

Resistance and Class Elitism in Minerals Extraction in Resource-rich Aceh, Indonesia

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In questo articolo, analizzo la relazione tra lo sfruttamento “iper-capitalistico” delle risorse naturali in Indonesia, e i concetti e le pratiche minerarie artigianali locali che hanno caratterizzato Aceh, una regione di frontiera, ricca in risorse minerarie e segnata da una lunga lotta di indipendenza dallo stato indonesiano. In primo luogo, effettuo una ricognizione storica dell’industria mineraria in Indonesia per poi sviluppare due *case studies*. Dialogando con la letteratura che mette in luce le forme di ineguaglianza insite nell’accesso alle risorse, avanzo l’ipotesi che sebbene l’estrazione artigianale rappresenti un’alternativa socialmente ed eticamente più sostenibile rispetto all’estrazione industriale su vasta scala, essa moltiplichi molto spesso le ineguaglianze, in particolare quelle basate sull’appartenenza di classe.

INTRODUCTION

A theatre of war until 2005, the epicenter of the 2004 earthquake and tsunami, and a humanitarian reconstruction hub in the late 2000s, Aceh is a region where deforestation, agribusiness, industrial mining and environmental degradation are still at an early stage. Its particular history and relation with the state have converted this resource-rich Indonesian area into a frontier, where the small-scale and informal extraction of minerals and other commodities is now particularly rampant.

Low-technology, yet capitalistic, informal mining and the ideas of “accessible” local natural resources that permeates the recent history of the gold-rich West Aceh area are primarily driven by a set of general circumstances, relevant in Indonesia and most developing countries. As I will articulate in the first section of the paper, these circumstances include the shortcomings of the colonial and the post-colonial state in handling the commodities, political decentralization, economic liberalization and growing socio-economic importance of local elites, combined with the high demand for raw materials.

As the second section of the paper and the case studies therein will demonstrate, Aceh has in common with other Indonesian regions the decentralization of natural resource governance and the increasing importance of ethnicity and class in the exercise of power over local assets. Simultaneously this region represents a particular case among other regions in Indonesia that are rich in natural resources and where manufacturing and mining industries haven’t manifested so far. First, this region has a long tradition of small-scale yet very capitalistic cash cropping and mining, that has cyclically transformed fields and mines in market-oriented hot spots, well connected to Southeast Asia and the world. Under the umbrella of the sultanate that ruled Aceh from 1496 until 1904, in the shadow of two recent conflicts, and in post-disaster times the region has been dynamic from a technological, economic and cultural point of view. Second, Acehnese identity largely relies on the pride in resistance to colonial forces and the Indonesian state. Such forms of