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***“IF WE START SELLING THE LAND, WE MIGHT AS WELL NOT HAVE CHILDREN OR GRAND-CHILDREN ANYMORE, AS THEY WILL HAVE NOWHERE TO LIVE”***

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**LAND GRABBING IN MERAUKE REGENCY, WEST PAPUA**

## **INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE STRUGGLES**

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## 1 Abstract

In 2010, the Indonesian government launched the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) in the regency of Merauke<sup>1</sup>, West Papua, which aims to transform 1.2 million hectares of land into largescale agribusiness estates for food and bioenergy production (Ginting and Pye 2013: 160). Even though the project is called “food and energy estate”, the largest part of the 1.2 million hectares of indigenous and forest land is used for industrial plantations and oil palm (2013: 166). The fact that this project is located within forested areas and that the permits of this customary owned land were handed out, triggered a great resistance movement, not only by international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's), but also by indigenous Papuans. However, the mentioned resistance movement has not yet been able to completely stop the MIFEE project (2013: 160ff).

This essay aims to elaborate more on the indigenous resistance struggles against the MIFEE project, focusing on the following questions: Which factors divide the local resistance against the MIFEE project? Why do indigenous Papuans have problems to build up a united resistance movement?

After the presentation of the used literature, some background information about the ongoing land grabbing through the MIFEE project in Merauke is provided. Subsequently, this essay has a closer look at the indigenous resistance struggles, which forms the core of this essay. As already mentioned, this essay tries to find reasons behind the disability of the local to build up a united resistance movement. Possible reasons are provided from the historical background, the social framework, and the physical-geographical context of the indigenous Papuans living in Merauke.

## 2 Used Literature

The used literature for this essay is composed out of older ethnographies, mostly concerning the Marind Anim tribe, as well as some newer texts and reports focusing on the MIFEE project itself and the emerging resistance to this project. Subsequently, the main texts are introduced briefly.

### 2.1 The MIFEE Project and Its Emerging Resistances

The report *An Agribusiness Attack in West Papua: Unravelling the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate* has the aim to “give a full description and analysis of MIFEE and profiles of the companies involved”<sup>2</sup>, as awasMIFEE! themselves write it on their website. awasMIFEE! is the product of independent activists from the United Kingdom “as an act of solidarity with the social and ecological struggles of the people of Merauke and elsewhere in West Papua”<sup>3</sup>. The report provides background information (Part 1), a description of the MIFEE project (Part 2), other concerns including transmigration and marginalisation (Part 3) as well as an analysis of the profiles of the involved companies (Part 4).

*Land Grabbing for Food and Biofuel. Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE) - Case Study* is a research study published in April 2012 by Aliansi Gerakan Reforma Agraria (AGRA) and Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) and is “part of the collaboration of PAN AP and its partners on mapping and documentation of land grabbing in selected Asian countries” (2012: 2). The report focuses on background information concerning the MIFEE project and especially on the consequential emerging conflicts.

In March 2015, Irene I. Hadiprayitno wrote an article for the Human Rights Review called *Behind Transformation: The Right to Food, Agricultural Modernisation and Indigenous Peoples in Papua, Indonesia*. This article gives a vast insight into the way how civil society organisations invoke “ideals of human rights [...] to construct claims related to land tenure and access to food [...]” (2015: 123).

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<sup>1</sup> Merauke is used synonymously for Merauke Regency in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> awasMIFEE! 2012: About Us. awasMIFEE! Tracking the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate. <[https://awasmiffee.potager.org/?page\\_id=37](https://awasmiffee.potager.org/?page_id=37)>. 20.05.2017.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The article ***Resisting Agribusiness Development: The Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate in West Papua, Indonesia*** was published in 2013 in the Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies and written by Longgena Ginting and Oliver Pye. As the title already says, this article focuses on the resistance which emerges against the MIFEE project. Furthermore, “*three distinct but connected narratives of opposition around the discourses of customary forest rights, Indonesian ‘imperialist’ subjugation of Papua, and land reform and food sovereignty*” (2013: 160) are critically analysed.

Wiranta Yudha Ginting and Cristina Espinosa wrote an article for the International Journal of Social Science and Business in November 2016 with the title ***Indigenous Resistance to Land Grabbing in Merauke, Indonesia: The Importance and Limits of Identity Politics and the Global-Local Coalitions***. The main topic of this article is the indigenous resistance which is grounded on “*environmental conservation, food security, human rights and indigenous territorial rights, forming a resistance coalition guided by ethic narratives and identity politics*” (2016: 1). Furthermore, the aim of this article is to analyse “*the potential and limits identity politics, local-national-global alliances, divergent indigenous agendas and the lack of long-term alternatives*” (Ibid).

## 2.2 Older Ethnographies

Dr. J. Van Baal's work ***Dema. Description and Analysis of Marind-Anim Culture (South New Guinea)*** published in 1966 is the result of his several attended fieldworks in West Papua. It gives a vast insight into the Marind Anim culture, trading themes as their social framework, myths, and rituals. Van Baal was greatly influenced by Paul Wirz's monograph *Die Marind-anim von Holländisch-Süd-Neu-Guinea* (1922-1925) (1966: vii-viii). Furthermore, Van Baal had a good friendship with Father Verschueren<sup>4</sup>, “*whose collaboration has been of inestimable value in writing the present work*” (1966: vii).

Thomas M. Ernst's article ***Myth, Ritual, and Population among the Marind-Anim*** was published in 1979 in the journal *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice - The Power of Ritual: Transition, Transformation and Transcendence in Ritual Practice*. Thomas M. Ernst was interested in different aspects of the Marind Anim culture, but especially in their myth and ritual. He assumed that “*certain aspects of Marind-Anim demography and relationships with other populations seem to be related in an important way to ritual activity. Ritual activity is in turn directly related to mythology*” (1979: 34). Finally, “*fitting these features together in a systematic manner provides some interesting results*” (1979: 34).

## 3 General Approach

This chapter provides background information about the ongoing land grab and tries to put the MIFEE project in a larger context. The focus lies on a general approach to the phenomena “land grab” including possible trigger factors for it. Furthermore, an insight into the MIFEE project itself is given as well as an introduction to the concerned geographical area and the people living there.

### 3.1 Land Grabbing

Over the past several years global crises in food, energy, water, and finance have not been uncommon. As a result, in 2011, more than one billion people went to bed hungry each night (Deninger et al. 2011: xiii). Particularly exacerbated through a constantly growing population and an increasing number of environment disasters, land ownership has become more popular in recent years (Saturnino et al. 2011: 209). In 2009, approximately 56 million hectares farmland deals were announced, while before 2008 there were less than 4 million hectares (Deninger et al. 2011: xlv). Land grabs, or, as *The World Bank* calls it, “agricultural investment” (Saturnino et al. 2011: 210), ought to provide a way out of the crises and so eventually reduce poverty by relying more on effective large-scale agriculture than on small farmers. The result is a growing interest of powerful economic actors, which can be states, large scale agribusiness or private people, in “not cultivated” respectively “empty land”. This “empty land” can especially be found in underdeveloped countries (such as Indonesia), to

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<sup>4</sup> “[...] *Father Jan Verschueren msc, [was] a missionary among the Marind Anim*” (Van Baal 1966: viii).

transform it into huge plantations of food and agricultural product for biofuel (AGRA and PAN 2012: 3). Most enterprises which practise land grabbing say that it is their aim to reduce poverty by producing more food for the world. The reality, however, gives a different picture: Business involved in land grabbing quite often pursue the goal to arrest the decline of their profit, regardless of whether this happens at the expense of environment and indigenous people (AGRA and PAN 2012: 3ff).

### 3.2 Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate (MIFEE)

As a reaction to the above mentioned global crises in food and energy especially the Indonesian government offers to be the “*world’s foodbasket*” (AGRA and PAN 2012: 3) and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono emphasizes this plan by his statement: “*Feed Indonesia, then feed the world*” (2012: 3). With this justification, the Indonesian government launched the so called “Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate” in 2010, better known by its acronym MIFEE, in the Merauke Regency, West Papua. MIFEE is part of the Indonesian government’s Masterplan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia’s Economic Development (MP3EI), which aims to achieve a much higher economic growth (2012: 4). For the MIFEE project, approximately 2.8 million hectares of land have been allocated, primary forests, savannah, and swamp areas being the main terrain of this area. Even though the MIFEE project claims to be a “Food and Energy Estate”, “*the largest part of the MIFEE project is slated for industrial plantations (over 970’000 hectare), with oil palm (over 300’000 hectare) and food crops (69’000 hectare) in second and third place*” (Ginting and Pye 2013: 166). To make such a project even possible and to attract large scale agro-business, different laws had to pass legislation. With those laws, local and foreign investments are made more easily: “*These laws are providing the flexibility and facility for foreign capital to plunder Indonesian natural richness [...]. These laws have practically provided the legal framework for land grabbing in the form of developing big plantations and food estates [...]*” (AGRA and PAN 2012: 5).

### 3.3 Merauke Regency - Environment and Population

The MIFEE project is situated in Merauke Regency, which is located in the south of West Papua, bordering with Papua New Guinea (Ginting and Espinosa 2016: 3). Merauke is well known for its rich biodiversity and is home to some of the largest wetlands in Asia-Pacific, which are part of the by WWF (World Wide Fund For Nature) identified “TransFly Ecoregion”<sup>5</sup>. The forests of West Papua are recognized as last frontier rain forests in the Asia Pacific region (Hidayat and Yamamoto 2014: 71). The fact that 75% of the land allocated for the MIFEE project are covered with natural forests make the huge impact of this project on the world’s biodiversity obvious. Furthermore, because of its fertile soils and flat grounds, Merauke is a pre-designated area for agricultural production. Indigenous Papuans, most of them belonging to the tribe called Marind Anim, who represent 40% of Merauke’s population, are living from this rich biodiversity (Ginting and Espinosa 2016: 2). The majority of indigenous Papuans are hunter-gatherers and thus mainly live from what nature provides them: sago and meat. As one person from the movie *Mama Malind Su Hilang* says: “*So we eat, we drink, every day, every moment, from what this forest provides for us*” (Mama Malind Su Hilang 2012).



Figure II: Merauke Regency (green coloured)

<sup>5</sup> WWF Global (n.d.): TransFly ecoregion. WWF Global.  
<[http://wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/where\\_we\\_work/new\\_guinea\\_forests/conservation\\_new\\_guinea\\_forests/sites\\_new\\_guinea\\_forests/papua\\_new\\_guinea\\_transfly/index.cfm](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/new_guinea_forests/conservation_new_guinea_forests/sites_new_guinea_forests/papua_new_guinea_transfly/index.cfm)>. 17.07.2017.

## 4 Indigenous Resistance Struggles

After having outlined some necessary background information, this chapter completely attends to indigenous resistance against the MIFEE project. The huge dimension of the MIFEE project, the fact that 75% of the concerned land is covered with meaningful forest and hence the livelihood of around 70'000 indigenous Papuans is threatened, lead to immense resistance at various levels (AGRA and PAN 2012: 6). NGO's, churches, local groups, and other national and international organisations sharply criticised the ongoing project right from the beginning and pointed out that a land grab in its biggest dimensions was underway. As a result, in 2002, a coalition came together as the Civil Society Coalition Against MIFEE (Masyarakat Sipil Tolak MIFEE), which acts as a coordinating umbrella organisation among local and national resistance organisations (Ginting and Espinosa 2016: 166).

Even though resistance exists, there are also conflicts and issues within the indigenous resistance movement. Different indigenous people are fighting each other, mostly because of unclear drawing of boundaries and unfair land compensations: *"Nearly all of plantations and forests in Merauke are now under conflicts"* (AGRA and PAN 2012: 8).

This above described starting situation of indigenous resistance against MIFEE gives rise to especially one big question: Why are indigenous Papuans fighting each other rather than allying and fighting against the "real enemy"? The following paragraphs try to find factors mainly in a historical, social, and geographical framework, which could negatively affect a united indigenous resistance building process.

### 4.1 Historical Background - Military Oppression

Martin Luther King said the following words:

*"We are not makers of history. We are made by history."*<sup>6</sup>

This quote is very applicable for West Papua, because the past has still got a huge influence on the situation today, as this subchapter shows.

Since the occupation by the Dutch, Papuans have not been free people anymore. The Act of Free Choice, which occurred in 1969 and is also known as the Act of No Choice, is a good example for the long-lasting oppression of the indigenous Papuans (Banivanua 2008: 584). Several incidents of violence towards indigenous Papuans have been reported in all the years. Human rights violation through the Indonesian government, especially their military forces, is quite a common thing in West Papua. Unfortunately, Merauke constitutes no exception. The report of *awasMIFEE!* for instance mentions several cases in which oppression and violence have been the consequence of people trying to organise themselves against MIFEE:

*"On 30th July 2010, the body of Ardiansyah Matra'is (25) was found floating in the Maro River. He was a local journalist in Merauke who had reported critically about investment plans. Although the police claimed it was suicide, he had reportedly received death threats via SMS before he was killed"* (*awasMIFEE!* 2012: 14).

*"SORPATOM is a Papuan group set up to reject MIFEE. On 16th October 2010, the day the group was to be launched in Merauke, police arrested three of the group's leaders and interrogated them for five hours"* (2012: 14).

Furthermore, to these physical obstacles mentioned above come in addition psychological ones, which make it even harder for the indigenous Papuans to form a unified whole: The fact that the independent movement, especially embodied through the biggest and most popular movement called Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), has not been successful since several years might also negatively affect the motivation and thinking of the indigenous Papuans while trying to resist the MIFEE project: Why should a united resistance movement against one particular land grab project in one particular regency have more success than a country-wide independence movement?

<sup>6</sup> Pinterest (n.d.): Quotes about history. Pinterest.com.

<[https://www.google.ch/search?q=quote+history&rls=com.microsoft:de-CH:IE-Address&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjI5KSxh4nVAhUF2xoKHUi7BNoQ\\_AUICigB&biw=1920&bih=910#imgrc=h9OXfjtNeohQaM:&spf=1500045083534](https://www.google.ch/search?q=quote+history&rls=com.microsoft:de-CH:IE-Address&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjI5KSxh4nVAhUF2xoKHUi7BNoQ_AUICigB&biw=1920&bih=910#imgrc=h9OXfjtNeohQaM:&spf=1500045083534)>. 16.07.2017.

The whole past (and present) of oppression, violence, and marginalisation together with the daily pressure indigenous Papuan feel from the omnipresent military forces create an environment respectively atmosphere, in which any resistance becomes a very dangerous and unattractive undertaking (Ginting and Espinosa 2016: 3-4).

## 4.2 Social Framework

This subchapter forms the core of the analysis of indigenous resistance struggles. Firstly, the attention is directed to intertribal factors, which are subdivided into two themes: The marginalisation of smaller tribes and the tradition of headhunting. Secondly, intratribal factors are analysed with a focus on social and local organisation as well as on intratribal conflicts.

### 4.2.1 Other Tribes

When the impact of MIFEE on local level is considered, quite often the tribe of the Marind Anim are used as a synonym for all indigenous Papuans living in Merauke. The Marind Anim represent the majority of the indigenous Papuans in Merauke (Ginting and Espinosa 2016: 2), but they are not the only ones. Father Verschueren for instance writes: “*All these neighbouring tribes are comparatively small and insignificant*” (1956: 44). “These neighbouring tribes” are for example the Yap-anim, the Maklew-anim, the Digul-anim, the Yei-anim and many more (1956: 44).

Figure III is an overlapping map based on two maps: The coloured map in the background represents the different tribes in Merauke (written in red) while the greenish map in the foreground shows villages (written in black and blue) affected by the MIFEE project. With the help of this overlapping map a simple conclusion can be made: Not only the Marind Anim are confronted with the MIFEE project – as it might be thought because of the fact that other tribes are hardly mentioned in any report or text – but also their neighbouring tribes.



Figure III: Overlapping map: Affected villages by MIFEE (written in black and blue) and the existing indigenous tribes (coloured map, written in red).

Even though the Marind Anim constitute the biggest part of the indigenous Papuans population, smaller tribes should also be considered. In the context of a united resistance movement, the following questions emerge: What relationship do the Marind Anim maintain with the smaller neighbouring tribes? Has there been an information exchange/meeting?

The following subchapter 4.2.2 about headhunting tries to give an approach about the condition of the relationship between the Marind Anim and their neighbouring tribes.

## 4.2.2 Headhunting

The tradition of headhunting is one factor which is likely to have a significant influence on the relationship between the Marind Anim and their neighbouring tribes. Headhunting was a common tradition within West Papua for years (compare for example Gerard A. Zegward's text *Headhunting Practices of the Asmat of Netherland New Guinea*, 1959). The basic aim was to obtain heads and along with them names, which could be passed on to the children. Also the Marind Anim practiced it, until it was forbidden by the Dutch government (Ernst 1979: 36-37). Van Baal writes, that "*The victims of Marind-anim headhunting are the ikom-anim the stranger, who are only there to be killed. To the anim-ha, real humans, are the members of the Marind tribe*" (Van Baal 1966: 695). This sentence shows what the Marind Anim thought about other tribes: They only existed, so that the Marind Anim were able to obtain heads. The Marind Anim were furthermore able to gather large headhunting groups, in comparison to other tribes, which travelled several miles east, west, and inland Merauke Regency to fight their headhunting raids. The superiority of the Marind Anim resulted in some smaller tribes being ceased and others reduced dramatically (Ernst 1979: 36). Ernst, for instance, says that "*As early as the nineteenth century they [the Marind Anim] had affected the population distribution west of the Fly River in British New Guinea*" (Ernst 1979: 36).

Today, this past of headhunting raids is probably still in the heads of the indigenous People or kept alive within stories and legends. The fact that the Marind Anim fought other tribes quite heavily might especially have a great impact on the image smaller tribes have of the Marind Anim. It might be because of this past they are not willing to cooperate with the Marind Anim and thus do not support a common resistance movement.

In the following subchapters, this essay focuses more on the social framework and intratribal factors of the Marind Anim, basically because of two reasons: Firstly, little information is available about the smaller tribes living in Merauke and secondly, the analysis of all tribes would go beyond the constraints of this essay.

## 4.2.3 Social Organisation - Land Rights and Financial Compensation

Before concentrating on land rights and financial compensation a brief outline about the social structure of the Marind Anim is inevitable. The social organisation of the Marind Anim is characterized by a clan-system. According to Ernst, the Marind Anim can be divided into three groups according to the major initiation cult of each (Ernst 1979: 38). The majority of Marind Anim celebrate the so called "mayo" cult. The mayo cult group are composed of "*a number of non-localized, 'totemic' patrilineal clans*" (1979: 38). These clans are again grouped into four phratries. Finally, these four phratries can be divided into moieties, two phratries forming one moiety together. Phratries are, as described above, composed of clans. However, the clans are made of subclans, which are often even further divided into sub-subclans (Van Baal 1966: 39).

The land in a territorial group<sup>7</sup> "*[...] is invariably divided into four, the trend to have this land portioned among the local phratry-segments [...] cannot with reason be denied*" (1966: 63). The distribution of land is thus inseparably connected with the social organisation of the Marind Anim. Each clan of the four phratries is responsible for another piece of land and every clan knows who is responsible for which piece (awasMIFEE! 2012: 15), because they "*[...] had well-defined borders with their neighbours but the people were not conscious of this*" (Verschueren 1956: 50).

The enterprises which acquire land in the context of the MIFEE project are obliged to pay some limited financial compensation. This distribution can, however, become a source of conflicts. In some cases, the clans which hold the so called "ulayat right" (indigenous land rights) get money for the use of their land (Hadiprayitno 2015: 136). In other cases, this distribution, however, can also be more difficult, for example if the clan members, who hold the "ulayat right" are not locally unified. According to Van Baal, it is quite common that members of clans and subclans, which the phratries are composed of, do not form local groups but are rather spread over several territorial groups (1966: 39). This means that the local organisation does not have to be identical with the social organisation on which the land allocation is actually based. The fact that the social organisation does not have to correspond with the local organisation and that it is quite often not clear (especially for outsiders) to which group/clan/community a person belongs to makes the financial compensation a challenging undertaking. The consequences are a growing number of intertribal conflicts: "*Nearly all of plantations*

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<sup>7</sup> Several villages together form a territorial group. For more information see chapter 4.2.4.



*and forest in Merauke are now under conflicts*” (awasMIFEE! 2012: 8). The following quote gives an example of intertribal conflicts which emerge from unappropriated financial distribution:

*“During 2011 a prolonged conflict has developed between the people of Kampung Sanggase, and their neighbours in Kampung Boepe and Medco. Local newspaper Tabloid Jubi has closely followed the developments which are connected to the Sanggase villagers' demands for compensation. The conflict arose over which village had the ulayat rights over the 2800 hectare site that Medco was using for its wood-chip factory in kampung Boepe. The survey originally carried out by Conservation International for Medco claimed that the people of Boepe had ulayatrights over the land, and so the limited compensation that Medco paid was given to them. However four clans in Sanggase disputed that claim, saying that they owned the land, and the people of Boepe only had rights to use the land”* (awasMIFEE! 2012: 17).

#### **4.2.4 Local Organisation – Leadership**

As mentioned in the previous subchapter, the social organisation does not have to correspond with the local organisation. The local organisation mainly consists out of four components, as Van Baal describes them: *“The men’s house, the hamlet, the village and the territorial group”* (Van Baal 1966: 39). When in 1914 the Dutch government decided to construct an *“administrative framework”* (1966: 40) and to bring the area under Dutch control, they had to face the fact that the villages actually had no leading person (1966: 40).

The following question, formulated by Van Baal, is decisive for this subchapter: *“How did the territorial group manage without formalized authority?”* (Van Baal 1966: 65). Van Baal gives some answers to this question, which are partly contradictory. Firstly, Van Baal, referring to Wirz, says that *“the samb-anim, great or important men, who really are the leaders of the group. They are respected by everyone, they are the custodians of tradition and myth, the leaders in ritual and the people who decide whether the group will participate in a headhunt etc.”* (1966: 65). However, Van Baal this time referring to Geurtjens writes: *“Every boan (totem-family) has its samb-anem, whose authority depends on his personal prestige [...]”* (1966: 65). And finally, Van Baal also states that *“more important is the fact that each men’s house had its leader, and that these leaders differed in the degree of prestige and authority they enjoyed”* (1966: 65). As these statements of Van Baal show quite clearly, it is difficult to figure out which people that actually are authoritarian people and how many really exist.

In conclusion, it can be said that the lack (if there is no authority at all) or the surplus (if every men’s house or totem-family have their own chief) of leading people could form a great obstacle for the indigenous resistance building process. This leads to two main questions: Who is allowed to represent the desires of the Marind Anim and speak in the name of them? Is there a person who is accepted by all Marind Anim (clans, villages, men’s houses, and territorial groups) and able to unify them?

#### **4.2.5 Conflicts - Sorcery**

*“Conflicts were not at all rare in Marind-anim society”* as Van Baals writes (1966: 677). Moreover, according to Van Baal, there were enough reasons for conflicts at hand during everyday life such as sorcery, women, and the ownership of gardens (1966: 678). Out of them, sorcery is said to be the main reason for raising conflicts. As soon as somebody died or got ill, sorcery was blamed for it. This meant that somebody had taken revenge for an earlier dispute. It can be said that sorcery was *“a constant source of suspicion and mistrust”* (1966: 678).

Van Baals description and analysis of Marind Anim culture from the year 1966 might seem outdated. However, this information about sorcery might be quite helpful to better understand the struggles indigenous Papuans have to unify for a common resistance movement. Sorcery created, as Van Baal stated, an environment of mistrust and thus had a *“strong disruptive influence within the community”* (1966: 678). Even though it is not clear to what extent the Marind Anim believe in sorcery nowadays, it is quite possible that there are some fragments still existing in Marind Anim life, which negatively influence the social relationships and make cooperation hardly impossible. In addition, the circle of revenge of some old disputes might have survived several generations and thus separate tribes into hostile subclans. This possible starting situation of sorcery still being a main source for conflicts and distrust makes a resistance building process even more difficult.

### 4.3 Physical-Geographical Context – Information Exchange

The previous subchapters 4.1 *Historical Background – Military Oppression* and 4.2 *Social Framework* analysed possible social-historical factors which could turn out to be obstacles for indigenous Papuans to gather for a common opposition against the MIFEE project. This paragraph, however, tries to find such factors from an environmental-geographical corner.

A reliable information flow is a very important factor for a resistance building process, if not the most important one. If people are thought to stand up and fight for a common issue, it is very important that every group knows what other groups do or which steps they reckon to do next. Ginting and Espinosa's article *Indigenous Resistance to Land Grabbing in Merauke, Indonesia* gives a good example for the importance of information exchange, in this case for the established resistance coalition:

*“The use of information and communication technology (ICT) played a crucial role in the development of the resistance movements. In addition, the coalition allowed different actors with different capacities at the local, national and international level to collaborate, building on their strengths and compensating for their weakness”* (2016: 5).

According to this article, especially NGO's built up *“a permanent communication network between the people in the villages and the NGOs to update information from the field to the NGOs networks and vice versa [...]”* (2016: 5) by using mobile phones and to so enable an information exchange between villages.

Even though a good network is already established through NGO's, it is likely that the remoteness of the villages is still a great obstacle for a resistance building activity. The article does not clearly define the dimension and the range of the information network: Is the information network spatially limited? Are only those areas included which are at present concerned by the MIFEE project or also areas which are likely to be affected in the future? Perhaps, only bigger villages take part in the communication network and are thus able to exchange information between each other.

As already discussed in chapter 4.2.1 *Other Tribes* it is quite often the case that the Marind Anim are the only tribe mentioned when speaking about indigenous Papuans of Merauke. This is also the case in Ginting and Espinosa's article. For this reason, it can be assumed that the information exchange probably works quite well within the Marind Anim tribe, but not further and not beyond their boundaries. However, exactly on this particular intertribal connection should be focused, because every single tribe, even the smallest one, plays a very important role when it comes to making an emergence of an united indigenous resistance movement possible.

Another point worth mentioning is the limited resources the indigenous Papuans have. The majority of the local are poor and thus probably not able to afford mobile phones or any other communication device, which would make it possible and also easier for them to take part in the information exchange network. An alternative to this issue could a mouth-to-mouth communication system provide. Nevertheless, also this mouth-to-mouth communication system has to face challenges: The inhabited area is not always easily accessible. According to Father Verschueren, traveling is easier during the wet season, because *“more than half the land is flooded and canoe travel along the coast is possible [...]”* (Verschueren 1956: 47). However, *“in the dry season the heat and the hardened soil make walking in bare feet difficult”* (1956: 47). Roads, paved and non-paved, are partly at hand but they surely do not cover the whole area<sup>8</sup>. So, the following question emerges: How can information be exchanged reliably, if no communication device is available and the environmental circumstances do not allow traveling long distances?

Even though different indigenous Papuans might actually long for an unification, the implementation of it because of the struggles to exchange information between small and remote villages poses a great challenge.

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Project (n.d.): Marind, Southeast Marind in Indonesia. Joshua Project: Bringing Definition to the Unfinished Task. <[https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/13544/ID](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/13544/ID)>.13.07.2017.

## 5 Conclusion

*Why are indigenous Papuans fighting each other rather than allying and fighting against the “real enemy”?* This question formed the starting point for the analysis of the indigenous resistance struggles. Throughout this essay several factors have been mentioned which are likely to have a negative influence on the indigenous resistance building process:

The historical background with years of marginalisation and oppression together with the ongoing daily pressure the indigenous Papuans feel from the omnipresent Indonesian military forces form an atmosphere, in which any insurgency becomes a risky and dangerous adventure. Even though some indigenous Papuans are willing to undergo this risk, they have to face several more obstacles.

One obstacle is the lack of a reliable information exchange network. The fact that the majority of the indigenous Papuans are rather poor and thus not able to afford good communication devices amplifies this problem. Although such an information exchange network already exists, it is quite unlikely that it covers all the concerned area and that it includes also the smallest tribes of Merauke. Small tribes, respectively all tribes but the Marind Anim, form an uncertain factor in the resistance building process, because very little is known and written about them. It is not quite clear, which relationship they have with the Marind Anim. The tradition of headhunting is likely to have a bad influence on this relationship, because the Marind Anim fought other tribes quite heavily in earlier days. Hence, it cannot be said whether they are willing to unify with the Marind Anim or if the smaller tribes prefer putting obstacles in their way.

Another challenge for an indigenous resistance unification can be seen in a lack or a surplus of leading people. Together with this, questions after the right to represent the indigenous Papuans arise: Who should be the voice of the local and represent them? Moreover, this challenge is amplified with intratribal conflicts which especially emerge from the belief in sorcery. Mistrust and disputes as results of the belief in sorcery do neither promote unification nor solve the problem of leadership.


The last point to mention is the financial compensation. Because of insufficient information about the social structure and the local land distribution, financial compensations are quite often distributed wrongly. The results are emerging conflicts and disputes between indigenous Papuans.

As this essay shows, indigenous Papuans have to face several obstacles to build a united resistance movement. However, it must be said that the mentioned factors are mostly assumptions and based on a theoretical approach. To verify these assumptions a comparison in the field is inevitable. Furthermore, an actual ethnography about the indigenous Papuans is necessary, because only older and outdated information is available about their way of life. An actual description helps “[...] to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise **his** vision of **his** world” (Malinowski 2002: 19) and to so uncover several abuses. Nevertheless, the conclusions elaborated about factors which could negatively influence a united indigenous resistance building process could be used as a theoretical framework and maybe help to pave the way to unification.

## 6 Declaration

*I hereby confirm that I have written the present work without any unauthorized means.*

**Date:** 22. July 2017



**Anja Furger**

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## 8 Table of Figures

### **Figure I Cover picture with quotation:**

Forest Peoples Programme, Pusaka and Sawit Watch 2013: "A Sweetness Like Unto Death". Voices of the Indigenous Malind of Merauke, Papua. Forest Peoples Programme: Supporting Forest Peoples' Rights.

<[http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2013/10/asweetnessundodeathmifeeindonesia\\_english2.pdf](http://www.forestpeoples.org/sites/fpp/files/publication/2013/10/asweetnessundodeathmifeeindonesia_english2.pdf)>. 01.06.2017: 3.

### **Figure II Merauke Regency (green coloured):**

awasMIFEE! (n.d.): About Us. awasMIFEE! Tracking the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate. <[https://awasmifee.potager.org/?page\\_id=37](https://awasmifee.potager.org/?page_id=37)>. 18.07.2017.

### **Figure III Overlapping map: Affected villages by MIFEE (written in black and blue) and the existing indigenous tribes (coloured map, written in red):**

awasMIFEE! 2012: An Agribusiness Attack in West Papua: Unravelling the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate. awasMIFEE! Tracking the Merauke Integrated Food and Energy Estate.

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