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Derived from the author’s PhD dissertation for the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Leeds, UK, this book discusses the revival of the adat (indigenous) movement in the context of political decentralization in Indonesia. Political reform and the passing of laws 22/1999 and 25/1999 on decentralization and regional autonomy after the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 led to intensified political struggles by adat communities across the country. Tyson suggests that adat revivalism should not be understood in isolation, but in relation to the wider context of Indonesia’s political and economic development. Furthermore, the revival of adat as a movement is related to the global discourse on indigenous rights. Built on multi-site ethnographic fieldwork in a number of adat communities in Sulawesi, this book provides a rich account of how adat has been continuously used by different actors to achieve specific goals. In addition to indigenous communities, adat has been employed by government officials, donor agencies, and private companies to secure control over political and material resources.

Setting the stage for Tyson’s discussion of ethnic politics in post-reform Indonesia are a couple of theoretical propositions regarding the study of ethnic revivalism and decentralization. First, many have argued that ethnic revivalist movements effectively represent marginalized or repressed ethnic groups. The second proposition is that decentralization provides a wide political space for popular representation at the local level. However, it has also been argued that indigenous movements can be harmful and counterproductive in the sense that indigeneity is, by definition, exclusive in nature. Adat movements may therefore help advance certain ethnic groups (or remedy their loss) at the expense of other marginalized minority groups that live in the same area. One of the key strengths of Tyson’s book is that it helps extend the horizon of the debate by questioning the power relations among various local and supra-local actors involved in adat revivalism. The revival of adat should be understood in the context of the complex relations among politics, administration, and indigeneity. Any group’s effort to be recognized as indigenous is a complex political process that involves deliberation and negotiation among different actors. “A more penetrating view on the different manifestations of power,” Tyson writes, “is therefore needed to help discern the interests and motivations of the various actors influencing adat revivalism” (p. 13).

The book is organized into eight chapters, which include an introduction (chapter one) and a conclusion (chapter eight). Chapter two discusses the key theoretical concepts that define the discourse in the following chapters. Tyson insists that adat is a social construction. The politics of being indigenous involves sociopolitical processes in

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2 Law No. 22/1999 decentralizes and dilutes the central government’s authority with respect to districts and municipalities except in the areas of religion, judicature, defense and security (including technology), international relations, monetary policies, conservation and national resource management, and high-tech standardization. Law No. 25/1999 regulates regional financing systems. See J. G. Holtzappel and Martin Ramstedt, ed., Decentralization and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009).
which power relations among indigenous communities and other actors play
significant roles. While it was Leiden scholars who dominated the politics of *adat*
during the Dutch colonial administration, nongovernmental organization (NGO)
activists and their international networks played (and continue to play) major roles in
the development of *adat* movements in post-Soeharto Indonesia. In chapters three to
seven, Tyson discusses at length various forms of *adat* revivalist movements, ranging
from the politics of recognition to the struggle for those rights that promised
autonomous governance and that land would be restored to its rightful owners. The
case studies chosen by Tyson reflect his main argument that *adat* revivalism was rooted
in the political and economic development of the country under the New Order
regime, which marginalized many indigenous communities.

Tyson describes how *adat* revivalism represents ongoing, contentious politics, the
results of which are still in the making. The concept of "*adat*" is fluid, and thus it can be
interpreted differently by different actors. State and development agencies often adopt
traditional knowledge and practices into development schemes. Under the New Order
administration, "cultural tradition" was often used as a tool of political control and
social mobilization. While certain *adat* practices deemed to support national unity were
granted recognition, other indigenous practices that were considered threatening to
national goals were suppressed (p. 32). The revival of *adat* has posed significant
challenges to such practices. Political openness brought about by political reform and
decentralization has paved the way for *adat* communities to articulate their own
interests. However, as formal recognition from the state is needed by *adat* communities
to secure their rights, the state is still able to maintain control and oversight. State
policies towards *adat* politics remain restrictive or ambiguous at best. Some
communities might have their political demands granted by the state, but political
institutionalization or administration of *adat* usually renders the challenging nature of
*adat* politics into something more compliant to the state's framework or regulations.

Challenging the mainstream argument that decentralization has had a positive
impact on political participation at the local level, Tyson argues that decentralization
does not necessarily lead to the political empowerment of indigenous people. Drawing
on what he describes as the "political school of decentralization," Tyson does not
assume that the reallocation of political and material resources at the local level is
solely a function of the administrative capacity of local government, as the proponents
of the "pragmatic school of decentralization" may argue. Instead, Tyson writes,
equitable reallocation requires the political empowerment of local people, including
indigenous communities (p. 36). Seen from this perspective, decentralization is not
politically empowering despite increasing the political participation of *adat*
communities. At the very least, the empowering effect of decentralization on
indigenous people is not as strong as commonly assumed. Bureaucratic politics
practiced by the state apparatus have domesticated *adat*'s revival and its demands for
fundamental changes to power relationships. Cases from Gowa and Palopo districts
show how the state manipulated the politics of recognition as a means of controlling
the *adat* communities instead of fulfilling their political demands (chapter 3). Members
of *adat* communities themselves are often weakened by political fragmentation or by
the lack of strong ideological leadership. *Adat* revivalist movements are often driven
not by the desires and demands of *adat* communities themselves, but by international
actors who identify and influence an international network of *adat* activists.
Tyson notes the significant role of young activists (pemuda adat) among the proponents of adat revivalist movements. This is to distinguish them from the “rightful bearers of custom” (pemangku adat), such as village elders, tribal chiefs, and members of noble families who derive their legitimacy from ascription or inheritance (p. 3). In contrast, pemuda adat are activists eager to make political changes for the sake of adat communities. They do not necessarily come from the local inner circles of adat communities, as these young people are often NGO activists deeply concerned with the fate of adat communities in general. The rise of the indigenous rights movement in Indonesia in the early 1990s was spurred by environmental NGOs like WALHI (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia, Friends of the Earth Indonesia) and SKEPHI (Sekretariat Kerja Sama Pelestarian Hutan Indonesia, Indonesian Network for Tropical Forest Conservation). Later, young NGO activists formed JAPHAMA (Jaringan Pembelaan Hak-Hak Masyarakat Adat, Network for the Defense of Indigenous Peoples) to deal with the issue of indigenous rights (p. 46). While the “rightful bearers of custom” often emphasize the issue of the authenticity of tradition and its transmission, the young adat activists are concerned primarily with the strategic use of adat for political change.

Critical reviews of the roles played by pemuda adat in articulating the interests of the indigenous communities reveal that there have been a number of problems, however. First, the relationships among pemuda adat, NGO activists, and their international networks can be described as trusteeships (pp. 68-69). A trusteeship style of relationship defines the NGO activists as being the most knowledgeable agents in the relationship, and therefore suggest that they know the right direction for the adat movement to take. When combined with the interests of international donors, relying on this type of relationship may be counterproductive to protecting the actual interests of indigenous people, as donors usually want to operate within state-supported frameworks. The Tyson studies involving a social forestry program supported by DfID (UK Department for International Development) in Seko community, North Luwu district, clearly illustrates how adat communities’ political struggles have been gradually domesticated, not only by the state but also by international donors that operate through the work of pemuda adat (chapter 4). Last but not least, Tyson observes that fragmentation among pemuda adat groups may denigrate the politics of adat. As the cases of land reclamation in East Luwu (chapter 6) or Bulukumba (chapter 7) show, the instrumentalization of adat by different groups within a particular adat community may result in conflicts of interest among the members of adat communities. In the long run, such conflicts may weaken adat communities’ struggles for political recognition and compensation for legitimate grievances.

Rich in ethnographic detail and supported by strong documentary analysis, a number of Tyson’s case studies provide a nuanced account of the politics of becoming indigenous after decentralization. The book deserves praise not only for its critical analysis of the political process, but also for its wide coverage of a number of critical issues in Indonesian local politics. In addition to its explicit focus on the impact of decentralization and adat revivalist movements, the book also provides critical accounts of the local roles played by NGOs and of power relationships at local levels. Unfortunately, the political economy of decentralization is not adequately presented in Tyson’s discussion. Absent in his discussion is the extent to which decentralization may have benefited certain groups while depriving or marginalizing others. The fact
that decentralization may have created local winners and losers could have a significant influence on the way political participation is mobilized or instrumentalized at local levels. More significantly, it may also define the outcome of political negotiations between adat communities, on the one hand, and related political actors, on the other. As also shown by Tyson, the revival of adat movements often has something to do with the presence of mining or timber companies. Due to the significant contribution of such companies to district revenues, it may be difficult for district governments—as in the case of Soroako and Bulukumba districts—to mediate in the disputes between adat communities and private companies.

I am curious to know the response of political parties to adat revivalist movements, since political parties play a significant role not only in national politics, but also at the local level. Political parties are one of the key pillars in local governance, and are the means through which citizens may channel their political interests. Unfortunately, despite the book’s great interest in the issue of political representation, Tyson does not include in his analysis the role of political parties in local politics. The book would also benefit from the further elaboration of the nature of district-level politics and government. In relation to each region’s ethnic composition, how do ethnic diversity and intra-regional differences affect state policies regarding adat communities? Last but not least, although the author emphasizes the importance of measuring the impact of decentralization and the adat revivalist movements on local political structures qualitatively, the book does not include many statistical comparisons. Adding some statistics about local political development would have given a clearer picture of the dynamics of local political landscapes and the adat communities’ achievements relative to localities where adat movements are absent. Nevertheless, Tyson has provided an excellent account of the politics of the revival of adat during decentralization. The work will be of great interest to political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists, among others, as well as to policy makers concerned with the issues of adat revivalism, local politics, and decentralization.