

Indigeneity, Locality and Recognition: Young People's Shifting Engagements with Modernity in an Indonesian Mining Town (Sorowako South Sulawesi)

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Abstract

After an inauspicious beginning in the 1970s, marked by the human rights abuses of the Suharto regime, the mining town of Sorowako, located in the remote interior of Indonesia's Sulawesi (Celebes) is now a cosmopolitan urban enclave. A compelling aspect of the modernity of this town is dramatic changes in intergenerational relations and associated novel forms of expression of a locality-based identity by young indigenous people. Parents who had no or limited education saw educating their children as a critical way to prepare them to benefit from the industrial modernity they were now part of: they made great sacrifices to educate their children, which required students to sojourn in towns in Sulawesi and Java. Many of these young people return to Sorowako and seek employment, but even a university degree is no guarantee of success. This paper explores the different ways in which young adults now express their indigenous identity, compared to the mode of their parents, for whom the claim to indigeneity was focused on gaining recognition of land rights and material benefits from the mine. Armed with new forms of social and cultural capital, many of these young people are also exploring local history and cultural practices; indeed many of them are involved in a form of local cultural revival, which stakes a claim for recognition of a distinctive cultural identity. Moreover, this claim is associated with shifting power relations that in turn reflect the changed economic and political circumstances in this early twenty-first century, compared with forty years ago.