



The Peasant and Forest Exploitation: Agrarian Conflict in South Sumatra During the New Order Period

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the fate of peasants in South Sumatra against the exploitation carried out by the New Order government and capitalists in the plantation and forestry sectors and its impact on peasants. This study uses a historical method consisting of topic selection, source collection (heuristics), source sorting (verification), interpretation (interpretation), and writing history (historiography). The sources used consist of contemporary newspapers, records of the Central Statistics Agency, articles, and books. The results of this study explain that there is a rural conflict between forest and plantation exploitation. Thus, it gave rise to protests and social movements carried out by peasants. As happened in Ogan Komering Ilir, Ogan Komering Ulu, Muara Enim Regencies, South Sumatra. The peasant demanded compensation for land that the government and companies forcibly took. However, the realization of the replacement has yet to be achieved. Instead, it has caused physical and legal conflicts between the government, companies, and peasant.

Keywords: peasant, forest exploitation, agrarian conflict.

1 Introduction

Land conversion in Indonesia has interference from the government as a position holder who has the authority to manage land and has the authority to grant land concessions to capitalists, entrepreneurs, and residents. One of the lands given concessions is forests. Since the time of the Dutch Colonial Government, forests in Indonesia have been converted and utilized for profitable commodity plantations such as rubber, coffee, and others. One of them is in South Sumatra. Plantations in South Sumatra consist of rubber plantations with hundreds of trees, with the most significant number tapping in the Ogan Komering Ulu area, reaching millions of trees.[1, p.108].

Like South Sumatra has fertile and prosperous land, producing natural resources that can be utilized. The lands in South Sumatra consist of forests that are used as plantations for natives, capitalists, and private entrepreneurs to seek profits from the fertile land in South Sumatra—during the Dutch Colonial period in Palembang, capitalists and private entrepreneurs flocked to exploit the land for plantations such as pepper, rubber, coffee, and oil palm.[2, p. 55] There are cases of exploitation causing conflict between local people and Western capitalism on the border of Palembang with Air Itam Village in South Sumatra. Confrontation with traditional nature is inevitable. Conflicts arose and continued until the Independence Revolution.[3, p. 55]

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Meanwhile, the forest transformation period of the New Order reflects the complex dynamics between economic development, land tenure, and social impacts. Soeharto granted concessions to the military and foreign companies through officially not-for-profit foundations with generals and retirement packages in his policies. Paul K. Gellert, *Oligarchy In The Timber Markets Of Indonesia : From Apkindo to IBRA to The Future of The Forests* in [4, p. 147] This era was characterized by policies that encouraged the expansion of plantations of critical commodities such as rubber, tea, pepper, and oil palm, significantly changing the landscape and land use patterns of the region. In addition to impacting the physical environment, this transformation also gave rise to various agrarian conflicts between large companies, the government, and residents who have claims to their customary lands.

Starting from Pierre Van Der Eng's article "After 200 Years, Why Is Indonesia's Cadastral System Still Incomplete?" This article highlights agrarian issues in land management in Indonesia and its impact on residents, especially those who indirectly experience losses due to arbitrary practices from actors such as the government and companies. [5, p.147] Pierre Van Der Eng, who highlights the macro agrarian problems in Indonesia, tries to explore that the factor that becomes the problem of rural settlement is the overlap of Western regulations with customary regulations so that they conflict with each other. Not to mention, the issue of customary land is a complex problem because it is still ambiguous in terms of customary and communal land rights in the community. The relevance of the points from the article makes it partisan for the study to write the agricultural problems that existed in South Sumatra during the New Order era by looking at the factors of policies that have made peasants experience injustice and have their land rights taken away.

Meanwhile, the first discourse on social movements and peasant uprisings in Indonesia has been conducted by Prof. Sartono Kartodirjo in his dissertation, *The Peasant Revolt of Banten in 1888: Its Conditions, Course, and Sequel- A case study of Social Movement in Indonesia*. Sartono explained that the symptoms of social problems experienced by peasants in Banten in 1888 were due to the destruction of traditional values characterized by dissatisfaction, uproar, and unrest among peasants. After the fall of the Banten Sultanate, the political control system could not be handled properly, resulting in the emergence of rebel groups that defied the Dutch Colonial government. However, the most highlighted thing was the disintegration of the traditional order, which impacted the poor political system, so religious sentiment against the Dutch colonists peaked and led to rebellion. In addition, the attitude of the Dutch Colonial towards the peasants through arbitrary actions such as determining expensive land rents without considering the financial capacity of the peasants has become one of the indicators of the spark of hatred that arose among the peasants against the Dutch Colonial. Thus, social movements and peasant rebellions were caused by agricultural problems involving rulers and peasants. The rulers tended to ignore the peasants' lives and welfare and instead made them even more oppressed in their social life. [6, p. 113-115]

Peasants during Talso experienced similar conditions in the New and post-New Order eras. Disputes between peasants, companies, and the government occurred due to rural issues that harmed peasants. During the New Order era, there were 1,753 cases of land conflicts with 257,686 victims. Meanwhile, after the fall of the New Order regime, agrarian conflict cases still exist involving government-owned

companies, namely PT Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN) and large private plantations (PBS) with a vast area of 330,00 hectares. Until the end of 2014, agrarian conflicts in Lampung Province continued to reach 45 regions in Lampung. The peasants fought back through their organizations in the face of the ferocity of the agrarian rulers, who tended to be unfair and unwise towards the peasants.[7, p. 16-17] So, it can be said that this rural problem will always exist from period to period of control in Indonesia. It may also occur in various provinces in Indonesia, such as South Sumatra, where this province is close to and neighbors Lampung Province. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the agrarian conflicts more deeply, involving peasants, the government, and companies. Moreover, the role of peasants tends to be rarely seen and take part in modern Indonesian historiography. Historiography often highlights great figures and overlooks the role of peasants in Indonesian history. Therefore, it is important to reproduce small and marginalized groups such as peasants and others.

This paper aims to investigate how forest exploitation in South Sumatra during the New Order era influenced the dynamics of agrarian conflict. By analyzing government policies, the economic interests of private companies, and peasants' responses, the paper hopes to provide a more comprehensive picture of the complex interactions between economic, social, and political factors involved in the rural conflict in the region.

2 Method

This research uses the historical research method. The historical research method is a way to conduct research using procedures established in general by historians. Later, it can make it easier for historians to research and write the historical narrative. According to Kuntowijoyo (2013), one of the renowned historians offers a way of historical research that has five stages, namely topic selection, heuristics (source collection), verification (source criticism), interpretation (interpretation of historians), and historiography (historical writing).[8, p. hlm. 69] In the selection of topics; the author chose this topic because this topic had not previously been discussed holistically, how the conditions of marginalized groups such as peasants in South Sumatra faced a diverse life during the New Order era. At the heuristic stage, the author uses primary sources in the form of Kompas newspapers in the editions of 10 September 1983, 24 December 1983, 29 December 1984, 21 September 1994, and 22 November 1985, Media Indonesia newspapers in the edition of 26 September 1991, Central Bureau of Statistics archives, articles, and books relevant to the research. The verification stage is conducted through a review according to the rules of historical research. The interpretation stage is based on the data that has been obtained and analyzed in such a way as to produce an understanding related to the problems of rural conflict faced by peasants in this period. The last stage is the historiography stage, which means chronological writing about the peasants who experienced terrible luck due to the New Order government's policies.

This research uses social history as an analytical knife to examine the issue of peasant social movements in South Sumatra in depth. According to Sartono Kartodirdjo, social history is a history that discusses social movements carried out by peasants, laborers, students, protests, and so on. Therefore, the subject of the research

is the peasants of South Sumatra who protested and demonstrated against injustice in land ownership.[9, p. 3].

3 **Forest Conditions during the New Order in South Sumatra**

During the New Order period, Sumatra and Kalimantan became two areas of forest utilization that were useful for increasing the country's foreign exchange. One of the most critical sectors besides oil, gas, and mining is forests. Forests store wealth in wood that can be used for human needs. The way to exploit the forest, Soeharto used foreign capitalists to invest their capital. The implication was that many foreign capitalists were interested in investing their capital.[4, p.147].

Administratively, South Sumatra is part of the island of Sumatra, located in the southern part and adjacent to Lampung. South Sumatra has abundant natural resources due to geographical factors close to Bukit Barisan in the west and east of the mountain ridge.[2, p. 117] In 1983, South Sumatra had a forest area of around 774,700 hectares, used for protected forests and production forests of 2,124,000 hectares. The details of the division of the protected forest area are:

- Ogan Komering Ulu, around 216,400 hectares.
- Ogan Komering Ilir, 78,525 hectares.
- Muara Enim, 63,250 hectares.
- Lahat, 149,600 hectares.
- Musi Rawas, 8,375 hectares.
- Musi Banyuasin, which is the largest in other areas reaching 153,375 hectares, Bangka 40,250 hectares, and Belitung 64,750 hectares.

Meanwhile, the details of the forest for production are Ogan Komering Ilir 85,750 hectares, Ogan Komering Ulu 656,975 hectares, Muara Enim 21,565 hectares, Lahat 39,750 hectares, Musi Rawas 359,880 hectares, Musi Banyuasin 453,080 hectares, Bangka 393,080 hectares, and Belitung 113,250 hectares. Thus, the largest land area for protected and production forests is in the Musi Banyuasin area.[10, p.167]

South Sumatra is one of the government's goals for exploiting forest resources. In 1983, the components of the forest trees were exploited into wood so that the results of the targeted forest or the goal of taking advantage of it is wood from trees in the forests of South Sumatra—forest management by cutting down trees that become wood for human needs. Wood produced in South Sumatra includes round wood, pole wood, sawn wood, plywood, firewood, charcoal, and rattan. These woods will later be exported by companies for economic purposes.[10, p.169].

4 **Forest Exploitation in South Sumatra During the New Order**

Soeharto built his government with a financial foundation generated from forest exploitation. The way to collect foreign exchange by taking advantage of forest exploitation was by starting with making policies stated in Law No. 1 of 1967 and Law No. 6 of 1968 concerning foreign and domestic investment, Forestry Law No. 5 of 1968, and Government Regulation No. 21 of 1970 concerning Forest Concession

Permits (HPH) with contracts for 20-25 years for log cutting permits (round) and forestry industry (plywood). The implications of several policies have attracted foreign and domestic capitalists interested in investing their capital for investment. Especially capitalists from abroad, namely the United States and Japan. As for foreign private companies that are interested, such as Weyerhaeuser, George Pacific, and others. The stock availability close to the Asian Market has encouraged the government to provide concessions outside of Java. Of the selected areas, the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan are the primary targets for providing HPH concessions to these capitalists.[11, p. 2]

The implications of the existence of HPH concessions have encouraged capitalists to exploit forests in South Sumatra. In 1986-1987, South Sumatra had the presence of Private Companies with HPH concessions; in practice, these private companies carried out their logging and forest conversion activities. In Ogan Komering Ulu, one company had the right to manage land of around 13,300 hectares; in Ogan Komering Ilir, there were six companies with management land reaching 461,000 hectares. In Muara Enim, there were three companies with management land reaching 46,500 hectares; in Musi, Banyuasin is the area with the most companies; and in management land, there were 11 companies with management land area reaching 1,563,000 hectares.[10, p. 168] Thus, there were around 21 companies that had HPH Concessions with a total land area of 2,083,800 hectares. The existence of this company has revived the commercialization of the Asian market and has had an economic influence on Indonesia, especially in South Sumatra.

According to the BPS of South Sumatra in 1986, the above company has produced forest products in the form of logs (round) reaching 1,145,136.95 cubic meters, pole wood zero, sawn wood reaching 470,151.84 cubic meters, plywood (*triplek*) reaching 225,057.10 cubic meters, firewood 64,711.90 cubic meters, charcoal reaching 11.40 kilograms and rattan zero.[10, p. 169] Thus, round wood production is the largest compared to several types of wood and wood products. Some companies established in South Sumatra are Inhutani, I, II, III, and IV, which are located explicitly outside Java.[11, p. 40] In addition, HPH concessions were also given to oligarchs, which cannot be denied because of Soeharto's military background, finally making him give it to the military elites, namely commanders, retired officers, and generals. All of that was given to make them happy and as a gift from the quota set by the government.[12, p. 200]

Meanwhile, the management of HPH and HTI land carried out by the company certainly experiences obstacles and problems in producing forest products; there are also several reckless problems in managing the land. Several agrarian problems are in the spotlight from this. It is the background to the emergence of agrarian conflicts in South Sumatra, in particular.

5 The Emergence of Agrarian Conflicts Due to Forest Concession Policies

In the discourse on agricultural issues and conflicts, we need to look back at the roots in Europe. Moreover, in this case, agricultural matters have become a severe problem in both rural and urban areas; even if viewed historically, they can raise political

awareness in rural areas in Europe during the transition of the 20th century. The cause was the transitional politics of the capitalists who penetrated the agricultural sector. Therefore, the maneuvers carried out by the capitalists and the government have caused significant problems for peasants and given rise to agrarian conflicts.

The emergence of rural problems certainly has a spark that will make them a problem in the future. Agrarian issues often occur in conflict between the government, companies, or so-called oligarchies with residents or peasants. Regarding government policies on agricultural matters, there are two factors: first, agrarian policies emphasize aspects of increasing production without arranging agrarian structures from unequal to fairer, and second, agrarian policies emphasize political stability to achieve economic development goals. These two aspects have an impact on the condition of peasants.[13, p. 99] Thus, if this policy fails, it will give rise to the potential for conflict with peasants or residents.

In South Sumatra, overlapping agrarian regulations are often caused by government negligence, which ultimately hurts residents. In 1985, many institutions in South Sumatra had different land maps. This caused overlaps when preparing land for new projects. This condition contradicts the field's ability to create transmigration and forest maps, which do not match the maps owned by the Agrarian Directorate. This problem causes residents' plantations to experience unilateral land grabbing by companies.[14]

Moreover, land control tends to use existing customary laws in Indigenous communities. It ignores the legal requirements of existing customary laws and formal legal requirements such as certificates.[13, p. 104] Freek Colombijn emphasized that customary land has uncertainty regarding land ownership rights because customary land is owned communally, which causes specific individuals not to enjoy customary land fully. Moreover, most customary regulations are unwritten, which confusing needs to be clarified for the ownership system. It will undoubtedly be difficult or even impossible to sell because customary land belongs to a community unit inherited from generation to generation.[15, p. 73] In this way, the Western land system is more accessible to trust and precise in written laws regarding land ownership.

Meanwhile, there is a case of Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) concession ownership carried out by companies in South Sumatra that try to manipulate the size of the HTI area. One example is the Musi Hutan Persada Company, led by Prayogo and Tutut. Agrarian conflicts over HTI between the government, private companies, and residents have emerged due to the decision to provide land for HTI. The Inti Indorayon Utama Company and residents are involved in a conflict related to the company's HTI concession and land grabbing. Both of these issues cause conflicts of interest.[11, p. 73]

According to Walhi's (Indonesian Environmental Forum) report, in 1994, there were six cases of agrarian conflicts caused by Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) concessions that affected the population affected by the HTI program. These cases occurred in East Kalimantan, West Kalimantan, South Sumatra, and Southeast Sulawesi. Several cases have sparked public anger, leading to the burning of bridges and HTI base camps.[15]

6 Voice and Social Movement of Peasants on Agrarian Issues

The discourse on peasants has been done by a pioneer of Modern Indonesian history, namely Sartono Kartodirdjo, in his dissertation entitled *The Peasant Revolt of Banten in 1888: Its Conditions, Course, and Sequel A Case Study of Social Movements in Indonesia* (translation *Pemberontakan Petani Banten 1888*).^[6] This phenomenal work has opened the veil that the role of small people such as peasants has a significant influence on social, political, and economic in fighting against the arbitrary policies of the Dutch Colonial. This historiographic work attempts to counter the grand narrative in Dutch Colonial historiography that trivializes the passive role of peasants in Indonesian history. In fact, in this case, one of the driving forces was the peasants, who succeeded in protesting and demanding justice from the rulers (Dutch Colonial). If associated with peasants' resistance in South Sumatra during the New Order, there are similarities in the actors who carried out social movements against the rulers. Therefore, the inspiration from Sartono's work sparked this article.

The voices of the little people have probably existed since the Dutch Colonial era, Japan, Indonesia Independence, and the Old Order in South Sumatra. However, it is interesting to look at the New Order era because during this period, studies on peasants in South Sumatra were not written much, even though they had similarities with the previous government.

The New Order government has made policies that are more pro-capitalist and less concerned about the fate of the little people like. In this era, peasants experience the fate and suffering of poverty from the results of policies issued by the government structurally. From the perspective of agricultural development in rural areas, it has been delayed, and there are fewer pro-peasants in rural areas. So, peasants who are less prosperous and prosperous in their policies often have to fight oligarchies who are so strong in their positions and authority. Moreover, peasants are only used as objects of development rather than as the primary development subjects.^[16, p. 37] Therefore, it can trigger social tensions between the rulers and the people in social and economic aspects. From here, it will cause social movements launched by the people, such as peasants, due to the injustice carried out by the government. Social movements such as protests and demonstrations are one way to express expressions that come from the hearts and minds of peasants.

According to Mc Adam (Soenyono, 2008), four factors contribute to social or peasant resistance movements. First, there is dissatisfaction and social disappointment due to hatred and social discontent. Second, ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that criticize institutions and leaders. Third, the ability to collaborate or mobilize challenges. Fourth, political opportunities. In addition, McAdam calls the second, third, and fourth dimensions a means of mobilizing movements (structural mobilization) and political opportunities (political opportunities).^[16, pp. 46–47]

During the New Order, many agrarian conflicts started from outside, namely conflicts with parties outside the village, including large companies and the government in the plantation sector; there was a takeover of land previously owned by the people, for example. Investment in plantation capital has been decreasing in recent years. And conflicts caused by forest exploitation. Throughout the New Order, forests were one of the primary sources of income. Forest Concession Rights were given to private companies to exploit forests. HPH holders should have paid monetary rights to

land, called Customary Rights by law. Government Regulation No. 21 of 1970 states, "For the sake of public safety in forest areas that are being worked on in the context of forest control, the implementation of people's rights to collect forest products is frozen." [16, pp. 97 and 201] Therefore, peasants suffered losses caused by the policy.

Several cases first occurred in 1983, which explained the problem of land acquisition to open oil palm plantations in Baturaja. In this case, peasants felt compensation needed to be based on the promises made by PT Minanga Estate. Of this problem, 150 residents of Kebun Jati Village (Pangandonan District, OKU) experienced land losses that were not paid according to the agreement. So, peasants flocked to the South Sumatra Regional Government to demand compensation by the agreement. Meanwhile, with the same problem, rubber peasants in OKU District demanded that the Regent of OKU (Ogan Komerling Ulu) keep his promise to pay according to the agreement, namely land compensation between IDR 100,000-150,000 / hectare. However, they paid IDR 5,000 per hectare, and rubber trees were paid IDR 25 per tree. The Regent of OKU himself stated that they should be grateful for the compensation for the land, especially since it could be said that the land had the status of a Right to Use Marga or customary land. [16]

The second agricultural problem occurred in Lubukkeliat Village, Muarakuang District, Ogan Komerling Ilir (OKI) Regency 1983. The issue of rural and land compensation problems is caused by forced land acquisition carried out by PTP XXI and XII Contractors to the local community there—the land acquisition of almost 90 hectares of local people to be used as a sugarcane plantation. According to Sukarno Abu Hasan, a rubber peasant who owns 1.5 hectares of land, 91 families of peasants were affected by the land grab by the company. The land had been cultivated since their ancestors; most lived by tapping rubber and gardening. However, with the approval of the local government, the people's land was forcibly evicted for the sake of the CM (Cinta Manis) Sugarcane project. Although according to the statement of the OKI Regent, M Yusuf Halim firmly stated that the land used as a sugarcane plantation by PTP XXI and XXII did not belong to the people but was still controlled by the clan, therefore there was no term of compensation for the gardens and plants growing there. However, Sukarno Abu Hasan stated that 15 families were compensated with details of Rp150,000 per hectare of land and Rp1000 per producing rubber tree. The rest of the fate of the peasants is still hanging due to the land grabbing. [17]

Furthermore, rural problems arising from government policies harmed peasants in 1984. In this case, peasants numbering 125 families from three villages in Sekayu District, Musi Banyuasin, South Sumatra, experienced a significant impact on their income. The peasants rejected the government program, namely PIR (People's Core Plantation) IV, which was planned to build oil palm plantations. The rejection was due to the forced takeover carried out by the PIR project contractor. However, the consequences of this policy also gave rise to vertical conflicts that caused the peasants to send letters to the governor, DPRD, DPR RI, and the Legal Aid Institute (LBH). However, the efforts made by the peasants did not produce significant results regarding this agrarian problem, so the peasants decided to hold a demonstration against the local government. The peasants' struggle to demand justice traveled 90 km from their homes in Petailan, Lais, and Teluk Kijing Villages to the local government in Palembang, using three buses at their own expense. peasants held a demonstration

and expressed their feelings on Friday, December 28 at 11.00 WIB at the South Sumatra Governor's Office.[18]

Another agrarian problem also occurred in 1991. This problem resulted from a policy that caused chaos between corporate capitalists and peasants due to disagreements between the two parties regarding compensation for land purchases in the Ogan Komering Ilir (OKI) Regency. The company evicted hundreds of hectares of peasants' land. Around 485 heads of peasants families (KK) in three villages in the regency complained to the people's representatives to ask for compensation for the clearing without deliberation.[19]

Meanwhile, in other cases, capitalists, namely, the EML Company, evicted people's plantation land in Simpang Babat for HTI plants, and the SH Company evicted people's plantation land in Talang Ibul Muara Enim for oil palm plants. In 1991, 75 percent of the rubber plantation land belonged to the people, managed traditionally, and passed down from generation to generation. Waves of protests and demonstrations were carried out by residents against the land grabbing; they voiced their disapproval of the actions taken by the company that carried out the eviction, and they voiced the truth and asked for justice from the government. As a result of the residents who remained adamant, they had to fight with the company's security forces. However, the dead end was obtained even though they had LBH and the DPRD to regain protection and their land rights.[13, p. 171] Thus, the problems that occur between the government, capitalists (companies), and the people are caused by disagreements between the parties. These tend to benefit the government and capitalists more and ignore the fate of the peasants, thus giving rise to waves of protests and social movements carried out by peasants to demand rights and justice in order to obtain welfare from what they have.

However, when viewed from the problem of agrarian conflicts involving peasants and the authorities, it is also found until now, for example, the case of land disputes in Simpang Kopas Village, Damak Maliho, and Mekar Jaya, North Sumatra Province in 2023. The agrarian conflicts that occurred in the three villages highlighted the issue of unilateral land grabbing by companies and exploitation of natural resources carried out for economic gain, which had an impact on the displacement of local peasants, resulting in violations of peasant human rights.[24, p. 426] In other words, this agrarian conflict can be found in various regions which indicates how serious the problem is, so it often creates social violence.

Meanwhile, another similar case study of rural problems also occurred in the Americas, namely in Latin America. Most peasant social movements in Latin America arise because of the issue of fighting for land ownership rights, which can quickly trigger social transformation. In addition, these movements involve peasant groups and marginalized, marginalized, excluded, and unemployed groups in rural and urban areas. Some social movements in Latin America (Mexico, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Colombia). One of the most exciting countries to highlight is Mexico because this social movement made agrarian reform efforts in the 20th century, which, resulting in substantial changes to the prevailing agrarian regime. [25, p. 9]

7 Conclusion

During the New Order era in South Sumatra, forest exploitation driven by Soeharto's policies was always profit-orientated and led to agrarian conflicts between the government, companies, and peasants. Concessions for logging and plantations often resulted in land disputes and dispossession of customary land, especially in areas such as Ogan Komering Ilir, Ogan Komering Ulu. and Muara Enim. peasants are the primary victims of these policies that favor oligarchs and capitalists. Peasants are often faced with poverty and loss of land. As a result, peasants are driven to social protests that lead to violence and disregard for the authorities due to land grabbing.

The absence of solutions for the peasant social movement in South Sumatra has left peasants in a state of confusion without direction despite their struggles. To support their struggle for land ownership rights, it is essential to recognize their role in the Indonesian historical narrative and increase their visibility in South Sumatran historiography. Hopefully, this research will continue to be developed in various disciplinary forms to generate renewed discussion, especially in the transnational arena. That way, the discourse of plantation peasants in South Sumatra continues to get more attention from scholars

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