter this trend, the project is thus due to publish in January 2025, two new school text books for use in island schools, which employ Enggano teachers, so that pupils can be taught in their own maternal language.⁵³ This initiative is in line with Indonesian educational regulations, which mandate teaching in local languages, and builds on the efforts of the provincial government Language Office (*Kantor Bahasa Propinsi Bengkulu*), which recognises Enggano as a distinct language and has already published a bilingual Enggano-Indonesian dictionary.⁵⁴



Enggano has been identified as having great ecotourism potential: Credit: Eleanor Fithen

Seeking recognition of territorial rights

Based on their customary laws and traditions and their immemorial occupation of the island, the Enggano claim collective ownership of all the island and to the seas around the island up to three nautical miles from the shore. This marine tenure claim incorporates all the main coral reefs around the island some of which are up to two kilometres off shore.

Under the Indonesian Constitution as amended in 2000, the rights of indigenous peoples (*masyarakat hukum adat* - MHA) are recognised 'as long as they still exist'. Indonesia has also ratified the main United Nations Human Rights Covenants and Conventions, which have been widely interpreted by the UN treaty bodies - the official UN committees set up to oversee the implementation of such laws - as upholding indigenous peoples' rights to their territories, to self-determination within the framework of the Nation State, to self-governance, to exercise their customary laws, to represent themselves through their own institutions, to maintain their identities and to control their traditional knowledge, and to the right to give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent to measures that may affect their rights.⁵⁵

Indonesia also voted in the UN General Assembly for the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which spells out these rights in more detail. Importantly, for the Enggano and other indigenous peoples of Indonesia, the international human rights framework makes clear that these rights of indigenous peoples obtain even if not yet formally recognised by national laws as they are based on the peoples' own

customary laws which in many cases precede the creation of nation states. Law 39 of 1999 on Human Rights expressly requires the State to uphold international human rights laws ratified by Indonesia. Indonesia also has a National Plan to implement Human Rights, including with respect to indigenous peoples.⁵⁶

Current statutory laws in Indonesia have not yet adopted clear procedures at the national level for titling indigenous territories nor yet legislated a national level process for recognising which indigenous people can be said to 'still exist'. Instead, discretion to recognise indigenous peoples is left to the district and provincial legislatures and administration. This follows the 2012 ruling of the Constitutional Court that clarified that indigenous peoples (MHA), 'so long as they still exist', do have rights to their territories and forests, and that such customary forests are not part of State Forest Areas.⁵⁷

Accordingly, after some prevarication and delay, and in the absence of a national framework law, the Government agreed an interim process,⁵⁸ by which regional governments, at either provincial or district levels, can recognise that indigenous peoples exist through local legislative acts (PERDA) and can then pass decrees (SK) recognising the rights of specific indigenous peoples to their territories (*wilayah*). Where these *wilayah* overlap areas classed as forests these should then be designated by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry as customary forests (*hutan adat*). Such customary forests should then be excised from State Forest Areas and be reclassified as being part of 'Rights Forests' (*Hutan Hak*). In Bengkulu province a number of indigenous peoples have already been recognised by such PERDA such as the Rejang in Lebong and Rejang-Lebong districts and certain areas recognised as *hutan adat*.⁵⁹

The basis for the Enggano's claim to a marine territory may seem somewhat unique for Indonesia but in fact has deep historical justifications in terms of Indonesia's status as an Archipelagic State. As explained in the 2017 publication *Sovereignty and the Sea*,⁶⁰ during the 19th century, in the absence of any existing international law about the extent of a country's marine fisheries, the Dutch colonial power asserted its sovereignty over off-shore reefs and valuable pearl and sea-cucumber fisheries based on the existence of customary marine territories in both eastern Indonesia and off the west coast of Sumatra. These claims on behalf of the indigenous peoples and the colonial power were made to exclude Australian companies operating in these contested waters.

The claims triggered the process by which the Dutch and then the independent State of Indonesia developed their claims to all the waters of the Indonesian Archipelago. These claims profoundly influenced the Law of the Sea, which was finally agreed in the 20th century and, despite much British and American resistance, now accepts the marine territories of Archipelagic States even to marine areas within their archipelagos that extend beyond previous laws recognising rights only to the extent of a cannon shot, 3 miles, 12 miles and latest even 200 miles off-shore. *Adat* marine territories are thus the foundation for Indonesia's marine sovereignty and should be respected by the Indonesian State.

Nor are the Enggano unique in retaining their customary law rights to their fisheries.⁶¹ For example, the Keo people of Flores express their relationship to their territory, comprising both their lands and their seas as 'our Mother and our Father of which we are the children'. In ritual poems the Keo chant how even forty of their forty arm-length cotton fishing nets cannot encompass the extent of the seas in their marine territory. Indeed, given the fact

that Indonesia is a country comprising 17,000 islands and claims a huge marine territory of some 5 million square kilometres, what is surprising is that the process for recognising claims to marine *wilayah adat* has not yet been clarified for the multitude of coastal and fishing communities who assert their identity as indigenous peoples (*masyarakat adat* or, in legal terms, *masyarakat hukum adat*).

In terms of international human rights law, upholding indigenous peoples' rights to their fisheries needs to be understood in terms of their fundamental rights to 'the lands, territories and resources that they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used.'⁶² International human rights laws also uphold their rights to practice their traditional occupations and pursue sustainable use of their resources, their right to food, their collective rights to self-determination, and to culture, knowledge and identity, among others. Likewise indigenous fishers have to be involved in discussions about laws and policies that affect them and to take part in decision-making. Exclusion of indigenous peoples from their rights to control their own fisheries constitutes an ongoing violation of their rights to be consulted, to participate in decision-making and to give or withhold their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) to measures that affect them. In the same vein, the Food and Agriculture Organization's *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security* notes that

Where States own or control land, fisheries and forests, the legitimate tenure rights of individuals and communities, including, where applicable, those with customary tenure systems, should be recognized, respected and protected, consistent with existing obligations under national and international law.⁶³

A recent report of the Danish Institute for Human Rights notes that:

For fishing-dependent indigenous communities, fishing is not just an occupation and fish is not just a commodity. Fisheries are the basis for – and an integral element of – their cultures, spiritual beliefs, traditional knowledge and food systems.⁶⁴



Explaining customary land ownership systems

Conclusions and prospects

The assembled evidence, summarised above, proves conclusively that the Enggano are an indigenous people (*masyarakat hukum adat*) of Indonesia. Outsiders have recorded them living on their island for at least five centuries, while the Enggano's own oral histories reach back into time immemorial. Genetic studies suggest they have unique origins different from most of the inhabitants of Sumatra and it is plausible that they have inhabited the island from pre-agricultural times. Their language is also highly distinctive and has been formally recognised as such by the government.

Based on their own testimonies, corroborated by studies by academics from prestigious universities in Indonesia and abroad, it is clear that the Enggano also retain their own customary laws, kinship system, social norms and governance regime, which moreover has developed a way of accommodating settlers and reconciling people of different world religions. They continue to make use of their lands and seas for their livelihoods and they clearly self-identify as a distinctive indigenous people (*masyarakat adat*).



Sharing indigenous experiences with Free, Prior and Informed Consent protocols. Credit: Eleanor Fithen



Developing a FPIC Protocol to secure a local voice in development planning

Actually the Enggano have been making claims to their lands as an indigenous people, with the help of the national indigenous peoples' alliance (AMAN - *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara*), since 2015.⁶⁵ Although this initiative lost impetus due to higher level political changes, since 2022, with the support of the Akar Foundation, the Enggano have already registered their claim to be recognised as a *Masyarakat Hukum Adat* by the local provincial government in Bengkulu and reportedly the Governor is broadly supportive of this claim. A draft provincial legislative act (*peraturan daerah* - PERDA) has already been developed to this end and is in the process of being discussed by the provincial assembly. This would provide the basis for the Enggano to then secure recognition of their tenurial rights over their territory which, as noted, both includes land and marine resources.

In addition, the Enggano with the help of Akar and Forest Peoples Programme have been drafting a trilingual *Free, Prior and Informed Consent Protocol* which sets out how they require all future decisions that may affect their rights will be made, in full consultation with their representative organisations and after timely provision of all pertinent information. In essence, this FPIC Protocol aims to strengthen the Enggano's claim to recognition of their rights as an indigenous people (*masyarakat hukum adat*) over their customary territory and sources of livelihood. In addition, this FPIC protocol is intended to strengthen the protection and security of natural resources in the Enggano Islands from exploitative activities and those that have the potential to cause conflict at the site level. In this way, the Enggano seek to secure a more measured and peaceable governance of the island which recognises the complementary roles of the local government, representing the State, and the indigenous people.

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