

Coconut Trees that Bear Jerry Cans

The Malind tribe in Merauke is proud of its ecological traditions - each clan in the tribe is responsible for protecting a natural element. The Moiwend clan is responsible for the coconut trees and fruit. However, in recent times Malind youth have started using coconuts to make alcohol. These home-made drinks are much cheaper to buy than beer and spirits, and have added to the town's problems. Now, some Malind elders are calling for the reinstatement of customary laws that would punish those who make use of coconuts in this way in order to save their tradition and their community.

The changes that have come with incorporation into Indonesia have weakened the power and influence of traditional leaders, who fear that their society is breaking down. They are searching for ways to reinforce social order as modern Indonesian laws seem weak and ineffective, while customary law is seen as stronger. Yet there seems to be no way that customary law can be implemented as the people are now subject to contemporary Indonesian rules and regulations. This dilemma is common in developing countries and causes the rapid weakening of traditional cultures and the disempowerment of customary leaders. Society breaks down as the youth refuse to listen to their elders and the intricate web of traditional clan society and creation beliefs are lost. This video shows how the revered tree of life – the coconut – becomes the source of violence and disharmony when it is turned into alcohol.

Issues: ecology, environment, alcohol, imperialism, colonisation, coconuts in traditional culture, authority structures, creation beliefs

Talking points

- 1 To what extent do you think traditional values and the authority of customary elders can survive in the modern culture of a country such as Indonesia?
- 2 How important do you think coconuts are to the Malind people? What are some of the uses that parts of the coconut tree are put to?
- 3 Do you think that alcohol is affecting the lifestyle of the Malind people? Should people be allowed to drink alcohol if they want to? Should it be the responsibility of the police or customary elders to deal with problems caused by alcohol?

