

Managing the *sasi* way

Indonesia has a unique, ancient and traditional cultural system of managing natural resources, especially fisheries

Ever since 1979, when I became head of the *kewang* group charged with implementing and supervising the traditional laws of Mat of the island of Haruku in Maluku, I desired to write down the rules of the customary law in force in our village since olden times.

I began by writing about the *sasi* regulations or *adat* prohibitions which embody the main principles of law of the *adat* society of Haruku. For several years, I have used these writings to educate the people of Haruku, especially the younger generation, which now appears to be less aware of the traditional wisdom of their ancestors.

Growing pollution and environmental destruction in Haruku and its surroundings convinced me of the need to circulate these writings widely.

Our ancestors' tradition embodies a collection of principles for the management of natural resources, which has proved reliable in safeguarding the natural world around us and in protecting relationships both among people as well as between people and their environment.

Going by legends and folk tales, it is estimated that *sasi* became a part of the culture of Haruku village in the 1600s. *Sasi* can be described as a prohibition on the harvesting of certain natural resources in an effort to protect the quality and population of such biological resources—plant or animal.

Since the regulations for implementing this prohibition also touch upon human beings' relationship with nature and with other persons in the area affected by the prohibition, *sasi* is also an effort to maintain the patterns of social life by

equally distributing among all local inhabitants the benefits or income from the surrounding natural resources.

The rules of *sasi* are decided at a meeting of the council called the *Dewan Adat Seniri*, referred to in Haruku as *Sanir'a Lo'osi Aman I-laru-ikui* which means the 'Complete *Seniri* of the Village of Haruku'. The *kewang* is the *adat* institution charged with the supervision of the implementation of the rules of *sasi*.

Members of the *kewang* are chosen from every clan (*soa*) in Haruku. The heads of the land *kewang* and the sea *kewang* are both appointed according to inheritance or descent from the first officials who held these positions. So is the case of the assistant head.

As monitors of *sasi*, the *kewang* is charged with

- safeguarding the implementation of all *sasi* rules established by the *seniri* meeting
- punishing or disciplining those citizens who violate the rules
- establishing and checking the borders of the land, sea and river areas included in the *sasi* area
- putting up *sasi* signposts
- conducting meetings related to the implementation of *sasi*

Four types

There are four types of *sasi* in Haruku sea, river, forest and village. At a meeting of the *adat* council of Haruku on 10 June 1985, the detailed rules regarding the four types of *sasi* were adopted. These were signed by the *Raja* or king of Haruku and the

heads of the land and sea *kewangs*. The *sasi* rules demarcate the borders of the sea and the river, as well as the 'free anchoring' areas. The rules also specify the fishing gear which may be used. Furthermore, the river *sasi* forbids cleaning fish or washing dishes in the river. It also prohibits men and women from bathing together.

The forest *sasi* bans the plucking of young, under-ripe fruits as well as the cutting of fruit-bearing trees to make fences or cutting palm leaves for roofing. This can be done only with the permission of the owners and the *kewang*.

The village *sasi* forbids noisy weekend parties. Social events held in the evenings must have the sanction of the village council. Catching the *taba* fish is banned for two hours of the evening on Sundays. No one may enter the forest on Sundays, except in an emergency or during the clove season, with the permission of the *kewang*.

There are several more detailed rules as well as prescriptions of fines which range from 2,500 to 10,000 rupiah. These written rules only reiterate the *adat* rules which have been handed down from the ancestors of the village.

Nonetheless, a number of additional regulations have been formulated in tune with modern developments. An example is the prohibition in the river *sasi* of the operation of motor boats with their engines running. So is the ban on the use of a type of fine-mesh factory-made net called *karoro*, which has appeared only in recent years.

The prohibition in the village *sasi* on women climbing trees has been modified to permit them to do so, as long as they wear appropriate clothing such as pants, which are only now available.

Similarly, the rules regarding the amount of monetary fines for violations of *sasi* have also been adjusted to take into account current economic conditions.

The *sasi* relating to the *lompa* fish (*Trisina baelama*, a kind of small sardine) is of particular interest. Of all the fish in Haruku, the *lompa* is the most important and of all forms of *sasi* in the village, the

most significant and unique one is the *sasi* on *lompa*. This is specific to Haruku since it is not found anywhere else in Maluku. It is even more special because it represents an integration of the sea and river *sasi*. This is because *lompa* can live both in the sea and the river, like salmon and other anadromous species.

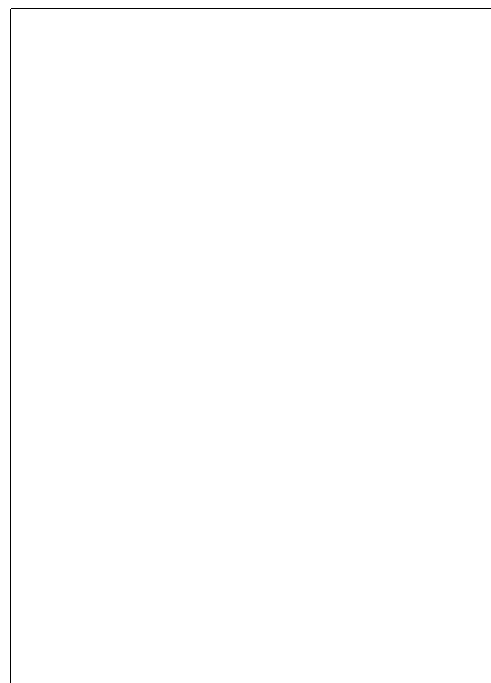
Each day, the *lompa* fish spend around two and a half hours of the afternoon in the Learisa Kayeli river, at least 1,500 m from its mouth. Studies have shown that the river has insufficient plankton, which is the fish's main food. So, in the evening, they move out to the open sea in search of food, returning only in the early hours of the morning.

The *sasi* on *lompa* comes into effect when young *lompa* or fingerlings are first seen off the coast of Haruku, between April and May. These schools of young fish usually enter the river mouth after a month or two.

Ceremony

A ceremony called the *panas sasi* (heat of *sasi*) is held thrice a year to mark the start of *sasi*. It usually takes place in the late evening, around 8 p.m., when all members of the *kewang* assemble in the house of their head, bringing along dry coconut palm leaves for a bonfire.

After a prayer, the fire is lit and the *kewang* proceeds as a group to the centre of the *sasi* site. The ceremony takes place at the



crossroads where *tabaos* or decrees are announced to the villagers. There, the head of the *kewang* lights the bonfire to the accompaniment of drums in a melody which symbolizes the existence of five clans of the village. As the drum beats fade, all the members of the *kewang* shout in unison, 'Sirewei!' This is a statement of intent, a promise or an oath.

After this, the *kewang* head delivers a speech of advice in honour of the village and its leaders. This speech, called *kapata*, declares the beginning of *sasi*. The secretary of the *kewang* then reads out the regulations of *sasi* on *lompa* and the punishments for violations. The ceremony ends at 10 p.m. in front of the village halt where the remaining dry palm leaves which have not burnt, are taken and thrown into the ocean.

To indicate that the rules of *sasi* on *lompa* have gone into effect, the *kewang* puts up signs in the form of sticks with fresh, young coconut palm leaves tied around their tips. The signs comprise both the main *kayu bua sasi* as well as auxiliary signs. The *sasi* rules specify, among other stipulations, that as long as the *lompa* are in the area covered by *sasi*, they may not be caught or otherwise disturbed. There is also a ban on sea-going motor boats entering the river with their engines running. *Lompa* needed for bait may be caught only with a hook, but not from the river.

Those who violate the rules are fined. Even child culprits are punished with five strokes of the rattan cane, each stroke a reminder to obey the instructions of the five clans of Haruku.

The protected *lompa* fish grow large enough and ready to be harvested in about five to seven months after they were first sighted. The *kewang* then holds a routine Friday meeting to set the time to end the *sasi*, also referred to as opening the *sasi*. This decision is then passed on to the village head to be conveyed to all the villagers.

A second, similar *panas sasi* then takes place. After the ceremony, the head of the *kewang* lights a bonfire at the mouth of the Learisa Kayeli to draw the *lompa* into the

river, prior to the pull of the tide. Not long afterwards, schools of *lompa* crowd into the river. The villagers then stretch barriers across the mouth of the river so that the *lompa* does not escape into the sea when the tide ebbs.

The beating of drums signals to the villagers to get ready to go to the river. The third drumbeat indicates that the *Raja*, the *Seniri Negeri* and the pastor should reach the river, as the villagers take their place on its edge. The village head and his group throw out the first net. Then the pastor follows suit. After that, all the villagers are free to catch whatever *tampa* there are.

According to research done by the fisheries department of Pattimura University, during the lifting of *sasi* in 1984, *lompa* harvested that year totalled around 35 tonnes in gross weight. This is certainly not a small amount for a single harvest. More importantly, it is a source of not only nutrition but also additional income for the villagers of Haruku. Clearly, *sasi* is not a collection of rigid *adat* regulations. It will continue to be dynamic and responsive to the changing times, as long as its spirit, soul or life—the principle of conservation and a balance in the relationships among human beings and with their surrounding environment—is maintained and does not change.

How long?

But how long can this last? Illegal bombing by irresponsible persons continues to damage the coral reefs of the Haruku coast. The *kewang* has made various efforts to prevent the spread of the destruction of this habitat, including complaints to the police and the courts.

These, however, have not borne fruit, often because the simple and ordinary people of Haruku do not have access to the centres of power.

This article is translated from the writings of Eliza Kissya, who is a fisherman, a farmer as well as the head of the Haruku village council. He was awarded the 1985 Kalpataru Prize by the Indonesian Ministry for Population and Environment.